A. Cairns, “The Electoral System and the Party System in Canada, 1921-1965,” in R.S. Blair and J.T. McLeod, eds., *The Canadian Political Tradition* (Toronto, 1993)

**Overview**

Paper investigates 2 common assumptions about the party system: (1) that the influence of the electoral system on the party system has been unimportant, or non-existent; and (2) that the party system has been an important nationalizing agency with respect to the sectional cleavages widely held to constitute the most significant and enduring lines of division in the Cdn polity. Chapter argues that the elector system has played a major role in the evolution of Cdn parties, and that the claim that the party system has been an important instrument for integrating Cdns across sectional lines is highly suspect.

**Background**

The following basic effects of the electoral system have been noted. The electoral system:

* Has not been impartial in its translation of votes into seats – its benefits have been disproportionately given to the strongest major party and a weak sectional party
* Has made a major contribution to the identification of particular sections/provinces with particular parties – it has undervalued the partisan diversity within each section/province and in so doing has rendered the parliamentary composition of each party less representative of the sectional interests in the political system than is the party electorate from which that representation is derived
* Favours minor parties with concentrated sectional support, and discourages those with diffuse national support. This has resulted in the exaggeration of the significance of cleavages demarcated by sectional/provincial boundaries and has thus tended to transform contests between parties into contests between sections/provinces

One of the most widespread interpretations of the party system claims that it, or at least the two major parties, functions as a great unifying or nationalizing agencies. Cdn politics are politics of moderation, or brokerage, which minimize differences, restrain fissiparous tendencies, and thus over time help knit together the diverse interests of a polity weak in integration. In reality, the evidence supporting this model is very weak, if not non-existent

* Quebec constitutes the most striking example of the sectional nature of party strategy, electoral appeals, and electoral outcomes. This is a specific manifestation of the general principle that: when the distribution of partisan support within a province or section is such that significant political pay-offs are likely to accrue to politicians who address themselves to the special needs to the area concerned, politicians will not fail to provide at least a partial response
* Individuals relate to the party system in several ways – two most fundamental being class and sectionalism. The two are antithetical, for one emphasizes geography while the other stresses income stratification
  + The politics of sectionalism is the politics of instability. It induces parties to pay attention to the realities of representation that filter through the electoral system, and it is potentially far more disruptive to the polity than class politics.

**Conclusions**

* Cdn political scientists unwilling to attribute explanatory power to the electoral system as a determinant of the party system. Lipson argued the reverse (an argument that is “surely misleading and fallacious”)
* The only reasonable perspective to adopt is to accept the interdependence of electoral systems and party systems
* This chapter has suggested that the electoral system has been an important factor in the evolution of the Cdn party system. Its influence is tied with the politics of sectionalism, which it has stimulated.
  + Sectionalism in party system is unavoidable so long as there are significant differences between the distribution of party voter support in any one section and the distribution in the country as a whole. The electoral system, hwr, by the distortions it introduces as it transforms votes into seats produces an exaggerated sectionalism at the level of representation