Canadian Voting Behaviour in Comparative Perspective

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Chapter 12: Canadian Voting Behaviour in Comparative Perspective by James Farney and Renan Levine

I. Introduction

The existing comparative literature on voting behaviour and elections does not always succeed in including Canada in parsimonious theories about elections around the world. Characteristics of Canada like federalism, the persisting electoral relevance of religion, and low levels of strategic voting are well-known to Canadianists, yet produce novel insights about the nature of partisan identifications, the persistence of group loyalties, and the role of information when placed in comparative perspective. In this essay, we outline key comparative theories, review both Canadian contributions and identify on-going avenues of investigation in four areas of the voting literature: long-term influences on the vote, election-specific effects, and questions of rationality.

Of the three, long-term influences on the vote such as regional identities and cultures (or their apparent lack of influence) have received the most attention in Canada (see Everitt and O’Neill 2002, Kanji 2002, Leduc et al. 2002, and Gidengail 1993 for reviews). Scholars seeking to understand particular elections in Canada have also long emphasized election-specific short-term influences on the vote as much of the historic competition between the Liberals and the Progressive Conservatives seem to revolve around questions of who would best lead the government rather than social cleavages. More recently, the Canadian Election Study’s use of pooled cross-sectional time series have enabled scholars to make major contributions to the study of short-term affects on voters, but this contribution often goes over-looked. Finally, we review

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recent research into the question of whether voters are capable of making rational decisions. Aside from the important question of strategic voting, this discussion has been a rather limited one in Canada. Interesting opportunities exist to understand the how emotions, cognitive shortcuts, and political knowledge affect Canadian voters.

II. Long-term influences on Voters

A. Partisan identification and social class

At the dawn of the survey age, two schools of American scholars pioneered the field of electoral behaviour and found that many voting decisions were made long before the actual campaign. The Columbia school found that citizens’ vote intentions could be readily predicted from their level of education, income and their class membership (Lazarsfeld, et al. 1948, Berelson, et al. 1954). Media and campaign influences were mitigated by social discourse with others, mainly those of the same social status whose views were shaped by similar past experiences. The Columbia school’s theories especially resonated in Western Europe where researchers noted that most party systems were organized along class or religious cleavages and had changed little since the 1920’s (Lipset and Rokkan 1967, Rose and Urwin 1970). In Canada, though, society did not seem deeply divided along class lines, there were weak, if any ties between distinct socio-economic groups and the major parties, and seemingly no evidence that class played a major role in determining the outcome of political competition (Alford 1963; Nieuwbeerta and Ultee 1999; Gidengil, 1993; Kanji and Archer 2002).
The Michigan school’s (Campbell et al. 1960) socio-psychological model emphasized identification with a party as the key causal mechanism explaining the vote. Election-specific forces might cause some temporary disruptions, but, barring a major realignment of partisan loyalties, most voters would soon return to the party they and their parents supported. The Michigan model did not export well to other countries. Early studies in Europe (e.g. Butler and Stokes 1969; Thomassen 1976) found that party identification was either indistinguishable from the vote or was actually more volatile than the vote, making it highly unlikely that partisanship played an important, proximate role in the causal chain leading to the voting decision that the American evidence seemed to suggest (see also LeDuc 1981).

In Canada, some initial studies (Regenstreif 1965, Meisel 1972) indicated that Canadian party identification was weak and unstable, while others (Sniderman et al. 1974) argued that most Canadians did identify with a party and maintained that identification through multiple governments. Clarke et al. (1979, 1996) resolved some of this controversy by identifying what they call flexible partisans in three-quarters of the population. These voters might shift their attachment over time or between provincial and federal elections, but will still report some, less-intense partisan loyalties.

In the subsequent decades, both models have seemingly lost capacity to explain voting behaviour. In almost every industrial democracy, a greater percentage of the population appears to lack traditional party loyalties to any party (“dealignment”, see Franklin et al. 1992; Crewe and Denver 1985; Dalton, Flanagan and Beck 1984). New parties like the Greens in Germany gained strength with appeals that emphasized issues like the environment that transcend old class

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2 See Niemi and Miller (2002) for a review of revisions and current controversies over party identification in comparative electoral studies. An important Canadian contribution to the debate was made by Blais et al. (2001) who tested various methods of measuring party identification, faulting the method used on the American National Election Studies.
divisions. In many countries, this destabilization has been accompanied by a weakening of class divisions, a decline in church attendance and/or a shift in the values held by the public (see Dalton 1984, 2002, 2005; Nevitte 1996, 2002). Leduc et al. (1984) found that much of the volatility in Canadian party identification favored one party or were temporary fluctuations, rather than matching a pattern of dealignment away from all parties (see also Bowler, Lanoue and Savoie 1994).

B. Other long-term influences: social values, religion and regionalism

This does not mean that there are no long-term influences on the Canadian voter. Social values and political belief systems other than partisan identification can also constrain and condition voter behaviour. Values are a relatively small, stable and hierarchical set of beliefs applicable across a wide variety of situations (see Rokeach, 1973). Using these methods, Hofstede (1980) found that Canadians tend to be more individualist compared to citizens of many Asian and Latin American countries, but value individualism less than Americans and Australians. How these value systems relate to political attitudes is rarely tested by political scientists who tend to confine their study to testing whether pre-selected values like equality and individualism affect political attitudes (see Feldman 2003 for a review).

One important link that has not yet been fully explored is the linkage between political values and certain religious heritages. Religion has long appeared to affect voting behaviour in Canada (Regenstreif 1965; Meisel 1975; Blais, Brady and Crete 1992). Johnston and his colleagues (1992) found that Catholics tend to be Liberals while Protestants are more likely to vote Conservative independent of the ethno-linguistic divide. This religious divide supersedes other social divisions, including class, when there is a high concentration of Catholics in the area.
Blais (2005) has found that the Catholic-Protestant divide is still the largest single predictor of Liberal voting, even in those areas where there are not many Catholics.

What is surprising about the salience of religion is that religiosity has been declining in Canada (Nevitte 1996) and, unlike American parties, Canadian parties rarely employ religious-based appeals (Mendelsohn and Nadeau 1997). In Dalton’s study of eleven industrialized countries, he found that Canada has the second highest correlation between denomination and vote, but that the country is firmly in the middle of the pack when church attendance and vote is compared (Dalton 2005). Canadian parties generally try to broker religious differences and there are not vast behavioural or attitudinal differences between church goers and their non-church going neighbours, implying that the religious divide is an artifact caused by families socializing political leanings based on old religious cleavages (see Irvine, 1974; Johnston, et al. 1992). Johnston (1985) argues, though, that the family must be supported in this socialization by community-based forces such as discussion networks if the cleavages are to remain salient, yet the source of such outside reinforcement is not readily apparent in Canada (Blais 2005). In fact, scholars are at something of a loss to offer any explanation of why religion is still so salient in Canadian voting (Blais 2005).

Paralleling the decline in religiosity has been a trend away from material concerns towards “post-material” issues of lifestyle and self-expression (Inglehart, 1977, 1990, 1995). Flanagan (1987; Flanagan and Dalton 1984, Flanagan and Lee 2003) argues that the shift is two-fold, one from economic to non-economic values, and another from authoritarian to libertarian

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3 Some have cautioned that the acceptance of Ingelhart’s thesis should be tempered by a concerns about measurement and how much of what he calls materialist values are a function of short-term economic conditions (Clarke and Dutt 1991; Clarke et al. 1999, 1997; Davis and Davenport 1999; Davis, Dowley and Silver 1999; Davis 2000;).
values. This value shift has been linked to destabilizing changes like the formation of new parties (Kitschelt 1989; Dalton 2005).

Neil Nevitte’s *Decline of Deference* (1996) argues that these trends extend to Canada. Using a slightly different set of indicators, a team of sociologists recently argued that over the past twenty years, post-materialism in Canada has become more salient and more likely to map onto partisan divisions (Brym et al. 2004). Brym and his colleagues argue that Canada’s historic lack of a class cleavage has made the divide between materialist and post-materialist values more relevant here than they might otherwise be (see also Kriesi 1998).

Value changes are often linked to increasing levels of voter dissatisfaction and concerns about our ability to understand and predict democratic politics (see Franklin et al. 1992; Dalton 2005; Fiorina 2002; Dalton, Flanagan and Beck 1984). These changes have become increasingly pronounced with each successive cohort of voters something that, at first glance, matches well with value change over generations (Kanji 2002). A common way of linking these changes together is to argue that, as citizens become more educated and materially secure, they become better able to understand and participate in politics, including more unconventional forms, and less likely to accept the lead of political elites (Carty, Cross, and Young, 2000; Kanji, 2002). Existing institutions, according to this analysis, create dissatisfaction and alienation from politics because they do not offer opportunities for the substantive participation that today’s citizens desire.

Data offered by Gidengil and her colleagues (2003), however, questions whether the link between dissatisfaction or falling turnout and increasing post-materialism can be so easily drawn. They find that the decline in participation is driven by a decline in voting among each successive cohort of young voters, not by post-materialist youth dropping out. The overall decline in voter
turnout is caused by a decline in voter turnout among less educated, less post-materialistic young voters. This evidence should make us pause to re-examine how we link value change to political dissatisfaction before making reforms.

Nadeau (2002) finds that dissatisfaction with Canadian politics is derived from dissatisfaction with the basic structure of the country and not with a particular institution or leader. Much of this dissatisfaction appears to be strongest in specific regions. Strong regional political divisions have persisted in various forms since scholars began surveying Canadians (Alford 1964; Clarke et al. 1979; Carty 1996; Eagles 2002; Simeon and Elkins 1974). There is no scholarly consensus over why different regions vary so widely in their priorities or why these differences persist. Elkins and Simeon (1980) argue that the variance can be explained by the different settlement patterns that formed in each province. Outside of Quebec, though, it is not clear that regional identities are intergenerational or that they produce the strong sense of group identity that Jenkins (1996) identifies as the necessary basis for political activity (see also Huddy 2003). Fletcher (1987) proposed that there was a high level of regional variation in political messaging. More recently, Gidengil et al (1999) found that region still mattered even after controlling for socio-demographic variables, but struggled to pinpoint a specific causal mechanism (see also Henderson (2005).

III. Institutional Effects on Voting Behaviour

Understanding the effect of regionalism on Canadian voters is complicated by federalism. In contrast to the United States and Europe, we know little about how Canadian voters understand the link between provincial and federal politics. In both Europe and the United States, voters seem to function on the same electoral cycle even when casting votes for different levels
of government (see Shugart and Carey 1992, Marsh 1998). Reif and Schmitt (1980) proposed a second order elections model to explain non-national elections in Europe (European Union, local and regional elections). The most important election (usually the national level) is the ‘first order election’. The first order dominates voters’ political frameworks and viewpoints. Less important elections (like those for EU Parliament and regional governments) are ‘second order elections’. While voters may see them as relevant, their behaviour in the second order election is influenced by judgments about the state of government performance at the first order level.

Elections soon after or shortly before the national election often reflect national results, but elections in the midst of the national government’s term often results in a surge in support for the opposition, much like patterns observed in mid-term U.S. Congressional elections (see Kernell 1977; Campbell 1986, 1993). Knowledge of this cycle can assist strategic actors in Canada where the timing of non-national elections is endogenously determined by political actors.

Canada, with its distinct provincial and federal party systems, offers a useful set of cases for further exploring these dynamics. Irregular provincial parliament dissolutions give scholars a range of different points on the national election cycle to observe. While the absence of standardized provincial election studies has limited investigation into these areas, Canadian scholars have been able to point in interesting directions. Blake’s (1985) study of B.C. voters found that British Columbia voters in that province vote along center/periphery lines federally, but along class lines provincially. The answer he proposes is that the province’s constitutional responsibility for economic issues makes class a natural divide in its politics. The implication is that voters inhabit two separate worlds where the national and non-national governments are roughly equal in importance. Elsewhere in Canada, however, the devolution of policy jurisdiction from the national government is insufficient to uncouple elections between the two
levels of government. Indeed, in even in Ontario there is evidence that voting for different levels of government is connected (see Clarke et al. 2005), a finding consistent with studies of European elections (Marsh 1998; van der Eijk, Franklin and Marsh 1996, Hough and Jeffrey 2003).

These questions will only become more important, both for scholars and in practical politics, as several provinces examine changing their electoral systems. Canada’s first-past-the-post system tends to bias large parties in the centre (“Duverger’s Law,” Duverger 1964, Riker 1982). Past departures from first-past-the-post has been linked to the persistence of Canada’s multi-party system (Gaines 1999).

III. Election-specific Influences on Voters

One major shortcoming of any theory which emphasizes features of a polity that change very little will find it difficult to account for changes in voting patterns. The socio-economic and socio-psychological models implicitly describe an electorate voting on the basis of some social characteristic or inherited identity. The general sense of discontent and electoral volatility that affected many democracies from the mid-1960’s to the late 1970’s fed scholars’ desire for models that could explain change better than either the Columbia or the Michigan school. Newer evidence suggested the relative unimportance of issues to voters in the Michigan studies may have been the result of there being few substantive differences between the competing parties at the time of those studies or ambiguity in where candidates stood on important issues (Pomper 1972, Page 1978, Shepsle 1972, Rahn, Aldrich and Borgida 1994).

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Key (1966, 1964) described an “echo chamber” where elite pronouncements and mass sentiments reflect each other. When candidates starkly differ on important, easy to comprehend issues that map onto the ideological divide between the two parties, the evidence suggests that voters are well aware of the issues and vote accordingly (see Carmines and Stimson 1980; Aldrich et al. 1989; Blais et al. 2004). Two recent elections in Canada appear to have centered on specific issues, the energy issue in 1980, and the battle over NAFTA in 1988 (see Uslaner 1989, 1998). When substantial divisions match social divisions, the political conflict will closely match social cleavages (Evans 1999; Kitschelt 1994). More recent work continues to give credence to Key’s conjectures, finding that the voters’ choices match elite appeals to the electorate, accelerating declines in class voting and generating more evidence that voters are aware of, and respond to, programmatic appeals (Evans 1999; Hout, Manza and Brooks 1999).

The dominant view of many late 20th century federal elections in Canada has been that many campaigns eschewed programmatic appeals in favor of personality-based pleas (see Clarke 1996). Studies of presidential politics in the United States have long emphasized candidate traits as a major input into voter decision-making (see especially Markus 1982). Canadian evidence has provided comparative perspective by demonstrating how views of candidate traits take shape in the voter’s mind (Clarke et al., 1984; Brown et al., 1988; Blais et al. 2002; Blais, et al. 2003; Cutler, 2002). Much of this evidence has come from the rolling cross-sectional design, in which a small representative sample of the electorate is polled every couple of days, of the Canadian Election Study. This allows analysts to examine each 3- to 5- day period as if it was a separate survey. With such a design, scholars can observe the effect of an event like a debate, the airing of a campaign advertisement, or a major news story on public opinion (Johnston et al. 1992; Blais and Boyer 1996; Blais et al., 2003; Blais et al., 2005). During the campaign, Canadians tend to
lack information about small parties (Fournier 2002), yet they do learn during election and referendum campaigns (Johnson et al. 1992, 1996). Additional information about issues tends to lead to more conservative responses on economic issues and more liberal responses on social issues in the U.S. and Canada (Berinsky and Cutler 1998).

Some election – specific effects, though, have little to do with the campaign. Widely broadcast reports of the national or local economy and people’s own economic condition can help people form judgments of candidates and parties (see Fiorina 1981; Lewis-Beck 1988; Kinder, Adams and Gronke 1989; Markov 1992; Hetherington 1996; Nadeau, Niemi and Amato 2000; Blais and Nadeau 1992; Anderson 2006). In Canada, Perrella (2005) found that short-term economic pain tended to hurt the incumbent, but when there were long-term economic disruptions, measured by provincial unemployment rates, “non-mainstream” parties, rather than the main opposition, tended to benefit. This is consistent with work in the U.S. seeking to explain third party presidential campaigns (see Converse et al. 1969; Alvarez and Nagler 1995; Abramson, Aldrich and Rohde 1999). Belanger (2004a, b) identified similar factors motivating support for the Reform Party and the Bloc Quebecois, but, confirming Pinard (1971), identified that non-economic factors are also important to minor party success (see also Farney and Levine, forthcoming).

IV. Rational and Less-than-rational Choices

Some of the scholars who revised the socio-psychological theories of voting to account for short-term forces work from the rational choice or public choice approach rooted in the Hotelling-Downs model of party competition (Downs 1957). Rather than basing their investigations on public opinion surveys, their theorizing was rooted in economic modeling
techniques. In these models, voters seek to maximize utility, the satisfaction or benefits enjoyed after realizing a preferred outcome. Scholars assume that each voter has one ideal outcome. Voters evaluate the candidates or parties relative to this ideal, so the decision can be depicted spatially. Each relevant consideration, whether it is important issues or character judgments form a different dimension. Each of these dimensions is weighted by the importance of that criterion, so elections fought over a single issue can be depicted by a line. By assuming voters support the party closest to their ideal point, Downs’ (1957) seminal work located an equilibrium at the median voter and predicted that the parties would converge to that voter’s ideal until there was just enough differences between the two parties that the voter would not be indifferent between the two.5

The voter’s decision is modeled as a product of the benefits she would receive if the candidate won the election and the probability of the vote cast for a candidate (or party) deciding the election. The vote is cast for the candidate with the highest product (see Riker and Ordeshook 1968), but votes are only cast if the benefits of voting exceeds the costs. These costs include the costs of acquiring the information necessary to make an informed choice.

As we explain below, rational choice has developed far beyond these simple beginnings. Some of these new developments could open up interesting new vistas for Canadian scholars though, to date, the Canadian scholarship has tested implications of rational choice mostly by observing strategic voting and turnout. Strategic voters abandon their favorite party and cast a vote for a party with a better chance of winning to prevent a less desirable alternative from

5 An alternative view, the theory of directional voting, argues that voters see many issues as having two sides and will prefer parties that are intense advocates for their side of the issue, even if that party’s stance is farther away from the voters’ ideal position than a moderate party (Rabinowitz and Macdonald, 1989; Macdonald, Rabinowitz, and Listhaug, 1998). Although methodological concerns over how to compare the two models dominate the debate, scholars conclude that the proximity model did a better job explaining the vote in Canada in 1993 and 1997 (Blais et al. 2001; Johnston et al. 2000).
winning the election. Because there are more than two parties running in many ridings, and all
ridings are first-past-the-post plurality races, Canada offers some of the richest data to test
theories of rational turnout and strategic voting. When two parties are closely matched in a
riding, scholars in the rational choice tradition would expect that turnout would increase and
supporters of one of the other parties will desert their favorite to support one of the parties
struggling to win the narrow race. Indeed, Canadian data provided the first set of evidence that
voters were sensitive to the probability of the election outcome in multi-candidate races (Black
1978).

Blais (2002) estimates that about 6 percent of Canadians outside of Quebec cast a vote
for a party other than the one they liked best because the party had a better chance of winning the
riding. Black (1978) found that 12% of the electorate did not cast votes for their favorite party. If
anything, this percentage is surprisingly small, given the number of parties and their regional
concentrations of support, compared levels of strategic voting observed in the United States and
elsewhere (see Blais 2000; Blais and Carty 1991; Blais et al. 2001; Blais and Nadeau 1996;
Abramson et al. 2004).

Canadian evidence suggests that voters are not very sensitive to the probability of their vote
being decisive, which may help explain low strategic voting and relatively high levels of turnout
as many voters turn out to vote for their sincere preference regardless of the electoral context
(see Cox 1997; Blais 2000, 2002).

Scholarly criticism against rational choice often emphasizes problems with the
assumptions made in rational models, especially regarding the public’s capacity to compare the
candidates to an ideal outcome. Indeed, scholars find widely varying levels of political
information within countries. People with the opportunity, ability and motivation to collect and
retain information about politics do, but the number of those people is small compared to the universe of potential or actual voters (see Luskin 1990; Lambert et al. 1988). The problem is that there is little reason to expect voters to collect information about the candidates because there are few incentives to collect information in collective, public decisions under conditions of uncertainty like elections in large countries like Canada (Fournier 2002). But even if they do not possess an extensive set of information about the candidates or the impact of their votes, they may be able to act rationally. Many voters resort to short-cuts, cues or heuristics that they expect will enable them to arrive at the “correct” decision, i.e. the vote they would have cast if they had carefully considered all of the relevant information (Sniderman et al. 1991; Lupia and McCubbins 1998).

One of these short-cuts is party identification or closeness, enabling many partisans to choose a candidate based on minimal information provided by the candidate’s party label. Partisans may not be attentive to news or information about other candidates or parties, but that may not matter to their choice as long as they are confident that they know enough about their party’s nominee to be reasonably assured that they are casting a vote for the candidate that best represents their interests. Other short-cuts include a candidate’s race, gender, ideological label (liberal-conservative or right-left), electoral prospects, and heavily publicized missteps taken by the candidates (see Jacoby 1991; Popkin 1991). Johnston et al.’s (1996) analysis of the 1992 Charlottetown referendum campaign found that these short-cuts did not enable less-informed Canadian voters to vote as accurately as the well-informed voters but Elkins (1993) found that the weaknesses of individual voters balance themselves off when aggregated, quieting fears that a more informed public would have led to a different result.
Emotions can play an important role in influencing attention to politics and political participation. Marcus and MacKuen (1993) found that anxiety stimulates attention to campaign news and discourages reliance on short-cuts, while enthusiasm stimulates interest and participation in the campaign. Gordon and Arian (2001) found that individuals feeling threatened are likely to rely on emotions when forming judgments and are more likely to favor extremist or confrontational policies than individuals who feel little personal threat (see also McCann 1997). Emotions also appear to play a large role in people’s deliberation when the choice requires making a difficult trade-off from one desired attribute or policy for another (Luce, Payne and Bettman 2001; Levine 2003). The role of emotions, especially anxiety and threat, has not yet been extensively examined in Canada, but these concepts may prove useful in explaining support for NAFTA (see Uslaner 1998), Quebec independence, and changes in Canada’s multicultural policies (Fletcher, Levine and Szala, forthcoming). In 2004, the Canadian Election Study team found that anger (in the absence of anxiety or threat) was not a sufficient condition to punish the incumbent Liberals over the corruption scandal (Blais et al. 2005). These early findings are likely portends of many promising research agendas into political judgments in Canada.

V. Conclusion

A tension in the study of any country’s politics is that between the desire to emphasize its uniqueness (the area studies approach) and the desire to build generalizable theory that can incorporate the experience of a particular country (the comparative approach). For students of electoral behaviour interested in Canada, this essay points towards a different reality. The Canadian scholarship on voting is deeply indebted to the comparative literature. At the same time, especially with more recent work, an emphasis on explaining how Canadian voters behave
has resulted in significant contributions to the comparative literature on both long-term influences on the vote like partisanship and on how campaign events sway voters. Canadian contributions to our understanding of strategic voting and campaign effects are particularly noteworthy.

We have also argued, though, that there still exists significant opportunities for studies of Canada to resolve interesting and important puzzles in the comparative study of voting behaviour. Long-term effects like religion and region still matter in Canada, but scholars have not yet identified a causal mechanism explaining why, especially one that would also explain behaviour in other countries. Canada’s federal system provides an opportunity to further explain variance in voting behaviour at different levels of governance.

We hope we have highlighted several emerging areas of scholarship outside of Canada that have not received much attention in Canada. This is especially true of investigations into the rationality of voter decision-making, where scholars have begun to investigate how emotions and cognitive short-cuts influence judgments. Surprisingly, given the attention paid to the policy impacts of federalism, that the effects of federalism on voting behaviour have not been fully explored. New developments, including immigration and potential new provincial electoral reforms, will likely give scholars working on Canadian voting behaviour many opportunities to do research that will impact on both our knowledge of Canada and the larger comparative literature.
References


