Question: Over the past three or four decades, substantial amounts of time, energy, and money have been devoted to voting studies in Canada. For all the resulting books and articles, do we really have a good, comprehensive understanding of why Canadians vote the way they do?

In evaluating the field of voting studies in Canada, the resulting literature – while certainly doing a good job at pointing to potential factors of voting, or to frameworks through which to consider the action of voting – does not present us with a coherent or comprehensive understanding of *why* Canadians vote the way they do. This is largely due to the nature of the field as one that is cleaved on the basis of methodological or ideological considerations of what contributes to voting behaviour.

The field of voting behaviour is essentially cleaved along three schools of thought. First, the Columbia school privileges the consideration of voters as groups, considering blocs of voters along ethnic, regional, religious, or other, lines. The Michigan school, in contrast, provides a social-psychological approach to voting behaviour that is marked by a consideration of the process of socialization in determining vote choice. The Michigan School relies heavily on the concept of party identification. The third and final model is the rational choice model, though this model has been less well utilized in the Canadian context. The Columbia School and the Michigan School have been privileged in the study of Canadian voting behaviour, and thus cleaving our understandings of how individuals vote along these two (major) categorizations. With little overlap between the two schools, the result is that there remains a lack of a comprehensive understanding of Canadian voting behaviour. This short essay will consider the contributions from both schools, as well as the limited influence of the rational choice model within this part of the field.

The first group of the voting literature to be considered is that of the Columbia school. This method privileges the idea that individuals vote based on their social group affiliations (Kanji and Archer, 2002). Electoral decisions, according to this theory, are simply responses to various sociological pressures and cross-pressures that result from different factors such as social class, religious affiliation, ethnicity, urban/rural cleavages, and so forth. Applying this model to Canada has resulted in some interesting considerations of how Canadians vote. Utilizing this approach, Johnston (2007) proposed that Canada can be divided primarily along cultural factors, the largest one being the cleavage of the French-English cultural divide. He uses this cleavage to suggest that this view of Canadian voting patterns explains the ability of the Liberal party (a party of the centre) to dominate electoral politics throughout most of the 20th century. Liberal success is a factor of not because they are centrist in redistribution but rather the central cleavage in Canada, they manage to come down on both sides. In the ROC, they are Catholic and French; while in Quebec, they are the non-Francophone option. Blais (**DATE**) has a similar argument for explaining Liberal victory his chapter of *Anatomy of a Liberal Victory,* in which he explains three cleavages in Canada that tend to vote overwhelmingly for the Liberal party: (1) Catholics, (2) the non-British vote; and (3) regional cleavages – Ontario and Atlantic Canada vote overwhelmingly liberal.

Meanwhile, the second group of voting literature – the Michigan school – promotes a modification of these explanations. The Michigan model begins with the premise that voting is inherently complex and that no single-factor is likely to suffice (taking issue with the Columbia school in this regard). Rather, the most powerful predictors are *proximate* and *psychological* in nature (Kanji and Archer, 2002). The core determinant of this model is party identification, or the affective tie that is believed to bind voters to their most preferred political parties. The Michigan model has been widely used in Canadian vote studies, though it has been significantly complicated in the Canadian sphere. The model of party ID serves largely as an indicator of underlying party preferences, and as such should be an intrinsically sticky identifier (Johnston, 2006). However, Canadian voting choice has varied wildly, exhibiting shocking electoral swings (Johnston, 2007), making the concept more difficult to import into the Canadian setting. Indeed, Gidengil (1992) warns against the adoption of this concept in Canada as she notes that we should not expect the concept of party ID to travel well. In her view, Canada lacks the institutional arrangements – party primaries, multiple ballots – that the United States has that encourages a deep sense of party ID that nonetheless remains distinct from their vote for a particular candidate.

Nonetheless, the concept has been adopted in Canada, and has implicated some findings in Canada. In their book *Absent Mandate*, Clarke et al. suggest that in Canada, party ID can take on two forms; it is either (1) durable or (2) flexible. They argue that in Canada, most individuals have a flexible party identification – a 2:1 ratio – allowing them to get around the sticky subject of electoral swings, and that Canadians have three primary determinants in their voting decision. The first is the psychological attachment, or party ID; the second is based on attitudes towards party leaders and candidates; while the third relates to attitudes or opinions on the issues.

The rational choice model has been marginally utilized in this question of why do Canadians vote the way they do? It has been utilized to expand on decisions of voting for or against Quebec sovereignty (Blais, Nadeau), casting the support for sovereignty as one that is based on a calculation of cost / benefits for Quebec with respect to the impact of sovereignty on the French language and on the Quebec economy.

Where the rational choice model has had a much larger influence in Canadian political science has been on the related question of: why do Canadians vote (or choose not to vote) in the first place. On this front, the rational choice model has been much more influential. The model suggests, at its most basic level, that individuals make a calculation on whether the benefits of voting outweigh the costs associated with voting – a simple calculation which states that if the probability that the benefits of voting outweigh the costs associated with voting, then an individual will choose to vote: P(B) > C. This model was tweaked by Andres Blais, when he introduced the factor of a duty term. In this model, D + P(B) > D, duty plays a very large role in determining whether an individual votes. Different people have different conceptions of civic duty as it relates to voting, but the model allows for individuals who – even if they don’t perceive any real benefits to themselves (or others) for taking part in the process – may make a decision to vote based solely on a strong sense of duty.

Loewen (2010) takes a very different approach to considering whether or not people vote, but maintains the basic rational choice model as the overlying framework. Loewen sees the duty consideration as less than ideal, as it treats the choice to vote (or not) as static, and does not condition for an individual’s relations to others. Loewen, by contrast views politics as a competition between groups of individuals who rely on more than just self interest, and make decisions as well on the interests of others. Thus, Loewen suggests that rather than seeing the decision to vote as a component of duty, the choice to vote is related instead to both the affinity an individual has towards a given party, the antipathy they feel towards other groups, as well as the benefits they see themselves accruing (or not). His model P(BS + Affinity + Antipathy) > C does not incorporate a duty term – so, while he disagrees largely with Blais’s prescription of voting choice, his analysis does not meet Blais’s head on.

The study of Canadian voting behaviour has largely borrowed from the US schools of thought, and additionally, has been divided along these lines. As a result, there is no coherent understanding of what conditions an individual’s vote for one party or another – at this point, any number of factors can be at play, including an individual’s socialization to a particular party, their ethnic or religious background, their location within Canada, their class, among others. Certainly no one factor has been raised to the fore.