

Fighting for Votes

Parties, the Media, and Voters in an Ontario Election

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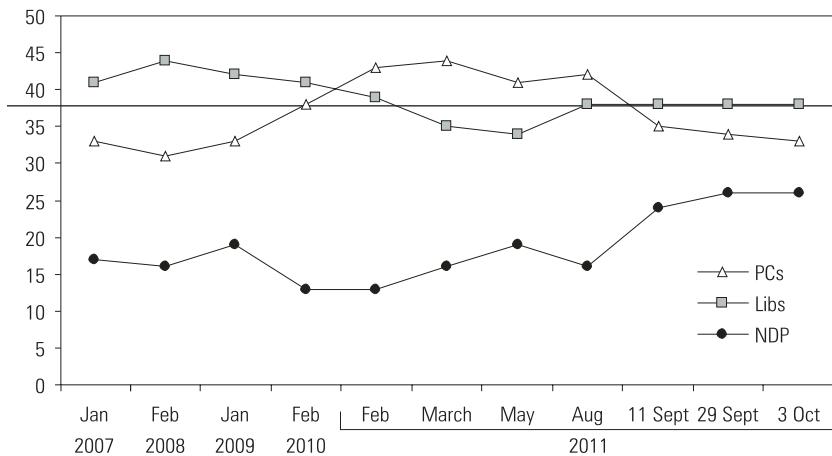
Introduction

The fortieth general election in the province of Ontario was held on 6 October 2011. By the end of the night, three political leaders in Ontario were claiming some sort of victory. For Dalton McGuinty, the incumbent premier, the election outcome spelled success in that it returned an experienced Liberal government to office: “Liberalism in this great country is alive and well and living in Ontario.” For Tim Hudak, the Progressive Conservative leader, voters had “put Dalton McGuinty on a very short leash” by decreasing the share of Liberal seats and holding the party to a minority government. For New Democratic Party leader Andrea Horwath, the outcome represented votes for change: “The people have said very clearly we need to move in a direction where people are at the top of the agenda” (Lupton 2011).

That politicians would try to spin an election outcome in their own favour comes as no surprise. What *is* surprising is how much the outcome differed from expectations that had been widely held just months earlier (see Figure 1.1). In July, Ipsos Reid polls gave the Progressive Conservatives an eleven-point lead over the Liberals. On 4 October, the same firm reported a ten-point lead for the Liberals and predicted the election of a third Liberal majority (Ipsos Reid 2011a).

Despite trailing in virtually all the pre-election polls, the Liberals held on to power. Nonetheless, they lost seventeen seats in the election, dropping from seventy to fifty-three, just one seat shy of another majority government. The Progressive Conservatives (PCs) and New Democrats (NDP) also had some reason to celebrate—the PCs gained twelve seats, going

FIGURE 1.1
Ontario poll results, January 2007 to October 2011



Source: Compilation by authors of CTV News/Globe and Mail/CP24/Nanos polls.

from twenty-five to thirty-seven, while the NDP increased its numbers from ten to seventeen. (Two seats were vacant at the time of dissolution, accounting for the total opposition gain of nineteen.) Four cabinet ministers were defeated, and no new Liberals were elected, nor did any PCs or New Democrats defeat each other's incumbents. Furthermore, the results followed striking regional patterns, as the Liberals won almost entirely in urban and suburban areas and the PCs in rural and semi-rural ridings and smaller cities. The NDP results were more scattered but generally followed their historical duality of two extremes – core urban areas and remote northern ridings.

The Liberals lost many of their rural or semi-rural seats to the Conservatives, including in their historic heartland in southwestern Ontario in ridings like Huron-Bruce, Chatham-Kent-Essex, and Perth-Wellington, as well as eastern Ontario seats like Prince Edward-Hastings. Significantly, these had been the battlegrounds over wind turbines as well as more general complaints about Liberal neglect of rural Ontario. The only arguably rural seat retained by the Liberals was Stormont-Dundas-Glengarry in the eastern corner of Ontario (which included parts of the city of Ottawa), along with some mixed urban-rural ridings like Peterborough and Brant.

While the Liberals were largely shut out of rural Ontario, the flipside was the striking failure of the PCs to win in urban and especially suburban areas – including many of the seats won by their federal counterparts in the election held only five months earlier. This is best illustrated in Peel Region, the area west of Toronto comprising Mississauga and other suburban cities with a population of 1.1 million, where 50 percent identify as visible minorities, 49 percent were not born in Canada, and 27 percent report speaking neither English nor French at home (Statistics Canada 2007). Peel was a microcosm of the changing demographics of Ontario. Of its eight seats, seven were held and retained by the Liberals, the eighth going to the NDP. In contrast, the federal Conservatives won all eight in May 2011, including six for the first time. A similar provincial PC failure was seen inside the city of Toronto, where the inner suburbs of Don Valley, Etobicoke, and North York had provided crucial federal breakthroughs in 2011 after years as safe Liberal seats, as well as in areas immediately east of Toronto like Oak Ridges-Markham, Ajax-Pickering, and Pickering-Scarborough East. These prosperous, immigrant-heavy, Toronto-area seats delivered the federal Conservative breakthrough and majority government in the spring, but also saved the provincial Liberals in the fall.¹ The only Toronto-area seat gained by the PCs was Thornhill, north of the city, and the only other urban seats gained were Barrie and the mixed urban-rural riding of Kitchener-Conestoga, adding to the party's slim holdings of urban seats such as Kitchener-Waterloo, Cambridge, and Burlington.

The NDP celebrated its own gain from ten to seventeen seats – its best showing since the 1990s Rae era – although it was still less than the twenty-two Ontario seats won by the federal party and dashed the hopes of those looking for a full-blown breakthrough. The NDP gained seven seats from the Liberals, widely scattered across the province – three in urban areas (London, Hamilton, and Toronto), one semi-rural seat (the historically volatile Essex riding outside Windsor, a traditional stronghold of organized labour and also an area of wind turbine protests), two northern Ontario seats, and, somewhat surprisingly, the suburban Bramalea-Gore-Malton riding. These added to their traditional strength in downtown Toronto (four seats), urban Hamilton-Niagara (three seats), and northern Ontario

(three seats). The New Democrats remained the province's third party, but in the new minority situation they had potentially greater power than before.

Although the outcome of the election did little to change the political landscape in Ontario, it is particularly interesting given the dramatic reversal of fortunes for the parties. In the spring, it appeared that the public was tired of McGuinty's Liberals, ready for change, and anxious to support Hudak. By October the refrain was very different. Clearly, over the course of the summer and throughout the official campaign, many Ontarians adjusted their preferences for their next premier, deciding to stay with a known quantity rather than take a chance on a new face. The parties presented their platforms, the leaders made their cases for why they were the best choice, local candidates met voters on their doorsteps – and yet the voters were uninspired. This was reflected in the lowest-ever turnout rate of 48.2 percent. As illustrated in Table 1.1, this marked a record low and the fifth consecutive provincial election in which turnout rates declined.

This book probes the outcome of this election by analyzing the contest from several different angles. Elections are not just about who cast ballots; they reflect the citizens, parties, media, history, and context of a polity. In order to understand an election outcome, it is necessary to delve into each component. This is not the way we often think of elections. Often we see them as stand-alone events with a defined outcome, many of the details and nuances of which are abandoned as the government springs into action.

TABLE 1.1
Turnout rates for Ontario provincial elections, 1975–2011

Year	Turnout (eligible voters)	Year	Turnout (eligible voters)
1975	67.8%	1995	62.9%
1977	65.6%	1999	58.3%
1981	58.0%	2003	56.8%
1985	61.5%	2007	52.1%
1987	62.7%	2011	48.2%
1990	64.4%		

Source: Elections Ontario Statistical Summary (<http://www.elections.on.ca/NR/rdonlyres/7849B894-4C4F-490E-9E8C-271BCFC0D4D/5611/StatisticalSummary2011.pdf>).

How the government came to be becomes less important than how it is using its power. We think it is important, however, to take a step back and reflect. In particular, we think it is useful to consider three questions: how do parties position themselves to appeal to voters, how do the media transmit information from and about parties to voters, and finally, how do voters respond to the information around them?

These questions are crucial because they address the heart of representative democracy. The link between parties and voters is the backdrop of electoral competition. Political parties define the arena of competition and shape how people understand the political world. They seek to convince voters that they are best able to form the government by presenting information designed to appeal to voters and entice their support. However, information does not only reach voters directly. The media is the intermediary that has a profound ability to mediate and moderate information transmission. Understanding how these three components work together (parties, media, voters) provides a comprehensive picture of how election outcomes develop.

We focus our analysis on the three major parties in Ontario: the Ontario Liberal Party, the Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario, and the New Democratic Party of Ontario. There are, of course, many other parties that contested the election – eighteen in fact. Chief among the small parties is the Green Party of Ontario. None of the minor parties won a seat in the legislature, however, and even the Greens managed to secure only a very small proportion of the vote (2.9 percent). We therefore concentrate on presenting information related to the three parties that were the viable competitors. Where particularly relevant, such as when considering newspaper coverage, we mention other parties in passing.

This book is unique in that it considers a *provincial* election. We began this project with the hope of rectifying a curious academic void. There are many excellent studies of Canadian federal elections – see, for example, the *Political Choice in Canada* and *Absent Mandate* series by Clarke and colleagues (1979, 1980, 1984, 1991, 1996); the *Canadian General Election* books by Pammett and colleagues (Frizzell and Pammett 1997; Dornan and Pammett 2001; Pammett and Dornan 2004, 2006, 2009, 2011); Johnston et al. (1992); Nevitte et al. (2000); Blais et al. (2002); Gidengil et al.

(2012) – but very few of provincial elections.² Certainly the scope of federal elections is much larger, but especially in Ontario, a major partner of Confederation and an independent economic force (see the discussion in Chapter 2), the stakes are nonetheless substantial. Furthermore, the decentralization of policy making in Canada means that provincial elections can yield new directions for fundamentally important programs such as health and education. The relatively smaller size and number of people of the province may make provincial campaigns much more manageable from a party’s point of view. Indeed, one might be tempted to think that provincial elections are less important and less interesting for voters. As Cutler (2008) has shown, however, Ontario provincial elections in particular do not exhibit these features. Thus, this book represents a unique statement on provincial politics.

This book is also unique for the range of data types used in the analysis and the types of literature it draws from. Each provides a unique perspective on the behaviour of parties, the media, or voters. Most of the information was gathered through the Making Electoral Democracy Work (MEDW) project (Blais 2010). A careful gathering of party statements – in the form of press releases, webpage updates, leader debates, platforms, and leader tours – was conducted through Carleton University. Local Liberal and NDP candidates were also surveyed post-election,³ and campaign strategists were interviewed. A two-wave survey of the Ontario electorate was conducted by Harris/Decima to probe the ideas and attitudes of voters, as well as their reactions to party campaigns and strategies. The Internet survey was fielded to panelists from 25 September to 5 October, and from 7 to 20 October.⁴ Except where otherwise noted, we restrict our analysis to those with identified votes who completed both waves of the survey. Table 1.2 shows the partisan and vote distribution of the sample, compared with the actual election outcome. The fact that the number of Green voters in our sample is limited (twenty-five) is another reason not to focus on analyzing that party.

Outside of the MEDW project, newspaper headlines, Facebook posts, and tweets were gathered to round out our understanding of the information environment facing voters. The data for headlines come from a content analysis of coverage of the Ontario election by the *Toronto Star*.⁵ The content

TABLE 1.2
Descriptive characteristics of the sample

Party	Actual vote*	Vote choice in sample (weighted)	Partisanship
Liberal	37.7%	37.7%	14.5%
PC	35.4%	36.0%	17.9%
NDP	22.7%	22.2%	11.6%
Green	2.9%	2.9%	0.7%
Other	1.2%	1.2%	0.3%
Non-partisan			55.1%

* Results from Elections Ontario, <http://www.elections.on.ca/NR/rdonlyres/7849B894-4C4F-490E-9E8C-271BCF0C0D4D/5604/SummaryofValidBallotsCast2011.pdf>.

analysis data include all news, editorial, and opinion pieces related to the provincial election in the *Toronto Star*.⁶ This paper was selected because of its reach. The *Star* is the largest daily newspaper in Canada and reaches the largest audience in Ontario (PMB 2011a). Indeed, it has a greater reach than most major television channels, including Cable Pulse 24 and CBC News Network (PMB 2011b). Thus, the *Star* has considerable agenda-setting abilities within the province. In addition, while many newspapers, especially regional ones, have largely abandoned coverage of Ontario politics, the *Star* remains one of the few newspapers with dedicated resources covering Ontario politics.⁷ Given the fixed election date, some pre-campaign data are included. The findings include all articles and editorial and opinion pieces from 21 August (seven days before the writ was dropped) to election day (forty-six days in all). Articles were identified using the database Factiva at the conclusion of the campaign.⁸ A total of 240 articles, drawn from the main news section of the newspaper (Section A), were analyzed: 185 news stories and 55 editorial and opinion pieces.⁹

The breadth of information we gathered about key players in the election enables us to comment not only on the outcome of the election but also on how the parties presented themselves to voters, how the parties were perceived by voters, how the voters were perceived by the parties, how traditional media reported party activities, and how new media sources were used in the campaign. This type of broad study of an election is rare. Most studies focus on voters using survey data, and those that cover a wider

range of campaign elements tend to look at each in isolation rather than as part of a coherent whole. Thus, our analysis of the election outcome from multiple perspectives, allowing for interactions between the components, is novel. As such, this study of an election will provide useful insights not only for students of political parties and voting behaviour within political science but also for political communication scholars.

In the chapters that follow, we adopt a relatively chronological approach to studying the election. Chapter 2 sets the stage by considering Ontario's elections in a historical context. The political culture of the province is one of loyalty, pragmatism, and identification with Canada as a whole. Ontario has a history of privileging stability and good management, which was largely developed on the back of the province's economic prosperity. Chapter 3 continues and completes the narrative by recounting the events and trends leading up to the 2011 election, including the economic challenges and ideological electoral swings of recent decades. Only by understanding these, in conjunction with the traditional history of the province, can one understand the underlying dynamics that shaped the election. Chapter 4 focuses on the events of the 2011 election in particular. This chapter provides a detailed account of the election campaign, both before and after the anticlimactic dropping of the writ. This provides important context and detail about the election campaign as it would have unfolded for voters.

Chapters 5 to 8 constitute our analysis of what the parties did in the election. First, we analyze the communication put forward by them, both unmediated and then partially mediated. Chapter 5 analyzes the messages communicated by each of the parties through traditional media – press releases, television advertisements, and campaign events. We find that the parties were well disciplined in sticking to their prepared scripts across media, while each emphasized a different set of issues. Chapter 6 focuses on the social media campaigns of the parties and leaders. Contrary to expectations, we find that campaigning with “Web 2.0” is not very distinct from traditional print and media campaigns. Chapter 7 considers the party leaders’ debate in detail. As a partially mediated communication forum, the way the party leaders addressed voters through their answers, particularly how they spun their answers to reinforce other campaign communication, is notable. Finally, in Chapter 8 we complete our analysis of the

campaign from the perspective of the parties by analyzing their strategic decisions. In particular, we focus on campaign personalization and consider the differences between local and provincial campaigning. We find that all of the parties targeted particular types of ridings and that at times there was a disconnect between the emphases of the provincial campaigns and those organized and executed by local candidates. In Chapter 9, we move from the parties to the media with our analysis of the campaign through the pages of the *Toronto Star*. For voters, media sources are the primary means by which party messages are translated. Thus, media outlets have considerable power to shape the nature of the campaign and even competition by reporting or not reporting on specific events.

We then consider the 2011 Ontario election from the perspective of voters. In Chapter 10, we look at campaign effects – what elements of the campaign influenced voters' decisions? We consider how contact by political parties, perceptions of the parties' standings in the election, and the specific issues that the parties championed in their platforms influenced voters. We find some evidence that strategic considerations influenced the decision to vote for the Liberals and NDP. Chapter 11 takes us to the final stage of our analysis, a consideration of how the voters calculated their vote preferences. There are many different factors that may influence one's vote, many of which are not specific to the campaign, and we consider the extent to which the patterns of party support were influenced by long-standing and proximate factors. We also present a summary vote choice analysis that gives a broad-strokes understanding of which elements of the 2011 election campaign mattered after controlling for long-standing factors. Finally, we end this book with a short conclusion that draws the various strands of our investigation together.

Overall, our analysis leads us to conclude that the parties that contested the 2011 Ontario election were very successful at communicating their messages to the voters. By and large, the messages that were sent were the ones that were received. We find that the political parties were remarkably consistent in how they marketed themselves to voters and in the type of information they presented to the public. The leaders and their communications staffs were extremely well disciplined in sticking to their prepared scripts and thus staying with their preferred messages. However, the media's role in this transmission was not as straightforward as one might suspect.

Yes, the media transmitted party messages and reported on party events. However, it also had its own focus, which was the horse-race aspect of the campaign. Information about polls and how the parties are doing is very interesting, and can spur participation by those whose “team” is close to winning, but it does not provide any substantive information about the issues being debated by the parties. However, the horse-race frame *does* have the potential to sway votes, as perceptions of who was likely to win mattered for a significant number of voters. In many ways, then, we can characterize the 2011 Ontario election campaign as a fight between competing teams for the support of voters that was scripted, largely inflexible, and supported by battle commentary from the media. Our portrayal is one in which the parties often ignored one another, instead directing their messages to their targeted voters and rarely engaging directly with each other in a serious discussion of policy alternatives. The media did little to remedy this as its principal focus was on reporting who was ahead and whether the parties’ strategies were succeeding.

This book contributes to the literature on election campaigns in two ways. First, it provides an in-depth study of a subnational election. In the Canadian context, this has rarely been done in the past. Comparisons with national election campaigns are thus possible, and an understanding of how party strategies differ when the size of the forum changes can be gained. Second, it documents the links among parties, the media, and voters in a careful and detailed way, drawing upon a rich and unique set of diverse data. The media are often considered to be the principal mechanism by which party messages reach voters, but our study suggests that the parties themselves do a good job of making sure that their messages get out in an unmediated or unfiltered form. Perhaps unfortunately, these messages appear increasingly targeted towards small groups of voters identified by the parties as key to their electoral success. These target groups may differ by party, and thus the parties are often speaking to different voters, with different messages, rather than engaging each other in substantive debate over issues of public policy.

Our voter analysis also shows that, despite all of the efforts channelled into campaigns by parties, voters are often swayed by long-standing attitudes and demographic characteristics that are not influenced by the

campaigns. Thus, even though parties get their messages out to voters, and the media work hard to report on the progress of the campaign and major events, the election outcome must still be understood partly in terms of stable factors.