

DATA DIVE WITH NIK NANOS

# EVEN JUSTIN TRUDEAU KNEW THE BATTLE WAS LOST

What was once a Conservative double-digit advantage is now turning into a potential rout

OPINION

Nik Nanos is the chief data scientist at Nanos Research, research adjunct professor at the Norman Paterson School for International Affairs at Carleton University, a global fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington and the official pollster for The Globe and Mail and CTV News.

The Liberal Party is no longer united behind him. The movement he created, built around his personality and a progressive agenda bent on reshaping Canada, is now unravelling. His time in office has been partly defined by his parting ways with high-profile cabinet ministers like Jody Wil-

son-Raybould, Jane Philpott and Bill Morneau. Arguably, the most damaging cabinet departure was that of Chrystia Freeland. Former deputy prime minister, former Minister of Finance and formerly one of his staunchest allies, she not only resigned but launched a policy broadside at the Prime

Minister, disagreeing with his direction regarding the finances of the country. Mr. Trudeau's leadership was more imperial than collegial, with a greater interest in public posturing on his progressive politics than tending to his parliamentary caucus. Concerns about his leadership, once voiced privately and relatively informally within the party, had escalated to public calls and open letters requesting that Mr. Trudeau resign.

What was once traditionally a big tent party has become a narrow segment of voters. Fewer and fewer Canadians are even open to voting Liberal. At the height of Mr. Trudeau's popularity two-thirds of Canadians (67 per cent) would consider voting Liberal. Now, it is almost half that (at 35 per cent). Young and middle-aged voters are deserting the Liberals in favour of the Conservatives, who are currently seen as the agents of change.

What was once a Conservative double-digit advantage is now turning into a potential rout. Twice as many Canadians today would rather vote Conservative (45 per cent) rather than Liberal (22 per cent), numbers that bring to mind historic wins like Brian Mulroney's victory in 1984 (50 per cent support), and John Diefenbaker's sweep in 1957 (53.7 per cent support). In both of these elections, tired Liberal governments were turfed from office by blue waves of change.

To shake the Poilievre juggernaut, the Liberals have tried myriad tactics, from attack ads to political gimmicks like the GST holiday - but none have moved the numbers. One option left was to try a new leader. Although he or she may experience a bump in the polls, overcoming the forces of government fatigue and division within the Liberal Party will be difficult.

The Liberals are in the difficult position of needing everything to go right for themselves and everything to go wrong for their opponents. Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre needs to make a mistake. NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh needs to turn off voters. Bloc Quebecois Leader Yves-François Blanchet needs to run an inept campaign.

Mr. Trudeau is responsible for his party's fortunes. He showed himself to be fearless, but the distance from fearlessness to folly is quite short. It is too early to tell if his recognition is too little, too late.

Scoring an accidental own goal is tortuous for any hockey player. Losing the game by purposefully shooting the puck into your own team's net is folly. But that is where Justin Trudeau has taken the Liberal party.

The big question is: Does Monday's announcement change the game? Would the Liberals do better or worse if Mr. Trudeau had decided to lead the party in the next election?

We should not really be surprised that Mr. Trudeau thinks he could win. It's impossible to separate his own political journey from that of his father, long-serving Liberal prime minister Pierre Trudeau, who went from the euphoria of Trudeauism in 1968, to resignation in 1979, to redemption in 1980. Maybe, he thought, his story could turn out the same?

After all, during his resignation speech Mr. Trudeau described himself as a fighter, and he has indeed beaten the odds on numerous occasions.

Back in 2008 he threw his hat in the ring in the Quebec riding of Papineau - far from a sure thing - and eked out a victory.

In 2012, he stepped in the charity boxing ring with Patrick Brazeau, the muscular former Conservative senator. Instead of becoming a political punching bag, Mr. Trudeau outclassed his opponent, and the referee intervened in round three to give the young Liberal leader the win.

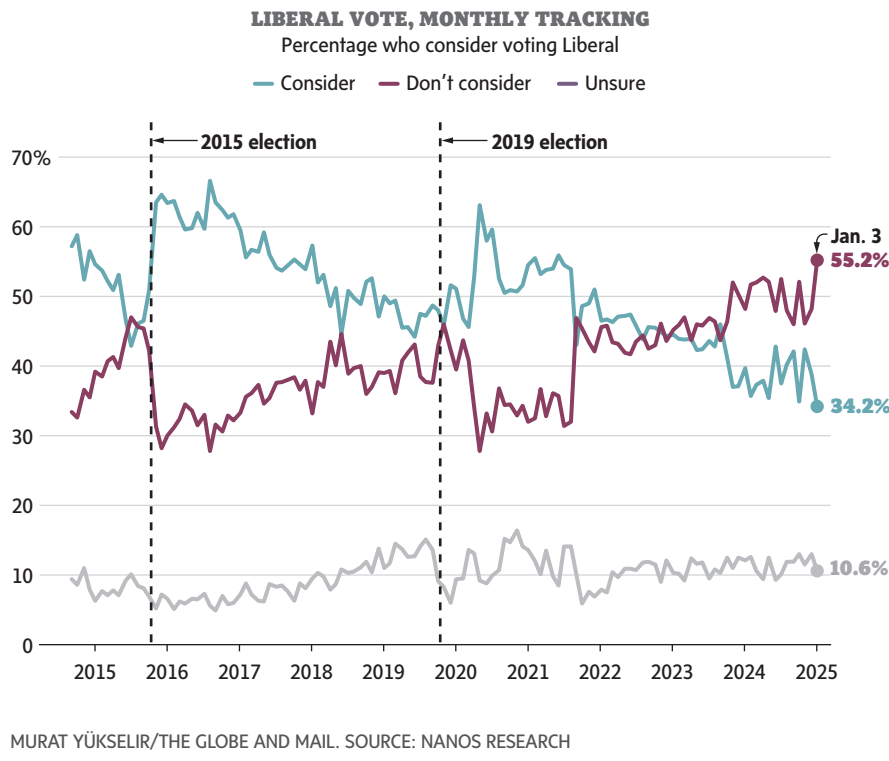
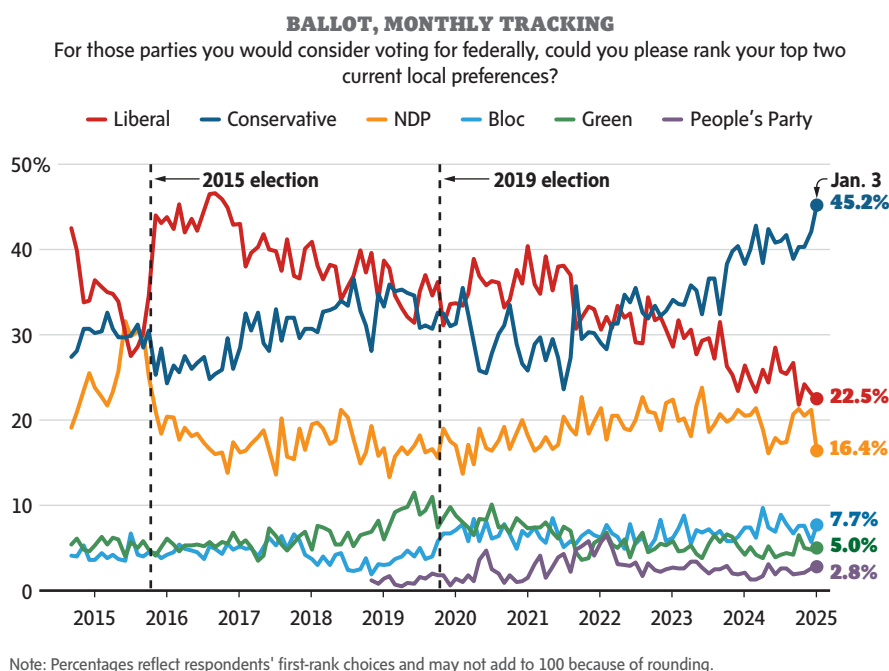
In 2015, he took the third-place Liberals to a majority victory over the incumbent Stephen Harper, who tried to dismiss him as someone not up to the job. Mr. Trudeau also survived the pandemic and the first Donald Trump presidency, forming minority governments in 2019 and 2021.

Mr. Trudeau, for much of his career, has been a political cat with nine lives - surviving against the odds.

Being dismissed as an underdog and trailing in the polls has not scared Mr. Trudeau as it would most politicians.

But even he has to realize that this time was different.

## Time's up for Trudeau



# No governing party in Canadian history has attempted to switch leaders while on life support

J.D.M. STEWART

OPINION

J.D.M. Stewart is the author of *Being Prime Minister* and the forthcoming *The Prime Ministers*.

When Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced his resignation on Monday he set the stage for a leadership race in the Liberal Party to replace him. The winner of that contest will become the party leader and Canada's 24th prime minister. These are exciting times in Canadian politics but not completely unprecedented.

The most recent example of a prime minister leaving to make way for a new party leader and PM occurred in August, 2002. Jean Chrétien announced his resignation in the face of a strong movement in the Liberal Party and caucus to have Paul Martin replace him. It had been a bruising internal battle and Mr. Chrétien then infuriated the Martinites by indicating that while he was stepping aside, he would not actually be leaving for another 18 months. It was a Machiavellian effort to keep his rival from taking power.

Mr. Martin still won the subsequent November, 2003, leadership contest and became prime minister the following month af-

ter pressure forced Mr. Chrétien to step down earlier than first forecast.

Perhaps the situation most similar to the one Justin Trudeau has created occurred just over three decades ago. In February, 1993, a very unpopular prime minister in Brian Mulroney announced he was stepping down as leader of the Progressive Conservative Party. He stayed in office while the PCs held their June leadership convention where they selected Kim Campbell. She became prime minister - still the only woman in Canadian history to hold the position.

The Progressive Conservatives were memorably decimated in the ensuing election that fall. But long forgotten now is that Kim Campbell had an early lead in the polls, momentarily changing the channel from Mr. Mulroney. Ultimately, a poorly run campaign and the baggage of the Mulroney years were too much for Ms. Campbell to overcome. Her party won just two seats, belonging to Jean Charest, who represented Sherbrooke and the other to Elsie Wayne of Saint John, New Brunswick. Ms. Campbell stood down as party leader on election night.

Whether the same fate falls on the next Liberal Party leader and prime minister remains to be seen. But there will be plenty of chattering if the Grits choose a woman to lead them for the first

time and she goes on to meet a similar fate as Ms. Campbell. The transition of power from one prime minister to another of the same party is not just part of the recent past, however. In the early days after Confederation in 1867 there were no leadership conventions to select party leaders. The caucus chose them, and it usually followed the advice of the outgoing PM. No advice was possible in 1891 after the death of Sir John A. Macdonald. He was succeeded by a string of four, short-term prime ministers.

The most interesting of those, from today's perspective, might be Sir Mackenzie Bowell. He succeeded Sir John Thompson in 1894. Sir Thompson had rather dramatically died of a heart attack during lunch at Windsor Castle - even sitting next to Queen Victoria's physician couldn't save him.

Again there was no advice to be given, and Sir Bowell, a sitting senator, took the reins as PM. But he soon faced a cabinet revolt and was forced to surrender the leadership of the party in 1896 to Sir Charles Tupper, the former Father of Confederation. Under the agreement, Sir Bowell would stay on as PM until the session of Parliament ended in April of that year. He then handed the prime ministership to Sir Tupper who led the party in the 1896 general election. Sir Wilfrid Laurier won.

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Sir Tupper's 69 days in office remain the shortest in Canadian history. That record may be in peril as it is highly likely that whoever becomes the next Liberal Party leader and prime minister will quickly face an immediate election. The prospects of winning appear bleak at the moment.

There is one important way Justin Trudeau's imminent departure is different from any previous ones: It comes during a precarious minority Parliament. It is true that the prime minister's father, Pierre, won the keys to 24 Sussex Dr. when he succeeded Lester B. Pearson as Liberal Party leader and prime minister in 1968. He took over a minority government, but not one in danger of collapse. He also called an immediate election, sensing favourable electoral winds.

Today, the circumstances are quite different. No governing party in Canadian history has attempted to switch leaders while its life rests on a shallow breath in a minority House of Commons. The ill-timed delay before Mr. (Justin) Trudeau finally made his announcement on Monday will leave the government and next prime minister on very thin ice with an extremely limited survival kit.

The way the coming months unfold will certainly leave an indelible mark on our history.