

From Campaign to Caucus: What O'Toole and the Conservatives Have Taught Us About the Importance of Leadership Competencies

“We need a principled leader who will unite our party by respecting all conservatives.

— Erin O'Toole, Leader of the Official Opposition (Conservative Party)

In August 2021, Canadian prime minister and Liberal leader, Justin Trudeau, dissolved the nation's 43rd Parliament and triggered a snap election. The election day was set for September 20th, making the electoral campaign only 36 days long, the shortest possible election period under federal law.¹ Although it was short, Canada's 2021 election was not uneventful. It culminated in a Liberal government, with Conservatives capturing the popular vote (Conservatives = 33.7%; Liberals = 32.6%) but failing to secure a majority of ridings (Liberals = 159; Conservatives = 119).² Following these results, the Conservative Party quickly found themselves facing another dilemma with an online petition calling on the party to convene a referendum on O'Toole's leadership.³ What does this petition mean for the Conservative Party and its leader? How did they get there? And what happens now? Let's take a look and find out.



→ THE PROBLEM

It began only an hour after the Conservatives' election loss was confirmed. Bert Chen, the Ontario representative on the Conservative Party's national council, launched an online petition calling on the party to review and vote on whether Erin O'Toole should be removed as the party's leader. The petition called O'Toole's leadership abilities into question, and was open to all Canadians. By the end of the week it had garnered over 2,700 signatures.³ Chen's argument was that "for a leader to change their positions, like what was done recently, requires a review of that leader."⁴ In an interview with CTV News, Chen explained that he's heard from other party members that they are disappointed with O'Toole's shift away from what he promised during his leadership campaign; "Erin has broken the trust of members by changing his position so drastically from when he was elected by the membership more than a year ago to lead this party."³ While some members of the Conservative Party certainly share Chen's sentiments, others, including the president, are not in favor of the petition. Rob Batherson, president of the Conservative Party of Canada, told CBC News, "When you hold an office in the party, there's an expectation that your conduct is such that it doesn't detract or harm the interests or the reputation of ... the national council on which you serve ... the party and ... the leader."⁴ He added that he had received many complaints from members who believe Chen was misusing his position on the national council, and that Chen should have raised his concerns behind closed doors first.⁴ Regardless of how the petition was launched, many Canadians are wondering how the Conservatives got there in the first place. Is the party's problem truly reflective of a fault in their leader's competencies? The answer lies in a few key electoral decisions that caused Chen (and other party members) to call Erin O'Toole's leadership competencies into question.

HOW CAUCUS WORKS

Caucus is a meeting at which members of a political party choose among candidates running for office or select delegates to attend a convention. The 2015 Reform Act also requires each party's caucus to decide whether it wants to give its members power to trigger a leadership review following an election. The Conservative Party of Canada voted in favor of this power after a narrow loss to the Liberals in Canada's 44th election, but Erin O'Toole is confident his 118 elected MPs have his back. "This is not about a sword of Damocles hanging over my head," O'Toole told reporters after the meeting. "We're united as a team. This is about having a fair and transparent process that a team must have when it respects one another."¹¹

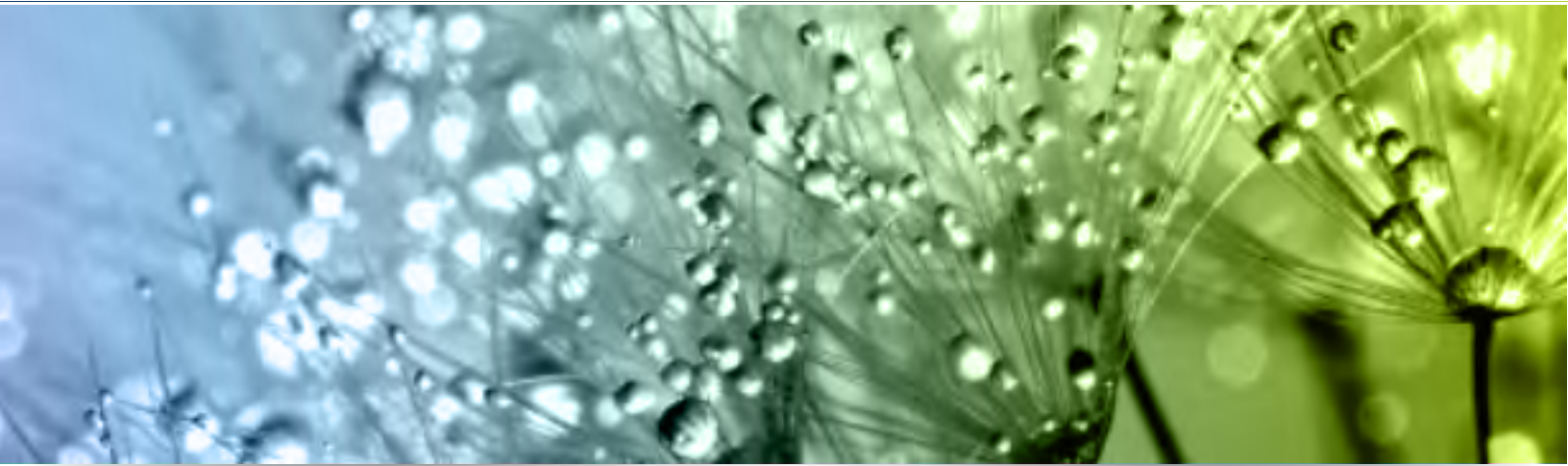


FUN FACTS ABOUT ERIN O'TOOLE¹²

- O'Toole was born in Montreal in 1973, but grew up in Bowmanville, ON.
- He is the eldest of five siblings.
- O'Toole's father worked for General Motors and his mother studied to become a teacher.
- At 9, Erin tragically lost his mother to breast cancer.
- At 18, Erin enrolled in the Royal Military College of Canada and became an officer for the Royal Canadian Air Force at 22; he spent his military career flying on search and rescue missions and naval support operations with 423 Squadron.
- O'Toole met his wife at a Mooseheads game in Halifax, and the couple now has two children.
- O'Toole spent time in the business sector prior to entering government.
- He has volunteered with the Royal Canadian Legion, Rotary Club, Clarington Youth and Community Leadership Program, and True Patriot Love Foundation.

➞ HOW THEY GOT THERE

When O'Toole ran for leader of the Conservative Party in 2020, his campaign promised to bring back "true blue leadership."⁵ At the time, that meant fiscal responsibility, fighting for auto and forestry workers, standing up for those wearing a uniform of service, and defending Canadian history and institutions from "attacks from cancel culture and the radical left."⁶ Since then, O'Toole has changed his approach. During the 2021 election campaign he made a public shift from the Conservative's traditional right-wing position towards the ideological center of Canadian politics. This was done in order to appeal to potential Conservative voters who are younger, more diverse, much more concerned about climate change, and much less angry about Justin Trudeau.⁷ "We're not your dad's Conservative Party any more," O'Toole said at a campaign stop in Saguenay, Quebec.⁸ Throughout his campaign and in his platform, he then proceeded to emphasize perhaps the most liberal perspectives the party has ever seen on issues such as climate policies, engagement with working Canadians and union leaders, and outreach to cultural communities.⁹ While some have heralded this approach as the much needed modernization of an outdated political platform, others did not look so favorably upon O'Toole reinventing his "true blue" self. Did O'Toole's campaign reveal faults in his leadership? Let's zoom in on the particular leadership competencies O'Toole's adversaries are calling into question, and we'll let you decide for yourself.



→ WHAT HAPPENED

More than anything else, O'Toole's contenders have criticized him for displaying a lack of **integrity**. This claim cites changes made during his 2021 election campaign that did not align with the promises he made while running for party leader the year before. For example, O'Toole initially pledged to repeal all gun law changes made by the Trudeau government, though he later stated that the firearms banned in May 2020 would remain. Addressing changes like these, Conservative Party National Councillor Bert Chen told CBC's *Power and Politics* that he and many other members felt "betrayed and upset." "Conservatives believe in integrity and accountability," Chen said. "Integrity means keeping true to your beliefs and what you've communicated that you will run on, and not changing them halfway through an election or on a dime."⁴

O'Toole has also been called out on his **vision** as a political leader. Vision is the ability to see the "big picture" in an organization, industry, and economy, and includes having a clear sense of the organization's (or nation's) ideal future state. It also includes communicating this to others in a compelling way. After O'Toole failed to win Canada's 44th election, many questioned whether he truly understood the big picture of his supporters, particularly the long-standing right-wing ones, who may have been lost to the People's Party of Canada (PPC) in this vote. PPC Leader Maxime Bernier came in second during the 2017 campaign for Conservative leadership, but he then left the party after accusing them of abandoning their "core conservative principles."⁸ With the changes O'Toole made to the party's platform and principles this year, it's no surprise that some are calling his ideology into question. Given that these changes pushed some members out of the "big blue tent" and into the PPC's corner, others are also doubting O'Toole's vision as a strategic political leader.

While the changes O'Toole made caused some to question his leadership, others have commended him for his **flexibility**. Prior to the election, O'Toole told Conservatives that the party must change because if it doesn't, it will not win the necessary votes to defeat the Liberals in the next election.⁷ He cast himself as a 21st-century conservative, stating that he is pro-choice and an ally to the LGBTQ+ community. He promised to put a price on carbon — an idea that has previously been opposed by Conservatives — and remained open to the possibility of provinces and territories keeping the Liberal carbon tax if Conservatives were to win the election.⁸ While party members such as Bert Chen may consider this a lack of integrity, others argue that O'Toole did not compromise his character, honesty, trustworthiness, or sincerity when he took a party with traditional core principals and reframed them in order to welcome more Canadians into the Conservative ranks.



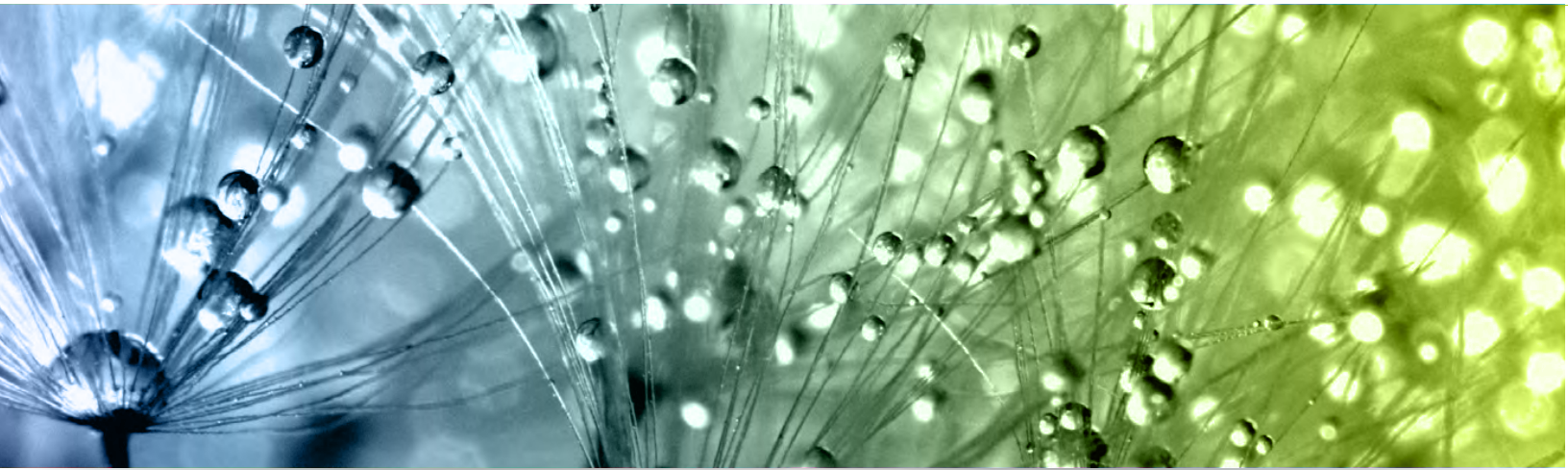
At the end of the day, we know that integrity, vision, and flexibility are key competencies in any political party leader. What that looks like, and whether O'Toole did a good job we'll leave up to you and the caucus to decide. One thing, however, is for sure; leaders need to be more than charismatic poster people. Whether they lead our nation, corporations, schools, teams, or families, leaders must excel in the practical competencies required for them to get the job done.

➡ KEY TAKEAWAYS

- 1. INTEGRITY MATTERS** One of the keys to a positive and productive work environment is having leaders who act with integrity. Integrity in leaders refers to being honest, trustworthy, and reliable. Leaders with integrity act in accordance with their words; they practice what they preach.¹⁰ This is an important leadership quality for governments and corporations alike.
- 2. VISION IS IMPORTANT** One thing we've learned from O'Toole's campaign is that leaders must be strategic. They need to have a vision. They should clearly understand their stakeholders and know how to position themselves to align with stakeholders' expectations (while, of course, remaining authentic and not compromising their integrity).
- 3. LEADERS MUST BE FLEXIBLE** Given the change in O'Toole's vision, some criticized him for a lack of integrity, while others commended him for his flexibility. Regardless of opinions on O'Toole's behavior, flexibility is an essential competency for leaders. Leaders need to adapt their strategy, goals, and approaches to problem-solving in order to meet the demands of their stakeholders — especially during times of change. The right balance between flexibility and standing by your principles is found when leaders are authentic to their vision, consistent with their values, and transparent in their processes.

➡ SIGMA CAN HELP

If you're interested in learning more about leadership competencies, SIGMA is here to help! We've developed a [competency framework](#) that can be applied in organizations across all industries. This framework will help you identify and develop leadership talent, as well as measure performance along the way. To learn more, check out our website or [contact us](#) today. We're always happy to answer questions or chat about how we can best to help you. ■



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