

The Canadian Party System

An Analytic History

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1

Introduction

The Canadian party system is unruly yet inscrutable. For one thing, it defies the most powerful generalization in empirical political theory, Duverger's Law. That law states that a strongly majoritarian institutional context such as Canada's induces voters to concentrate on two and only two parties. Instead, Canada has a multiparty system. Moreover, although the system's dominant parties date back to the mid-nineteenth century, each has been to death's door and back. The same citizens vote differently in provincial elections than in national ones. Although a party of labour exists, the system's class basis is weak. Party competition has been sustained by cultural politics, but most observers find the cultural patterns mystifying. Unlike most systems – and unlike all other systems with single-member districts – the Canadian system is dominated by a party of the centre.

Although some Canadian peculiarities have been used to make general points in comparative politics, such work tends to over-stylize the case, misstate its explanatory relevance, and understate its true peculiarity. I too present Canada as a deviant case and argue that its discharge is essential to a full understanding of more conventional cases. Likewise, comparison is essential to understand fully the Canadian case itself. A major virtue of the case is its disjointedness: a party system dating back to the mid-nineteenth century coexists with a mixed cast of newer parties. Because the institutional context is majoritarian, the coexistence is uneasy. In one sense, the Canadian system exhibits dynamics typical of general Anglo-American patterns. In other countries, however, the dynamics operated quickly, replacing one system of simple competition with another one. Because the

dynamics were quick and took place nearly a century ago, the genealogy is obscured. In Canada, these dynamics have occupied the better part of a century, are geographically differentiated, and are still under way; the genealogy is continuously visible.

This book is historical not only because it mines long periods for data on dynamic processes but also because it appeals to history to account for certain patterns that otherwise seem to be locked in mystery. Even more to the point, it argues that certain critical features are historical accidents. The electoral framework was disruptive in amplifying the initial effects of those accidents and then was conservative in discouraging further assaults on the accidentally generated pattern.

This book is analytical not in seeking to reduce the system's complexity to a handful of theorems but in holding up a mirror to analytically based claims by others. It presents theoretically motivated chronologies to assist the causal process analysis. The chronologies do not purport to be comprehensive but are as balanced as possible in relation to particular questions. Most important, I test the empirical reach of what might be called the Neo-Duvergerian Synthesis, notably Cox (1997) and Chhibber and Kollman (2004). In this work, Canada is already recognized as a critical deviant case. But that literature gets Canada less than half right and, in doing so, risks being misleading for patterns in other countries. In particular, I argue that the stipulation in the synthesis that Duverger's Law operates only at the district level overlooks plain facts. The most reasonable interpretation of those facts is that many voters look beyond their particular district – indeed to the other side of the continent – for strategic cues about how to behave. Meanwhile, focusing on observable implications of the neo-Duvergerian theorems distracts us from lessons in the rest of the data. Those lessons are far-reaching. They extend from the competing logics of parliamentary and electoral majoritarianism to the party politics of federations. They require us to look at parties as organizations whose motives cannot be boiled down to short-term electoral advantage.

For understanding the totality of the case, my pivotal claim is that explaining most of the system's anomalies requires one simple fact: its domination by a party of the centre. Canadian parties can be ordered from left to right, as is true everywhere. The gap between the Conservatives on the right and the New Democrats on the left is wide and easy to interpret.

But standing between these parties is the historically dominant Liberal Party. This fact is pivotal to Canadian multipartism and to the weakness of class politics. Canadian parties also sit on a second axis of choice, which I refer to as the “national” dimension. Its content varies over the decades but always reflects the fact that Canada is a binational state. Such a second dimension with identity politics content is also not unusual. What is unusual is that on this second dimension the Liberals also command the centre. This control is critical to the system’s volatility, to its geography, and to the gap inside Canadian voters’ heads between their federal and provincial selves. In sum, the Canadian party system exhibits a pattern – “polarized pluralism” – normally associated with systems emerging from a crisis or heading toward one. If polarized pluralism explains so much, then it too begs to be explained. This is the other main task of the book.

The Argument in Brief

Canada combines low-detail Westminster institutions with the sociology of deep division. Among rich industrial countries, Canada is the most diverse (Fearon 2003). In particular, French Canada constitutes a nation within the nation, an island in an English-speaking sea, so to speak. For French Canada, survival has been the overarching preoccupation. To that end, francophones, although a national minority, have been well served by the country’s majoritarian institutions. By any electoral standard, the francophone vote, especially in Quebec, has been remarkably coordinated, both in concentration on one party at a time and in mobility between parties. Concentration and mobility are then amplified by the electoral system. The upshot of this coordination was that, for nearly 150 years, Quebec alone could put one party halfway to a parliamentary majority. The rest of the country rarely matched Quebec in electoral coherence, however, so the province was the *de facto* pivot for the government. Quebec’s history of coordinated mobility is a major contributor to the electorate’s overall volatility.

Most of the time, the party that Quebec kept in power was the Liberals. Typically, this was because the Liberals were the only acceptable alternative, sometimes barely so. There was usually plenty of room on the Quebec nationalist side of the Liberals, but most of the time no party filled the space. Outside Quebec, the Liberals were the most pro-Quebec party, so

there was also plenty of room on the anti-Quebec side. Taking both parts of the electorate together on this existential dimension, the Liberals occupied the centre. Since they were not just centrist but also dominant, the Canadian system exhibited the dynamics that Sartori (1966, 1976) called “polarized pluralism.” This condition is normally associated with systems under challenge for their democratic character – postwar Italy or Weimar Germany – or for the integrity of the very community – India. Canada has been an example of the latter. In the electoral sphere, this has meant that, when cultural questions heated up, the Liberals have been vulnerable to invasion on both flanks, anti-Canadian forces in Quebec and anti-Quebec forces elsewhere in Canada. This has been a further contributor to electoral volatility.

Canada outside Quebec (and outside the handful of other francophone strongholds) is a classic Anglo-American settler society. Its identity is both plastic and susceptible to cultural and geostrategic influences from elsewhere in the Anglosphere. Canada has also undergone urbanization, industrialization, and labour mobilization on lines parallel to those of its main comparators, if sometimes at a slower pace. These forces have raised the dimensionality of policy debate. What is more, the economy is open and resource based and thus experiences the full weight of global business cycles. At first glance, it seems to be reasonable to suppose that these changes and vulnerabilities account for the party system’s fragmentation. But other Anglo-American systems also feature roughly orthogonal cultural and economic policy dimensions, yet their party systems have absorbed these pressures without surrendering to enduring fragmentation. The absorption was often painful, with fragmentation and volatility in the short run. But the other systems reconsolidated along new lines. Older cultural divisions might persist but are normally subsumed by the now dominant economic dimension. In Canada, however, old and new divisions coexist in disjointed pluralism, like Europe.

They coexist, I argue, not in spite of the majoritarian institutional framework but because of it. Thanks to the framework, the presence of Quebec has ramifications throughout the rest of the country. In a system of proportional representation, Quebec would be a stand-alone factor, important in function of its size but not out of proportion to that size. In the majoritarian context, Quebec can empower certain other groups,

typically culturally kindred ones, and thus strengthen the cultural agenda at the expense of the economic one. It can also provoke countermobilization by hostile forces, which simply reinforces the point. But coexistence is a two-way street. Much – probably most – of the rest of Canada feels the same pressures that the outside world does. And, crudely speaking, the further west one goes, the less immediately relevant a cultural agenda seems to be. Westerners are repeatedly tempted to try to reshape the Canada-wide issue agenda through the medium of a new party. The division of power in the federal system also shelters a big fraction of partisan contestation from transcontinental influences, such that provincial politics in places that do not mirror the Canada-wide cultural debate can resemble the world outside Canada. And forces originating in the provincial arena can bubble up into the federal one. A party system predicated on divisions in central Canada usually prevails federally. But its reach is never total, not all the way across the continent nor all the way down to the provincial arena. From time to time, pushback from outside central Canada threatens to undermine the system.

Among new parties, one is qualitatively different from the others. This is the New Democratic Party. The NDP and its precursors represent a universal force like that in almost all of the comparable systems, indeed in almost all systems in the rich capitalist world: a party of social democracy and organized labour. Its growth has generally been gradual, and it has experienced setbacks. It might never overturn the pattern of national politics, although it has come close. But it is securely ensconced in the Canada-wide system, and in certain provinces it is one of the dominant players. Its presence imparts a structure and a dynamic to elections that stand somewhat aside from both abiding cultural divisions and spasmodic geographically specific intrusions. Its presence is assisted by the forces of geography and federalism that create space for third parties. But its weakness, I argue, is not – or not mainly – the product of its own flaws or mistakes (of which there have been many). Rather, NDP weakness is the complement to Liberal strength. The strength of the Liberal Party means that consolidation on the centre-right to block the NDP has never been necessary. Similarly, the historical inability of the Conservatives to form governments means that NDP supporters can afford – most of the time – to stay put without risking coordination failure on the centre-left.

Coordination between NDP and Conservative supporters never makes sense, not on a left-right dimension at least. Here, too, the party system exhibits polarized pluralism.

At many points, the argument requires that we take seriously a force that seems to defy one logic of rational choice. The standing claim in the study of electoral coordination is that the critical arena is the local district. Strategic pressure operates at that level, and from this follow certain predictions for local equilibria. In showing how the predictions routinely fail, I find myself resorting to parastrategic arguments at a much higher level of aggregation, one at which voters have an even smaller chance of making a difference than the already infinitesimal one in the local district. I argue that actors respond to information about whole electorates, including ones to which they do not belong. This intuition travels beyond the explanation of local electoral fragmentation. Part of my substantiation of the case involves treating provincial electorates as counterfactuals for federal ones. In doing so, I also wind up accounting for a large fraction of Canada's massive federal-provincial discontinuity. Complementarily, this exercise holds up a mirror to party strategy. If parties focus only on winning the immediate election, then none of my arguments work. By indirection, we must conclude that parties think about the long run. As they do, they challenge much of the neo-Duvergerian apparatus.

Plan of the Book

An integrated account requires three main elements: the foundations of Liberal and Conservative electoral politics, the conditions for and patterns of third-party entry and exit, and interaction across federal and provincial arenas and between old and new parties. The majoritarian logic of Westminster parliamentarism privileges first movers, and this exerts downward pressure on later entrants. However, if a later entrant offers a programmatic alternative to the others and finds the means to survive, then at least some of the old parties will collaborate in opening up the new policy dimension. As this happens, at least one of the old parties might find itself at risk, especially to the extent that the majoritarian logic of the electoral system turns the party's initial strategic advantage on its head. The plan of the book follows from these elements.

Chapter 2 supplies a stylized introduction to the players and to critical dependent variables. The chapter is not just taxonomic but also underscores the inadequacy of some key analytical claims. It draws distinctions among the system's smaller parties. "Insurgents" appear suddenly and typically have rather short lives. The social democratic and labour left, culminating in the formation of the NDP in 1961, grew gradually and has staying power. The critical dependent variables are represented by indicators of fragmentation, volatility, and federal-provincial discontinuity. The indicators enable cross-national comparison. The chapter emphasizes that flux in the dependent variables and relations among them are not accounted for by the comparative elections arguments currently in play. In particular, fragmentation of the vote is as much the product of multiparty competition within electoral districts as it is of sectional conflict. What is more, the sectional pattern exhibits an episodic dynamic critical to understanding electoral volatility. The ebb and flow of regionalism complements cycles of Conservative boom and bust. The chapter also establishes the system's weak class foundations, its historically strong but now nearly defunct cultural bases, and the fact of Liberal centrism.

How the Liberals dominated the politics of the twentieth century is the topic of Chapter 3. The key was control of Quebec, the necessary and sufficient condition for Liberal victory in the country as a whole. The Quebec electorate exhibited a remarkable degree of electoral self-discipline: one-sided majorities in votes that produced even more one-sided majorities in seats. Eighty percent of the time between 1896 and 1988, majorities in Quebec were conferred on the Liberal Party, and almost every time this happened the Liberals formed the government. The few times that Quebecers declined to give the Liberals a solid bloc the party fell from power. Occasionally, the Quebec electorate went all the way and gave a near-monolithic bloc to the Conservatives.

Chapter 4 substantiates how the Liberal Party is in fact centrist on both of the dimensions that dominate electors' choices: the left-right one that organizes party politics practically worldwide and a Canada-specific "national question," the existential issue forced by the presence of Quebec. It is not that the Liberals sustained a centrist position on one dimension by controlling a pole on the other one, as analytical accounts normally claim

(Chappell and Keech 1986). I show that Liberal centrism on the national question is made possible by segmentation of the electorate between Quebec and the rest of Canada, such that the Liberals do control a pole of debate in both Quebec and the rest of Canada – but the opposite pole in each place, pro-Canada inside Quebec and pro-Quebec outside the province.

In the twentieth century, the Liberal combination of control of Quebec and centrism on the national question meant that a Canada-wide Conservative victory required an ends-against-the-middle coalition of francophones and francophobes. Occasionally, the Conservatives succeeded in building such a coalition. Building it helped to fuel a boom in the party's Canada-wide vote. But the coalition was unsustainable, and the boom was always followed by a bust. Amplitudes of boom and bust increased over the century and ultimately blew up the old system.

Quebec was critical, but the Liberals required additional support elsewhere. For most of the twentieth century, this support emerged from a group – Catholics – whose interests often aligned with those of Quebeckers and whose geography was strategically helpful. This is the argument of Chapter 5. In late-twentieth-century terms, the Catholic-Liberal connection was something of a mystery. I argue that the mystery can be resolved only by examining the historical record. In the nineteenth century, when substantive religious controversy was most acute, the parties did not divide along denominational lines. It was only in the twentieth century, with Canada's engagement in great-power diplomacy and war, that the divide increased. The temporal pattern reveals that the religious divide was in fact over national identity. After 1965, as Canada's relationship with Britain faded, Catholics became less distinctively Liberal, and identity politics shifted to an internal, group-specific basis. As this happened, the Liberals' overall position weakened.

Chapter 6 documents the life and death of parties with geographically focused appeals, parties that I call – somewhat imprecisely – “insurgents.” These parties supply a significant component of electoral fractionalization. Such parties defy simple explanation, however, since provinces with similar circumstances exhibit sharply divergent patterns. No less ubiquitous than third-party entry is third-party exit, sometimes as one third party displaces another, more often as old parties soak up sectional tension. The chapter

shows that explanations of entry and exit and of variation across provinces must incorporate path dependence.

The puzzle of the NDP is addressed in Chapter 7. Why has the NDP historically been weak? If it is so weak, then why does it exist at all? The chapter argues that for a party to survive in the long run under Westminster rules, it must be present itself, even if only vestigially, everywhere. A corresponding logic is that voters respond not just to a party's local chances but also to its Canada-wide ones. I substantiate this claim in two ways. First, I show that focusing on cultural groups most favourable to the NDP still leaves the party short of the support that its labour counterparts receive from culturally similar groups in other countries. Second, I use provincial elections as counterfactuals for federal ones. In provinces culturally open to class politics, the NDP is a major party provincially if not federally. In provinces less amenable to class politics, the opposite pattern holds.

Chapter 8 shows that the dynamics of interaction among the parties are asymmetrical. Conservative support ebbs and flows mainly in counterpoint to insurgents. The Liberal vote moves contrary to the NDP vote, with a long-run trend toward the NDP. Asymmetry extends to the relationship between "new" party invasion and fractionalization of the vote. Insurgents disproportionately produce sectional discrepancies and thus boost the extra-local component in system breakdown. Entry from the left was also somewhat concentrated geographically, but the federal CCF and NDP grew as much by spreading their vote as by deepening it. This spreading produced three-party competition within individual electoral districts. Such competition bespeaks coordination failure. The chapter documents specific instances of such failure with evidence from three campaigns.

This takes us to federal-provincial discontinuities in Chapter 9. Two basic forces are in play. One is the appearance of insurgents. They are especially strong in provincial elections and in the provinces that sit uneasily in a Canada-wide partisan framework: Quebec and certain western ones. The second process reveals both the power and the limit of Duverger's Law. After an initial surge of multipartism in provincial elections, provincial party systems remain consolidated, as Duverger predicts, even as the federal electorate is fractionalized. This discrepancy is especially marked where the CCF-NDP has made inroads. Growth in the left vote induces strategic consolidation on the centre-right and does so much more efficiently in the

provincial arena than in the federal arena. The identity of the centre-right beneficiary varies over time and place, however, reflecting historical accident and path dependency. Divergence is further enhanced where the provincial-level beneficiary of anti-socialist consolidation is a local insurgent with no enduring federal equivalent.

Chapter 10 recapitulates and integrates the findings, draws lessons that apply beyond the case, and identifies issues highlighted by the book but not directly addressed, much less resolved. One issue is the tension between parliamentary and electoral logics. Where the Westminster propensity for single-party governments creates pressure for geographically inclusive coalitions, the electoral system can create the opposite pressure. This observation comes out of the episodic dynamics that link Conservatives and insurgents. Another issue is the role of historical sequences in the evolution of the system. Only by such sequences can we make sense of certain patterns, especially for new parties. In this, Canada is a microcosm for processes and outcomes already part of the canon for the comparative study of elections. The patterns illustrate the various forms of path dependence. They also reinforce a message from the scholarship on party organization: parties do not always seek to maximize their vote share. Other goals can be worth pursuing, and the most basic goal of all is simple survival. The book's last theoretical point challenges us to become serious about how voters incorporate strategic information into their choices. The book then concludes with observations about the limits of its overall scope.

It is important to say what this book is not. It is not an exercise in thick description. Although my uses of history are balanced and inclusive (at least I have tried to make them so), they are no more detailed than required by theory. Information appears to the extent that it is probative and not otherwise. Similarly, the book does not try to explain everything about Canada's party system. It focuses instead on the features that can be explained by a modest number of central propositions. The focus is augmented where those central propositions signally fail or where they throw a sharp light on anomalies that fairly beg to be explored. Although the book has many implications for understanding the present state of the party system, it is not designed to that end. Indeed, the book is better at explaining the twentieth century than the twenty-first.