B.J. Gaines, “Duverger’s Law and the Meaning of Canadian Exceptionalism,” *Comparative Political Studies* 32:7 (October, 1999)

**Overview**

Duverger’s law is an unusually simple and specific elaboration on *exactly how* political institutions “matter”: It proposes that plurality rule elections result in two-party competition. Canada is commonly thought to violate the law at the national level, but to match its predictions at the district level, and thus not to constitute a genuine counter-example. In fact, analysis of a vast dataset of Cdn election returns reveals that these elections are multicandidate events, district by district, year after year. An explanation for this multipartyism may lie in the complicating factor of federalism, because Cdn provinces often feature strikingly different national and provincial party systems. Generally, the Cdn case illustrates that theories relating to party systems but not to other institutions are unrealistically parsimonious.

**Background**

* Duverger’s law: the simple-majority single-ballot system favours the two-party system and both the simple-majority system with a second ballot and proportional representation favour multipartyism.
  + Duverger proposed both “mechanical” and “psychological” effects underlying this law – the former concerning how votes are translated into seats, and the latter therefore prior and directly reflected in the votes
  + Voters can be locally or nationally strategic
* Counting parties – in his original work Duverger distinguished between major and minor parties

**Conclusions**

Canadian elections have, from the Duvergian perspective, repeatedly overproduced parties in a large proportion of all ridings. Because the “law” originates in voter behaviour, however, the Cdn exception – which is certainly real – may be explicable in institutional terms that remain true to the spirit of Duverger. Some of Canada’s multipartyism is attributable to the effects of voters in three provinces having been subjected to multiple electoral laws. Moreover, federalism admits the possibility of different party systems coexisting in given subnational units.