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# Canada's quasi-party system

## The causes and consequences of Liberal hegemony

André Blais, Elisabeth Gidengil, Richard Nadeau and Neil Nevitte, *Anatomy of a Liberal Victory: Making Sense of the Vote in the 2000 Canadian Election*. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2002. 241 pages.

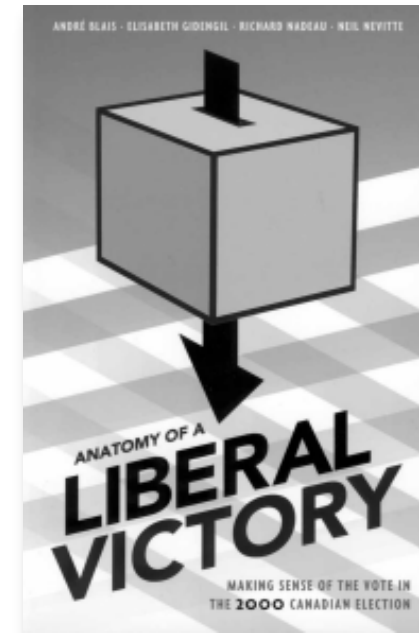
by Brian Tanguay

**W**ILL THE LIBERAL PARTY EVER BE DEFEATED AGAIN IN A FEDERAL ELECTION? Since the mid-1990s, the opposition parties and critics of the Chrétien regime have been casting about for a magic bullet that might help to dislodge the Liberals from power. Nothing has worked; not the various attempts to “unite the right,” not the reinvention of the Reform Party as the Canadian Alliance, not the search for a charismatic leader whose karate-kicking, wetsuit-wearing media stunts were intended to draw attention to just how old the incumbent prime minister really is. Through it all, through the attacks on his personal integrity (“Shawinigate,” or the Grand-Mère Affair) and that of his government (the HRDC imbroglio), Jean Chrétien has consistently frustrated his detractors. Chrétien’s election win on November 27, 2000 – his third successive majority government, placing him alongside Sir

John A. Macdonald, Sir Wilfrid Laurier and Mackenzie King as the only party leaders to have accomplished this feat – underscored just how dominant the Liberal Party has become in federal politics. Even if, miraculously, the right in Canada were somehow to be united under a single party banner, this would provide no guarantee that the outcome of the next federal election would be any different from the previous three, since the Liberals begin each campaign with a substantial advantage over the opposition.

This is one of the central themes of the latest publication issuing from the Canadian Election Study. The authors of *Anatomy of a Liberal Victory* make the point that “Liberal dominance is the steady state of the Canadian party system. Since 1945, the Liberals have won a plurality of the vote in 14 out of 18 federal elections.” They won handily in 2000 despite widespread dissatisfaction with their handling of the key issue of health care, despite the prevailing perception that Jean Chrétien was an arrogant leader and despite a noticeable drop in support for the party after the English-language leaders’ debate on November 9. How are we to explain the Liberal victory, and what are its implications for the current health and future prospects of Canadian democracy?

First the explanation. Blais et al. construct a multistage model of vote choice in Canada, incorporating eight different blocks of factors which can influence how voters cast their ballots. These blocks range from



long-term factors such as voters’ sociodemographic profiles (religion, region, education, income, gender), core beliefs and values, and partisan attachments to shorter-term factors such as evaluations of the campaign issues, the party leaders and the incumbent government’s performance. The authors devote a separate chapter to each different

block of variables. They find, somewhat surprisingly, that economic perceptions had little impact on voter choice in 2000; the Liberals did not really benefit from the improvement in aggregate economic indicators (unemployment, real disposable income, GDP per capita) that occurred during their second mandate. Nor did the positioning of the various parties on key campaign issues – health care, law and order, federal vs. provincial powers, fiscal policy – play much of a role in determining the outcome of the election. Voters, according to Blais et al., “seemed to be making up their minds on the basis of general ideological orientations rather than on specific issue

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positions.” Moreover, while voter evaluations of the Chrétien government’s performance on such issues as debt reduction, job creation, taxes, health care, crime and corruption ranged from modestly positive (on debt and jobs) to quite negative (health, taxes and corruption), the net effect of these judgements on the outcome was small. This was because those who were unhappy with the Liberal government’s past performance tended to split their votes among the opposition parties.

Four blocks of factors did play a significant role in determining the outcome of the election. First of all, sociodemographic variables had a much greater impact on voting decisions than the reigning orthodoxy in the scientific literature on voting would have suggested. In recent years, researchers have largely moved away from a focus on the social characteristics of the voters – especially social class, but also race or ethnicity, religion, language and so on – to a preoccupation with the psychological determinants of voting (party identification) or the means-ends calculations that voters employ when deciding how to cast their ballots (rational choice). Blais et al. find that sociodemographic variables account for about 12 per cent of the vote outside Quebec – “no small achievement,” in their view. What is distinctive about Canadian voting patterns is the persistence of regional and religious cleavages at a time when the impact of such variables appears to be declining in most other advanced industrial countries. Liberals continue to enjoy strong support among Catholics and new Canadians, the Alliance draws disproportionate support from rural men and the NDP appeals to voters with no religion. Given the sociodemographic profile of the

country, the Liberals enter each election campaign with an important leg-up on their competitors.

The second important block of factors contributing to the election outcome consisted of voters’ core values and beliefs. This was especially true in Quebec, where views on sovereignty constituted the key determinant of voter choice. The Liberals won 44 per cent of the vote in Quebec, up 7 per cent from 1997, and took 36 seats, a gain of 10. Although the Bloc Québécois’s share of the popular vote rose from 38 to 40 per cent, it suffered a net loss of six seats, winning 38. Progressive Conservative support, meanwhile, plummeted from 22 per cent and five seats to a mere 6 per cent and one seat. According to Blais et al., the Liberals did well in Quebec because “there are many more federalists than sovereignists” there.

Outside Quebec, the most important ideological divisions pitted supporters of the free enterprise system, who tended to vote for the Alliance or the Conservatives, against those who are more skeptical of the virtues of the market, who not surprisingly tended to support the Liberals or the NDP. Another value that came into play during the 2000 election was social conservatism. Only about a quarter of the electorate in Canada is socially conservative, favouring a traditional role for women (as homemakers and mothers), for example, or opposing same-sex marriages, and these voters are much more likely to support the Alliance than any other party. Cynical voters (anywhere from a third to two thirds of the electorate, depending on the indicator used), who are convinced that all of the political parties are basically the same and that once in power a party will simply ig-

nore the wishes of the electorate, tended to vote for one of the opposition parties (not necessarily the Alliance).

So core values and beliefs did contribute to the outcome of the 2000 election in important ways. Blais et al. contend that this puts the lie to the conventional wisdom about the Canadian party system, embodied in the notion of brokerage politics, that “ideas matter little to the outcomes of Canadian elections and that individual vote decisions are disconnected from values.” They claim instead that the 2000 election engaged “voters’ competing world views. Like elections in the United States and Europe, Canadian elections are ideological battlegrounds.”

The authors here seem to be moving considerably beyond their data to articulate an arrestingly counterintuitive conclusion. In a very perceptive account of the 2000 federal election,<sup>1</sup> Stephen Clarkson writes that the contest “was a dispiriting affair, an intellectually barren contest in which the four challengers were as uninspiring as the aging defender, who precipitated the premature contest and posed its only significant issue – whether, in his arrogance, he had overreached himself and would self-destruct.” Was the 2000 campaign an ideological battleground, pitting the Liberal ideal of the compassionate welfare state against the hard-nosed laissez-faire ideology of the Alliance? Liberal strategists certainly tried to frame the election in this manner, and as Clarkson points out, the media “bought into this view of the election as an ideological polarization.” Or was the election really about an increasingly arrogant leader trying to consolidate his grip on power and, in the process, defang his chief rival for the throne, Paul Martin, Jr.? The answer seems

to be that it was both at once. Values and ideologies certainly did play a role in affecting voter decisions, but to label the contest an “ideological battleground” requires downplaying or ignoring the veil of flimflammy and flapdoodle behind which the political parties all too often concealed their ideas.

Perceptions of the party leaders were the third block of variables exerting an important influence on voter choice in 2000. Conventional wisdom, Blais et al. observe, has long been that “Canadians pay more attention to party leaders than do voters from most other countries and for good reason.” In this case, the conventional wisdom is

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confirmed: the authors estimate that about 20 per cent of the voters in 2000 “would have voted differently were it not for how they felt about the leaders.” Even if Blais et al.’s findings on leadership simply accord with the prevailing view, they nevertheless yield some of the most interesting insights in the book. Unlike the 1997 election, when Jean Charest’s enormous personal popularity had a significant impact on Tory support in Quebec, in the 2000 contest none of the leaders enjoyed much of an advantage over the others. Joe Clark, who was perceived to have “won” the English-language debate, was the one leader who managed to translate favourable evaluations of his performance into support for his party,

mostly at the expense of the Liberals. Interestingly, in spite of the commonly held view that Stockwell Day's campaign was something of a disaster, Blais et al. find that voters' evaluations of Day changed very little over the course of the contest: "In the last week of the campaign, Day was as popular as Chrétien among non-partisans [those who have no strong attachment to a political party], and more popular than Manning had been in 1997." Day's campaign only *seemed* to be a *débâcle* when measured against the unrealistic expectations of Alliance partisans, many of whom were anticipating a major breakthrough in Ontario (about 30 per cent of the seats). In light of

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the minuscule gains made by the Alliance in the eastern half of the country, it is likely that the bitter disappointment of the party's activists was a major reason "why many of them subsequently raised questions about Stockwell Day's leadership."

Finally, partisanship or party identification constituted the fourth block of variables that affected voters' decision-making in 2000. About half of the electorate in Canada identifies very or fairly strongly with one of the political parties, and the vast majority of these partisans are likely to cast their ballots along party lines (although about 15 per cent of them did not vote for "their" party in 2000). The principal source of Liberal dominance in the Canadian party

system can be traced to the fact that "of those Canadians who identify with a party a full half think of themselves as Liberals." In effect, then, the Liberals begin each election campaign with roughly a quarter of the electorate (half of the 50 per cent of voters who are strong partisans) lined up solidly in their camp. No other party can count on anything close to that level of committed support: in 2000, 11 per cent of voters identified with the Alliance, while roughly 7 per cent considered themselves Conservatives and another 5 per cent identified with the NDP. In Quebec, the Bloc Québécois and the Liberals had roughly the same share of committed partisans (approximately 22 to 24 per cent). The authors conclude that the Liberals' partisan advantage is so substantial "that their chances of winning a federal election are huge unless some powerful overriding short-term factor, or set of factors, goes clearly against them." A united right is unlikely to erode this significant Liberal advantage, especially since many Conservative supporters would move to the Liberal Party in the event of a merger. The depressing, unavoidable reality for Alliance leaders and supporters is that fully 45 per cent of Conservative voters consider the Liberal Party their second choice; only 17 per cent opt for the Alliance (the Alliance is the second choice of only 9 per cent of all Canadian voters).

*Anatomy of a Liberal Victory* offers readers a persuasive and penetrating account of the various factors that contribute to the current hegemony of the Liberal Party of Canada. For the most part, the authors shy away from rendering any judgements about the implications of this situation for the health of democracy in this country. The closest they come to making such a norma-

tive assessment is in their discussion of voting turnout in the most recent federal election, which fell to an all-time low of 61 per cent. Indeed, they note that turnout rates in Canada are calculated on the basis of *registered* voters rather than *eligible* voters as in the United States. If the latter had been used it is likely that the figure for 2000 would have been even lower than 61 per cent. The decline in voter turnout in Canada has been limited to the younger, post-Generation-X cohort. Almost a third of voters born after 1970 did not bother to go to the polls in 2000. This new generation of voters remains far less interested in or informed about politics than any previous generation, although they are slightly less cynical about politics than their elders. Blais et al. see no reason why this trend toward increasing political disengagement among the young should be reversed in the future, and thus turnout rates are likely to decline even further in upcoming elections. New methods of voting – via the Internet, for example – might be one way of halting the decline in turnout, but much more research needs to be done on the reasons why the younger generation of voters remains largely unimpressed by traditional party politics.

Fifty years ago, in his brilliant dissection of the Social Credit movement in Alberta,<sup>2</sup> C.B. Macpherson wrote that Canada is "supposed to have a two- or three-party system ... yet one party has been in office, with only two intervals, ever since 1896, and continuously since 1935." Macpherson labelled this a quasi-party system, in which one party is so dominant and so successful that it is

widely seen as the only party capable of forming a national government. Just as they were 50 years ago, the Liberals are the natural party of government in Canada – the government party, in Reg Whitaker's phrase.<sup>3</sup> And the opposition parties are regional rather than national organizations, just as they were when Macpherson described them as incapable of "compet[ing] effectively for the support of the majority of the federal electorate." Such a situation seems to breed delusions of omnipotence in the prime minister and to foreclose any possibility of meaningful reform of our democratic institutions, as a number of recent scholarly and popular accounts have detailed.<sup>4</sup> Court intrigues and palace revolts, of the kind now being fomented by Paul Martin and his supporters, thus become a poor substitute for real competition among healthy national political parties. ■

## Notes

1. "The Liberal Threepeat: The Multi-System Party in the Multi-Party System," in Jon H. Pammett and Christopher Dornan, eds., *The Canadian General Election of 2000* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2001).
2. *Democracy in Alberta* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1953).
3. See his book, *The Government Party* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977).
4. See in particular Donald J. Savoie, *Governing from the Centre: The Concentration of Power in Canadian Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999) and Jeffrey Simpson, *The Friendly Dictatorship* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2001).

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