The Liberal Party: Still Canada’s Natural Party of Government?

Paper prepared for delivery at the Conference on Dominant Party Systems, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, May 9-10, 2014

Amir Abedi
Department of Political Science
Western Washington University
516 High Street, AH 415
Bellingham, WA 98225-9082
USA
Phone: +1-360-650 4143
Fax: +1-360-650-2800
amir.abedi@wwu.edu

Steffen G. Schneider
TranState Research Center
University of Bremen
P.B. 33 04 40
28334 Bremen
Germany
Phone: +49-421-218 87 15
Fax: +49-421-218 87 21
steffen.schneider@sfb597.uni-bremen.de

Draft version – Please do not quote – Comments welcome
Introduction

Throughout much of the 20th century, the Liberals were Canada’s “natural government party.” After the spectacular demise of Prime Minister Brian Mulroney’s Progressive Conservatives in the 1993 election, the three back-to-back majority governments won by Jean Chrétien appeared to confirm the long-term dominance of the Big Red Machine (Clarkson, 2005). However, the fate of the party began to change with Paul Martin’s failure to renew the Liberal majority in 2004 and his government’s demise in 2006. The stunning election outcome of 2011, which gave Stephen Harper’s (new) Conservative Party its first majority and relegated the Liberals to an unprecedented third place behind the New Democratic Party (NDP) in the House of Commons even suggests that the Conservative Party may have inherited the Liberals’ erstwhile position of dominance.

This rather stunning turnaround of electoral fortunes is an invitation to review explanations offered for the dominance of the Liberals and for the phenomenon of single-party dominance in general. Which of the suggested explanatory variables appear more or less relevant with the benefit of hindsight? Which factors led to the erosion of Liberal dominance? Could the imminent demise of the Big Red Machine have been forecast earlier than in 2006, on the basis of a more adequate explanatory model for the rise and fall of dominant party regimes? And can a single explanatory model ever account for the rise and for the fall of dominant party regimes such as the Liberal one, or do we need separate explanatory models for different phases of a dominant party’s life cycle? Finally, what do we learn from the Liberal experience up to 2006 with a view to the party’s and its Conservative competitor’s future prospects?

We approach these questions in three steps, focusing on the Liberals’ postwar record and the 1993-2006 government episode. First, we outline the contours of Liberal single-party dominance in the postwar decades, introducing our own definition and operationalization of dominance and summarizing the development of the Canadian party system along the way; comparative data on 16 established parliamentary democracies are used here to put the Canadian experience in context. In a second and third step we review and discuss explanations for the Liberals’ dominance and its erosion during the post-war decades, focusing specifically on the period between 1993 and 2006. In conclusion, we speculate on the potential of the Conservative Party of Canada to replace the Liberals as the country’s dominant party.

Party System Developments in Postwar Canada and the Role of the Liberals: A Dominant Party Regime?

As widespread as the Liberals’ characterization as Canada’s “natural governing party” is (or was), it seems apposite to reflect on the foundations of this assessment: Is the party system of
postwar Canada aptly characterized as a dominant party regime? If so, just how dominant were the Liberals from a broader, comparative perspective? After all, the case of the Canadian Liberals does not figure nearly as prominently in the comparative literature as the Big Red Machine moniker suggests.¹ This section therefore introduces our definition of single-party dominance, operationalizes it, and applies it to the Canadian party system since 1945.

First of all, and in line with standard definitions of single-party dominance (Boucek 1998: 103), a party may be defined as dominant if it controls government over an extended period of time, whether alone or as the most powerful member of a coalition. Such a definition is geared towards executive rather than electoral or parliamentary dominance (Boucek 1998: 105-8), while opposition status is treated as a sufficient indicator of non-dominance. Our own understanding of single-party dominance is in line with this definition. However, its operationalization is not quite as straightforward as first meets the eye. Based on such a definition, any government party may be more or less dominant, or perhaps not genuinely dominant at all – depending, first, on its relative bargaining power in the parliamentary setting at large or in a government coalition, and secondly, on the length of its government experience. The coalition scenario is, of course, irrelevant for Canada, which continues to follow the Westminster model in this respect: There have not been any (formal) government coalitions since 1945, although the Liberal minority government between 1963 and 1968 had NDP support and a Liberal-NDP minority coalition government was considered in 2008.

But how should we measure relative power – and is there a cut-off point beyond which a party may be said to be truly dominant? Likewise, what is an extended period of time? As it turns out, the measures used in the literature to capture these two dimensions often lack a strong theoretical justification or empirical grounding. A further complication arises when we ask ourselves whether indicators and thresholds may be gleaned from a single case such as Canada (if so, there would seem to be little doubt about the Liberals’ dominance in the postwar era), or whether they should be derived from comparative data (if so, the case of the Liberals may well appear more ambivalent). In the following, we offer a theoretical rationale offered for indicators and thresholds of dominance wherever possible and otherwise rely on a dataset of election outcomes and governments in 16 established parliamentary democracies between 1945 and 2006 to put the case of the Canadian Liberals in context.²

What is a plausible indicator for relative power in the parliamentary arena, then? As we have suggested elsewhere, the link between a party’s relative power and thresholds based on vote or seat shares is quite tenuous, and the theoretical rationale of such thresholds often remains

¹ For instance, while the case is ignored in the volume edited by T.J. Pempel (1990), only one of the chapters in the Bogaards and Boucek, 2010 volume (Carty, 2010) deals with the federal Liberals.
² The 16 established parliamentary democracies are: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.
unclear (Abedi and Schneider, 2010). To be sure, at least one numerical threshold that is frequently used satisfies the criterion of theoretical plausibility because it indicates a qualitative difference: a seat share of more than fifty per cent. As any party with a seat share of more than fifty per cent may be safely assumed to be in government and is, moreover, able to govern alone, this numerical threshold – unlike, say, a forty per cent vote or a 45 per cent seat share (Blondel, 1968: 186; Ware, 1996: 165) – captures the qualitative difference between being fully in and out of power. In the context of Single-Member District Plurality (SMP) electoral systems, governments are, of course, likely to be single-party majority governments. Hence the criterion may not appear to be very helpful in assessing gradations of dominance in Westminster-style democracies. However, several postwar federal governments in Canada – including Liberal ones – were minority governments. Thus we need an indicator for relative dominance in these cases.

We draw on the game-theoretical concept of a dominant player and on power indices for this indicator.\(^3\) These indices are based on the idea that power in parliamentary games “rests on how often [a party] can add [its] votes to a losing coalition so that it wins” (Leech, 2002: 5; see also Caulier and Dumont, 2010). The normalized Banzhaf index used here takes values between 1 for so-called dictators (players with a seat share of more than fifty per cent) and 0 for dummies (players who are without any relative power because they are irrelevant for crossing the majority threshold). In games without a dictator, the values of players may vary with their number and relative weight. A party, then, has a power “surplus” if its own power index value is larger than any other player’s, and like the raw index value, the surplus of a dictator is 1. If at least one other player has the same value, the power surplus is 0, indicating a non-dominated game. Finally, a party has a power “deficit” if a more powerful player is in the opposition.

We consider the index value of the sole or major government party and the next highest value in the game for these calculations. In each parliamentary game (instance of government formation), this party may thus belong to one of four groups of cases (and for our purposes, such a game occurs in the wake of elections, when government responsibility shifts from one party or group of parties to another during a legislative term, or when parties join or leave an existing government):

- The party is a \textit{dictatorial dominant player}, with a majority of seats and a power surplus of 1.
- The party is a \textit{non-dictatorial dominant player}, and it has a power surplus of \(0 < x < 1\).

\(^3\) The game-theoretical literature has modeled processes of decision-making and government formation in parliamentary systems – where the unitary actor assumption with regard to party behavior seems unproblematic – as weighted majority games with at most one so-called dominant player (van Deemen, 1989: 316-25; Roozendaal, 1992: 6-11).
• The party – which may or may not have a plurality of seats – has a power surplus of 0, and no dominant player exists.
• The party – which holds less than a plurality of seats – has a power deficit of \(-1 < x < 0\), and the dominant player is in the opposition.

Our operationalization of single-party dominance, then, combines the requirement of government membership with the necessary preconditions of dominant player status. The proposed ordinal ranking captures non-arbitrary, genuinely qualitative power differentials between dominated and non-dominated games. The D1 and D2 scenarios represent gradations of single-party dominance. A player in the D1 category may govern alone while players of the D2 type have to rely on coalition or minority governments; players of the D3 or D4 type are forced to govern in the presence of one or more competitors whose bargaining position is at least as favorable as their own.

Table 1 documents the average power surplus for the Liberals and their main competitor, the Progressive Conservatives (PC), in the 1945-2006 period with its 19 federal elections. While the Liberals won twice as many elections as the PC, both parties occasionally failed to win a majority, and hence the average power surplus of the respective government party is lower than 1 in each case. Still, the average value of the Liberals was slightly higher than their competitor’s value. Table 1 also reports comparative data for the United Kingdom (UK) and our set of 16 established parliamentary democracies (including Canada and the UK, which is singled out as a benchmark for Westminster democracies here) to put these figures into perspective. The comparative data indicate that the SMP electoral system indeed translates into a much higher average power surplus than Proportional Representation (PR) systems, mostly in continental Europe, which dominate in our country sample. However, the comparison with the United Kingdom indicates that the Canadian Liberals (and the PC) were less able to translate these institutional features into a relative power advantage than their British counterparts. In short, the Canadian Liberals were not quite as dominant if viewed from a comparative instead of a Canadian perspective.

**Table 1** Power dimension: data for Canada, the UK, parliamentary democracies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party name</th>
<th>Elections won</th>
<th>Average power surplus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIB (CDN)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC (CDN)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LAB (UK)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
But, of course, dominant player status in individual parliamentary games need not translate into long-term dominance. To be sure, 13 elections won by the Liberals, as opposed to six by the Progressive Conservatives, translates into a very lopsided share of time in government for the former (roughly 45 out of 61 years). However, the single-party dominance literature tends to be primarily interested in consecutive years in government or the number of elections won in a row. It is, in other words, interested in the length of contiguous government episodes. Unfortunately, qualitatively meaningful a priori thresholds as in the power dimension are hard to come by in the second, temporal one. The ad hoc nature of temporal cut-off points used in the extant literature – anywhere between ten years (O’Leary, 1994: 4) and “three to five decades” with “as many as ten, twelve, or more successive governments” (Pempel, 1990: 1-2) – is equally obvious. We can, however, do better than using mere ad hoc criteria. If a theoretically grounded justification of cut-off points is impossible, the thresholds should at least be grounded in the systematic consideration of pertinent empirical data.

It may, then, appear intuitively plausible to define thresholds based on the average duration of government episodes (defined with reference to the identity of the sole or major government party) in a given sample of cases. The statistical literature, however, alerts us to the problem of right censoring (the fact that some observed cases have not yet experienced a failure – here: a change in the identity of the largest government party – by the end of the observation period). Moreover, as Cleves et al. (2004: 2) point out, one cannot assume that survival times (the durations of government episodes) are normally distributed, and hence measures derived from average durations and standard deviations are somewhat questionable. The method of survival analysis provides us with an alternative way of deriving thresholds (Box-Steffensmeier and Jones, 2004), and it is also very much suggested by the life-cycle imagery of the single-party dominance literature (for instance, Pempel, 1990). In the following analysis, we use Kaplan-Meier survival estimates – and the duration associated with a survival probability of 25 per cent or less – for the calculation of a temporal cut-off point. To be sure, the ensuing value has an empirical and a posteriori character, and hence lacks an obvious theoretical justification. However, the suggested method appears less ad hoc than simply using one of the competing "one-size-fits-all" thresholds proposed in the literature, as it takes the actual distribution of survival times in our sample of government episodes into consideration.

We thus use our data set of parliamentary democracies and the Kaplan-Meier estimates to derive an empirically meaningful threshold to distinguish between unusually long government
episodes and all others. As it turns out, the median survival time in the entire data set is less than six years, the one associated with a 25 per cent survival probability is twelve years, and the one associated with a ten per cent probability is about twenty years. Hence three of the Liberal government episodes were longer than the ten-year threshold suggested by O’Leary (1994: 4), but none of them endured twenty years or more (the temporal threshold of Blondel, 1968), let alone “‘three to five decades' with 'as many as ten, twelve, or more successive governments’” (Pempel, 1990: 1-2).

Table 2 Government episodes, Canada, 1945-2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Government episode</th>
<th># elections</th>
<th>Mean power surplus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11 June 1945-20 June 1957</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIB (Mackenzie King, Saint-Laurent)*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 June 1957-21 April 1963 PC (Diefenbaker)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 April 1963-3 June 1979</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIB (Pearson, Trudeau)*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 June 1979-2 March 1980 PC (Clark)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 March 1980-16 September 1984 LIB (Trudeau, Turner)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 September 1984-3 November 1993 PC</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Mulroney, Campbell)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 November 1993-5 February 2006 LIB (Chrétien, Martin)*</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* denotes an instance of single-party dominance

In order to gauge the Liberals (and the Progressive Conservatives’) relative bargaining position during each of the postwar government episodes, we may examine its “cumulative” power surplus (adding up the surplus or deficit values for each consecutive instance of post-electoral or mid-term government formation in a given episode) and the related mean value (the cumulative surplus divided by the number of government formation instances that have occurred in that episode). As Table 2 shows, only the post-1945 and the post-2003 Liberal episodes achieved the mean value close to 1 (the value for single-party majority governments) that one would expect in the Westminster context. The lower values for the other Liberal and PC
episodes, again, indicate the high frequency of minority governments in Canada (although values greater than 0 still indicate that the respective government party dominated other parliamentary players at least once in the game-theoretical sense during a given episode). Taken together, then, Canada’s “natural party of government” is a relatively marginal case of single-party dominance from a comparative perspective on parliamentary democracies.

How the Liberal Party Managed to Maintain its Dominant Position

In Canada the Liberal Party dominated federal governments in the second half of the twentieth century and even into the first decade of the twenty-first century. The only significant periods of time during which the Liberals were not in power were the five year period from 1957 to 1963 under Prime Minister Diefenbaker and another Progressive Conservative government led by Prime Minister Brian Mulroney from 1984 until 1993. Just like Stephen Harper’s 2006 election victory, the latter episode seemed to indicate the end of Liberal dominance. However, the party managed to regain power in the fall of 1993 and stayed in office until early 2006.

How did the Liberals manage to maintain their dominant position for so long? Which factors are conducive to the emergence and stabilization of dominant party regimes, influence their duration, and play a role in their erosion and demise? The literature has generally conceptualized single-party dominance in terms of an evolutionary model, as the outcome of a virtuous cycle in which self-enforcing processes enable a party to achieve and secure dominance (Boucek, 1998: 194-9; Pempel, 1990: 334-5, 352). In addition to the factors that help a party to maintain its dominant position one also has to examine potential causes for the decline of single-party dominance. In the following, we will closely follow the order of the guiding questions/theoretical guidelines prepared by the organizers of the conference on dominant party systems in order to facilitate comparison across various cases. First, we will take a closer look at explanatory factors that are usually linked with the emergence and stabilization of dominant party regimes and discuss for each of them in turn whether they seem to have played a role in Canada, with a view to Liberal dominance.

Party Voter Linkages: Translating individual electoral victories and government experiences into long-term dominance depends to a certain extent on the power of executives and overall state capacity. Where it is high, the benefits of office facilitate the task of mobilizing, expanding, and transforming a government party's electoral base, of rewarding loyal supporters and attracting new ones, and of holding opponents or internal factions at bay. The very fact of being in government provides a party with abundant resources. This access to state resources may
notably be used for patronage and the creation of clientelistic networks. Besides the generous
distribution of pork, wielding the instruments of political socialization and control over the
policy agenda may also strengthen a party’s dominance (Boucek, 1998: 105-108). After all,
during its long stay in power the Liberal Party successfully established a close connection
between itself and the country, in other words, Liberal values became Canadian values (Jeffrey,
2010: 4). Moreover, for most of the twentieth century the Liberals had effectively portrayed
themselves as the party of national unity and were most trusted by Canadians to handle the
increasingly diverse country and maintain national unity based on their “nation-building social
programs and [their] commitment to strong central government” (Jeffrey, 2010:4).

With regard to resource advantages, one may expect that the power of executives should
be greater in Westminster systems and lower in consensus democracies with many veto players
(Lijphart 1999). One of the features of the Westminster model of democracy, which Canada
inherited from the British, is the concentration of power in the hands of, typically, a single-party
majority government, which facilitates the distribution of “pork” to the government party’s
clientele and thus the establishment and stabilization of a dominant party regime. The patronage
potential of governments increased massively when the state’s ambition and reach expanded in
the twentieth century, thus creating opportunities for (would-be) dominant parties.4

There is no doubt that patronage and clientelism, which mainly took the form of
providing supporters with government contracts and jobs, played a significant role in
maintaining the Liberal Party in power (Clarkson, 2005: 8). Initially, the “monopolization of
office was facilitated by the most extensive and centralized system of patronage appointment in
the English-speaking world” (Ware, 1996: 196). The nature of the use of state resources for
partisan ends had already begun to change after World War I, when the bureaucracy became
more professional and could no longer be used to reward allies of the Liberal Party directly
(Clarkson, 2005: 9). However, that did not spell the end of the use of patronage mechanisms.
Liberal Prime Ministers could still take advantage of the manifold appointment powers that they
had at their disposal to distribute positions in the judiciary, the Senate, and on the boards of
various government agencies and crown corporations (essentially state-owned or controlled
enterprises).

Moreover, the Liberals used their control over the apparatus of the Canadian state very
effectively. The fact that (until 2011) they were usually the only party that had sizeable support
in, and elected representatives from, almost every province in the country helped forge a strong
relationship with the business community. This was a mutually beneficial relationship with
government contracts going to friendly businesses and generous campaign contributions flowing

4 Using Mexico and Japan as their respective cases Greene (2007) and Scheiner (2006) show how resource
advantages/patronage potential enable incumbent governing parties to maintain their dominant status.
back to the Liberal Party (Clarkson, 2005: 11). The reliance on corporate campaign donations would remain a continuing feature of Liberal governments well into the early 2000s. It was only during the mid- to late-1980s that there was a period of estrangement between the business community and the party resulting from the Liberals’ opposition to the North American Free Trade Agreement. However, as soon as John Turner was replaced as Liberal leader by Jean Chrétien in 1990 there was a successful effort to rebuild those ties. Corporate contributions to the Liberals once again gave the party an important advantage during election campaigns throughout the 1990s. As we shall see, though, the close relationship between the Liberal Party and certain elements of the business community and the associated scandals would ultimately contribute to the demise of Liberal dominance (Clarkson, 2005: 43, 164-165, 194).

While control over state resources and patronage provided the Liberal Party with an important advantage over its competitors, it was not the only factor that facilitated the establishment and maintenance of a dominant position in the Canadian party system. Rather it was the close connection to certain socially distinctive blocs of voters that the party had established over time. The literature on social cleavages (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967) suggests that the more cleavages there are, and the deeper they are, the more parties are likely to emerge as representatives of the underlying conflicts. A party may gain a dominant position simply because the groups opposing each other in a conflict strongly diverge in numerical terms, and hence one side has the potential to mobilize a much larger electoral base than the other. There is often also a territorial dimension. One party may, for instance, come to represent the economic grievances of a peripheral jurisdiction against the center and in the process, entrench itself as the legitimate voice not only of particular groups and interests in that jurisdiction, but of an entire regional or ethno-cultural political community. A dominant party’s electoral base must be cultivated and may even have to be changed as socio-economic and socio-cultural structures develop. The extent to which the government party manages to keep isolating the opposition is also crucial. Each of these tasks is, in turn, facilitated by the availability of organizational resources and flexibility, as well as their lack in the opposition. The effective use of the perquisites of office is among the most decisive factors here. Parties have been more or less successful in reacting to shifts in socio-economic and demographic structures.

Canada is a particularly interesting case when it comes to the study of the relationship between social cleavages and their effects on voting behavior. This is due to the fact that unlike the vast majority of advanced industrial democracies in Canada the class cleavage has been almost totally irrelevant in affecting vote choice. Instead, until recently, religious, ethno-linguistic and regional divisions have been the main drivers of voters’ electoral behavior and the federal parties’ differing fortunes (Alford, 1963; Gidengil, Nevitte, Blais, Everitt, and Fournier, 2012: 19-22, 34, 149).
From the First World War to the 1960s, the Liberals’ winning formula was based on a partnership between the Western prairies and French-speaking Quebec. Then, after 1960, with the West in the hands of the Conservatives and Quebec still dominated by Liberals, politics came to be centered on Ontario, which often determined the outcome of federal elections (Carty, 2002: 349). The Liberal Party also received strong backing from Catholics and recent immigrants (those arriving after the end of the Second World War), especially those of non-European origin (Blais, 2005; Clarkson, 2005: 17). This electoral coalition would maintain the Liberals in power for most of the twentieth century and the weakening of the religious and to a lesser extent regional cleavages would contribute to the electoral difficulties the party encountered in the twenty-first century. Of particular importance was the gradual loss of the support of francophone Quebeckers, which began initially at the provincial level with the emergence of Quebec nationalism as a result of the “silent revolution” of the 1960s when French-speaking Quebeckers asserted their right to be “masters in their own house.” This eventually had an impact on electoral behavior at the federal level as well, especially after the contentious repatriation of the Canadian Constitution in 1982 when Prime Minister Trudeau moved ahead without support from the Quebec government (Gidengil et al., 2012: xvii).

**Spatial Positioning:** The rise and fall of dominant parties can also be affected by party system structures. A strong leftist party may achieve long-term dominance where the right is fragmented, and vice versa. A centrist party of the catch-all type (Kirchheimer, 1966) may capture the median voter and become a perpetual Condorcet winner in a polarized multi-party system without viable coalition options for more sectarian parties at the margins of the ideological spectrum (Riker 1982). In both scenarios, a weak and divided opposition facilitates a dominant party’s hold on power. A weak and divided opposition is less likely to be able to challenge an entrenched dominant party. Once a party has become dominant for the first time, it obviously has a key comparative advantage in further isolating and delegitimizing its competitors, in kindling and nurturing opposition fragmentation, and hence in (re)shaping the very rules of political interaction to its continuing advantage (Sartori, 1976: 44). Where favorable electoral rules, cleavage and party system structures coincide this strategic advantage is obviously enhanced.

The Liberal Party of Canada managed to plant itself firmly in the center of the country’s political spectrum, thus forcing the opposition to the two opposite ends of the ideological range (Johnston, 2008: 822; Johnston, 2013: 264). The only exceptions were 1984, when the Progressive Conservative leader Brian Mulroney successfully maneuvered his party so close to the political center that pundits had a hard time to distinguish the two parties’ policy positions (Clarkson, 2005: 130), and to a slightly lesser extent the centrist campaigns Stephen Harper’s
Conservative Party of Canada ran between 2006 and 2011. Since winning a majority government in 2011 the Conservatives have moved further to the right on several policy areas and may thus have (temporarily?) vacated the center of the political spectrum.

The Liberals not only occupied the center of the ideological spectrum for a long time but also tried to appeal to a broad segment of the voting populace by developing a catch-all appeal (Carty, 2010: 149). In the late nineteenth century Prime Minister Laurier had already emphasized the importance of the party maintaining a pragmatic and flexible stance on policy over a principled one (Clarkson, 2005: 8). This approach was followed by other successful Liberal prime ministers like King, Pearson, Trudeau, and Chrétien. They all made sure to keep the party in the political center and avoided antagonizing important voter groups by blurring political issues, co-opting personalities, and borrowing policies from both the left and the right whenever necessary (Clarkson, 2005: 9, 22, 164-165). For example, under Prime Minister Chrétien in the 1990s the Liberals combined a focus on fiscal responsibility with socially liberal policies (Clarkson, 2005: 206). Moreover, according to polling data the Liberals managed to gain ownership of important issues like foreign policy and national unity by the 1960s and economic policy, unemployment, and the debt/deficit issue during the 1990s (Belanger, 2003: 546-550, 555). Voters seeing the Liberal Party as being the best equipped to deal with the most crucial policy issues certainly enhanced the strategic advantage they already held over their opponents.

In addition to their favorable position in the center of the left-right ideological spectrum the Liberals also held a pivotal position on another important axis of the Canadian political dimension, that is, the question of national unity. The Liberal Party has long been asserting that as the sole genuinely national political party it is best equipped to navigate the relationship, and bridge the division, between the predominantly French-speaking province of Quebec and the mostly English-speaking rest of the country (Clarkson, 2005: 284; Johnston, 2008: 821). From 1896 until 1984 the Liberals’ dominance in Quebec allowed them to win and maintain power federally simply by winning a large share of seats in that vote-rich province. It also provided them with other important strategic advantages. As long as federalism versus separatism was the main axis of conflict in Quebec, it precluded the left-leaning New Democratic Party (NDP) from making any significant in-roads into the province. Moreover, center-left voters in the rest of the country who cared about that issue would vote for the Liberals and not the NDP. The same applied to voters on the center-right of the political spectrum. The opposition to the right of the Liberal Party faced an additional strategic dilemma. While it could win votes in the rest of the country by taking a hard line on Quebec for a long time it could only win federal office if it succeeded in attaining a significant number of seats in Quebec. This required an appeal to moderately nationalist Quebeckers. Establishing such an incoherent electoral coalition allowed the Progressive Conservatives to win three majority governments in 1958, 1984 and 1988 (the
only three majority governments they won between 1931 and 2011). However, maintaining that coalition long-term proved to be impossible. The result was generally electoral defeat and the emergence of regionalist protest parties (Johnston, 2008: 827-828; Johnston, 2013: 265).

Between 1993 and 2006 the Liberals managed to stay in power because of the electoral collapse of the Progressive Conservative Party and the rise of the right-wing populist Reform Party (which dominated in the Western provinces) and the separatist Bloc Québécois (BQ), which became the largest party in Quebec. The fragmentation and regionalization of the party system aided the Liberals in that it took Quebec off the map and led to vote splitting between the two right-of-center parties (Reform and Progressive Conservative), which allowed the Liberals to win almost all of the seats in Ontario the new pivot of Canadian elections. While the Liberals were still a party that could win seats in almost all Canadian provinces, Liberal majority governments during that period resulted mainly from electoral dominance in Ontario and the Atlantic provinces (Blais, 2005: 822; Carty, 2002: 349; Clarkson, 2005: 175, 206, 234, 266). A somewhat similar scenario had aided the Liberals during and following the Great Depression when they faced a divided opposition in the form of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), left-wing predecessor of the NDP, and two (Conservative and Social Credit) right-of-center parties (Clarkson, 2005: 9).

Thus, Liberal dominance during the most recent period (1993-2006) was a very tenuous affair. It rested on two factors: a divided opposition and a lack of negative short-term events. However, in 2004 both of these favorable conditions were no longer in evidence (Gidengil et al., 2012: 185). While the Liberals survived the election that year as a minority they were eventually ousted from power in 2006.

**Institutions, Coordination, and Cooptation:** The relationship between electoral systems and the incidence of single-party dominance is not straightforward. Dominant-party regimes should develop under both proportional and majoritarian systems. On the one hand, proportional systems make it relatively easy to gain a dominant bargaining position with a plurality of votes and seats and to maintain it longer term (Pempel 1990: 336-9). On the other hand, the mechanical effect of majoritarian systems can transform a plurality of votes, or less, into a single-party majority, and hence an even more dominant position. Moreover, the psychological effect of majoritarian systems is very much a function of experiences made by voters in previous elections. Hence the effect should not only discourage them from supporting third parties, but it should also make a vote for the runner-up ever more of a “waste” the more elections the dominant formation has already won.

From its inception Canada has used the SMP system to elect the members of the lower house of its parliament, the House of Commons. The Liberals’ success in preserving for a long
time their status as a truly national party had much to do with their capacity to profit from the SMP system, which tends to give the plurality party a commanding majority of seats. At the same time, it discriminates against less successful national parties (such as the Progressive Conservatives and the NDP) and benefits parties that have a strong regional base and appeal (like the BQ, the Reform Party/Canadian Alliance, and the Conservative Party of Canada, which resulted from the merger of the Canadian Alliance and the Progressive Conservatives in late 2003). Since for most of Canada’s twentieth century electoral history the Liberals gained the plurality of national votes and were often the only party that was strong enough to win seats throughout the entire country they benefited from the electoral system more than any of their competitors (Clarkson, 2005: 12-13, 203, 233). The advantage the Liberals derived from the electoral system was particularly pronounced whenever the opposition was divided, such as for example during the split on the center-right of the political spectrum that was in evidence between 1993 and 2003.

An efficient organizational structure is also an asset for a party that wants to achieve and maintain dominance. A party’s organizational structures have to be constantly adapted to changing social and political circumstances, though. This task may ironically be more of a challenge for an already dominant than for a non-dominant party as major organizational reforms are usually triggered by electoral defeats and other crisis situations (Harmel and Janda, 1994: 267-268). In order to ensure its long-term dominance, a government party must therefore be flexible enough to avoid organizational sclerosis (Arian and Barnes, 1974: 597).

The Liberal Party’s dominance has historically not only been reflected in the size of its membership, which was consistently larger than that of its opponents, but also in the higher degree of activism of that membership (Clarkson, 2005: 276). The party’s lack of factionalism and thus its ability to present a united front has also been an important factor in accounting for its ability to stay in office for an extended period of time (Carty, 2010). During federal election campaigns the Liberal Party was usually a lot more disciplined than any of its competitors (Clarkson, 2005: 34-35, 47-48, 165-167). The regionalist nature of political behavior in Canada with its potentially centrifugal tendencies, which is another challenge to any party that wants to build and sustain an effective and coherent party organization, was also successfully tackled. In the 1950s and 1960s when the provincial Liberal Parties increasingly began challenging the federal party’s policies and became more and more regionalist in their positions, the federal party organization decided to significantly loosen the ties between itself and the provincial parties (Clarkson, 2005: 138) and thus prevent a potentially devastating “regional fractionalization of the national party” (Carty, 2010: 150).

As we have outlined above, the Liberal Party’s dominance rested on a number of factors. Controlling the levers of the federal government gave the party control over state resources and
patronage and thus an advantage over its competitors. Moreover, the Liberals’ long stay in office allowed the party to build close ties to the business community, which further enhanced its resource advantage. However, this was not the only source of Liberal dominance. After all, the Conservatives too gained control of the federal government, for example in 1957 and 1984, but could not emulate the Liberals’ long-term dominance. The federal Liberal Party had also successfully built an electoral coalition of socially distinctive blocs of voters (Catholics, francophone Canadians, and visible minorities) that for most of the twentieth century allowed it to dominate Quebec in federal elections and win enough seats in Ontario and the Atlantic provinces to guarantee it the position of Canada’s largest party. Another contributor to Liberal dominance was the party’s favorable spatial position. As a pragmatic, centrist party it could maintain a lot of policy flexibility. The fact that the opposition was often fragmented and regionalized further enhanced the Liberals’ advantageous strategic position.

**How the Liberal Party Lost its Dominant Position**

The most recent Liberal spell in power (1993-2006) was facilitated by a division on the right of the political spectrum, which allowed the Liberals to benefit from vote-splitting and thus win almost all of the seats in Ontario. As long as such a scenario persisted the Liberals were also the main beneficiary of the SMP electoral system, which generally rewards the party that gains the plurality of the national votes. Finally, the party’s ability to maintain party unity and prevent the rise of factionalism was also an important factor in accounting for its ability to stay in office for an extended period of time. Thus, one would expect that as long as these favorable conditions were in place Liberal dominance would remain assured. However, if one or more of these factors ceased to be operational the party’s advantageous position would be in serious danger.

**Internal Causal Factors:**

*Generational replacement, realignment, and modernization:* Is there any evidence that would indicate that the advantage the Liberals used to enjoy among Catholics, francophones, and non-European Canadians has been waning or has disappeared altogether? Analyses of the most recent Canadian National Election Studies certainly show that between 2000 and 2008 the Liberal Party lost significant support among its traditional supporter base, that is, Catholics, francophones, and Canadians of non-European descent (Gidengil et al., 2012: 33, 149, 174). For Catholics this negative development culminated in 2011 when data revealed that they were no more likely than other Canadians to vote for the Liberals (Fournier, Cutler, Soroka, Stolle, and Bélanger, 2013: 881). The share of francophones in Quebec voting Liberal eroded too. While in 2000 one-third of
francophones voted for the Liberal Party, only 25 percent did so in 2004. Liberal support hit an all-time low in 2006, rebounded slightly in 2008 and plummeted in 2011 (Gidengil et al., 2012: 149). While Liberal losses among French-speaking Quebeckers began in the early 1980s as a result of the Trudeau government’s decision to repatriate the Constitution without Quebec’s support, the decline in Catholic support was much more recent and did not begin in earnest until 2004. The main reason for that decline was the negative effect of the sponsorship scandal, which we will examine in more detail later (Gidengil et al., 2012: 26-27, 33). While from 2000 to 2008 the Liberal Party still performed better than any other party among Canadians of non-European descent, by 2011 it was no longer the first choice of visible minorities. For the first time, the New Democratic Party (NDP) managed to attract a larger share of that particular group of voters than the Liberals (Fournier, et al., 2013: 881).

Thus, it is apparent that the electoral coalition that has kept the Liberal Party in power for a long time has been significantly weakened. This has been an ongoing process that has gathered steam in recent years. As Johnston (2008: 825) has pointed out the party’s electoral fortunes, while fluctuating somewhat, slowly began to deteriorate beginning in the 1960s. Consequently, during their most recent spell in government the Liberal party’s vote shares were already below historical norms and the party only maintained its majority status in the House of Commons due to the weakness of the divided opposition. The gradual loss of support accelerated into a significant decline after 2004 and culminated in the NDP overtaking the Liberals as the country’s second largest party in 2011 (Johnston, 2013: 260).

The most recent developments can also be illustrated by data on party identification. In the 1990s the Liberal Party had by far the largest number of partisans in Canada (Gidengil et al., 2012: 174). Until 2006 the number of voters who identified themselves as Liberals remained fairly stable. Beginning in 2008, though, the share of Liberal partisans started to decline. In the province of Quebec that decline started earlier and was particularly pronounced as the share of Liberal identifiers dropped by close to 50 percent between 2000 and 2008 (Gidengil et al., 2012: 155-156). Nevertheless, almost 33 percent of partisans who had voted for another party in that year’s election still identified as Liberals. However, the fact that more and more Liberal identifiers began to vote for other parties indicated a problem (Gidengil et al., 2012: 66-67). By 2011 it was clear that the party was no longer just losing voters but also beginning to lose partisans. Between 2004 and 2011 the share of voters who identified as Liberals dropped from 23 percent to 14 percent. During that same period Conservative identifiers grew from 17 percent to 29 percent and the NDP managed to increase its share of partisans from 8 percent to 14 percent (Fournier et al., 2013: 886-887).
Economic liberalization: We have earlier outlined how the Liberals benefitted from the resource advantages they gained due to their extended stay in power and the resulting close ties to the business community. These resources could be used for patronage and for the maintenance of clientelistic networks. However, what might initially seem like a positive feedback process (an extended stay in power leading to a continuously increasing resource advantage) can easily turn into a negative one and usher in the dominant party’s demise. After all a party that remains in office and enjoys the above-mentioned fruits of power for too long has a higher likelihood of eventually being associated with assorted scandals. Overall, then, like a steady drip of water may eventually split a stone, every scandal will negatively impact a governing party’s image and weaken its base of support. If a government’s standing in the public is already weak a major scandal can ultimately be decisive in sealing that party’s fate.

Just like any other long-governing party the Liberals were not immune to scandal. Electoral defeats during the twentieth century were often the result of preceding scandals (Clarkson, 2005: 54-55). The Liberal defeat in 2006, too, was the result of a major scandal. The so-called sponsorship scandal, also known as “Adscam,” had its origin in the Chrétien government’s attempt at more aggressively advertising the many benefits Quebec derives from being a part of the Canadian federation. The close outcome of the 1995 sovereignty referendum seemed to indicate a clear lack of appreciation of that fact among Quebeckers. However, the program was soon plagued by rumors of a rampant misuse of funds. An audit of the program by the then Auditor General of Canada, Sheila Fraser, revealed that the advertising agencies, which had long-standing ties to the Liberal Party, had done little or no work for the significant amount of money that they had received from the federal government. Furthermore, it became apparent that some of the funds received by the ad agencies were eventually funneled back into the coffers of the Liberal Party. The Auditor General’s report was not published until after Jean Chrétien had resigned in December 2003 and was replaced as party leader and prime minister by Paul Martin, Chrétien’s long-time rival. The new Prime Minister asserted that he had no knowledge of any inappropriate financial dealings, immediately cancelled the sponsorship program and set up the Gomery commission to carry out a public inquiry into the matter (Gidengil, et al., 2012: xvii).

The Adscam scandal severely damaged the Liberal brand and cost the party dearly in the 2004 and 2006 elections. The establishment of the Gomery commission, which published its findings in two steps in November 2005 and February 2006, as well as the resulting revelations kept the issue alive in the public’s mind for over two years. Gidengil and her collaborators (2012: 94, 95, 161) estimate that in 2004 Adscam cost the Liberal Party about seven percentage points in Quebec and over five-and-a-half percentage points in the rest of Canada, enough to prevent them from winning a majority of seats. In 2006 they lost a further percentage point in
Quebec and three percentage points in the rest of Canada – almost all of that to the Conservatives, who had made “ethics” and “Liberal corruption” the main focus of their campaign (Gidengil et al., 2012: xxi, 96, 173).

*Party-building:* A weak and divided opposition is less likely to be able to challenge an entrenched dominant party. In the competitive environment of liberal democracies, where incumbent parties tend to lose votes, dominant parties are likely to generate growing dissatisfaction in the electorate. This in turn creates incentives for the coordination or merger of opposition parties, and hence developments that foster or accelerate the demise of the dominant party.

As we have outlined above the Adscam scandal played a crucial role in ending the Liberal Party’s hold on power. On the one hand it alienated significant elements of their electoral coalition (especially Catholics as we pointed out earlier) and on the other hand it electorally benefitted the main opposition party, the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC). In the 2004 election, for the first time since 1988, the Liberals had to compete against a united right-of-center opposition party. In December 2003 the Canadian Alliance and the Progressive Conservatives merged to form the CPC. Beginning in 2004 Liberal losses were no longer split among a number of opposition parties on the center-right of the political spectrum but rather enabled the new Conservative Party to win enough electoral districts (ridings) to, first, deny the Liberals a majority (in 2004) and then replace them as the largest party (in 2006).

The merger of the Canadian Alliance and the Progressive Conservative Party was the culmination of a process that started in the late 1990s. As soon as it became evident that the Reform Party could not break out of its Western Canadian base it tried to find ways to win over Progressive Conservatives to end the vote splitting that had harmed both right-of-center parties, especially in Ontario. The first attempt in 2000, which saw the Reform Party re-brand itself as the Canadian Alliance, proved to be unsuccessful and allowed the Liberals to win another majority government. It was not until Stephen Harper became the leader of the Alliance in 2002 and Peter MacKay took over the leadership of the Progressive Conservatives in 2003 that serious merger talks between the two parties began. With another election likely in 2004 the talks were accelerated and successfully concluded by the end of 2003. In March 2004 Stephen Harper was elected as the leader of the new Conservative Party and led the party into the June 2004 elections (Gidengil et al., 2012: xvii-xviii).

“Leadership clearly matters to individual vote choice. The more voters like a particular leader, the more likely they are to vote for that leader’s party” (Gidengil et al., 2012: 112). Single-party dominance frequently coincides with popular heads of government; incumbency advantages combine with the requisite leadership skills in mastering crisis situations. There is
often a tension between steps required to ensure the loyalty of a party's rank-and-file members, on the one hand, and measures dictated by efforts to broaden and renew its electoral base, on the other. A popular and experienced party leader represents a comparative advantage if she increases a party's electoral fortunes, helps to avoid or master scandals and other crisis situations, ensures cohesion, or solves conflicts between internal factions (Boucek, 2010). However, a leader who stays on for too long or is associated with scandals may become a liability and hinder a party's organizational adaptation.

Liberal dominance in Canada has often been associated with strong and effective leaders like Laurier, Mackenzie King, St. Laurent, Pearson, Trudeau, and Chrétien. All of them won multiple elections. However, there have also been times when electoral defeat was associated with weak and ineffectual leadership. For example, John Turner, Liberal leader from 1984 until 1990, was frequently blamed for the party’s lackluster showing in the 1984 and 1988 elections. Among other things he was criticized for organizational and financial problems, ineffective campaigns, and his inability to prevent infighting and the development of factionalism (Clarkson, 2005: 109-157; Jeffrey, 2010: 4-5).

The end of the Liberals' most recent stint in office in 2006 and the party’s inability to regain power since then have also been associated with weak leadership. Paul Martin was criticized for his handling of the sponsorship scandal (Clarkson, 2005: 266-267). In particular his decision to set up the commission of inquiry kept the issue in the limelight for longer than it would have been otherwise and handed the Conservatives a strategic advantage during the 2004 and 2006 campaigns. Moreover, Martin was unable to unify the party after he took over from Chrétien. Conflicts between the supporters of both leaders continued to hamper Martin’s time in office (Gidengil et al, 2012: xviii; Jeffrey, 2010: 6-7). His successor, Stéphane Dion, was widely considered to be a compromise choice and was immediately savaged by Conservative attack ads portraying him as an ineffectual and indecisive leader. The success of these ads was apparent in polling data that showed that in the 2008 election the Liberals lost four percentage points as a result of Dion’s weak personal ratings. Once again there were also serious signs of factionalism. The supporters of Michael Ignatieff, the losing leadership candidate in 2006, continued to criticize and undermine Dion’s leadership (Gidengil et al., 2012: xxi, 114). After becoming leader in 2008, Ignatieff himself received the same treatment as Dion from the Conservatives. Once again the attack ads hit a nerve with Canadian voters. Ignatieff was the lowest rated of any of the major party leaders. In the 2011 election only 5.4 percent of Liberal voters outside Quebec supported the party because of its leader. Among Conservatives the equivalent share was 23.5 percent who voted for the party because of Stephen Harper and among NDP supporters 24 percent voted for the party because of Jack Layton (Fournier et al., 2013: 891).
**External Causal Factors**

*Economic shocks:* There is no evidence that in Canada favorable economic conditions have a significant positive impact on a party’s electoral performance (Gidengil et al., 2012: 69-83). However, a governing party may suffer the electoral consequences for a bad economy. It should be stressed, though, that a minor deterioration in the state of the economy is not enough to trigger voter backlash. Rather, there has to be evidence of a significant economic crisis. For example, very high unemployment (an unemployment rate of roughly ten percent or more) will lead to negative electoral consequences (Gidengil et al., 2012: 74). Thus, the two most dramatic electoral losses suffered by incumbent parties in Canada occurred in 1984 (Liberal loss) and 1993 (Progressive Conservative loss). These were the only two elections in the last four decades when levels of unemployment were above the ten percent threshold for a sustained period of time (Gidengil et al., 2012: 82). Between 2000 and 2011 the unemployment rate in Canada never reached those heights. Overall, assessments of the economy merely had a minor impact on voter behavior and could not account for the demise of Liberal dominance in 2006 (Gidengil et al., 2012: 74-75, 82).

**Conclusion**

As we have seen Liberal dominance rested on a number of factors. Controlling the levers of the federal government gave the party control over state resources and patronage and thus an advantage over its competitors. Moreover, the Liberals’ long stay in office allowed the party to build close ties to the business community, which further enhanced its resource advantage. The federal Liberal Party had also successfully built an electoral coalition of socially distinctive blocs of voters (Catholics, francophone Canadians, and visible minorities) that for most of the twentieth century allowed it to dominate Quebec in federal elections and win enough seats in Ontario and the Atlantic provinces to guarantee it the position of Canada’s largest party. Another contributor to Liberal dominance was the party’s favorable spatial position. As a pragmatic, centrist party it could maintain a lot of policy flexibility. The fact that the opposition was often fragmented and regionalized further enhanced the Liberals’ advantageous strategic position. The most recent Liberal spell in power (1993-2006) was facilitated by a division on the right of the political spectrum, which allowed the Liberals to benefit from vote-splitting and thus win almost all of the seats in Ontario. As long as such a scenario persisted the Liberals were also the main beneficiary of the SMP electoral system, which generally rewards the party that gains the highest number of national votes. Finally, the party’s ability to maintain party unity and prevent the rise
of factionalism was also an important factor in accounting for its ability to stay in office for an extended period of time.

The decline of Liberal dominance resulted from an erosion of most of the above outlined advantages. The electoral coalition that kept the Liberal Party in power for a long time weakened significantly. This has been an ongoing process that has gathered steam in recent years. The party’s electoral fortunes, while fluctuating somewhat, slowly began to deteriorate beginning as early as the 1960s. Consequently, during their most recent spell in government the Liberal party’s vote shares were already below historical norms and the party only maintained its majority status due to the weakness of the divided opposition. The gradual loss of support accelerated into a significant decline after 2004. Catholics are now no more likely to vote Liberal than they are to vote for any other party. The Liberals are also no longer the first choice of francophone Quebecers and visible minorities. Just like any other long-governing party the Liberals were not immune to scandal resulting from an extended stay in power and close ties to certain elements of the business community. Electoral defeats during the twentieth century were often the result of preceding scandals. The Liberal defeat in 2006, too, was the result of a major scandal. The “sponsorship” scandal alienated significant elements of the party’s electoral coalition and benefitted the main opposition party, the Conservative Party of Canada, representing a now unified center-right of the political spectrum. While the right is united, the Liberals increasingly have to compete for the same voters with the left-of-center NDP. Thus, vote-splitting on the center-left contributed significantly to the Conservatives’ success in winning a majority of seats in 2011. Finally, weak party leadership and the development of factionalism also played a role in ending the Liberals’ most recent spell in power.

The Liberal Party has now lost three elections in a row to the Conservatives. Does that mean that the Conservatives are now in a position to replace the Liberals as Canada’s natural party of government? At first sight it might indeed seem to be that way. In terms of spatial location, the Liberals’ once advantageous strategic position has turned into a disadvantageous one. The two right-of-center parties (Canadian Alliance and Progressive Conservatives) merged in late 2003 and formed the new Conservative Party. The sponsorship scandal eroded voters’ trust in the Liberal Party and created an opening for the opposition. The CPC positioned itself close to the political center between 2004 and 2011 and the Liberals increasingly had to compete with the NDP for left-of-center voters (Gidengil et al., 2012: 49). The Liberals had already been losing support to the NDP for quite some time (Johnston, 2013: 260). Opinion polling data show that the supporters of both parties increasingly see eye-to-eye when it comes to issues like “accommodating Québec, doing more for racial minorities, and regional alienation” (Fournier et al., 2013: 892; Gidengil et al., 2012: 50). Furthermore, “Liberal voters were closer to NDP voters on the market liberalism index than they were to Conservative voters” (Gidengil et al., 2012: 51).
Thus, vote splitting is now a problem for the center-left parties and working to the advantage of the Conservatives. Moreover, Stephen Harper has not had to deal with any challenges to his leadership and thus far there is no sign of any factionalism within the Conservative Party. The party’s campaigns over the last three elections have been characterized by a high degree of discipline and by a lack of the kind of political gaffes that had often hampered the Reform Party and the Canadian Alliance (Gidengil et al., 2012: xx, 175).

Nevertheless, there are still significant challenges that the party must overcome before it can establish itself as a dominant force in Canadian politics. While the Conservative Party’s electoral support base has become less regionalized and less rural (the party made significant inroads in Ontario and the Atlantic provinces as well as in urban areas) it is still predominantly male and (fundamentalist) Protestant (Gidengil et al., 2012: 33). Moreover, the ideological core beliefs of the party in terms of support for free market economic policies and moral traditionalism are not shared by a majority of the population. Polling data indicate that support for traditional values in particular is shrinking (Gidengil et al., 2012: 49). The fact that the 2011 election victory, which ushered in the CPC majority government, was based on a less than two-percentage-point increase in the party’s vote share compared to 2008 indicates that the Conservatives have a high hurdle to overcome in order to continue their growth and ensure future majority governments. Thus, a prolonged Conservative spell in government requires a continuation of the vote splitting between the two center-left parties (Liberals and NDP) as well as a significant change in the Conservatives’ positions, especially on moral issues. A further moderation of the Conservatives’ ideology could, however, alienate long-time supporters and potentially lead to intra-party conflict (Gidengil et al., 2012: 177, 183). Thus, while the Conservative Party is currently in a very advantageous strategic position, emulating the Liberal’s long successful stint as Canada’s natural party of government will not be easy.

Bibliography


