E. Gidengil, “Canada Votes: A Quarter Century of Canadian National Election Studies,” *CJPS* 25:2 (June, 1992), 219-48

**Overview**

Review essay that examines the contribution of the Canadian National Election Studies to understand vote choice in Canada. Analyses using both the sociological approach and the social-psychological approach are discusses. Essay starts with a review of the debates about the role of class, region, and religion in Cdn voting and then discusses the applicability of the concept of party ID to Canada. The paper ultimately argues that social psychological approaches need to take the social context of political choice more seriously and points to the need for sociological approaches to conceptualize social categories as live social forces

**Background**

* Aspects of the current debate in the field, and the subsequent gaps in field coverage, are a cause for concern. Particularly troubling is the persistent tendency for the field to remain more or less bifurcated between explanations that emphasize societal cleavages and those that adopt a social psychological approach
* First Cdn NES in 1965 and 1968 were offshoots of Michigan school in their design
* Though the survey design was based off Michigan school, the analyses of the data reflected more the Columbia tradition (social psychological)
  + Canada – at that time – presented “a cornucopia of intriguing anomalies” with respect to societal cleavages – including the enduring importance of regional and religious cleavages, and the corresponding weakness of class cleavages
* Alford first demonstrated low level of class voting in Canada – Canada as a case of “pure non-class voting” and even the use of more theoretically rigorous Marxist class categories failed to reveal more than very modest class effects (in response to Alford)
  + Recognizing that the class cleavage is at best modest at the voters’ level, the other reaction to Alford’s findings has been to accept the fact of low class voting, but to reject Alford’s rationale for it in favour of an explanation emphasizing elite manipulation
* Ogmundson’s “wasted vote” thesis – was that a substantial proportion of working class Cdns are forgoing their “real” preferences in favour of a “realistic” alternative
  + Received some support from Zipp and Smith’s finding that class voting is higher in areas of NDP strength
* Region versus class as false dichotomies? Alford’s prediction reflected a conceptualization of social class and region as mutually exclusive bases of political behaviour – one cleavage would not necessarily predominate only at the expense of the other
* Religion – Meisel first demonstrated existence of religious cleavage in his study of voters in Kingston in the early 1950s
* Johnston’s specific emphasis on the need to understand social categories as live social forces long overdue – and was the way the Columbia school had conceptualized it.
  + In this conception, social categories not seen as being important in themselves, but as indicators of present and past primary contacts with family members, workmates, friends and neighbours – incorporates the notion that “contact breeds consensus” and that cross-pressures can make for a “breakage effect”
* Party ID – is it a meaningful concept in Canada?
  + Core variable in the original Michigan model – conceptualized as a psychological identification, rooted in long-term processes of political socialization in which the family played a key role. Party ID involved a feeling of closeness, an attachment to a particular party; just a people identify with their religious or ethnic group, so the also identify with a particular party
  + Since parties, like other grounds, tend to be quite stable in terms of what they stand for, party ID could appropriately be viewed as a long-term stabilizing component of voting choice
  + HOWEVER, we should not expect the concept of party ID to travel that well – as Canada lacks the institutional arrangements – party primaries, multiple ballots – that encourage US votes to develop a deep sense of party ID that is distinct from their vote for a particular candidate
* Refusing to accept the notion that the concept of party ID was inapplicable to Canada, Jenson and Elkins both attempted to show that party ID was distinguishable from current vote preference
  + Jenson’s argument hinged on conceptualization of party ID as a continuum – while Elkins took on a similar argument, suggesting that we must distinguish between the nature of party ID and its frequency –
    - The pattern of relationships between infidelity – the failure to vote for one’s party and/or maintain one’s identification over time – and the intensity of party ID was similar to the US pattern, though absolute levels of fidelity were lower in Canada
* Leduc et al fully rejected party ID as a meaningful concept in Canada due to voter volatility
* Political Choice model (Clarke et al) – developed by Clarke after having found that, even in combination, the several societal cleavages (region, religion, ethnicity, subjective social class, community size, age and gender) could explain no more than 11% of the variance in voting for either major parties. They thus concluded that any adequate explanation of electoral choice would have to focus on Cdn’s psychological attachments to salient political objects – their beliefs, attitudes and perceptions regarding the parties, their leaders, and their issue positions
* The finding that party ID remained the single best predictor of voting for each of the parties certainly raises the possibility that voters’ stated party IDs simply reflected their current vote preference, and in both models party ID could indeed be explained partly as a response to one of both of the short-term forces of issue proximity and leader evaluations. The strongest determinant of party ID in both studies, however, was previous vote. This ultimately renders both models unsatisfying as explanations of vote choice.

**Conclusions**

* As it stands, social-psychological approach leaves us with few insights into how Cdns actually come to form their attitudes toward the salient political objects, and at the very least we need to ask what sorts of people are most likely to remain stable in their voting choice, what predisposes others to have more flexible attachments, etc
* More generally, we need to incorporate into our models of vote choice some understanding of the way Cdns structure their thinking about politics.
* Important gaps in coverage remain – little has changed in the 15 years since Elkins and Blake first called for greater attention to the role of psychological variables and particularly personality traits in explaining political behaviour
* On the psychological and sociological factors, two bases of social differentiation were conspicuously absent from the earlier discussions of sociological approaches to vote choice: ethnicity and gender