CHAPTER 1

Parties and Democracy in Canada: Regional Fragmentation, Institutional Inertia, and Democratic Deficit

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INTRODUCTION

Canada's political party system has undergone some dramatic changes over the past century, yet in terms of its essential dynamics it has remained fairly constant. The role of political parties in the democratic process has been important, and in some respects indispensable, but a role not always or in every way virtuous and positive. This chapter will investigate this mixed record of performance through an examination of the characteristics and competitive dynamics of Canada's party system, considered within the context of the broader political system, and in particular the shaping effects of federalism, regionalism, and the first-past-the-post electoral system. Although these institutional and cultural features of the Canadian political landscape have sometimes exerted a dampening, if not perverse, effect on Canadian democracy, they have not prevented (and have sometimes contributed to) successive waves of democratic reform that affect the operation of parties, their relationship with voters, and the contours of the party system itself.

FOUR CANADIAN PARTY SYSTEMS

Of first importance in Canada's party system is that it has not always been as it is today in terms of the number of political parties or the nature of their electoral appeals and bases of support, but that there have nevertheless been certain enduring constants within Canada's party politics.
Political Parties and Democracy

The most popular interpretation of Canada’s party system is to view it through the lens of four distinct stages or eras of party competition.\(^1\) The first period of party politics spanned the half century from Canada’s origins as a federation in 1867 until 1921, the year of the first general election following World War I. The Canadian political system established by the British North America Act in 1867 combined the principles of both Westminster-style parliamentary democracy and U.S.-style federalism, the potential contradictions of which (for example, supremacy of Parliament versus divided sovereignty) led at least one notable scholar to predict its inevitable failure.\(^2\) And over the first quarter century of Confederation it appeared this assessment might be borne out, as federal—provincial conflict raged both in the courts and at the ballot box over the meaning and extent of the powers allocated in the constitution to the central and regional governments, respectively. Yet by the end of the 19th century, these disagreements over what kind of federation Canada would be (centralized versus decentralized) were more or less resolved, with both political and judicial influences acting to scale back the central government’s early attempts to dominate the provinces and diminish the scope of their powers.\(^3\)

Party competition during these early decades of Confederation took the form of a classic two-party system, which is a normal feature of political systems that use the simple plurality or “first-past-the-post” electoral system. The Liberal and Conservative parties operated as broad national parties, alternating in power and building electoral coalitions comprised of different regions, classes, religions, and language groups. As noted by André Siegfried in his classic study *The Race Question in Canada* (1907), politics was primarily a battle over the spoils of power between the “Ins” and “Outs,” unsullied by ideological principle and focused on parochial concerns at the local level. For Siegfried, the one defining characteristic of Canadian politics was the smoldering antagonism between the English-speaking majority and the French-speaking minority—“two nations warring within the bosom of a single state.”\(^4\) Not that there weren’t some basic differences between the parties, in particular surrounding the question of commercial relations with the U.S. and imperial ties with Britain. These differences certainly helped to structure the vote during this period by defining the core support base for each party and occasionally realigning the partisan loyalties of the electorate (such as in the elections of 1896 and 1911).\(^5\)

This combination of classic two-party competition and highly personalized politics, with its focus on the use of patronage, policy, and patriotic appeals to build and maintain national party organizations and winning electoral coalitions, had the additional salutary effect over time of integrating a diverse polity and constructing a viable nation-state. The first party system, however, did not survive the nationalist—imperialist crosspressures generated by World War I. The issue that proved particularly vexing for Canada’s two national parties was conscription, the need for which was strongly supported by British Canadians and adamantly opposed by French Canadians. It not only divided Canada politically along ethno-linguistic lines but also provoked street riots and military suppression in Quebec and reduced the Liberal Party to a largely French-speaking rump facing a bipartisan Unionist Party and government. Although the country was fortunate to escape the horrors and lasting enmities that would have been generated by armed civil conflict or the corrosive effects on national unity and political stability of an organized separatist movement in the French-speaking province of Quebec, the political effects and aftermath of the wartime experience were nonetheless both profound and long lasting.

The system-changing election of 1921 did more than unseat the Conservatives and bring the Liberals back to power, in the pattern of previous elections. The second-place finisher was an upstart agrarian party, the Progressives, who captured a majority of the seats in western Canada. There were also a number of independent Labour candidates elected across the country in industrialized urban centers. The appearance of these new actors in both national and provincial political arenas marked the increasing salience of class and regional cleavages in a rapidly urbanizing and industrializing Canada; their electoral success, especially at this time for agrarian parties like the Progressives, marked the failure of the traditional parties to moderate and contain rising political tensions and conflicts.

This change in the number and character of political parties, as well as other changes that followed in the wake of the war, was effectively the beginning of Canada’s second party system. The old-line parties may have been able to stave off the challenge of the new parties and for a short time restore “normal” politics, but the social and political strains that accompanied the 1930s depression altered once and for all the old pattern of party allegiances. Two new parties—the socialist Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) and the populist Social Credit Party—appeared in the election of 1935 and quickly established durable voter bases in western Canada (and for the CCF significant pockets of support in the east), permanently altering the political landscape and the dynamics of electoral politics federally and in a number of provinces.\(^6\)

Unlike the first party system, the second was a multiparty affair dominated by one party: the Liberals. Canada’s longest serving prime minister, Mackenzie King, governed for all but five years between 1921 and 1948, with his hand-picked successor Louis St. Laurent governing for another nine. Facing a divided opposition and a weak Conservative Party (renamed the Progressive Conservatives in 1942), the Liberals were able to win a record five consecutive majority governments. During this period the foundations of the modern welfare state were
laid, and foreign, defense, and commercial policies were pursued that weaned Canada from its colonial past and British ties toward greater continental cooperation and integration with the United States. This substitution of imperial relationships—in effect, swapping a declining great power for the world’s emergent superpower—was not accomplished without creating tensions within the national fabric and psyche. Indeed, Canada’s relationship with the United States always had been fraught with tension, with Canadians alternately repelled by their fear of disappearing into the great U.S. economic and cultural maw and attracted by the dynamism of the United States, its apparently insatiable demand for Canadian resources, and the opportunities presented by its huge consumer market.

The long reign of the Liberals during the second party system fostered the close integration of party and state. This “government party” syndrome, as described by Reginald Whitaker, thrived on the circulation of party and bureaucratic elites and the use of state spending to maintain party organization and support in the regions. This use of the state for partisan purposes, however, is mainly attributable to the one-party dominance of government during this era, rather than to rampant corruption. Indeed, a key development during this period was the modernization of the Canadian state through the installation of a professional, merit-based bureaucracy charged with administering universal programs based on nonselective criteria. The installation of a modern state apparatus increasingly constrained and constricted the use of traditional forms of partisan patronage as a basis for party organization. Indeed, from a partisan perspective, the weakness of this “ministerialist” system of party organization, and the cause of its eventual downfall, was the concentration of both government and party functions in the hands of government elites who were increasingly preoccupied with the tasks of administration and governance. Over time, party affairs and concerns tended to be neglected, and when control over state spending and programs was ceded after an eventual election loss, party organization collapsed as well.

Canada’s original two-party system buckled under the growing diversity of demands and interests in post–World War I Canada, especially regional and class antagonisms. Yet despite these shocks, the traditional parties were able to adapt, with the Liberals becoming the dominant party based on their superior ability to aggregate and accommodate the interests of different regions, classes, and language groups in classic brokerage style. Mackenzie King was particularly adept at this process, “doing nothing by halves that could be done by quarters . . . and never taking sides, because he never allowed sides to take shape.” While perhaps this cautious, managerial approach was a recipe for managing tensions and maintaining political stability, it did not produce inspiring leadership or seek to frame the task of governance in lofty ideals and goals. Critics from the left opined the absence of a creative and progressive politics in a nation seemingly obsessed by an overriding concern with political stability and national unity. And nationalists on both the left and the right were critical of policies that seemed to encourage (or did nothing to discourage) the increasing economic and cultural integration of Canada with the United States, a trend that produced growing unease about Canada’s sovereignty, identity, and development prospects.

Nor were the elite-dominated organization, brokerage fixation, and managerial philosophy of a successful Liberal Party conducive to a vibrant, inclusive, and participatory party democracy. Although there were some limited advances on this front, such as the introduction of delegate conventions for choosing party leaders and the gradual extension of the franchise to excluded groups—beginning with women in 1919, Asians in 1948, and finally Aboriginal Canadians living on reserves in 1960—a genteel elitism, racism, inequality, and intolerance toward minorities continued to color popular attitudes, government policies, and social structures. John Porter’s renowned study of the character of Canadian society and politics in the 1950s, titled The Vertical Mosaic, reflected his findings of an established hierarchy of ethnic, linguistic, racial, gender, and class inequalities that left the upper reaches of Canadian political, economic, and social institutions dominated by unilingual, white, protestant males of British heritage.

Challenges to this exclusive, elite-dominated political system during this period tended to come from primarily Western-based protest parties steeped in British socialist and American populist traditions and advocating a more egalitarian society and/or direct democracy. One of these “prairie populist” movement parties (the CCF) evolved into a mainstream, labor-affiliated, social democratic party (the New Democratic Party), which has continued to be the primary alternative on the left for Canadian voters.

In the 1960s, the role within and relationship between political parties and Canadian democracy changed again. It was the ever-deepening relationship with the United States and its implications for Canadian sovereignty that became a key issue in the eventual political defeat of the St. Laurent Liberals at the hands of an ardent defender of Canada’s traditional values and British ties, John Diefenbaker. Diefenbaker’s Progressive Conservatives won a narrow minority in 1957, quickly followed by a massive majority—the largest in proportional terms in Canadian history. But “Dief the Chief,” as he came to be known, is generally acknowledged to have been a better leader of the opposition than prime minister, and it did not take long for his rancorous governing style to alienate voters, especially in Canada’s large urban centers. Even more problematic was his failure to develop a support base among French Canadians, who were repelled by the Chief’s views on
the “national question” that were so popular in rural English Canada. As a result of these and other factors, the massive majority of 1958 was turned into a minority in 1962 and then to electoral defeat in 1963, ushering in Canada’s third party system.\(^\text{13}\)

After the Diefenbaker interlude, the Liberals once again became Canada’s dominant party, although the parties themselves, and the competitive dynamics of the party system, were substantially altered. One important political institution, however, remained unchanged. The single member, simple plurality (or first-past-the-post) electoral system continuously distorted voter preferences by over-representing the strongest party, while conversely punishing smaller parties with diffuse national support. The electoral system distorted election outcomes in other ways as well, exaggerating the regional character of some parties, while denying any regional seats to others despite significant support within those electorates. According to Alan Cairns in his classic study, both parties and voters in Canada were ill-served by this electoral system, which did not consistently deliver the system’s one purported benefit—majority governments—but did seriously distort the partisan complexion of regional electorates, thereby exaggerating the role and importance of regionalism within Canadian politics.\(^\text{14}\)

Canada’s third party system was forged in the political cauldron of four elections in rapid succession—1962, 1963, 1965, and 1968—with only the last producing a majority government. Under Lester Pearson, a former Nobel Peace Prize laureate, the Liberals came to power in 1963, and did not give up control of the government until 1984 (save for a short stint in opposition in 1979). The prime minister for most of this period was Pierre Trudeau, a Quebec intellectual who came to Ottawa as one of the so-called three wise men recruited by Pearson to develop a federal response to the rise of Quebec nationalism and more ominously an independence/separatist movement in that province. The decade also saw the rapid rise of yet another regional party at the federal level, the Quebec-based “Creditistes,” a populist party that persisted until the election of 1980. The third party system, however, was primarily a three-party affair, with the Liberal and Progressive Conservative parties contesting for power and the smaller New Democratic Party (NDP) vying for left-of-center votes and occasionally acting as the spoiler or holding the balance of power in minority situations (1962–1968, 1972–1974, 1979).\(^\text{15}\)

The profound changes taking place in Canadian society during this period—progressive urbanization, expansion of a well-educated and relatively affluent middle class, the increasingly multicultural character of society (especially in the major cities), and the changing role and status of women as they made advances in their struggle for equality—profoundly affected the dynamics of party competition and placed new demands on political parties. During this period the governing Liberals adopted a

social democratic mantle, stemming potential gains for the left-of-center NDP while successfully crafting a national unity/national identity strategy based on the policies of bilingualism and multiculturalism. This reinforced and expanded upon the party’s traditional support base among French Canadians and visible minorities. At the same time, Diefenbaker’s populist appeal displaced both the Liberals and smaller regional parties in the West, and by coalescing opposition to the Liberals, made his Progressive Conservative Party a competitive alternative to the Liberals at the national level.

It should be noted that Diefenbaker’s accomplishment is attributable in part to the decline in salience of Canada’s British Empire connections, obviating the rationale for the protectionist commercial policy that had become an albatross around the Conservative Party’s neck in the resource-producing regions of Canada, and allowing the party to appeal to a broader constituency in English-speaking Canada. The Liberals, with a secure Quebec base but virtually shut out of western Canada after 1958, were forced to pursue majorities in urban Ontario, a strategy sometimes thwarted by the presence of the NDP and its oscillating appeal to left-of-center voters. The overall result was the absence of truly national parties that were competitive in all regions and the ever-present possibility of minority governments.\(^\text{16}\)

There were a number of positive developments regarding political parties and democracy during this period. One of these concerned the regulatory context for parties and elections. The passage of the Election Expenses Act during a period of minority government in 1974 placed limits on the amount of money parties could spend during election periods, imposed legal requirements on parties to disclose the names of donors, and used the tax system to encourage individuals to donate to parties, thereby broadening the financing of parties beyond corporations, unions, and wealthy private donors. All of this had the effect of placing limits on and making more transparent the role of money in party and electoral politics and began the process of moving parties away from their dependence on large (and presumably influential) contributors to party coffers.\(^\text{17}\)

The parties also experienced a dramatic expansion of their membership numbers during this period and actively recruited women and minorities to join their ranks. Party conventions became more open and participatory, with typically thousands of delegates congregating to choose new leaders and discuss policy resolutions. At the same time, progress in terms of getting more women and minorities elected to Parliament was painfully slow, and the parties were often criticized as a barrier to progress. Beyond selecting new leaders and periodically passing judgment on their performance, member participation tended to be shallow, sporadic, and largely meaningless in terms of deciding party policies. Even member recruitment tended to occur only during
leadership contests or elections, with participation spiking only to be followed by a dramatic fall-off in membership numbers and participation between these episodes.¹⁸

A profound test of the sturdiness and resiliency of Canadian democracy during the last quarter of the 20th century was the commitment on the part of all political parties, both within Quebec and at the federal level, to resolve democratically the question of Quebec's place within Canada. During Trudeau's years as prime minister (1968–1979; 1980–1984), the arguments for Quebec independence versus Canadian federalism were put forward primarily by the provincial Parti Québécois on one side and the provincial and federal Liberal parties on the other. Following Trudeau's retirement, two consecutive election victories by Brian Mulroney's Progressive Conservatives—each time with a majority of Quebec's seats—altered the tenor and content of the national unity debate, as did the creation in 1990 of the Bloc Québécois as a 'sovereignist' option for Quebecers at the federal level. In 1980 and again in 1995, a referendum in Quebec was held on the issue, with the federalist side winning comfortably in the former but only barely in the latter. Yet in over three decades of constitutional discussions, elections, and referenda, the notion that Quebec's future would be decided by Quebecers themselves, through democratic means, was never seriously questioned.¹⁹

One significant outcome of this protracted national self-examination and questioning was the patriation (from the United Kingdom) and reform of the Canadian constitution. The adoption of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982, the crowning achievement of Trudeau's tenure as prime minister, substantially altered both the substance of Canadian politics and the character of the Canadian political system. Canada became a constitutional democracy with the courts assuming a prominent role in interpreting and enforcing constitutional law, thereby limiting the purview of parliaments and political executives. This was particularly the case with regard to the individual and group rights constitutionally entrenched by the Charter. "Rights" quickly became an important part of the Canadian political conversation, and the Charter itself—which in addition to the standard list of liberal rights and freedoms includes sections on minority language, Aboriginal, multicultural, and gender rights—a compelling focus for Canadian identity and national unity.²⁰

Brian Mulroney's second mandate as prime minister from 1988 to 1993 was marked by conflict, controversy, and ultimately a spectacular collapse of voter support for his governing Progressive Conservatives, by then under the leadership of his successor (the only woman ever to serve as Canadian prime minister, Kim Campbell). Two new regional parties emerged from the wreckage of the Progressive Conservatives: the separatist Bloc Québécois and the western-based, neo-conservative Reform Party, each of which served a term as Canada's official opposition to the governing Liberals, who were returned to power under the leadership of Jean Chrétien. This "electoral earthquake," which also saw the NDP reduced to near obscurity, heralded the end of the third party system and the onset of the most regionalized and ideological brand of party politics in Canadian history. The issues that triggered this turnout were constitutional and economic: two failed constitutional accords that were meant to revise and supplement the 1982 changes (which were opposed by Quebec) and a hotly contested free trade agreement with the United States, followed in short order by a deteriorating fiscal and economic situation. In the process, many Canadians—especially conservative voters in western Canada and francophone Quebecers who had given their support to Mulroney after abandoning the Liberals in 1984—became alienated from the governing Progressive Conservatives, but also from the brokerage-style politics being practiced by all three national parties.²¹

The Liberals yielded their latest hold on power in 2006, but not before passing new party and election finance legislation that eliminated corporate and union donations to parties while providing them with annual public subsidies. Although the ability of parties to solicit money from individual Canadians continues to be important to their success, more than ever in Canadian history they are treated and regulated as public institutions, sustained by a relatively secure and "untainted" source of public funds. Ironically, the changes in party financing under the Liberals proved to be of greater financial benefit to their erstwhile opponents: the Bloc Québécois and the new Conservative Party (created in 2003 from a merger of the former Progressive Conservatives and the Reform-cum-Canadian Alliance Party). The changes were consolidated and further extended by the new Conservative government led by Stephen Harper, who took advantage of public backlash against revelations of Liberal Party corruption in Quebec (the so-called sponsorship scandal) to reduce the Liberals to minority status in 2004 and to propel his own party to a minority win in 2006.²²

THIRD PARTY FORMATION AND REPRESENTATION

Clearly, many Canadians were alienated from and angry with the mainstream political parties in 1993, but apparently not with political parties per se. In the span of just a few years, two new political parties were able to attract significant organizational, financial, and electoral support, especially in those regions of the country most disaffected with "politics as usual." While this represented a crisis for particular parties and transformed the party system, it confirmed that political parties remained the primary means of registering political protest and that change, renewal, and renovation of parties and the party system were still possible. New parties could form and succeed; old parties
could decline and even disappear if they failed to adapt to a changing environment or respond adequately to voter concerns, demands, and preferences. Party system change, in this sense, may be interpreted as a sign of the health and vitality of Canadian democracy, rather than evidence of its crisis or decrepitude.

Canada has long been something of an exception among the Anglo-American countries in terms of third party or minor party formation. Although only two parties have ever formed the government in Canada (Liberal and Conservative, or some variant thereof), since 1921 the party system has included three to five parties with elected members of Parliament. Most of the smaller parties have had distinct regional bases of support, even if presenting themselves as national alternatives with candidates in all regions. Others have had no such pretensions beyond their regional appeal.

Various explanations have been offered for this propensity for third-party formation (and success). Some have been case or situation specific, such as C. B. MacPherson’s interpretation of Alberta’s “quasi-party” tradition, the origins of which, he argued, lay in its neo-colonial relationship with eastern Canada and its homogeneous agrarian class structure. Other perspectives on third-party formation have been more generally applicable, such as Maurice Pinard’s theory of minor party formation purporting to explain the “Creditiste” phenomenon in Quebec by citing the coincidence of two factors—one-party dominance, combined with conditions of political or economic strain—which together create a “structural conduciveness” to third-party formation. Other explanations, commonly presented by scholars of Canadian federalism, have targeted the interaction of Canada’s political institutions: the workings of the electoral system in a regionally divided society, the concentration of power and rigid party discipline typical of the Westminster form of parliamentary government, and finally Canada’s decentralized federalism, which makes provinces—possessed of substantial autonomy, revenues, and powers—discrete political arenas worthy of political contestation, providing minor parties with both a raison d’être and political sustenance if they are successful in capturing provincial power.

Certainly federalism has had a major impact on party organization and behavior. As noted, a number of parties have existed, and in some cases governed, primarily or exclusively at the provincial level. For the most part, federal and provincial parties and party systems remain separate and distinct, despite the coincidence of party labels. Indeed, federal and provincial wings of the same party may be quite hostile toward each other. This lack of national integration of parties in Canada can have both negative and positive effects for Canadian democracy. On the negative side, it reduces the role that parties can play in securing political stability and regional representation through the accommodation of diverse regional interests within broad-based national parties. A highly regionalized party system itself exacerbates regionalism; it distorts regional interests and identities by frequently misrepresenting regional voter preferences within parliament. This can become a self-perpetuating cycle where regions that perceive themselves as poorly represented within particular parties or governments become alienated from those parties and therefore less likely to vote for them.

On the positive side, minor parties have performed several roles historically that can be seen to be valuable to a vibrant democracy. For instance, they have been key sources of both policy and organizational innovation. The traditional mainstream parties have been poor performers, if not largely moribund, when it comes to policy development and innovation, instead relying on government-appointed royal commissions to advise them on new policy directions. In addition, third parties have brought radical proposals for change to the “electoral table” and often have been innovators of new policies and programs at the provincial level. This was the case, for instance, with regard to Canada’s system of public health care, which was first instituted by an NDP government in the province of Saskatchewan. A quarter century later, it was the western-based Reform Party at the national level that was the first to champion the neo-liberal critique of big government, which prescribed lower taxes, cuts to social spending, deregulation, and decentralization as the cure for societal ills.

Another way in which “third” parties have been of service to Canadian democracy is in the area of organizational reform, grassroots participation, and new member recruitment. Minor parties on both the left and right have been innovators in terms of party organization, fund-raising techniques, and election campaign tactics in ways that have internally democratized parties or extended their popular reach. Of course, as long ago observed by political sociologist Maurice Duverger, such changes have a “contagion effect” on others in the party system who attempt to emulate and counter the introduction of any successful innovation by a competitor. The effective use of a new technology of mass communication (radio) by the populist Social Credit; class-based ideological appeal by the socialist CCF; affiliated membership, door-to-door campaigning and affirmative action initiatives by the social democratic NDP; new leader selection processes by the separatist Bloc Quebecois; and new fund-raising techniques by the neo-conservative Reform Party are some examples of innovations introduced and taken furthest by minor or protest parties in Canada.

Finally, new parties have provided an important safety valve function. Their presence has given Canadian voters an institutional outlet for their frustration, anger, or disillusionment with government policies, the mainstream parties, or more broadly with the political system. By channeling dissent into the electoral arena, new parties (unless they immediately sweep the older parties aside) can give the mainstream parties time to
adapt and subsequently to craft or adopt policy or institutional remedies. As well, by becoming part of the “national conversation” in the electoral arena and within Parliament, new parties themselves gradually become institutionalized and exert a moderating influence on more radical or extreme elements within their support base. In this way, the party and political system challenged by the rise of third parties is stimulated to respond in ways that ultimately absorb and deradicalize political dissent. This can provide at least part of the explanation for the findings of Richard Johnston, who argues that the most recent rise of regional parties in 1993 is consistent with the unfolding of a recurring and long-term cycle of protest in Canadian electoral history that results in the regional fragmentation of the party system, only to be followed by a period of reconsolidation and nationalism. However, Johnston does note that the latter process appears to happen at a higher level of party system fragmentation than existed previously, suggesting that individual parties—as well as the party system as a whole—may suffer from a diminishing capacity over time to “shoulder the burden” of national political integration imposed by Canada’s regional, ethnic, and linguistic diversity.33

This conclusion seems especially warranted given the continuing failure of other national political institutions to share this burden, in particular the Senate and the federal cabinet. The Canadian Senate, almost alone among comparable federal states, has never been an effective forum for regional representation within the national Parliament. Though comprised roughly on the basis of regional equality, as prime ministerial appointees, its members have had neither the legitimacy nor the inclination to act as articulators and defenders of regional interests within the legislative process, contributing to popular and scholarly opinion that the institution is largely dysfunctional and/or irrelevant. For its part, the federal cabinet—once the primary venue for regional representation and still constructed according to the tradition that every region has its appropriate share of ministerial posts—has declined as a decision-making body as the power of individual ministers has faded relative to the prime minister and his officials, and to the central agencies that provide both with information and advice.34

PARTIES AS ORGANIZATIONS: HOW DEMOCRATIC?

Just how inclusive are Canadian political parties of different segments of Canadian society, and how responsive are they to the views of their activists? What role do grassroots members play in their parties? And how relevant is this to the quality of Canadian democracy?

In general, Canadian political parties have had membership organizations that are fairly dormant at the constituency level between elections, only to be activated and pumped up with new members during general elections and party leadership contests. When their key role in the electoral process (choosing candidates or delegates) recedes in the aftermath of an election, the organizations tend to shrink to a dedicated core group dominated by local executives. During these times, it is estimated that between 1% and 2% of Canadians may be members of a political party, a figure that compares unfavorably with other Western democracies.35 Moreover, this is the case even though membership in parties is less restrictive than voting eligibility, with noncitizens and those not yet of voting age able to join. As well, those belonging to political parties do not tend to be representative of the population as a whole. About two-thirds of party members are men, with an average age around 60, and most of these are of European ancestry. Younger and visible minority or “new Canadians,” as well as those without a university education, tend to be left out.36

The parties have not been insensitive or obtuse about these discrepancies and the criticisms they have provoked. In the 1970s and 1980s, the parties made efforts to attract more women, youth, and ethnic minorities into their membership. Internal party structures were created in order to effect the greater participation of these underrepresented groups, with the New Democratic and Liberal parties going farthest in order to ensure a more representative membership base. By contrast, in the 1990s there was a movement away from such affirmative action measures by the populist and conservative Reform Party and its successor the Canadian Alliance, both of which rejected group-based politics and special treatment or measures for women and minorities. This difference of approach has continued after the merger of parties on the right to form the new Conservative Party of Canada. Finally, language composition is another area of uneven representation, which became worse in the 1990s due to the collapse of the Progressive Conservatives and success of the nationalist Bloc Québécois. After the emergence of the Bloc Québécois at the federal level, only the Liberals among the remaining parties were able to boast francophone membership numbers that were not risibly low.37

Most party members are inactive; and although there is some variation between parties, relatively few spend any time in the average month on party activity, with a financial contribution or posting a lawn sign the most common contributions during election periods. There is widespread dissatisfaction with this level of participation among party members, with most being of the opinion that there should be more discussion of matters of public policy and a greater role in developing the party’s election platform. This interest in a policy study and development role for party members touches on an area of weakness exhibited by Canadian political parties, which commit few resources to ongoing policy study, have developed neither a policy institute or foundation nor strong ties with independent policy groups, and tend to leave
policy making in the hands of party leaders and their personal entourages. Canada’s mainstream political parties have traditionally operated as elite-dominated, centrist-oriented brokerage parties, placing a premium on leadership and short-term issues, with little attention to long-term policy development. For the party leader and his advisers to craft an electoral appeal that could produce a potentially winning coalition of voters, flexibility in the realm of ideology and policy has been required with consistency and coherence less important than striking the right policy grace notes to make the broadest possible appeal. Whether this approach was imposed on parties by Canada’s ever-present (some might say rampant) regionalism and national unity concerns or was the result of “missed opportunities” when socialist parties failed to reorient the political discourse toward a more class-based politics, the fact remains that clear and lasting distinctions in policy platforms—or the policies pursued while in power—have not been a hallmark of Canadian party politics. Instead, policy study and innovation have been displaced to other political sites, such as experts in the bureaucracy, and certainly in the Canadian case, government-appointed royal commissions, task forces, and judicial inquiries.

Clearly Canada’s main political parties have not been participatory organizations when it comes to questions of policy. The same cannot be said, however, for the role of party members in selecting local candidates or party leaders. Carty argues that Canadian parties have operated as franchise operations, whereby local autonomy is granted to constituency organizations to choose their own candidates and delegates to party conventions, in return for leaving control over policy and election platforms to the leader and caucus, particularly the leader. Local nomination contests are relatively open affairs, generating significant recruitment drives that can bring in hundreds of new party members, often friends and associates of the candidates, but those recruited do not always remain active or even stay as party members, particularly if they were recruited to the losing side in a nomination contest. As well, many nomination contests—and almost always where there is an incumbent—remain uncontested.

Although the nominees of local constituency organizations still face the hurdle of leadership approval before becoming candidates, imposing candidates on a local association (the prerogative of party leaders who must sign nomination papers) risks arousing resentment, and in some instances, defections to other parties. This does not mean that it never happens. Leaders have appointed local candidates because they are “stars” expected to improve the party’s electoral prospects or to demonstrate they are open to members of target groups such as women or visible minorities who are still woefully underrepresented. This prudence to interfere with the ability of local associations to nominate candidates of their own choice has been particularly prevalent in the Liberal Party.

As for party leadership selection, its history is “one of continual pressure for an expanded electorate, with greater rank-and-file participation.” This steady evolution toward more inclusive and participatory forms of leadership selection has not prevented parties from adopting a variety of selection methods that reflect their party’s history and particular circumstances. The first leader selected by delegate convention, in 1919, was Mackenzie King, Canada’s longest serving prime minister. For decades thereafter the convention became the standard mechanism for choosing leaders, but these were usually small and managed affairs. The modern open convention with thousands of delegates arrived in the 1960s, forcing leadership candidates to engage in intensive recruitment drives and to pack local delegate selection meetings with their supporters. This placed a premium on money and organization as the keys to mounting a serious leadership bid. It also forced the opening up of what had been a relatively closed, elitist process to groups that were previously excluded, such as women, youth, and visible minorities, as parties sought to keep pace with broader societal demands for democratization, equality, and inclusiveness.

The crisis of the third-party system brought on by the rise of the Bloc and Reform parties, and the demise of the Progressive Conservatives, was the occasion for the transition from delegate conventions to either direct election through some sort of universal ballot or hybrid systems that combine features of direct election and delegate convention. Also important in precipitating the change was innovation at the provincial level, led by the Parti Québécois in 1985, to be followed over the next decade by provincial parties in every region and of various partisan persuasions. With provincial parties, the Bloc Québécois, and the Reform Party all adopting direct election of the leader with a vote for all party members, the other federal parties felt compelled to follow suit simply to meet the expectations of party members and the broader public who increasingly considered this to be the litmus test of a party’s democratic character. It also was seen as a way to reinvigorate parties after a devastating electoral defeat or a period in the political wilderness of opposition. Some parties, notably the Liberals, adopted a hybrid system that is a compromise aimed at satisfying the demands of the grass roots for a direct say and their preference as a brokerage party for a collective and deliberative decision-making process. Unique party histories and dynamics played a role in the decision made by other parties to water down the one member, one vote principle by adopting special weighting procedures, for instance to provide equality for constituencies (the Conservatives) or to guarantee a certain degree of influence for affiliated groups (the NDP). No party has yet to advocate a system based on the U.S. presidential primary model, where
PARTIES IN PARLIAMENT AND GOVERNMENT

While over the past several decades political parties as organizations have changed appreciably, their role in Parliament has changed very little. Party discipline continues to structure parliamentary practices and procedures and has proved resistant to reforms intended to provide individual members of Parliament with a more significant role than that permitted within the confines of strict party discipline. Successful candidates who win a seat in Parliament can expect to have their legislative role circumscribed by the strictures and requirements of responsible government, leader-determined strategy and tactics, and partisan adversity. The tolerance of party leaders for dissent varies, but members of party caucuses in the House of Commons generally are punished if they stray from party lines, as enforced by party whips under the direction of the party leader. Moreover, Canadian governments have been reluctant to follow the British “three-line whip” model that provides leeway for dissent on many votes, instead tending to consider almost every vote in the House as a matter of confidence. The resulting requirement to remain lockstep with party and government means that most backbenchers either turn to constituency work to sustain their motivation and original impulse to serve the public interest, or they stay on as members of Parliament for only one or two terms.

That said, since Canadian governments must always have the confidence of the majority in the House of Commons to effectively govern, prime ministers and their governments risk defeat if they remain unresponsive to the concerns of the government caucus and the opposition parties. Although confidence may be a given in times of majority government, governing with only a plurality of seats (not uncommon in Canada’s case) considerably heightens responsiveness to the opposition. As well, in defense of strict party discipline, it does allow governments to move ahead with their agendas and “implement their election platforms recognizing that unplanned economic or social problems might throw their timetable off schedule.”

Legislation in Parliament is not initiated by individual members of Parliament, whose role is to pass or defeat it. However, there may be scope in a committee to amend legislation, although this is subject to two major limitations: Legislation generally only goes to committee after a vote on its basic principles (thereby limiting the legislative ambit of the committee), and party discipline in the context of a majority will ensure that committees inevitably will approve legislation in the form the government wants. But it is the committee, often overworked and ignored, where reformers have focused their attention, since it offers the best hope for a more relevant role for members of Parliament. Pre-legislative hearings on bills, a role in drafting some legislation, and an oversight or vetting role on government appointments have all been suggested as possible reforms. Perhaps the major stumbling block is that governments have tended to view such “upgrades” for committees as opposition-inspired impediments to its rightful mandate to govern.

The other primary outlet for individuals elected to Parliament under a party banner (as virtually all are) is the weekly caucus meeting. Ideally, caucus will allow backbenchers to voice the concerns of their constituents and, since meetings are conducted in secret, to criticize government policy or the performance, strategy, and tactics being employed by the party leadership. In other words, at least in theory it can be a venue for accountability, a vehicle for representation, and a forum for information exchange, discussion, and deliberation. There are, however, several problems with realizing this potential role for caucus in parliamentary democracy: First, it is often left untapped by party leaders; second, backbenchers—particularly those recently elected—often have unrealistic expectations of their role in the policy process; and third, the whole exercise occurs behind closed doors, denying the visibility that politicians crave (and need) in order to convince constituents that their interests are being properly represented.

In government, the leader and his entourage, including staff appointed to the central agencies providing decision-making support to the government, have displaced the influence of party. Always in a position of dominance in a Westminster-style parliamentary government, over the past few decades the political executive (prime minister and cabinet) has experienced a further concentration of power in the person and the office of the prime minister. Where party was once a legitimate and significant communication and feedback channel for the political executive, acting as a counterweight to the bureaucracy, it is now relegated to at best a minor role, supplanted by pollsters, policy advisers, strategists, and consultants reporting directly to the prime minister. Donald Savoie refers to this centralization of power within the political executive as “court government,” which he links to a number of factors: the long-term preoccupation of Canadian prime ministers with national unity and federal—provincial issues, the intense media focus on the prime minister as both government and party leader, the growing control over all matters of public policy and bureaucratic activity exercised by specialized functionaries working within central agencies reporting to the prime minister, and finally the expanding impact of the prime minister’s international role linked to globalization.

Although party influence has declined, the leader’s entourage is a site of increased power within government. As described by Sid Noel, these entourages, composed mainly by political professionals, are essentially
clientelistic formations, with "no purpose beyond providing loyalty, service, and acclaim to their leader," and each linked directly to the leader by bonds of mutual obligation.51 Most of the enhanced party resources made available through party finance reforms have been diverted from party building at the grassroots level to larger and more sophisticated leader entourages "delegated the tasks of designing and running national, media-focused, leader-oriented election campaigns."52 Local party organizations are restricted to door-to-door canvassing or greeting the leader's tour as it passes through town. Entourages also have become useful for intraparty competition (to challenge incumbents or fend off challenges), an indispensable political activity that if successful is rewarded handsomely with patronage appointments, government contracts, and other perks of office. The carryover into the private sector is an obvious benefit for members of the entourage, whose insider knowledge and personal connections make them invaluable additions to lobbying and consulting firms.53 Together, court government and leader entourages have diminished the role of political parties in the various dimensions of governing, whether representation, policy formation, or decision making. This declining relevance to governance no doubt has been a factor in the declining attractiveness of parties for individuals and groups seeking an effective vehicle and means for their own participation and influence in the political process.

PARTIES AND VOTERS

It appears, then, that the role of parties remains paramount within Parliament, while notably diminishing within government, but what about their significance within the electorate? Of the roles and functions performed by parties, turning citizens into voters by mobilizing them into the electoral process, and structuring their vote by presenting them with reasonably clear alternatives from which to choose, should still be considered the most crucial to democracy.

The relationship between political parties and Canadian voters has been described in terms of periodic system-changing realignments or persistent one-party dominance and third-party formation. Yet another interpretation is that party-voter relations, particularly over the past two decades, can be understood as a case of "stable dealignment." This describes a situation where partisanship in the electorate is weak (and growing weaker), making the potential for electoral volatility high. Leduc has argued that a dealigned Canadian electorate means a high potential for sudden change, "whether or not such change actually takes place in any particular election."54 Data from successive Canadian National Election Surveys (CNES) indicate that the percentage of Canadians who are only weakly partisan or do not identify with any federal political party has risen steadily since 1993, eroding any solid basis of partisan support within the Canadian electorate. In fact, Canadians have the weakest political-party affinity in the Western world.55

Declining levels of partisanship in the electorate have been accompanied by evident ideological weakness, with 40% of respondents to national surveys placing themselves in the ideological center and another 30% either rejecting the notion of ideological placement entirely or failing to locate themselves on a simple left-right continuum.56 In contrast to U.S. voters, "who tenaciously hold on to their ideological orientations and are much more conservative, much more moral, with more religiosity and so forth," a huge shift of Canadian voters has occurred into the ideological no-man's land.57 This combination of weak partisanship and lack of ideological orientation to politics, whatever its causes, militates against clearly distinguishable ideological appeals from the parties, which can be expected, in reciprocal fashion, to reinforce the prevailing tendencies and trends that are already extant within the electorate. Although this can be seen to have consequences, both good and bad, for democracy, it certainly makes centrist politics and ideological inconsistency the most likely winning electoral strategy for Canadian political parties. By default this places party leaders front and center in terms of crafting an appeal to voters and defining the party both in terms of policy and personality, but particularly the latter. Pierre Trudeau's long stint as Liberal leader and prime minister is perhaps the best example of this phenomenon, though the subsequent periods in leadership of Brian Mulroney (Progressive Conservative, 1984–1993), Jean Chrétien (Liberal, 1993–2003), and Stephen Harper (Conservative, 2006 to present) can be similarly characterized.

The leader domination, weak partisanship, and nonideological orientation that characterize Canadian party and electoral politics may help to explain the troubling decline in voter turnout in Canada, which is particularly severe in its cohort of young voters. But other factors relevant to this downturn in voter participation are severe regionalization and a seemingly dysfunctional electoral system. As noted above, regionalization has been a feature of party politics in Canada for much of the past century but has become even more pronounced since the changes wrought by the election of 1993. One of its effects has been to reduce competitiveness drastically in many electoral districts, which in a first-past-the-post system is one of the surest ways over time to depress voter turnout. With average turnout rates declining from the 75% range prior to 1993 to 60% more recently, a number of prominent individuals, national organizations, task forces, political parties, and even a few provincial governments have hopped on the bandwagon of electoral system reform, with three provincial referenda on proposed changes toward systems offering greater proportionality in vote-to-seat outcomes (with another scheduled for 2009). However, despite ongoing agitation, the majority of voters and politicians still demonstrate a
reluctance to abandon the present system with its known deficiencies for the unknown implications of a new system.\textsuperscript{58}

In particular, the problem of low levels of political participation among youth has become something of a national fixation. Diagnoses of the problem cite a number of probable causes: unresponsive political parties, political illiteracy spawned by inadequate civics education in schools, the need to “capture” youth sooner by lowering the age of enfranchisement, and a depoliticized youth culture immersed in the virtual worlds of gaming, MySpace, and text messaging. Political parties are beginning to engage young voters with more targeted campaigns and increasingly through their media of choice. But it also may be that party politics and voting are increasingly viewed as ineffective, ritualistic, and archaic and as such are being supplanted by more direct, inclusive, and participatory forms of political participation.\textsuperscript{59}

In Canada and elsewhere, scholars have linked their empirical observations of this shift in political activities to a long-term generational change in cultural values toward what has been termed postmaterialism. Underpinned by an affluent generation that is more highly educated and less deferential toward political elites, postmaterialists have higher expectations regarding their own political participation. Nevitte has theorized that shifting public attitudes toward politics is a “generationally driven, public reaction against all hierarchical institutional arrangements that limit the opportunities for meaningful citizen participation.”\textsuperscript{60} According to the argument, political parties have failed to adequately respond to this broad societal change by reforming their own structures and practices, so therefore it is not surprising that for many individuals other forms of political participation—such as involvement in the new social movements—have become the preferred alternative to political parties.\textsuperscript{61}

CONCLUSION: POLITICAL PARTIES AND THE DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT

The election result of 1993 created a national patchwork of party support, which constituted the most regionalized party system and Parliament in Canadian history. In this fourth Canadian party system Atlantic Canada, Quebec, Ontario, and the West have become discrete arenas of party competition, with different party combinations competitive in each region. In fact, for the past half century national party competition in Canada has been sporadic at best, with no indication that the future will be any different. During this period parties have only briefly, if at all, been able to lay claim to a national base of support. The Westminster system of one-party government inherited by Canada works reasonably well in a two-party system, with a ruling party and an official Opposition Party that has a reasonable prospect of replacing the government. For much of the time since the election of 1921, this was not the case in Canada, usually benefiting the Liberals as the only party in a position to govern. More recently, an exacerbation of the tendency to regional fragmentation seems to have generated growing levels of voter dissatisfaction and alienation from a political system that consistently fails to reflect voter preferences accurately.

Already in 1991, the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing was reporting on the profound concerns of Canadians about the state of their liberal democracy, noting the widespread distrust of political leaders, the political process, and political institutions. The Commission thought that perhaps the parties themselves had been a contributing factor to this malaise of voters, but whatever the cause, “there is little doubt that Canadian political parties are held in low public esteem, and that their standing has declined steadily over the past decade. They are under attack from citizens for failing to achieve a variety of goals deemed important by significant groups within society.”\textsuperscript{62}

In their 2003 study of nonvoters in Canada, Pammett and Leduc note that an overwhelming majority of Canadians cited negative attitudes toward politicians and political institutions as the principal factor underlying declining voter turnout in the country. Public distrust of parties and politicians has been growing stronger over the past quarter century, as indicated by survey responses to a number of questions measuring levels of voter satisfaction or disaffection.\textsuperscript{63} During his brief period as Liberal leader and prime minister, Paul Martin acknowledged and moved quickly to address Canada’s democratic deficit by making democratic reform a primary issue. His action plan proposed “a fundamental change in parliamentary culture, a rebalancing of the relationship between the Cabinet and the House” through various measures that would give members of Parliament greater independence and more freedom from strict party discipline.\textsuperscript{64} Notably, electoral system reform was not part of this package, which in any event was bypassed by events when Martin’s government went down to defeat in 2006.

Over the past decade or more, a number of reforms have been proposed from various quarters aimed at reviving Canada’s political parties and improving the responsiveness, inclusiveness, and transparency of its representative institutions. First, the setting of fixed election dates, already adopted in a number of provinces, was passed into legislation by the new Harper government. However, the incompatibility of this measure with the vicissitudes of minority government was made evident when Prime Minister Harper proceeded to ignore his own legislation in calling an election one year in advance of the fixed election date. A second issue, more significant but also more intractable, is that of electoral reform. William Cross, in his democratic audit of Canadian political parties, argues that adopting some method of proportional
representation is necessary so that parties and their supporters are
rewarded for campaigning vigorously in all parts of the country. However, though hailed by many as the cure for Canada's democratic ills, progress has been stalled by the recalcitrance of voters (to date) to embrace such a change when asked and by the unwillingness of incumbent parties who benefit from the existing rules of the game to undermine the basis of their power by making it easier for opponents to get their candidates elected.

Perhaps reforms that relate to the organization and practices of political parties themselves have a better prospect of success. Here Cross has three suggestions to better equip parties to meet the changing democratic expectations of Canadians in the 21st century. The first is to open up candidate nomination and leadership selection processes radically, including moving toward U.S.-style primaries, as a means of enticing more Canadians to belong to parties and to choose to be participants on an ongoing basis. The second is to enhance the role of grassroots members in policy study and development as a way to make their participation in party activity more meaningful. In particular, parties could use some of the generous public funding they now receive to establish policy foundations that "would allow members to study policy issues, to debate alternatives, and to present their legislative caucuses with alternative policy approaches." Finally, Cross recommends further reforming the campaign finance system to make parties less dependent on the public purse and to remove remaining financial barriers to potential political candidates. With regard to the former, he and others cite the danger of state funding "crowding out" individual contributions to political parties, further reducing communication with and responsiveness to party members, which would lead to an even steeper decline in party memberships as parties become professional machines and wards of the state.

It may well be that the Canadian electorate increasingly has no allegiances to party and that fewer partisans in the electorate means more volatility and insecurity for all political parties. A case can be made that this situation is—at least in part—a product of creaky political institutions in need of renovation. Perhaps Canada simply exhibits, in a rather distorted fashion, many of the characteristics of a European-style, multiparty system, with parties grouped into ideological families that draw sustenance from relatively stable electorates that are predisposed to either right- or left-wing appeals. For the most part, electoral change occurs within these ideological families rather than across family boundaries. The difference between Europe and Canada is that Canada's political institutions are not designed to accommodate cooperation and power sharing between distinct but like-minded parties. On the contrary, its electoral system and parliamentary practices work against this, frustrating what appears to be a fundamental, long-term dynamic in
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6. The Social Credit would take power for the next 36 years in the province of Alberta and for the better part of four decades in British Columbia; the CCF would win power in the western province of Saskatchewan in 1944, the first socialist party to form a government in North America.

7. These themes are well represented in post-Confederation Canadian history texts. For a review see Carl Berger, The Writing of Canadian History (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1976).


23. Examples of the former include the CCF-NDP and the Reform Party; of the latter, the Social Credit and Bloc Québécois.


27. The United Farmers, Social Credit, CCF, NDP, and Saskatchewan Party in western Canada; the NDP in Ontario; the Union Nationale and Parti Québécois in Quebec.

28. For example, this was the case for decades with the federal and provincial Liberal parties in Quebec, while in the 2008 federal election the provincial Conservative government in Newfoundland and Labrador ran an ABC (anyone but Conservative) campaign against their federal counterpart.


35. Cross, Political Parties, 15–19.

36. Ibid., 21–22.

37. Ibid., 22–23.
38. Ibid., chapter 3.
42. Cross, Political Parties, 68; Wolinetz, “Cycles and Brokerage,” 184.
43. Cross, Political Parties, 76.
44. Perlin, Party Democracy, various chapters.
47. Ibid., 164.
52. Ibid., 206.
53. Ibid., 206–207.
57. Graves as cited in Valpy, “Ideological No Man’s Land.”
64. Ibid., 281.
66. Ibid., 179.
68. Analysis of the 1993 and 1997 federal elections’ results confirm this. The partisan changes that occurred outside Quebec were a vote shift within ideological families; in other words, ideological affiliation did matter when partisans defected to another party. Only in Quebec was there evidence of a fundamental realignment of voters in terms of party identification, related to the rise of the Bloc Québécois. For an analysis of the 1997 federal election that confirms the centrality of region to the pattern of partisan support, see Neil Neivitie, Andre Blais, Elisabeth Gidengil, and Richard Nadeau, Unsteady State: The 1997 Canadian Federal Election (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2000).