

Accounting for the Electoral Success of the Liberal Party in Canada

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The Liberal party of Canada is one of the four most successful parties in contemporary democracies. It has won a plurality of the vote in 15 of the 19 elections held since 1945 and it has formed the government for 44 of the last 60 years. It belongs to a small club of very successful parties, together with the Liberal Democratic party in Japan, the Irish Fianna Fail and the Swedish Social Democrats, the three other parties on the planet that have systematically won democratic elections and formed the government since the end of the Second World War.

My task is to account for the success of the Liberal party in Canadian politics. I analyze the elections held since 1965, the starting point of the Canadian Election Studies (CES). The period covered is 40 years and it includes 12 elections and 11 Canadian Election Studies (there was no CES in 1972).

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The Liberal party does not dominate everywhere. It is weak in the West, where it has received only 26 per cent of the vote, on average, since 1965. In Quebec, the party has obtained a plurality of the vote only once in the last six elections.

The Liberal party is extremely successful in Ontario, where it has received, on average, 43 per cent of the vote, compared to 33 per cent for its main competitor. The situation is similar in Atlantic Canada, where the Liberals' average share of the vote is also 43 per cent, against 34 per cent for its main competitor.¹

It is in Ontario and Atlantic Canada that the Liberals have established their recent dominance, and this is where my inquiry starts. I offer a simple explanation for Liberal pre-eminence in those two regions. I then consider the West, and I examine whether the same reasons could explain why the Liberals have been less successful in that region. I do not extend my analysis to Quebec, which would require still another explanation (in fact two distinct explanations, one for francophones, one for non-francophones).

I am concerned with the big picture, the structural dominance of the Liberal party. I am not interested in explaining why the Liberals did better or worse in some elections than in others. Whenever possible, I pool election outcomes and/or Canadian Election Studies over the 1965–2004 period.

The Social Bases of Liberal Success in Ontario and Atlantic Canada

In order to understand why the Liberal party is so strong in Ontario and Atlantic Canada, one must first take stock of the social bases of its success.

The conventional wisdom, in Canada (LeDuc, 1984) and elsewhere (Franklin et al., 1992; Clarke et al., 2004), is that social background characteristics are no longer very relevant to vote choice. I disagree. It is true that socio-demographic characteristics provide only a partial explanation of the vote and that some of these characteristics have become less important over time. Still, I show below that we miss a crucial part of the story about the sources of Liberal success in Canada if we choose not to examine its social bases.

I focus on the three most important cleavages: region, religion and ethnicity. The starting point of my inquiry is the following excerpt from *Anatomy of a Liberal Victory* (Blais et al., 2002: 96): “It would be impossible to understand the Liberals’ victory without recognizing the extent to which their strength outside Quebec hinges on the support of Catholics and Canadians of non-European origin.”

Abstract. I show that the strong electoral success of the Liberal party in Canada stems in great part from the strong support of Catholics and Canadians of non-European origin. In the absence of the fervent backing it enjoys among these two groups, the Liberals would not be among the most successful democratic parties in the world. Yet, we do not have a good understanding of why Catholics and non-Europeans vote Liberal. I argue that the group bases of Liberal support should lead us to question the common interpretation that the party's centrist policy position is the key to its electoral success.

Résumé. Je montre que le succès électoral du Parti libéral fédéral au Canada découle en bonne partie de l'appui des catholiques et des citoyens d'origine non européenne. Sans l'appui solide de ces deux groupes, le Parti libéral n'aurait pas remporté les succès électoraux remarquables qu'il a connus. Pourtant, nous n'avons toujours pas d'explication satisfaisante des raisons qui amènent les catholiques et les citoyens d'origine non européenne à voter pour le Parti libéral. Je soutiens que ces tendances sociologiques lourdes devraient nous inciter à remettre en question l'interprétation habituelle selon laquelle les succès libéraux sont attribuables aux positions centristes du parti.

I start with a simple model, collapsing all Canadian Election Studies conducted since 1965. I examine how the decision to vote Liberal or not in Ontario and Atlantic Canada is related to religion and ethnicity.²

Table 1 tells an important story. The religious cleavage in Canada is critical. Throughout all these elections, everything else being equal, the propensity to vote Liberal in Ontario and Atlantic Canada increases by 18 points when the person is Catholic.³

It could be that the religious cleavage has weakened over time and that my analysis overstates the impact of religion because I am collapsing all elections held since 1965. It is true that religion does not matter quite as much now. When I perform separate analyses for the elections held before and after 1990, I find that the propensity to vote Liberal among Catholics was 19 points higher before 1990 and it is 16 points after 1990. This is a very small change. The basic pattern remains.

Ethnicity also matters. I distinguish six ethnic groups. The first, which is my reference category, is the British group, which includes those coming from the USA and Australia. The other groups are the French, the Europeans (subdivided between West, East and South Europeans), and those from other continents (Africa, Asia and Latin America).⁴

Table 1 shows that the latter group is a strong supporter of the Liberal party. Everything else being equal, the probability of voting Liberal is 23 points higher when one comes from Asia, Latin America or Africa than when one is of British origin. This is a huge effect.

The Liberals also do quite well among South Europeans and those of French origin. East Europeans, for their part, do not behave differently from the British. Finally, West Europeans emerge as slightly less Liberal than the British.

These results confirm that religion and ethnicity are important determinants of voting behaviour, and that Catholics and Canadians of African, Asian or Latino origin are strong supporters of the Liberal party.

TABLE 1

Vote, Religion and Ethnicity in Ontario and Atlantic Canada

Variables	Logistic coefficient	Impact ¹
Atlantic	.00	
Catholic	.72**	.18
French	.33**	.08
Easteuro	.03	
Southeuro	.53**	.13
Westeuro	-.20**	-.05
Ala (Asia, Latin America, Africa)	.98**	.23
Constant	-.48**	
Adjusted pseudo R ²	.03	
N	11 157	

Source: CES data, 1965–2004. For a description of the variables, see the appendix.

* significant at the .05 level (two-tailed test)

** significant at the .01 level (two-tailed test)

¹For “Catholic,” I calculated the probability that each individual votes Liberal under two scenarios: first assuming that the variable equals zero (everyone is not Catholic), then assuming that the variable equals one (everyone is Catholic), all other variables remaining at their observed values. The reported impact is the difference between the two average probabilities, across the entire sample. For ethnicity, when one variable took the value of one, all the other ethnicity variables were set at zero. The reported impact is then the difference (in the mean probability of voting Liberal) between being French, for example, and being English (the reference category), across the entire sample.

But the crucial question is: How much of the Liberal success can be accounted for by the support of these groups? In other words, how much weaker would the Liberals be if these groups voted like other groups?

Catholics represent 30 per cent of the electorate in Ontario and 40 per cent in Atlantic Canada.⁵ The arithmetic is easy. The propensity to vote Liberal is 18 percentage points higher, everything else being equal, among Catholics, so the Liberals would have obtained about 7 points less in Atlantic Canada and 5 points less in Ontario if Catholics had voted like non-Catholics. In both regions, the Liberal lead would basically disappear in the absence of a Catholic vote.⁶

Catholics could become less crucial for the Liberals if they are decreasing in numbers, but this is not in fact the case. The percentage of Catholics in the CES and in the census has increased slightly over time.⁷

The second pillar of Liberal success is made up of Canadians of African, Asian or Latino origin. The propensity to vote Liberal is even higher among that group than among Catholics. But they are a small group. Over the whole period examined here, they constitute 1 per cent of the voters in Atlantic Canada and 6 per cent in Ontario.⁸ Because their marginal propensity to vote Liberal is about 23 percentage points higher,

they “contribute” one more point to the Liberals in Ontario. If they had voted like those of British origin, the Liberals would have had, on average, 42 per cent of the vote, instead of 43 per cent. The conclusion has to be that the Liberals’ success among Canadians of non-European origin has *not* been a crucial factor in their electoral dominance.

But are these new Canadians not becoming more and more numerous? Yes, they are. In 1996, they appeared to constitute 11 per cent of the eligible electorate in Ontario, and probably 10 per cent of the voters (most of them are recent immigrants and recent immigrants are less likely to vote; see Blais et al., 2002; Nevitte et al., 2004). Today, they may represent close to 15 per cent of the voters in Ontario. Still, there are twice as many Catholics as Canadians of non-European origin in Ontario.

The main source of Liberal strength thus comes from Catholics in Atlantic Canada and Ontario, and so the initial focus of my analysis is the link between religion and politics. Before delving into this, I need to examine the sources of Liberal weakness in the West.

Religion, Ethnicity and the Liberals in the West

Twenty percent of the voters are Catholic in the West, compared to 30 per cent in Ontario. The fact that there are 10 percentage points fewer of them in the West entails an “automatic” loss of 2 points. Thus one-eighth of the West/Ontario differential in Liberal support flows from the weaker presence of Catholics in the West.⁹

Likewise, there are slightly fewer citizens of non-European origin in the West than in Ontario. But the difference is not substantial, and this does not make any meaningful contribution to our understanding of Liberal weakness in the West.

It could be that religion and/or ethnicity have a weaker impact on the vote in the West. I have performed the same analysis to sort out the impact of religion and ethnicity on vote choice in the West. The results are reported in Table 2, which shows that religion and ethnicity have a very substantial effect on vote choice in the West, as they do in Ontario and Atlantic Canada.¹⁰ That being said, being Catholic appears to make a little less difference in the West; it increases the propensity to vote Liberal by only 12 percentage points—less than in Ontario and Atlantic Canada, where the difference is 18 points. If the impact were the same in the West, the Liberals would gain one more point. The bottom line, however, is that religion matters almost as much in the West as in the East.

What this tells us is that the Catholic vote is absolutely crucial to the Liberals. Observers of the Canadian scene have discussed at great length the deep regional cleavage in voting patterns (Gidengil et al., 1999). The religious cleavage is just as deep. In English Canada, the probability

TABLE 2
Vote, Religion and Ethnicity in the West

Variables	Logistic coefficient	Impact ¹
Catholic	.58**	.12
French	.48**	.10
Easteuro	.12	
Southeuro	.27	
Westeuro	-.25**	-.04
Ala (Asia, Latin America, Africa)	1.29**	.30
Constant	-1.16**	
Adjusted pseudo R ²	.03	
N	6 736	

Source: CES data, 1965–2004. For a description of the variables, see the appendix.

* significant at the .05 level (two-tailed test)

** significant at the .01 level (two-tailed test)

¹See note 1 in Table 1.

of voting Liberal, everything else being equal, is 15 points lower in the West than in Ontario or Atlantic Canada, while the likelihood of voting Liberal increases by 16 points if one is Catholic.¹¹

I take these results as indicating that Catholics are strong supporters of the Liberals. It could be that Catholics do not really like the Liberals, they just dislike the other parties, most especially the Conservatives, the Liberals' traditional foes.

Table 3 shows how ratings of the various parties are affected by region, religion and ethnicity (the table includes all respondents outside Quebec). It can be seen that Catholics do give the Conservatives and the Reform party lower ratings but that they also give the Liberals more positive marks. The average rating given to the Liberals, on a zero to 100 scale, is 58 among Catholic Ontarians of British origin, and 53 among Catholic Westerners of British origin. These ratings would be even more positive among Catholics of non-British origin. Table 3 also shows that Catholics do not evaluate the NDP more negatively than non-Catholics.¹² The bottom line is that Catholics positively prefer the Liberals over the Conservatives.

An additional question is whether the most religious Catholics are the strongest supporters of the Liberal party. The answer is yes. I have performed a logit analysis of vote choice outside Quebec (Liberal or not) with the following independent variables: region, ethnicity and religion, religiosity, and the interaction of religiosity and religion (Catholic). The interactive variable emerges as statistically significant. Everything else being equal, the propensity to vote Liberal is 19 points higher among "religious" Catholics than among non-Catholics; the difference is 12 points among "non-religious" Catholics.

TABLE 3

Party Rating, Region, Religion and Ethnicity in English Canada

Variables	PC	LIB	NDP	Reform/Alliance
Atlantic	5.03**	1.01	3.68**	-2.26*
West	-1.94**	-4.99**	-.66	7.54**
Catholic	-2.04**	4.24**	.23	-4.05**
French	-2.37**	2.21**	.22	-4.17**
Easteuro	-.08	2.54**	1.70*	1.44
Southeuro	-3.67**	3.54**	2.30*	.66
Westeuro	2.44**	-.05	-1.07	5.67**
Ala (Asia, Latin America, Africa)	-1.29	7.62**	5.73**	-5.54**
Constant	50.77**	54.12**	41.72**	39.21**
Adjusted R ²	.00	.03	.01	.04
N	15221	18291	17418	7206

Source: CES data, 1968–2004. For a description of the variables, see the appendix.

* significant at the .05 level (two-tailed test)

** significant at the .01 level (two-tailed test)

Note: For the Liberals and the NDP, the data include all the election studies between 1968 and 2004 inclusively, for the Progressive Conservatives the 2004 election is not included, and for Reform/Alliance, the 1993, 1997 and 2000 election studies are 80[?] included.

Are Catholics Different?

Without the Catholics, the Liberals would not dominate Ontario and Atlantic Canada and they would be extremely weak in the West. But why do Catholics vote Liberal?

One interpretation is that Catholics vote differently because they have different views on issues. To test that interpretation, I considered the 2004 CES questions that tapped Canadians' opinions on the issues of the day: views about government spending and taxes, health care, abortion and gay marriage, gun control and Canada's relation with the United States. I examined the link between these opinions and religion, region and ethnicity.¹³ A total of thirty issues were considered.

Table 4 summarizes the findings. I find religion to have a statistically significant effect in only nine cases out of thirty, and in all cases except one the difference of opinion between Catholics and non-Catholics was less than 10 points. Catholics are more conservative on abortion and gay marriage. But this does not explain their support for the Liberal party, since opposition to abortion and gay marriage tends to enhance support for the Conservative party. Aside from these two issues, no clear pattern emerges: Catholics are slightly more inclined to think that we should do more for women and against poverty, they are more prone to favour gun control and income tax cuts, and they are slightly less willing to spend on the environment, to approve a two-tier health system or to give Quebec

TABLE 4

Attitudes, Religion and Ethnicity in English Canada

Questions	Catholic		Non-European	
	Coeff.	Impact	Coeff.	Impact
Government spending. Spend more on ...				
Defense, military			-.72**	-.17
Welfare			-.98*	-.13
Health care				
Education			.74*	.12
Aid to developing countries			.75**	.13
Environment	-.23*	-.05		
Social housing				
How much power do you think unions should have?				
How much power do you think business should have?				
How much should be done to reduce the gap rich/poor?	.40**	.07		
How much should be done for women?	.22*	.05	.66*	.12
How much should be done for racial minorities?			1.37**	.26
How much should be done for Quebec?			1.17**	.16
Quebec has the right to separate	-.32**	-.06		
Do you think Canada's ties with the United states should be closer?				
Do you favour or oppose having some private hospitals in Canada?				
People who pay should be allowed to get medical treatment sooner	-.26**	-.06	.65**	.16
Do you favour or oppose same-sex marriage?			-.72**	-.16
Gays and lesbians should be allowed to get married	-.25*	-.06	-1.09**	-.24
Do you think it should be very easy for women to get an abortion?	-.63***	-.15	-.65**	-.14
Do you think Canada should admit: more immigrants, fewer... ?			.90**	.16
Do you favour or oppose the death penalty?				
The government should leave it to the private sector to create jobs				
Only the police and the military should be allowed to have guns	.40**	.09	1.18**	.25
The gun registry should be scrapped entirely				
Should personal income taxes be increased, decreased, or...?	.24*	.06		
Should corporate taxes be increased, decreased, or...?			.84**	.11
Canada did not participate in the war against Iraq. Good decision?				
Free trade with the US has been good for the Canadian economy				
What is the best way to deal with young offenders who commit violent crime? (give them tougher sentences)			-.29*	-.07

Source: CES data, 2004.

* significant at the .05 level (two-tailed test)

** significant at the .01 level (two-tailed test)

the right to separate unilaterally. The bottom line is that Catholics do not systematically differ from non-Catholics.

Johnston (1985: 112; see also Johnston, 1991) has suggested that "there may be, however, a countervailing ethnic *ethos* among Catholics which produces the Catholic Liberal attachment. Growing up Catholic may produce a distinct view of the ethnic character of the Canadian nationality. To those schooled in the company of other Catholics, Canada will seem perhaps more French and almost certainly less British."

Unfortunately, I find little support for that conjecture. Catholics outside Quebec are *not* more likely to say that more should be done for Quebec, they are not more inclined to support more immigration, and they react similarly towards racial minorities.¹⁴

We are thus left with a paradox. Catholics vote differently but they do not appear to differ on the issues.

Another possibility is that Catholics, especially the most religious of them, vote Liberal because they perceive the Liberal party to be “Catholic”; non-Catholics refrain from voting Liberal for the very same reason.

Canadians might view the Liberal party as Catholic because Liberal leaders are Catholic. Since 1965, all the Liberal leaders except Pearson have been Catholic, while none of the NDP, Reform or Alliance leaders, and only half of the Progressive Conservative leaders (Clarke, Mulroney and Charest) have been Catholic.

I have found no support for that interpretation. The religious cleavage was not weaker in 1965, when the Liberal party leader was not a Catholic, or in those elections where the Progressive Conservatives had a Catholic leader. Furthermore, Catholics systematically gave Conservative leaders more negative ratings even when these leaders happened to be Catholic.¹⁵ There is no evidence that Catholics vote for a party with a Catholic leader. This finding is consistent with those of Cutler (2002) who shows that leaders’ gender, language and region matter but not their religion. I suspect that many (if not most) voters simply ignore the religious denomination of party leaders.

It is not only at the top that the Liberals are Catholic. Liberal candidates are also heavily Catholic. Sixty-three per cent of the 1988 Liberal candidates for whom we have the religious denomination were Catholic, compared to 45 per cent among Conservatives and 31 per cent among NDPers (the percentages are 51%, 29% and 15% if we exclude Quebec).¹⁶

This led me to inquire whether Catholics are more prone to vote Liberal where the Liberal candidate is Catholic. The answer is no. I added a “Catholic Liberal candidate” dummy to my model for the 1988 election. That variable proved to be insignificant, as well as the interaction “Catholic respondent” \times “Catholic Liberal candidate.” There is no support for the hypothesis that Catholics vote Liberal only (or mostly) in constituencies where the Liberal candidate is Catholic.

Still another possibility is that Catholics vote Liberal only in those constituencies where there is some concentration of Catholics sufficient to form a significant community. The 1984 CES includes data on the percentage of Catholics in the respondent’s constituency. I incorporated that variable into my model for the 1984 election, as well as the interaction “Catholic respondent” \times “per cent Catholics in the constituency.” Both variables came out non-significant. It seems that what matters is

whether an individual is Catholic, not whether the individual lives in a Catholic environment.¹⁷

The fact that Catholics systematically vote Liberal suggests that many of them have strong attachments to the party. Indeed, 37 per cent of Catholics interviewed since 1965 said they think of themselves as Liberals, compared to only 21 per cent among non-Catholics.¹⁸ Party identification is clearly part of the story. But it is not the whole story. As Johnston (1985) has powerfully demonstrated, a religious cleavage, or any cleavage for that matter, must be renewed in order to remain relevant. When I add party identification to my model, the Catholic coefficient is substantially reduced, by about half, but the coefficient remains highly significant. Furthermore, the Catholic variable is strongly significant when the analysis is restricted to those with no party identification. The bottom line is that Catholic support for the Liberals cannot be construed as a residue of the past, transmitted through family socialization. The religious cleavage is as strong now as it was forty years ago.

The following conclusions can be drawn from the evidence presented above. First, the religious cleavage is very important in Canadian elections; it is as strong as the regional cleavage. Second, the strong support of Catholics is a key factor in Liberal success. Third, the religious cleavage has not significantly weakened over time. Fourth, we still do not know much about why Catholics vote Liberal.

Some thirty years ago, Irvine (1974) thought he had succeeded in explaining the religious basis of the vote. His explanation was family socialization. Ten years later, Johnston (1985) showed that he was wrong. At the end of his article, Johnston offered two conjectures, about the presence of an ethnic ethos among Catholics and about contextual effects. I have examined these two possibilities but I have found no sign of a Catholic ethos and little contextual effect. Why Catholics vote Liberal is still largely a mystery, at least for me. I propose the creation of a special prize for the individual or team that solves the mystery.

Canadians of non-European origin and the Liberal Party

Canadians of non-European origin constitute the second most important source of Liberal success. They have been less crucial than Catholics in the past but they are becoming more important because of their growing numbers.

I performed separate analyses of the impact of region, religion and ethnicity for the elections held before and after 1990, and I found that the ethnic cleavage has indeed become stronger. Everything else being equal, the propensity to vote Liberal increased by 19 points in the earlier period when one was of African, Asian or Latin American origin; the

gap is 28 points in the post-1990 period. I also checked for potential interaction effects between ethnicity and religion or region and I found no meaningful one. For instance, the probability of a Liberal vote increases by 24 points when one is non-European among Catholics; the gap is the same (25 points) among non-Catholics.

Canadians of non-European origin positively support the Liberals rather than reject the other parties. Table 3 supports that assertion. Non-Europeans give the Liberals much higher ratings than other voters; the typical score a non-Catholic non-European voter from Ontario gives to the Liberal party on a zero to 100 scale is 62. Non-Europeans also feel more positive towards the NDP and more negative about the Reform/Alliance than the British.¹⁹ The main point, though, is that non-Europeans like the Liberals.

Why? One possibility is that visible minorities support the Liberal party for the simple reason that the Liberal party happens to be (most of the time) the party in government. That interpretation can be tested in different ways. I first focus on the immigrant fraction of the CES respondents ($n = 2511$) and I determine whether those who came to Canada when the Liberals were in government were more inclined to vote Liberal than those who came when the Conservatives were in power.²⁰

All in all, 76 per cent of immigrants arrived in Canada under a Liberal government, a pattern that is not surprising given the overall dominance of the Liberals in Ottawa. Those who arrived at a time when the Conservatives formed the government were slightly less likely to vote Liberal (42%) than those who came at the time of a Liberal government (45%). The difference, however, is tiny. I estimated the relative propensity to vote Liberal among non-Europeans depending on their time of arrival in Canada. The mean probability of voting Liberal was 60 per cent if the respondent arrived under a Liberal government and 61 per cent under a Conservative government.

The same pattern—that is, the absence of any substantial difference between those who arrived when the Liberals were in power and those who came when they were in opposition—emerges when the analysis is restricted to immigrants who were at least 12 years old when they came to Canada.²¹

Perhaps it is not so much whether the Liberals were in power when they arrived that matters, but rather how long the Liberals had been in government. I performed additional analyses with a “Liberal incumbency” variable, which equalled the number of consecutive years the Liberals had been in power at the time of arrival, and that variable also proved consistently non-significant.²²

Another test is to determine whether Canadians of non-European origin, independently of their immigration status, support the Liberal party only in those elections where the Liberals were the incumbents. The Lib-

erals were not in power when the 1980, 1988 and 1993 elections were called. Were “visible minorities” less likely to vote Liberal in those elections? The answer is no. The probability of voting Liberal among visible minorities was the same in those three elections as it was in the other elections where the Liberals were the incumbent government. I also checked the possibility that non-Europeans’ support for the Liberals might have been weaker in 1993, when the party had been in opposition for nine years. There is no such pattern. I finally tested the hypothesis that non-Europeans’ support for the Liberals depends on the number of consecutive years the Liberals had formed the government at the time of the election, and that hypothesis is not confirmed.

All these results consistently invalidate the hypothesis that Canadians of non-European origin support the incumbent party rather than the Liberal party as such.

Canadians of non-European origin may vote for the Liberal party because they perceive the Liberal party to better defend or represent their views and/or interests. They are more likely to think that more should be done for racial minorities, Canada should admit more immigrants, and aid to developing countries should be increased (Table 4). The percentage in favour of these measures in the 2004 CES is 70 per cent, 39 per cent and 30 per cent respectively among non-Europeans, compared to 49 per cent, 15 per cent and 19 per cent in the rest of the population.

And the more favourable one is to immigration and aid to racial minorities and developing countries, the more prone he or she is to vote Liberal. Those attitudes, however, contribute little to explaining non-Europeans’ support for the Liberals. The initial gap (in propensity to vote Liberal in 2004) between Canadians of non-European origin and those of British origin is 25 percentage points (controlling for region and religion). The gap is reduced by only 4 points, to 21 points, when these views are taken into account.²³

Canadians of non-European origin are more socially conservative. They are more opposed to abortion and same-sex marriage (see Table 4).²⁴ There was much speculation in the 2004 election as to whether these issues would induce some of them to revisit their views about the Liberals.

It seems that the impact of these social issues was quite limited. Those who were opposed to abortion and/or gay marriage were less likely to vote Liberal but that impact was quite small. In 2004, the non-European/British gap in the propensity to vote Liberal was still a hefty 25 points, only marginally lower than the 30-point gap observed in the three previous elections combined.

The bottom line is that we still do not have a good understanding why non-European Canadians so strongly support the Liberals. So, I propose the creation of a second prize for the individual or team that will

provide a compelling explanation of why support for the Liberals is so strong among “visible minorities.”

I have not examined here the role of ethnic candidates and organizations nor have I inquired into contextual effects. At first sight, the challenge of providing a compelling account of this key source of Liberal success appears less daunting. But appearances may be deceiving.

Discussion

This journey into the sources of Liberal success has produced many nil findings. Some readers of previous drafts have expressed concerns about my remarkable ability to disconfirm hypotheses and my (equally) remarkable inability to produce “positive” results.

My typical response to such “unfair” criticisms has been that I adhere to a Popperian epistemology, according to which the goal of science is to disprove as many propositions as possible. Unfortunately, my Popperian convictions have weakened as I have grown older. I prefer writing and reading articles or books that provide compelling explanations over those that refute apparently plausible ones.

That being said, it is our task to take stock of both what we know and what we do not know about Canadian voting behaviour. We have known for a long time that Catholics and Canadians of non-European origin are among the strongest supporters of the Liberal party (see Meisel, 1956; Schwartz, 1974). My analysis shows that we still do not have a compelling explanation of why it is so.

One implication of the findings presented here is that groups matter. The Liberals are very successful among Catholics and voters of non-European origin and without the support of these two key groups they would have lost many elections.

This pattern is not peculiar to Canada. In the United States, we miss a crucial part of the picture if we do not consider the immense support that the Democrats enjoy among Black voters and the Republicans among Evangelicals (Abramson et al., 2002).

Classical studies of voting behaviour paid close attention to the link between social forces and vote choice. *The American Voter* (Campbell et al., 1960) devoted a whole section, more than 200 pages long, to the “social and economic context,” with the first chapter dealing with membership in social groupings and focusing on four groups: labour unions, Negroes (sic), and (yes) Catholics and Jews. Likewise, *Political Change in Britain* (Butler and Stokes, 1960) focuses on the link between class and party, trade union influence, and (yes) the political legacy of religion.

This sociological approach is in disrepute. Perhaps the best illustration is provided by *Political Choice in Britain* (Clarke et al., 2004). The

central claim of the book is that the valence model provides a more compelling explanation of vote choice than the sociological model. As the authors put it, "rather than being life-long political captives of their class locations or other ponderous social forces, British voters are capable of making effective, if 'rough and ready,' judgements regarding which party is best suited for government"(2004: 326).

I do not argue that Canadian voters are captive to their religion and/or ethnic origin or that they are incapable of ascertaining the merits and limits of the various parties. My point is rather that we miss something important if we do not examine the group bases of party support. In the Canadian case, we miss the fact that the Liberals have won most elections and that they have won in great part thanks to the strong support of Catholics and Canadians of non-European origin.

The standard interpretation is that the Liberal party has been so successful because it is centrist. There are at least two problems with this interpretation. The first is that centrist parties are not particularly successful outside Canada. I have mentioned at the outset that there are three other very successful parties in the world: two of them are generally classified as right wing, Fianna Fail in Ireland and the Liberal Democratic party in Japan, and one is on the left, the Swedish Social Democrats (see the classifications by Imbeau, 1985; Castles and Mair, 1984; and Blais and Crête, 1989). In fact, in many countries, centrist parties are among the least successful (Rabinowitz et al., 1991).

This interpretation also fails to account for the differential success of the Liberal party among segments of the electorate. Catholics and Canadians of non-European origin are *not* more centrist in their policy views than other Canadians, and so the spatial position of the Liberal party does not explain why the party is more successful among these two groups than with others.

Furthermore, the Liberal party would *not* dominate in Ontario in the absence of the strong support it enjoys among Catholics and visible minorities. In that province, the Conservatives have been, and are still, as popular as the Liberals outside Catholic and non-European circles. Outside these two groups, parties of the right have done as well as the centrist Liberal party. Outside these two groups, there is no evidence that the Liberal party has benefited from its centrist policy location. And there is no evidence that Catholics and Canadians of non-European origin vote Liberal because they like its moderate positions.

It is often argued that the Liberal party has been so successful in Ontario and Atlantic Canada because voters are repelled by its main competitor, which is perceived to be too much to the right. I question that interpretation. *Rendons à César ce qui revient à César*. The Liberal party has been successful because it has been strikingly adept at nurturing the support of two key social groups. How and why that success has been achieved

remains to be explained. Natural experiments, such as those associated with the sponsorship scandal, should help us understand how and why members of different groups do or do not revisit their support for a party.

Appendix—Variables

Religion

2004

Please tell me what is your religion, if you have one?

2000, 1997

What is your religious affiliation? Is it Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Islam, another religion or none?

1993

What is your religious affiliation? Is it Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, another religion or none?

1988

What is your religious affiliation? Is it Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, something else or no religion?

1984

What is your religious affiliation?

1980, 1979, 1974, 1968

What is your religion?

1965

Would you mind telling of what religion you are?

Responses were collapsed into two categories: Catholic and non-Catholic.

Ethnicity

2004, 2000

1. To what ethnic or cultural group do you belong?

2. In addition to being Canadian to what ethnic or cultural group did you or your ancestors belong on first coming to this continent?

1997, 1993, 1988

To what ethnic or cultural group did you or your ancestors belong on first coming to this continent?

1984

What ethnic or cultural group did you or your ancestor on the male side belong to on first coming to North America? (Do not accept Canada or United States)

1980, 1979, 1974

Can you tell me what ethnic or cultural group your ancestors who first came to North America belonged to (on the male side)?

1968

Please tell me from what country most of your ancestors came. (Ask all those who mentioned Canada or U.S.A.). And before that, where did most of your ancestors come from?

1965

Please tell me from what country most of your ancestors came.

Responses were collapsed into eight categories: British, French, East European, South European, West European, Asian, Latino and African. The latter three categories were combined in the final analyses.

Religiosity

Different questions have been used over the years. In the most recent election studies, those who said religion or God is very important in their lives were considered religious. In previous studies, those who said that they attend church at least two to three times a month are considered religious.

2004, 2000 and 1997

In your life, would you say religion is very important, somewhat important, not very important, or not important at all?

1993

In your life, would you say that God is very important, somewhat important, not very important, or not important at all?

1988

How often do you attend place of worship?

1984, 1980, 1979, 1974, 1968 and 1965

How often do you attend church?

Party identification

Party identification has been measured by two questions.

1. *In federal politics, do you usually think of yourself as a Liberal, Conservative, NDP, (Reform or Bloc Québécois) or none of these? (1997 formulation)**
2. *How strongly (federal party) do you feel, very strongly, fairly strongly or not very strongly?*

Only those who feel very or fairly strongly partisan are considered to be identifiers.

*The 2000 and 2004 election studies included an experiment. Half the respondents had “none of these” as an option, and the other half had “or do you usually think of yourself as not having a general preference” (2000) or “no party” (2004). Before 1988, “none of these” was not offered.

From 1965 to 1984, the questions were asked after the election. Since 1988, the questions were asked in both the campaign and the post-election survey. Whenever possible, I use the campaign survey.

Year came to Canada

(If not born in Canada) In what year did you come to live in Canada?

Party rating

How do you feel about (federal party)?

Use any number from zero to one hundred. Zero means you really dislike the party and one hundred means you really like the party.

Different variants of that question have been used over the years.

Notes

- 1 The main competitor is defined as the other party that received the most votes in Canada as a whole. Liberal dominance is more ambiguous in Atlantic Canada if the main competitor is defined as the party with most votes in the region. In that case, the average Liberal lead is only four points (43% against 39%).
- 2 As analyses of specific elections have shown (Nevitte et al., 2000; Blais et al., 2002), the impact of religion, ethnicity and region remains basically intact when other socio-demographic variables are controlled for.
- 3 All the tables reported have a small R^2 or pseudo R^2 . As King (1986; see also Achen, 1982) has cogently argued, the coefficient of determination is not a very useful statistic: “ R^2 is a measure of the spread of points around a regression line ... and there is nothing intrinsically or politically interesting in the spread of points around a regression line” (1986: 676–677).
- 4 I have initially distinguished respondents from Africa, Asia and Latin America but I have finally decided to collapse them because their numbers are small and their propensity to vote Liberal is quite similar. It is often argued that immigrants are strong supporters of the Liberal party, which raises the question whether it is immigration or ethnicity that matters. I have performed analyses that included a dummy variable that equalled 1 if the person was born outside Canada. That variable proved to be statistically significant, confirming that, even controlling for ethnicity, religion and region, immigrants are more likely to vote Liberal. The actual impact of that variable is quite small, however: the propensity to vote Liberal increases by only two points when one is immigrant. Furthermore, including that variable did not affect the coefficients associated with the other variables, and so, for the sake of simplicity, I use the more parsimonious model with only religion and ethnicity. There is no severe

collinearity between religion and ethnicity. For instance, “only” 78 per cent of Southern Europeans are Catholic.

- 5 In the pooled CES data set, 30 per cent of Ontario respondents and 39 per cent of those from Atlantic Canada are Catholic. The mean percentage of Catholics in the census (from 1961 to 2001) is 33 per cent in Ontario and 42 per cent in Atlantic Canada.
- 6 According to my estimations, the Liberals would have obtained, on average, 38 per cent of the vote in Ontario and 36 per cent in Atlantic Canada, in the absence of a Catholic vote. Assuming that two-thirds of the non-Liberal vote would have gone to their main rival in the region, the Liberal lead would have completely vanished in Atlantic Canada and it would have been reduced to a mere two points in Ontario.
- 7 The percentage of Catholics in Ontario and Atlantic Canada (combined), according to the census, went from 33 per cent in 1961 to 36 per cent in 2001. The percentage peaked in 1981 and has remained stable since.
- 8 The proportion of Canadians of non-European origin is underestimated in the CES, partly because the interviews are conducted in French or English. Census data on ethnic origin are not very useful because a substantial number indicate “Canadian.” The best approximation in the census data concerns the proportion of “visible minorities,” which is very close to “non-European” origin. The information is available only since 1986. The proportion of visible minorities in 1986 (almost the midpoint in the period covered here) among those over 18 and who are Canadian citizens is 6.1 per cent in Ontario, 1.3 per cent in Atlantic Canada, 5.5 per cent in the West, and 5.3 per cent in English Canada.
- 9 Over the whole period, the Liberals obtained on average 43 per cent in Ontario and 26 per cent in the West, a differential of 17 points.
- 10 Table 2 also shows that ethnicity has a bigger impact on the vote in the West. Everything else being equal, the propensity to vote Liberal is 30 points higher among those of African, Asian or Latino origin (the marginal effect is 23 points in Ontario and Atlantic Canada).
- 11 These estimations are based on a logit analysis of vote choice in all of English Canada, with region, religion and ethnicity being the independent variables, as in Tables 1 and 2.
- 12 But Catholics rate the Liberals much more positively than the NDP, as the intercept indicates.
- 13 In all cases I dichotomized the dependent variable and I used a binary logit regression. When religion was found to have a significant effect, I estimated its impact through simulations in which every respondent was assumed to be Catholic and then to be non-Catholic, everything else being held constant.
- 14 It could be that Catholics are more francophile, though not necessarily more sympathetic to Quebec, and/or that they used to be so but that this pattern is gradually eroding. To test that interpretation, I examined responses given in the 1988 CES about how much should be done to promote French. There is some weak support for that interpretation. Catholics did come up as more willing to say that more should be done to promote French. The effect, however, is weak; the difference between Catholics and non-Catholics is only 8 percentage points. The 1993 CES had an experiment, half the sample being asked about doing more to promote French and the other half about doing more for Quebec. Catholics were more willing to do more for French and Quebec, the difference being only 6 and 5 points respectively. The bottom line, in my view, is that attitudes toward French are not, and were not, a major reason for the Liberal success among Catholics. In 1988, the propensity to vote Liberal is 17 points higher among Catholics (controlling for region and ethnicity); the gap remains at 17 points when I include attitude toward French as a control variable (results not shown). The same pattern emerges in 1993.

- 15 The 1965 survey did not include leader ratings, and so it was impossible to determine whether Catholics were less positive about Pearson.
- 16 I thank Ken Carty for giving me access to his data set on local candidates in the 1988 election.
- 17 These findings are partly consistent and partly inconsistent with those of Johnston (1991). The inconsistency is that in Johnston's study the propensity to vote Liberal increases as the Catholic proportion grows. I do not find such a pattern because I include regional controls. The pattern identified by Johnston reflects the fact that the Liberals are weaker in the region (the West) where there are fewer Catholics. Within each region, there is no such association. But the most significant findings are consistent. There is no evidence that the religious cleavage, as far as support for the Liberal party in federal elections is concerned, gets stronger as the percentage of Catholics increases. Johnston shows, however, that Catholics are more inclined to vote NDP than Conservative where they are a small group. The focus in this paper is on the propensity to vote Liberal or not. I should point out that in one province, Newfoundland, being Catholic *decreases* the probability of voting Liberal (I thank Robert Young and Peter Neary for that observation). Finally Bélanger and Eagles (2005) report a contextual effect of "Catholicism" at the constituency level in the case of the 2000 election but that contextual effect appears to be quite small.
- 18 Party identification has been measured differently over the years, and the results obtained depend very much on the measure (Johnston, 1992; Blais, Gidengil, Nadeau and Nevitte, 2001). Over time variations are reduced when, as is done here, only those who feel very or fairly strongly partisan are considered to be party identifiers.
- 19 Non-Europeans are more positive than those of British origin towards the NDP but they give the two parties similar ratings (which are much lower than those given to the Liberals).
- 20 When there was a change in government in a given year, I consider the government to have been Liberal if and only if the Liberals formed the government for more than six months. The following years were years of Liberal government: 1900–1911, 1922–1930, 1936–1956, 1963–1978, 1980–1984, 1994–2004.
- 21 In all these analyses, which were confined to the immigrant segment of the CES pooled data set (including all of English Canada), vote choice is, as in Table 1, related to region, religion and ethnicity, with the addition of a Liberal government or Liberal incumbency variable, plus an interaction term (Ala X Liberal government or Ala X Liberal incumbency).
- 22 I also performed analyses with an alternative operationalization of "Liberal incumbency," which equals the number of consecutive years after arriving in Canada in which the Liberal party had been in power, at the time of the election. The results were substantially similar.
- 23 There is no evidence that these attitudes matter more among non-Europeans.
- 24 The initial correlation is very weak. For instance, only 43 per cent of non-Europeans are opposed to gay marriage (against 26% in favour and 32% ambivalent or uncertain), compared to 38 per cent in the rest of the electorate. The 16-point difference reported in Table 4 emerges when religion is controlled for. Non-Europeans are less likely to be Catholic. Among non-Catholics, non-Europeans are clearly less favourable to gay marriage than other Canadians.

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