

PARTIES, ELECTIONS,  
and the FUTURE of  
CANADIAN POLITICS

Edited by  
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————— *To all of our mentors  
at the University of British Columbia.  
Thank you.*

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This volume was conceived during Royce Koop's postdoctoral fellowship in the Department of Political Science at Memorial University of Newfoundland in 2010-11. The two of us had a number of conversations over the course of that year about parties and elections (both inside and outside of Canada), and early on we noted that there had not yet been a consolidated effort to unpack the tumultuous last two decades of electoral politics in Canada. Given our training at the University of British Columbia, where we had been doctoral students together, and the fact that our supervisors are the foremost experts in Canada on political parties (R. Kenneth Carty supervised Koop) and elections (Richard Johnston supervised Bittner), we thought it fitting to bring together scholars from these different subfields to talk about contemporary Canadian parties and elections in order to figure out what was going on.

The result of this planning was a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)-funded workshop at Memorial University in October 2010, focusing on parties, voters, and elections in Canada. Over two days, papers were presented by André Blais, Kelly Blidook, Ken Carty, Greg Clarke, Bill Cross, Munroe Eagles, Elizabeth Goodyear-Grant, Allison Harell, Harold Jansen, Chris Kam, Matthew Kerby, Georgia Kernell, Lisa Lambert, Peter Loewen, Alex Marland, Scott Matthews, Russell Williams,

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PARTIES, ELECTIONS,  
and the FUTURE of  
CANADIAN POLITICS



# Introduction

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## Change and Continuity in Canadian Parties and Elections

AMANDA BITTNER AND ROYCE KOOP

Brian Mulroney's Progressive Conservative Party won a huge majority in the House of Commons in the 1988 national election, partly as a result of his "grand compromise" between the West and Quebec after the failure of the Meech Lake Accord. A few years later, following the multipurpose Charlottetown Accord and a failed referendum, Mulroney quit, leaving his successor, Kim Campbell, with a damaged party, a damaged nation, and a big job ahead of her. Canadians sent a message in the 1993 election: the party was devastated at the polls and its share of parliamentary seats fell from 169 in 1988 to 2 in 1993. The intraparty cooperation and compromise necessary to secure widespread support across Canada have not resurfaced since that election – Jean Chrétien's long period in power masked serious and enduring divisions within the Liberal Party itself – and, despite the fall of the Bloc Québécois in the 2011 federal election, seem unlikely to return anytime soon.

If we look back on the last eighteen years and seven elections in Canadian federal politics, on the surface it appears that a great deal has changed. The sovereigntist Bloc Québécois was a strong and solid presence in the House of Commons from 1993 until the 2011 election, even playing the role of Official Opposition for a single term. We have also seen the emergence and reshaping of a new party from the West, as Preston Manning's Reform Party first broke into the House in 1993 and then morphed into the Canadian Alliance in an effort to appeal to Canadians across the country.

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We have also seen the demise of the Progressive Conservative Party as we knew it, followed by its merger with the Canadian Alliance to form the new Conservative Party of Canada in 2004. During this period, the Canadian public was governed by a succession of Liberal majority governments in the 1990s, followed by a string of minority governments (one Liberal followed by three Conservative) beginning with the 2004 election. The recent 2011 election has solidified Canada's transition to something different, with the formation of Stephen Harper's first Conservative majority government.

Although it may appear to the naked eye as though much has changed in Canadian politics, we do not really know whether this is in fact the case, since to date there has been no explicit, synthesized, in-depth analysis of the state of the Canadian political system dedicated to understanding the dynamics of electoral and party system evolution over the last two decades. Has there really been change in the nature of (1) party organizations, (2) party behaviour in the House of Commons, (3) voters' perceptions of national parties, (4) the institutions that shape the structures of parties and the actions of voters, and (5) patterns of competition – party systems – at the national level? This collection of essays provides an account of Canadian politics during this period, with contributors examining issues related to these different but interdependent aspects of national electoral politics.

A number of themes emerge throughout this volume, all related to what we nominally dub "continuity and change" in Canadian parties and elections. Longitudinal accounts of Canadian politics – such as those of Carty (1992), Johnston (1992), and Smith (1992) – have always grappled with issues of both continuity and change. Indeed, it is difficult to find examples of wholesale change in Canadian politics without also turning up corresponding signs of continuity. New parties have emerged, but the old parties have endured; the Canadian electorate has changed over the course of the twentieth century, but the single-member plurality system that translates the wishes of that electorate into representation has stayed the same; national campaigns have embraced new communication technologies such as television and the Internet to communicate with voters, but candidates in the ridings continue to campaign by shaking hands and kissing babies in much the same way as candidates running under the banners of Macdonald and Laurier did. By examining parties, voters, and the institutions within which these actors function, we are able to discern more clearly the dynamics of party politics over the last two decades: twenty years of both continuity and change.

The following sections briefly introduce and discuss the indicators of continuity and change that structure the presentation of chapters in this book, after which we briefly speculate on the future of Canadian politics in light of these contributions. This foreshadows our concluding chapter, which discusses the development of the Canadian party system in light of the results of the 2011 national election.

### **Parties in the Legislature**

Mulroney's large Conservative majorities in the House of Commons in the 1980s were followed by a decade of strong Liberal majorities (although without quite the same level of voter support). These were followed by nearly a decade of successive minority governments, Liberal and then Conservative, until the 2011 election returned Canada to Conservative majority governance. Changes in the seating plan of the House of Commons aside, there are reasons to expect that differences in governments and the distribution of seats might have an impact on the nature of legislative activity. Indeed, as some of the essays in this book demonstrate, politics in Parliament in the last decade have been quite different from politics in years past. Some suggest that only small changes have taken place, whereas others point to fundamental differences in the ways that members of Parliament behave in the House of Commons. In Chapter 5, for example, Anthony Sayers observes that cabinet membership has, over time, come to favour urban areas. His story of change is one in which the distribution of leadership roles in the country has shifted in such a way that rural ridings are less likely to see one of their representatives sit at the decision-making table. This marks an important shift in the nature of representation in the House of Commons and reflects the urbanization of Canadian society over the course of the twentieth century.

In contrast, Chapter 6 paints a picture of both continuity and change. Elizabeth Goodyear-Grant argues that we have seen continuity in terms of women's presence as actual officeholders (the House of Commons has consisted of about 20 percent women for the past few decades) but that some change has taken place in relation to the parties' focus on women as voters. She points to more regressive policies directed towards women (but suggests that these changes are the result of a change in government rather than a change to the party system) and notes that recent electoral campaigns have been targeted more directly at women. Goodyear-Grant suggests that this is the result of increased electoral competition and constant election campaigning, a story similar to that told in Chapter 3 by Kelly Blidook and Matthew Byrne.

Minority governments, which both Canada's parties and its citizens endured from 2004 to 2011, operate differently from majority governments, regardless of the party at the helm. The instability associated with minority governments means that the ways that parties "work," both inside and outside of Parliament, change. Evidence suggests that minority governments lead parties to become more adversarial, as the scorekeeping required when they are "constantly campaigning" becomes more intense. This conflicts with notions of increased interparty cooperation that might be expected when clear majority governments do not form. Chapter 3 demonstrates that adversarialism in the House of Commons increased substantially as a result of the shift from majority to minority governments.

The risk of government defeat in minority parliaments is also likely to influence the policy positions articulated by MPs. Blidook and Byrne note that the tone of MPs' statements has changed over time and attribute this in part to the occurrence of minority parliaments. Chapter 4 supports this observation, as Munroe Eagles finds that MPs' policy positions are linked to the characteristics of their constituents. He suggests that MPs are concerned with presenting themselves as sensitive to the preferences of voters and will demonstrate responsiveness to constituents when provided with opportunities to do so. Minority governments and the frequent elections associated with them provide legislators with incentives to consistently demonstrate that they act on behalf of their constituents, in order to develop a local personal vote that will aid in their re-election.

We might have expected that the change in the nature and origins of the Conservative Party of Canada, combined with the regional strengths of the other national parties, would have caused policies and politics to become more regionalized since the 1980s. Chapter 8 suggests, however, that there is very little evidence to support this notion. Although policies emerging from Parliament may have become more conservative over the last three elections, especially in relation to gender, Blake Andrew, Patrick Fournier, and Stuart Soroka find no indication of an increase in the regionalization of politics as expressed through media coverage over the last twenty years. Similarly, William Cross and Lisa Young suggest in Chapter 2 that the methods used to select candidates have also exhibited continuity. They demonstrate that observations made in the early 1990s (e.g., Erickson 1993) about the role of political parties in recruiting candidates still hold: most candidates are recruited by either the local or national party organizations.

Cross and Young's findings about party recruitment of women and ethnic minorities are particularly interesting when placed alongside discussions of parties' appeals to both women and ethnic voters. Goodyear-Grant demonstrates that the parties changed their approaches over the course of the last two decades, especially in the elections punctuating Harper's Conservative minority governments. She points to the parties' targeted campaigns, including the Conservative approach of classifying women as "Zoe" and "Sheila" and aiming messages accordingly, as well as the Liberal Party's "pink book," developed prior to the 2008 election.

### **Parties in the Minds of Voters**

While targeted appeals to specific groups of voters are not a new phenomenon, neither is the notion that certain groups will be more supportive of some parties than others. Indeed, it appears that although there may be substantial change in the ways that the parties have behaved in the House of Commons over the last two decades, not much has changed in the minds of voters. Three chapters very clearly make the case for continuity in voting behaviour: Allison Harell's discussion of the ethnic bases of party support (Chapter 7); Scott Matthews's assessment of how voters deal with partisan attacks (Chapter 11); and Amanda Bittner's evaluation of voters' abilities to engage with and process changes to the political landscape (Chapter 12).

For decades, the Liberal Party has benefited from the support of voters of non-European backgrounds. In response to observations in the popular news media about a shift in the support of ethnic minorities from the Liberals to the Conservatives, Harell examines the ethnic bases of support for parties at the federal level. She finds that the traditional linkages between voters of non-European ethnic background and the Liberal Party remain strong, which suggests strong continuity in the bases of party support despite the Liberals' lack of success in recent years. Although Harell's story is one of continuity, this may in fact be transformed into an account of change in light of the results of the 2011 national election.

The picture painted by Matthews is similar, in that he points to continuity from the point of view of voters. His findings suggest that partisans behave in the same way that they perhaps always have. We might expect the partisan bases of party support to have changed over the years, given changes in the menu of options available at the federal level. Furthermore, combining party system change with the increased adversarialism observed in the House of Commons during the recent string of minority parliaments,

we might expect the commitment of partisans to their parties to wane when their parties are attacked. Increased negative evaluation of parties does not, however, appear to be linked with capitulation on the part of partisans. When their party is attacked, Canadian partisans will defend it fiercely, regardless of the level of negativity expressed towards the party in the legislature. Canadian politics in recent years has clearly not been for the faint of heart.

Since 1993, we have seen the demise of one of Confederation's founding political parties, the emergence of new (competitive) parties, and a series of minority governments. The notion that voters are not responding to those changes seems, on the surface, to be absurd. In Chapter 12, Bittner suggests that voters have difficulty coping with electoral flux. When parties and leaders change from election to election and a brand new menu of options appears on the scene, there is an associated impact on voters' ability to navigate through election campaigns. Changes in the party system make it difficult for voters to cope; the more stable things are and the more they know how they feel about leaders and parties, the better they are able to translate their evaluations into choices. Bittner suggests that new parties are at a disadvantage for being new: new parties and new leaders are penalized because voters are not familiar with them. This is not a function of changes in the party system: voters have not become less able to cope with change in recent years but have had this difficulty at least since Mulroney's second win in 1988.

Continuity also emerges as a theme in the media coverage of election campaigns in this period. Comparing the contemporary era to the 1980s shows that although new parties and new leaders emerged and received media attention in the 1990s, the system has stabilized once again to reflect earlier patterns of news coverage. Andrew, Fournier, and Soroka find that the emergence of new parties has not led to increased regionalization or ideological polarization, at least not in terms of media coverage (Chapter 8). They suggest that the rise and fall of Liberal and Conservative coverage reflects the parties' positions in government at the national level rather than regional patterns.

### **Parties Playing by the Rules of the Game**

No discussion of Canadian electoral politics is complete without an assessment of the political institutions that structure how parties organize and compete with one another. For the most part, these institutions have remained stable over time. Despite many efforts at reform, single-member

plurality continues to be the electoral system in place. Important institutional changes occurred and were again discussed in the 1980s and early 1990s, but changes in succeeding years were minuscule by comparison.

Nevertheless, small changes did take place, concerning the redistribution of seats in the House of Commons, boundary rules, and party financing laws. These changes were not inconsequential and may have fundamentally altered the nature of party competition for the future. In Chapter 10, Harold Jansen and Lisa Lambert examine the impact of changes to party financing laws, and tell a story of change as a result of institutional reforms. Based on their assessment of the decisions made by the Green Party over the last half-decade, they suggest that financing laws have had particularly important implications for new and emerging party organizations. They recognize, however, that the future remains unknown. The Green Party may be a lasting feature of the Canadian landscape, or it may be a reflection of recent short-term flux before the system heads towards a new period of continuity. Although the party secured a seat for its leader, Elizabeth May, in the 2011 election, its future remains unclear.

Uncertainty is a theme in this volume, as the status of a number of the features of the political landscape that have emerged over the last two decades is not entirely clear. In fact, some of this uncertainty may be the direct result of institutional reforms. Williams, for example, looks at the impact of changes to the political map through redistribution and boundary rules implemented in 1985 (Chapter 9). He suggests that the way electoral boundaries are drawn has contributed substantially to the string of minority governments in the first decade of the twenty-first century. He argues that the absence of a majority government made changes to electoral laws nearly impossible because of the way that apportionment has been politicized. Indeed, his earlier (pre-2011) predictions were confirmed when the election of a Conservative majority government led to the introduction of a new system of redistribution, with the passage of Bill C-20 in the House of Commons in December 2011.

### **Party Systems**

Have things really changed in Canada, as pundits would have us believe? The most important way that Canadian politics might have changed is in the nature of the national party system. In Chapter 1, Kenneth Carty examines changes to Canadian electoral politics and argues that we are facing a major change in how we conceive of the federal parties. In particular, he suggests that the way that we think about the Liberal Party

must be fundamentally altered. No longer can it claim to be Canada's brokerage party, a party of the centre that seeks to appeal to voters of all stripes across all of Canada's regions. As a result, he suggests, the nature of party competition and organization has shifted, which has important implications for the future of Canadian party politics.

Although Richard Johnston, too, indicates the uncertain future of the Liberal Party, he also points out that flux is a recurrent theme in Canadian electoral politics (Chapter 13). He suggests that Canada stands out from other Westminster systems in terms of its electoral volatility, the number of parties competing in the system and sitting in the legislature, and the trajectory of changes to the system. In particular, he notes that when major electoral shifts take place in Canada, things often return back to "normal," in contrast to electoral earthquakes in other democracies, where permanent realignment is likely to result instead. One might argue, therefore, that the last twenty years have represented one of these periods, revolving around the fortunes of the Conservative Party (as Canada's electoral flux often does), and that a return to "normal" will take place in the near future. The question is whether the election of a Conservative majority government in the 2011 election is in fact the "new normal" in the Canadian party system. Only time will tell.

### **How Will Canada's Electoral Landscape Look in the Future?**

Those of us who study parties and elections are usually loath to make predictions, and the 2011 Canadian election is a perfect example of why this is so. Going into the election, many thought that it was "business as usual": an election for an election's sake, and likely to lead to either another Conservative minority or perhaps a Conservative majority, depending on how Canadians felt about the parties. Instead, and nearly coinciding with the leaders' debates, polling numbers revealed a massive shift in party support, particularly a massive shift in support for the New Democratic Party.

To most Canadians, the 2011 election introduced enormous, unexpected changes. We think it quite possible, however, that 2011 really capped off a period of "electoral deviation" in which the parties struggled with non-traditional competitors and institutional changes that worked against the establishment of a stable pattern of competition of the sort that characterized Canadian politics prior to the 2004 national election. This book is about how parties and voters struggled to adapt to new challenges in the last two decades, and how their responses to these challenges ultimately led to the return of a national majority government in 2011. In some cases,

these actors responded by adapting and changing; in other cases, they remained the same. The rest of this book charts both change and continuity throughout this period, and concludes with some reflections on the nature of the Canadian national party system during these years and what might lie in store for post-2011 Canada.

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