

## They campaigned for 36 days. What comes next is up to you

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Monday's federal general election is going to be unique. It will be the first held during a global pandemic – the Spanish flu crisis was bookended by elections in 1917 and 1921 – and that raises two big questions: How will the pandemic affect turnout, and what will be the impact of the record use of special ballots?

On the first question, worries about personal safety during the fourth wave of COVID-19, along with the real possibility of historically long lineups at some polling stations, could cause some voters to stay home.

Voter turnout has become a growing problem in Canada; in the last three federal elections, roughly [one in three registered voters](#) never bothered to cast a ballot. Turnout could be lower this time, if recent provincial elections are any guide. Of the four held during the pandemic – in British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland and Labrador – three saw significant drops in voter participation.

Last week, Matthew McKenna, an Elections Canada spokesperson, effectively [lowered expectations](#) when he warned that Election Day could be a protracted affair.

Thanks to the 36-day election period – the shortest possible under the law – and the complications wrought by the pandemic, Mr. McKenna said that Elections Canada was still [40,000 poll workers](#) shy of its staffing goal, heading into the final weekend.

There will also be roughly 1,000 fewer polling stations across the country on Election Day compared to 2019, and the total number of polls inside each voting place is also down.

This is entirely due to the pandemic. Schools, apartment and condo lobbies, and other traditional venues were unavailable, so Elections Canada scrambled to find alternatives.

In most cases, those alternatives were found. Many ridings will see little or no drop in the number of places to vote. But some voters, especially in condo and apartment-heavy Toronto ridings, face a very different story. Toronto-Centre had 91 Election Day polling stations in 2019; this time it will have 15. Spadina-Fort York has dropped from 56 to 15. University-Rosedale plummeted from 69 to 23. Parkdale-High Park has gone from 69 to 33.

Other urban areas are also affected. Winnipeg-North riding is dropping from 34 to 20 polling stations; North Vancouver drops from 40 to 23.

People in these ridings will face longer distances to travel to vote, and possibly longer lineups. Voters are going to need plenty of patience – a resource that has already been depleted by the pandemic.

Patience will also be needed when it comes to finding out who won the election, thanks to the record high demand for special ballots from people voting from inside their ridings.

Special ballots, which in a normal year are mailed in or delivered to an Elections Canada office, are usually associated with people who vote from overseas, or who can't be in their riding for regular or advance voting days.

There's not usually a lot of people who vote by special ballot from inside their own ridings. In 2019, [the number was 397,000](#), and their votes were counted on election night.

This year? More than [one-million local electors](#) asked for special ballots. At least 35 ridings saw between 5,000 and 10,000 such requests. More than 706,000 of these ballots had been returned to Elections Canada as of Friday – [a high rate of return](#) – and more will come on Monday; this year exceptionally, local electors can drop off special ballots at any polling station in their riding on Election Day.

But this time, Elections Canada won't start counting those ballots until Tuesday. That means that Monday night is likely to end with some races, and possibly the election as a whole, still undecided. It may take days to declare a winner in ridings with thousands of outstanding special ballots still to count.

In an election that seems likely to produce another minority government, every seat will be critical. And, consequently, so will every vote.

Before the campaign began, an Elections Canada survey found that 67.8 per cent of eligible voters said they were certain to cast a ballot, if the conditions were right. And an estimated [5.78-million electors voted at advance polls](#) last week – a record number, and an 18.5 per cent increase over 2019.

The record-setting turnout at advance polls shows that, despite the challenges, our fellow citizens are eager to exercise their democratic rights. If you haven't voted yet, then Monday, Election Day, is your last chance.