

RESEARCH NOTE

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Minority government for Canada 2004

Introduction

December 2003 was a significant month in Canadian politics. Following votes by Canadian Alliance and Progressive Conservative members, the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC) was formed on 8 December. Four days later Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chrétien handed office over to former controversial Minister of Finance (1993–2002) Paul Martin.

Martin had barely settled into office when his government received a report by the Auditor General into government sponsorship, advertising and public opinion research in Quebec.¹ The Auditor General found that the Public Works Department's Sponsorship Program was run in a way 'that showed little regard for Parliament, the Financial Administration Act, contracting rules and regulations, transparency, and value for money'. There was also 'widespread non-compliance with contracting rules'. In over four years, the programme consumed CAD250m of which CAD100m was spent as fees and commissions.² Within a few days, the Liberals' opinion poll standing had dropped by over ten points, with the Conservative Party's support beginning to rise. The Liberal fall was said to be affected also by the actions of the Liberal Ontario provincial government when it raised taxes despite a promise not to do so.³

Despite these setbacks, Prime Minister Martin decided to seek 'his own mandate' by calling an early election for 28 June 2004.⁴ The new Commons would number 308 seats, an increase of seven; 155 seats were needed to gain control of the House.

The contestants

The Liberal government's position was precarious, for it would take the loss of only 14 seats to see it in a minority position in the House. In 2000 over three-quarters of Liberal seats had come from Ontario and Quebec, and in 2004 it was reliant on doing equally well in these provinces, for there was little chance of it winning many new seats elsewhere.

Even though the CPC elected Stephen Harper as leader as late as 20 March 2004, the main challenger entered the contest with a real chance of disturbing the government. The party was determined to break the Liberals'

stranglehold in Ontario and in the Maritime Provinces. Realistically, it seemed to have little chance of gaining a majority of seats, though it appeared to have a good chance of winning more seats than the government.

The Bloc Québécois (Bloc) contests only Quebec. It had performed poorly in 2000, winning only 38 seats. In 2004, however, the sponsorship scandal gave its stocks a boost. Polls soon suggested that it would go close to winning half the Quebec votes and many more seats. Its leader, Gilles Duceppe, spoke of being open to supporting either major party if a minority government were to be formed.⁵

The New Democratic Party (NDP) also expected to do well. The NDP is a party of the left with close links with labour unions. It has always been on the fringe of parliamentary activity, though it has supported Liberal minority governments in the past (1963–5, 1972–4). Its leader, Jack Layton, believed the NDP capable of winning a record number of seats, and of playing a key role in deciding which major party was to form government.⁶

The Canadian Greens also saw this election as an opportunity for expansion, expressing a confidence of winning 5 per cent of the vote. Realistically, though, even to reach the minimum percentage of the vote needed to qualify for public funding (2 per cent) would be an impressive step forward.

Liberal Party campaign

In office since November 1994, the Liberal Party entered the contest with the normal baggage of being in office for a long period, the most serious part of which was undoubtedly the sponsorship affair. Among the main planks of the government's policies were:

- a promise to increase spending on health
- the achievement of Kyoto greenhouse emission targets
- an accelerated cleanup of contaminated industrial sites
- an increase in tax transfers to local government for development of infrastructure projects
- extra child-care places and new early learning programmes, and
- creating a more sophisticated Canada-US relationship.

One aspect of the Liberal campaign that brought much intra-party criticism was the Prime Minister's apparent attempt to wipe out memories of the Chrétien years.

Martin was also criticised for pushing himself ahead of party. Annoyed party members noted that Liberal campaign lawn signs featured ‘Team Martin’ logos and the new prime minister’s picture, with the Liberal mark relegated to small print on the bottom of the signs.⁷

A great deal of Liberal time was spent in running ‘attack ads’ directed against the CPC. These included graphic images suggesting the party was dangerous and not to be trusted with government.⁸ The Prime Minister claimed that the Conservatives would run roughshod over minority rights and impose socially conservative values on the country that would take Canada ‘down a slippery slope toward the erosion of individual and minority rights and freedoms’.⁹ He also accused his opponents of being ‘in the pocket of the USA’.¹⁰ Interestingly, Martin called on possible NDP voters to consider voting tactically. Could they risk a vote that might see a Conservative government coming to power, he asked. Should they, in fact, vote Liberal simply to avoid such an outcome?¹¹

Conservative Party campaign

The Conservatives entered the contest re-invigorated after the Alliance–PC merger. Harper soon proved himself well able to withstand Liberal insinuations that he was in some way ‘scary’.¹²

Among CPC promises were:

- lower taxes for individuals and families
- stable, long-term funding for health care
- working with provinces to repair the Health Accord
- reducing financial barriers to post-secondary education and training
- abolition of the notorious gun registry
- enhanced security relations with the US, and
- constitutional changes including election of senators, fixed four-year election dates, alteration of the electoral system and free votes in Parliament on all but budget questions.

Despite such policies, it was soon clear that the CPC was intent on reminding voters of the sponsorship scandal at every turn. From the first day of the campaign, Harper focussed on the government’s ‘culture of corruption’.¹³

Unfortunately for the Conservatives, their campaign was weakened by the Liberals being able to use material provided by different CPC spokespeople that made it appear as if the CPC posed dangers for Canada’s future:

- Harper’s commitment to free parliamentary votes on any social issues that his backbench might put forward, such as gay marriage, abortion or capital punishment¹⁴
- one CPC MP’s claim that there was no difference between abortion and the beheading in Iraq of American contractor Nicholas Berg¹⁵
- a party document which stated that bilingualism requirements applying to Air Canada should be

weakened and the airline should be able to move its head office from Montreal,¹⁶ and

- another MP’s assertion that a CPC government would redefine the Charter of Rights, and use the ‘notwithstanding clause’ to overrule court rulings on social issues.¹⁷

According to the *Toronto Star*, Harper was hurt by those members of his own team ‘who couldn’t keep their conservative social agenda under wraps long enough to let voters vent their spleen on Liberals’. This lack of control was crucial to the result.¹⁸ Another commentator suggested that the Liberals’ ‘attack ads’ would not have worked if they had not been reinforced by Conservative statements on matters like abortion and gay rights.¹⁹

New Democrat Party campaign

The NDP had problems with statements by its leader. Layton was criticised for blaming the deaths of some Toronto homeless people on social services cuts that Martin had made as Finance Minister. He also proposed an inheritance tax that would hurt young professional couples, and attempted to gain Quebec votes by promising to abolish the Clarity Act on Quebec separation.²⁰

The result

The turnout of 60.5 per cent was the lowest on record and well below the 75.3 per cent recorded in 1984 and 1988. Some observers linked this to citizen resentment at the democratic distortions inherent in the voting system.²¹

Table 1: 2004 results

Party	Seats	Vote (%)
Liberal	135	36.7 (-4.1)
CPC	99	29.6 (-8.1*)
BlocQ	54	12.4 (+1.7)
NDP	19	15.7 (+7.2)
Green	-	4.3 (+3.5)
Other	1	1.3 (-0.2)

*compared with CA/PC vote 2000

Source: Elections Canada

This was the Liberal Party’s fourth-worst showing since Confederation. Despite this, its total of seats was higher than polls had predicted, enabling it to retain office 20 seats short of a parliamentary majority. Among those losing their seats were the Ministers of Agriculture, National Defence, Canadian Heritage, National Revenue and two junior Ministers.

For the CPC, the result was below expectations. With late polls indicating a ‘statistical tie’, Harper had spoken confidently of his eventually leading a minority government.²² In the event, the CPC tally of seats was 11 more than the Alliance–PC effort in 2000, though its vote was 8.1 per cent lower. It picked up 23 seats in Ontario, but won no seats in Quebec and lost ground in the Maritime Provinces.

The NDP more than doubled its 2000 vote. However, Layton had spoken of beating his party's 1989 record haul of 43 seats, and his party's 19 seats fell well short of that figure. Its vote of 15.7 per cent fell 4.7 per cent short of its record. Layton was frustrated with the result, particularly as there was some suggestion that strategic voters may have chosen the Liberals ahead of the NDP in a determination to block the CPC.²³ Layton won his first Commons seat at this, his third attempt.

In Quebec the Bloc increased its vote to 48.8 per cent, a jump of 8.9 per cent on the previous election. Its 54 seats equalled its 1993 record. Duceppe stated that he was prepared to work with either major party to achieve parliamentary stability. He pushed aside questions on Quebec independence, saying that there was no referendum in sight to take Quebec out of Canada.²⁴

Although the Greens managed 4.3 per cent (0.8 per cent in 2000), there were expressions of disappointment about their failing to reach their declared target of 5 per cent, even though they contested every seat. They were comfortably over the 2 per cent needed to qualify for public electoral funding.²⁵

One notable result was the election of the first quadriplegic MP—for the CPC in a Manitoba riding.

Accounting for the result

As with any election the factors behind people's votes are many and uncertain in their impact. Among the factors said to have been important in this Canadian election were the following:

Regional attitudes

Regional differences affect Canadian election outcomes. Some 2004 returns illustrated this quite starkly. In Alberta the Liberals managed just 22 per cent of the vote to the CPC tally of 61.6 per cent. In Newfoundland and Labrador, however, the Liberals' 48 per cent easily eclipsed the 32.3 per cent won by the Conservatives. The Bloc managed nearly half of the Quebec vote, with the Liberals gaining barely one-third, and the CPC unable to win one vote in ten. Table 2 shows how the nation is politically divided at the Manitoba-Ontario border:

Table 2: Regional differences (seats won)

	East	West	North
Liberal	118	14	3
CPC	31	68	-

Problems of government

Opinion poll analysis suggested that the Liberal Government was hurt by many aspects of its period of rule. Its handling of health administration had been controversial, in Quebec (in particular) public anger over the federal sponsorship scandal was said to have 'swamped' the party, and in Ontario, the Liberals'

heartland was said to have been 'sideswiped by the perfidious provincial budget' brought down by the Liberal Ontario government.²⁶

The Prime Minister

Martin was criticised for a 'dishevelled and panicky' campaign and was ridiculed for his frenetic last day which saw him immerse his feet in both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. The 65 year-old was spoken of as 'yesterday's man'.²⁷ Pre-election polls indicated that 49 per cent of respondents believed that Martin did not deserve to remain Prime Minister; 36 per cent thought that he did.²⁸

Health

According to pollsters, health care was the prime issue for Canadians, and there is evidence to suggest that it was an issue that hurt both of the major players. The government was widely criticised for its cuts to health funding, with critics pointing to long waiting lists, reduction of services and a lack of equipment reducing the quality of service. A Nova Scotia Citizens Health Care Network spokesperson even linked the deaths of people on hospital waiting lists to cuts made to federal health funding.²⁹

On the other hand, Alberta Premier Ralph Klein (CPC) earned unwelcome headlines for his party with his plans to introduce into the system an element of privatisation that critics said might violate the health laws. Late in the campaign Klein was forced to say he would not rush into any changes before consulting with Albertans. After the election many Conservatives blamed Klein for putting Harper in a position where he was on the defensive against charges from the Prime Minister that the Conservatives would not stand up for Medicare.³⁰

Ontario

The Liberal hold on power owes a lot to urban Ontario, and particularly Toronto. The Conservatives failed to convince enough voters in this part of the largest province that their policies should be supported, costing them any chance of government.

The Conservatives as a threat

The poor vote for the CPC may have been caused by the fact that the merger between the Alliance and the Progressive Conservatives had focussed on process rather than on putting forward a positive vision for Canada. The party worked so hard at opposing the Liberals that policy ideas seemed to have been pushed to one side. The party certainly lacked a tight control over what its spokespeople were saying, and one newspaper noted that: 'the new party speaks with many contradictory voices, a cacophony of confusion that needs to be sorted out'.³¹ Opinion polls suggested that public distrust of the party was high and that the messages coming from the Prime Minister in the final days of the campaign—that the Conservatives would radically change the country for the worse—did impact on many voters.³²

Strategic voting

About 5–10 per cent of the Canadian electorate vote strategically.³³ Opinion polls indicated that some potential NDP voters were faced with a dilemma. As their first choice was not likely form a government, they were forced to consider whether they preferred a Liberal or CPC government. Some apparently came to the conclusion that they could not afford to vote NDP if such a vote would elect a Conservative government.³⁴

Minority government

The result of the election is that Martin will form a minority government, most likely with NDP support. Although the government will generally be able to govern with the NDP support only, from time to time the Bloc may come into the equation.

As it became increasingly likely that no party would gain control of the House of Commons, both Martin and Harper had ruled out the possibility of forming a coalition government where each participating party would hold some Cabinet positions. In this they were continuing the Canadian tradition against coalitions.³⁵

By contrast, minority national governments have been an important part of the Canadian political landscape over the last 80 years. The elections of 1921, 1925, 1926, 1957, 1962, 1963, 1965, 1972 and 1979 all produced hung parliaments.

Conclusion

How long will a minority government survive? Some Canadian minority governments have lasted for a substantial amount of time, while others have lasted barely six months. The average duration has been about 18 months with the longest lasting more than three and a half years. The NDP has stated that they are only prepared to support the Liberals if electoral reform is granted—preferably by the introduction of proportional representation. Much may depend on whether or not that is conceded by a Government that has done so well out of the existing first past the post electoral system.

A Canada.com poll of readers indicated that 11.2 per cent believed the Liberal minority government would last only two months, 38.1 per cent thought it would survive for a year, 30.4 per cent nominated a survival time of two years, and one in five thought it could last for a full term.³⁶

Endnotes

1. *Report of the Auditor General of Canada. Government-Wide Audit of Sponsorship, Advertising, and Public Opinion Research*, November 2003.
2. *Report of the Auditor General*, op. cit., p. 1.
3. *Globe and Mail*, 1 June 2004.
4. Lee Carter, *BBC News*, 16 June 2004.
5. *Globe and Mail*, 24 June 2004.
6. *Montreal Gazette*, 26 June 2004.

7. *Toronto Star*, 6 July 2004.
8. For example, one 30 second spot ran claims that Harper would have sent Canadian troops to Iraq, that he opposed gun control and that he wanted to limit a woman's right to choose on abortion, *CBC News*, 10 June 2004.
9. *Toronto Star*, 25 June 2004.
10. *Globe and Mail*, 26 July 2004.
11. *Montreal Gazette*, 22 June 2004.
12. 'Conservative leader not so scary', *Sun*, 18 May 2004.
13. *Globe and Mail*, 24 May 2004.
14. *Montreal Gazette*, 7 June 2004.
15. *Toronto Star*, 7 June 2004.
16. *Toronto Post*, 22 June 2004.
17. *CBC Canada Votes*, 27 June 2004. The federal Parliament or a provincial legislature may declare that a law or part of a law applies temporarily 'notwithstanding' certain sections of the Charter.
18. *Toronto Star*, 29 June 2004.
19. *Montreal Gazette*, 29 June 2004.
20. *Globe and Mail*, 29 June 2004.
21. <http://www.canadiandemocraticmovement.ca>.
22. *Montreal Gazette*, 25 June 2004; *CBC News*, 25 June 2004.
23. *Globe and Mail*, 29 June 2004.
24. *Globe and Mail*, 29 June 2004.
25. *Canada.com*, 29 June 2004.
26. *Edmonton Journal*, 6 June 2004.
27. *Globe and Mail*, 16, 21 June 2004, *Chronicle-Herald* (Halifax), 29 June 2004.
28. *London Free Press*, 27 June 2004.
29. *Edmonton Journal*, 28 May 2004.
30. *Toronto Star*, 1 July 2004.
31. *Globe and Mail*, 23 June 2004.
32. *CBC News*, 28 June 2004.
33. *Canada.com*, 28 June 2004.
34. *CTV.ca*, 13 June 2004.
35. David E. Smith, 'Canada's Electoral College', *CBC Canada Votes*, 25 June 2004.
36. *Canada.com*, 9 July 2004.

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