
Abstract
During the twentieth century, as Canadian voters began to associate the brand of their major political parties with the characteristics of their leaders, the Liberal Party of Canada’s leadership races evolved into events of national importance. This study examines this transformation through the 1948, 1958 and 1968 leadership conventions. It incorporates perspectives from inside the Liberal Party as well as the Canadian media’s portrayals of the conventions. This thesis explores the alternating pattern of anglophone and francophone Party leaders, the complications associated with the predictability of the outcome, the evolution of convention tactics to recruit delegate support, Party (dis)unity throughout the contests, and the political science theories that deconstruct the conventions and predict outcomes. It also details how, over time, the political ambitions of senior-ranking members trumped the interests the Liberal Party.

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The 1948 Liberal Party of Canada leadership election was called to replace retiring Liberal leader and sitting Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King. The convention was held exactly 29 years after the 1919 leadership convention that saw King elected Liberal leader. Secretary of State for External Affairs Louis St. Laurent defeated Minister of Agriculture (and former Premier of Saskatchewan) James Garfield Gardiner and former cabinet minister Charles Gavan Power on the first ballot, and would be Liberal leader and Prime Minister Lester Pearson announced on December 14, 1967 that he would be retiring in April 1968. Pearson had been Liberal leader since 1958 and Prime Minister since 1963. He was still much liked by the party and by the Canadian people in general, but he had failed in two attempts to win a majority government. The Liberals were also trailing in the polls behind the Progressive Conservatives, whose popular new leader Robert Stanfield had been selected in September 1967. Long before the actual convention a vigorous leadership contest had begun. At the outset the two leading candidates were St. Laurent and Gardiner. St. Laurent was a Liberal frontbencher and had been Secretary of State for External Affairs since 1961. He was a strong supporter of Pearson and had worked closely with him on foreign policy. Gardiner was a more conservative and experienced public servant, having served as a cabinet minister in the Laurier government and as Premier of Saskatchewan from 1952 to 1960. He was a strong supporter of Pearson and had close ties to the Liberal party machine. The convention was held in Toronto on April 14, 1968, and was attended by 40 delegates representing the national party organization. The convention was a stormy one, with suggestions of foul play and intrigue. The delegates were divided on the issue of Pearson's successor. Some wanted a more moderate candidate, while others wanted a more conservative one. The delegates eventually elected St. Laurent on the third ballot, and he would be Liberal leader and Prime Minister from 1968 to 1969.