

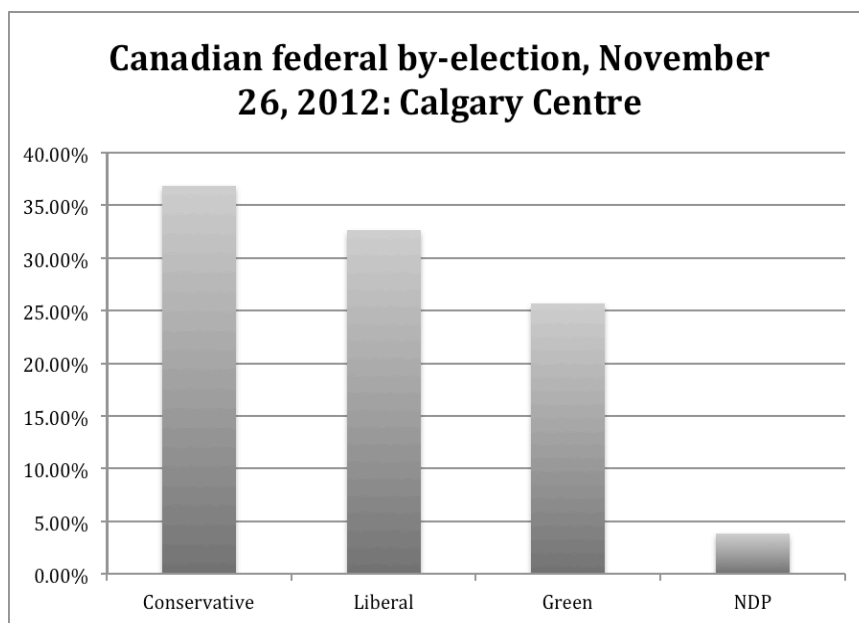
Milan Ilnyckyj
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Why do electoral coalitions in Canada change?

The concept of an 'electoral coalition' can be interpreted in at least two ways: as the structure of parties and candidates that seek to contest an election together, and as the coalition of voters who end up putting a government into power. The first kind of coalition can be defined as the set of candidates that benefit one another by being successfully elected (for instance, all NDP Members of Parliament). The second kind of coalition refers to the group of voters that has come together to successfully elect a particular party. The two need not be complementary; for instance, two parties might decide to form a coalition for a federal election, yet fail to attract a sufficient coalition of voters to form a government. Nonetheless, the two interpretations are clearly not wholly divorced from one another. For instance, the successful effort to 'unite the right' through the merger of the Progressive Conservative Party and the Canadian Alliance in 2003 affected the composition of the set of candidates offered up in future federal elections, while also replacing the dynamic that elected a string of Liberal governments between 1993 and 2006 with one that gave the new right-wing party minority and eventually majority status in parliament. The shifts that have taken place in the composition of Canada's federal parties – as well as in the composition of sets of voters who end up having their preferences satisfied – have been driven by many factors, including the rise of modern Quebecois nationalism, the success of individuals in making deals between parties, and changing voter preferences. Due to the complexity of explaining such shifts, it is not surprising that a single explanatory narrative can rarely be found to incorporate all of them. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify factors that have probably had some importance across time.

The complexity of the Canadian case is highlighted by the academic discussion about whether Canada constitutes an exception to Duverger's law, which claims that plurality rule

elections result in two-party competition.¹ Unlike in the United States, the pressure for ideologically like-minded parties to coalesce in order to avoid vote-splitting has not generally proved decisive in Canada, despite the obvious statistical evidence that the multiplicity of relatively similar parties affects electoral outcomes. The willingness of Canadian voters to forego pragmatism in some cases is illustrated by the small but sometimes decisive share of support that continues to be given to the Green Party, despite the low likelihood that a vote for them will result in the election of a candidate in most ridings.²



This behaviour is especially perplexing in situations where there is a tight race between two parties that vary significantly in the quality of their environmental credentials, but where the unwillingness of Green Party supporters to shift their support to the lesser of the two evils results in the election of the least green party on the ballot. Such behaviour is at odds with the logic behind Duverger's 'law' and challenges more mechanistic models for predicting voter behaviour during contested

¹ Brian J. Gaines, "Duverger's Law and the Meaning of Canadian Exceptionalism" *Comparative Political Studies* 32:7 (October, 1999), 835-61.

² 940,000 Canadian voters cast their ballots for the Green Party during the 2008 federal election, while electing no Members of Parliament. Source: Fair Vote Canada, "This is not democracy" <http://www.fairvote.ca/en/problem> (Accessed 7 January 2013)

elections. It suggests that voters at least sometimes cast ballots for reasons aside from improving the probability of victory for the party that has the best chance of winning while best satisfying the preferences of an individual voter.³ For instance, voters may feel that voting for a candidate with a stronger platform in a particular area will send a stronger message, even if the candidate is unlikely to win.

Rather than relying on rational individuals to drive the consolidation of parties in response to counterproductive vote-splitting, it is possible for party leaders to make arrangements that partly address the problem. For instance, parties can agree to run only a single candidate between them in contested ridings, or simply to support one another in parliamentary confidence motions. Such agreements have been contemplated by the leaders of many parties at many times, with recent examples including the 2004 effort by Stephen Harper to form a coalition with the Bloc Quebecois and New Democratic Party (NDP). The capricious character of such arrangements is perhaps illustrated by the vitriol which Prime Minister Harper denounced a mooted coalition between the Liberal Party and NDP in 2008 and 2009.⁴ Despite the failure of those parties to follow through on the possibility then, such an arrangement remains as one mechanism by which the party landscape in Canada may change in the future, and through which electoral outcomes could be altered.

The idea that changing electoral coalitions are driven by rational behaviour by voters or political elites is challenged by a more social conception of political participation, as described by Peter Loewen:

³ Odd results in Canadian elections are not limited to who forms the government. For instance, the Bloc Quebecois became the Official Opposition after the 1993 federal election despite winning a smaller share of the vote than the Reform Party or Progressive Conservatives.

⁴ Steele, Andrew, "Is Majority Possible?" *Globe and Mail*, 14 September 2009
<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/second-reading/is-majority-possible/article790003/> (Accessed 7 January 2013)

Hebert, Chantal, "PMs Horror Stories Might Not Pay Off" *Toronto Star*, 11 September 2009
<http://www.thestar.com/comment/columnists/article/694101> (Accessed 7 January 2013)

In this view, politics is not just a contest between parties fighting for the support of individual citizens. Rather, it is a fight over scarce resources between groups of citizens and their respective representatives in political parties; how individuals feel about various partisan groups matters for their understanding of politics.⁵

This coheres with the account of partisanship as group identification expressed by Green et al.⁶

Partly, such considerations affect the decision to vote or not vote in the first place. They may also help to explain how individuals choose to vote and how parties choose to behave in areas like the formulation of policy platforms and the selection of leaders. If parties understand themselves in terms of appealing to groups of voters with particular characteristics (for instance, 'union workers' or 'suburban parents'), that self-perception could well shape the process of policy development. In turn, that could influence electoral success. There are examples of government policies that have arguably been tailored to appeal to groups of likely supporters, such as the recent Home Renovation Tax Credit, the Children's Fitness Credit, and the Children's Arts Credit - all arguably created to appeal to suburban voters who may be willing to vote Conservative. Explicit appeals to particular groups such as members of particular religious denominations could also affect the dynamics of voter turnout, with these groups working to turn out the vote for parties and candidates they perceive as representing them.

The establishment of the Bloc Quebecois by Lucien Bouchard in 1991 illustrates another cause for shifting electoral coalitions in Canada. Generally speaking, there is substantial evidence that particularities of regional politics can affect the electoral fate of Canadian parties, as well as lead to the establishment of new parties. Examples include the emergence of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) from Alberta in 1932, the creation of the Social Credit Party in 1935, and the genesis of the Canadian Alliance in the same province in 2000. In addition to being

⁵ Peter Loewen, "Affinity, Antipathy, and Political Participation: How Our Concern for Others Makes Us Vote, ". *CJPS* 43:3 (September, 2010), 662.

⁶ Green, Donald P., Bradley Palmquist and Eric Shickler. *Partisan Hearts and Minds* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 26

widely separated physically, Canadian provinces vary substantially in terms of economic structure and political traditions. That diversity generates one mechanism through which change in electoral coalitions can take place. Geographic diversity has also been cited as an explanation for Canada's apparent divergence from Duverger's law.⁷ Canada's first-past-the-post system rewards parties that have a geographical focus to their support (like the Bloc Quebecois) while harming the prospects of parties with diffuse support (especially the Greens). This may partly explain the periodic emergence of parties with a strong regional affiliation. Also, because Canada's allocation of parliamentary seats to provinces on the basis of population is not automatic, governments have the opportunity to bolster their own support by passing laws to add seats in regions where they are popular.⁸ Alternatively, they may seek to delay the impact of population growth in areas where their support is low by allowing such imbalances to persist.

Geographic variation in Canada exists across multiple axes. These include very different economic structures, such as level of dependence on primary commodities and the dominance of certain sectors in certain regions. For example, the dominance of the oil and gas industry in Alberta almost certainly has electoral consequences, both in terms of affecting voter preferences between parties with different energy and environmental policies, and in terms of driving changes in party policies across time. Other relevant factors that vary geographically include language and religion; patterns of immigration; and variation in population demographics. Alongside geography, other factors that could plausibly affect the composition of party and voter electoral coalitions include immigration; different relative rates of economic growth between regions, economic sectors, or

⁷ Rae, Douglas W. *The political consequences of electoral laws*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967.)

⁸ Ibbitson, John. "Ottawa moves to reshape the House" *Globe and Mail* 24 September 2009 <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/ottawa-moves-to-reshape-the-house/article1300709/> (Accessed 8 January 2013)

social classes⁹; decreasing membership and political influence among unions; the perceived relationship between federal and provincial branches of parties, and the experiences of those parties in government; the largely random and ephemeral events and controversies that occur during particular election campaigns; changes in the prominence of the Quebec sovereignty issue¹⁰; trade, globalization, and Canada's economic relationship with the rest of the world; and American economic performance and its impact on the popularity of Canada's governing party. It is also plausible that particular elections have been interpreted by voters as primarily a 'referendum' on a single issue. A recent example was the 1988 federal election and the issue of the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement.

Given the overlapping explanations for Canada's continually changing political outcomes, it may be that academics will need to shape explanations based on "idiosyncratic histories" and "thick, atheoretical description" despite the aspirations of scholars like Gaines to identify parsimonious, quantifiable, and testable explanations.¹¹ The variables involved may simply be too inescapably intertwined – and too subject to individual interpretation – for a concise and convincing theory to emerge and become widely accepted.

⁹ See, for example: Richard Johnston, "The Structural Basis of Canadian Party Preference: Evolution and Cross-National Comparison," unpublished ms. 17

¹⁰ Green, Donald P., Bradley Palmquist and Eric Shickler. *Partisan Hearts and Minds* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 165

¹¹ Brian J. Gaines, "Duverger's Law and the Meaning of Canadian Exceptionalism" *Comparative Political Studies* 32:7 (October, 1999), 856.