

The Progressive Conservatives

Kelly Saunders

If the election of 2016 was a historic triumph for the Progressive Conservative (PC) Party, the 2019 election is a close second. Following the biggest majority win seen in this province in over a century, the Tories were returned to office three years later with their second largest seat total, equaling the Roblin Tories in 1959 and 1962. When the dust settled on election night, the Tories claimed thirty-six of the province's fifty-seven seats, just four seats shy of their 2016 record high.

In some ways, the outcome of Manitoba's forty-second election was a foregone conclusion. Over the previous three years the Conservatives had maintained a comfortable lead over their opponents. The New Democratic Party (NDP) struggled to recover from its devastating loss in 2016, and it appeared that their new leader, Wab Kinew, had not yet managed to solidify his support within the party. The premier's decision to call the election a full year earlier than scheduled under Manitoba's fixed-date election law did not seem to bother most voters, despite his rather flimsy excuse about not wanting to interfere with the province's 150th anniversary celebrations. Nonetheless, some saw Brian Pallister's decision to head to the polls early as a potentially risky move. The Conservatives' austerity agenda during their first mandate, in particular their substantial overhaul of the health care system and the controversial closures

of Winnipeg emergency rooms, had made them unpopular in some quarters and vulnerable to opposition attacks.

Then there was the leader himself. The man *Maclean's* magazine once dubbed Manitoba's "paradox premier" had the dubious achievement of being one of the country's most unpopular political leaders. Known for his irascible and sometimes difficult personality, Pallister seemed to spend a good deal of his time in office picking fights with everyone from the mayor of Winnipeg and the Manitoba Metis Federation to the prime minister. Even Manitobans did not seem to like their own premier much, with polls showing more than half of voters disapproving of Pallister and his leadership style. In contrast to the popular wisdom that political leaders should enjoy at least some measure of likeability amongst voters in order to ensure re-election, the premier seemed to take pride in his polarizing personality, preferring, as he described it, results over popularity.

Aware of these possible pitfalls, the PCs hedged their bets and took nothing for granted heading into the election. Following months of speculation, the election was timed to ensure that the bulk of the campaign would occur during the dog days of August, when voters were least likely to devote much attention to the issues or the Conservative record in office. The election call came just weeks after a

**Understanding the
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2019**

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1 percent cut in the provincial sales tax came into effect, which had been a key (and widely popular) Conservative promise in the last election. In their election advertising, the PCs focused on two main themes. The first consisted of television ads targeting Wab Kinew, reminding everyone of the NDP leader's turbulent younger days and allegations of domestic violence by a former partner. The second series of ads attempted to portray Pallister in a softer light, describing his humble beginnings on the family farm in Portage la Prairie.

The Conservatives also chose to play it safe in their campaign promises. While the official campaign slogan was "Moving Manitoba Forward," the 2019 platform actually promised more of the same: to fix the province's finances and make life more affordable for Manitobans by cutting taxes on everything from home insurance to fifty-dollar haircuts. There were, however, signs that the party was beginning to heed criticisms that it had become too fixated on the bottom line at the expense of providing services. Sprinkled in their platform were promises to boost health care spending by \$2 billion, increase child care spaces, and tackle the province's growing methamphetamine crisis. The PCs' goal of securing a second mandate by playing it safe and avoiding mistakes also extended to campaign strategy. David McLaughlin, the party's campaign director from the 2016 campaign, returned to the helm to rev up the Conservatives' efficient and well-organized ground game, ensure that candidates stayed on message, and keep Pallister out of the media

spotlight. In a classic front-runner tactic, the premier appeared in only one leader's debate, preferring to travel to all of the province's fifty-seven constituencies and meet one-on-one with voters to sell his message.

Post-election, the PCs' fortunes appear to be on strong footing. While voter turnout was slightly down from the 2016 election and the party saw its majority drop by four seats, it was clear that Manitobans were not prepared to reject the Pallister government for its austerity agenda. With the exception of Colleen Mayer in St. Vital, all of the incumbent cabinet ministers were re-elected. This was no small feat given that many were running in newly redrawn ridings as a result of the 2018 electoral boundaries redistribution. At the same time, the Tories also managed to hold on to key urban and suburban ridings, winning fifteen seats in Winnipeg. Historically, the Conservatives' base of support has largely been centred in rural Manitoba, with the NDP tending to fare better in Winnipeg and in the North. Given that thirty-two of the province's fifty-seven seats are linked to Winnipeg, the party's growing urban strength bodes well for its future competitiveness.

In the end, the PCs retained power in the 2019 election by effectively selling the status quo. While Manitobans may be less than enamoured with their incumbent premier and some of his decisions, they are still fatigued by the seventeen years of NDP rule that preceded the Tories' return to power. Until the NDP is once again seen as ready for prime time in the eyes of voters, Manitoba's blue wave will continue for the foreseeable future.