

## The Liberal Party of Canada: Still Canada's "Natural Governing Party?"

By James Suderman

**Abstract:** Canada's evolving party system has shifted the discursive, institutional, and legal frameworks for how party politics are performed in Canada. As a result, the dominant track record of the Liberal Party of Canada now faces several new challenges to its historical status as Canada's natural governing party. The inability to successfully fundraise to set election issues within the guidelines of new legal regulations has weakened the Liberal Party's ability to compete with the Conservatives. The current leader-driven model of cadre party politics has also put more emphasis on attracting peripheral voters, such as flexible partisans and dealigned voters, which makes one-party domination less likely. Furthermore, the Liberal Party has also faced recent losses to their core support, due to shifts in historical regional support, religious support, and the support of ethnic minorities.

The Liberal Party of Canada, Canada's oldest party, has historically been considered the "natural governing party" of Canada. This title seems to be based on little more than the Liberals' dominant track record throughout the twentieth century, during which they held power for 69 of the 100 years.<sup>1</sup> The Liberal Party has always managed to ascend back to power soon after a defeat or scandal, which has historically been based on their strong ties with traditional cores of support and their ability to determine the "centre" of political debate. Clarkson argues that the Liberal's ability to adapt to each new party system, with the help of the first past the post voting system, has allowed for continuous success.<sup>2</sup> Only one Liberal leader from the party's inception to Dion's failure in 2008 had failed to attain the position of Prime Minister. However, in the first 10 years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one Liberal leader has already failed, and the current leader continues to struggle, to reclaim Liberal hegemony.

Many supporters are quick to assume that this recent failure is a blip in Liberal dominance, blaming temporary instances such as the Sponsorship Scandal, infighting, and even the global shift to the political right. However, I believe the cause is more structural and long term, which implies greater implications for the Liberals. The gradual evolution of a new hollow-shell, leader-driven, media-centred party system has significantly decreased the likelihood that the Liberals, or any other party, can claim the status of being Canada's "natural governing party." Changing institutional and legal framework throughout the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, such as the loss of elite corporate fundraising, the increasing importance of leadership appeal to flexible and durable partisans, and the shifting of traditional bases of

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<sup>1</sup> Elections Canada, "Appendix 3: Canadian Parliaments: 1867-2006."

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Clarkson, *The Big Red Machine: How the Liberal Party Dominates Canadian Politics* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005).

durable support, has left the Liberals with little hope of continuing their dominance as Canada's "natural governing party."

### **Shifting Discursive, Institutional and Legal Framework: The Evolution of Party Fundraising**

The requirement of running expensive and professional campaigns during election races has made effective fundraising especially important in today's party system. Those parties that cannot fundraise effectively within the system's new rules face a serious disadvantage. Historically, the Liberals were able to maintain their political hegemony by being one of the most effective fundraisers. They typically relied on the elitist methods of expensive and exclusive private fundraising events. However, the Elections Expenses Act of 1974, Bill C-24 in 2003 and the Accountability Act of 2006, which were designed to curb corruption by capping individual donation, eliminating corporate donation, and introducing state funding for parties, have handicapped the Liberals traditional method of accumulating funds. Their inability to adapt has become increasingly evident, as total fundraising increased for all parties from 2000 to 2005, except for the Liberals.<sup>3</sup>

The Liberals recent inability to adapt to the new party system's method of fundraising has become detrimental to their consistent ascent to power as Canada's "natural governing party." I believe that successful cadre parties in Canada do not simply "rush" to the centre as the "market analogy" suggests.<sup>4</sup> Rather, these parties deliberately construct and set the centre of political debate for an election. I believe this process is mirrored in the "value change thesis," which claims that "value change is rooted in structural change."<sup>5</sup> The value change thesis would support that a changing set of values, which become evident in an election, has put the Liberals at a long-term disadvantage because of the new structure of the overall political system. The thesis recognizes that the cadre parties themselves have great influence over the values of Canadian voters because of the institutional and discursive framework in which they operate. For example, the Conservatives used the MacDonald commission to influence discursive framework, and hence the values of Canadians, by framing the free-trade issue as a question of "how much

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<sup>3</sup> Lisa Young, Anthony Sayers, and Harold Jansen, "Altering the Political Landscape: State Funding and Party Finance," in *Canadian Parties in Transition: 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition*, eds. A. G. Gagnon and A. B. Tanguay (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2007), 343.

<sup>4</sup> Janine Brodie and Jane Jenson, "Piercing the Smokescreen: Stability and Change in Brokerage Politics," in *Canadian Parties in Transition: 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition*, eds. A. G. Gagnon and A. B. Tanguay (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2007), 41.

<sup>5</sup> Neil Nevitte and Christopher Cochrane, "Value Change and the Dynamics of the Canadian Partisan Landscape," in *Canadian Parties in Transition: 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition*, eds. A. G. Gagnon and A. B. Tanguay (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2007), 257.

or how little,” instead of “for or against” the implementation of free trade.<sup>6</sup> The Liberals recent failure to attain power is a sign of a long-term trend that will not end simply with a shift in Canadian values, but rather a gradual change in the overall political and legal framework. This gradual change may not occur until a search for the next party system in Canada occurs, known as the “groping stage.” However, this will likely not occur anytime soon considering that the current system is still in its early stages of development.

Regarding Canada’s discursive framework, a cadre party’s ability to set the centre of the political debate partly depends on maximizing monetary resources. It requires expensive media campaigns, tour schedules, and professional entourages to effectively influence the public’s opinion of what issue the election should focus on. That is why the Liberals failure to attain competitive amounts of resources through individual fundraising has become so important. For example, the Conservative’s use of expensive, prime-time television attack advertising of Stephane Dion completely discredited him as a strong leader to the electorate. Much of the Conservatives ability to use this type of political framing was possible because of the Conservatives’ effective individual fundraising strategy. Consider that the Liberals only raised \$1.47 million through individual donation in the last quarter. Compare this to the Conservatives \$4 million and NDP’s \$1.13 million in the last quarter.<sup>7</sup> This is even more significant when one considers that this data included last summer during Ignatieff’s cross-country fundraising campaign. Not only does this fundraising method bring in large amounts of money for the Conservatives, it maintains a personal connection between society and the Conservative party. The Conservatives attack ad strategy was also deliberate in the way that it set the political debate of the 2008 election as an issue about the strength of the leader, which has become extremely important in Canada’s leader-centred party system. The Conservatives continued attack on Liberal leadership, partly enabled by superior fundraising, makes it increasingly difficult for Liberals to set the election issue, and therefore, hinders their ability to attain power. The Liberals inability to take back power, created by the new legal framework around new fundraising policies, signals a shift away from their status as the “natural governing party” of Canada.

### **Shifting Peripheral Support: Flexible Partisans and Stable Dealignment**

LeDuc refers to Canada’s population as being in “stable dealignment,” regarding party affiliation and loyalty. He bases this argument on a poll that shows only 14.8% of Canadians consider themselves very strongly attached to a party, and on studies that show that an increasing

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<sup>6</sup> Janine Brodie and Jane Jenson, “Piercing the Smokescreen: Stability and Change in Brokerage Politics,” in Canadian Parties in Transition: 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, eds. A. G. Gagnon and A. B. Tanguay (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2007), 47-48.

<sup>7</sup> Jane Taber, “Harper Rakes it in as Ignatieff Struggles to Find Fundraising Sea Legs,” The Globe and Mail Online, November 3, 2010.

number of voters wait to decide on their vote until late in the election.<sup>8</sup> Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Liberal Party found ways to adapt and change in ways that captured the interest of many of these unaligned voters. They took advantage of past party systems that allowed high levels of corporate interaction with political parties, and successfully set election issues that were to their partisan advantage. However, a historical expansion of the franchise and Canada's continued flexibility of partisanship also created a wide open environment for sudden and unpredictable change.

In the current leader-driven system, the public's high level of detachment with political parties has caused more focus on the party's leaders themselves. This has created a system where it is extremely important that the leader resonates with the "stably dealigned" electorate. Since 2005, the Liberals have had little to offer in terms of a dynamic leader. Paul Martin, Stephen Dion, and Michael Ignatieff have all faced numerous criticisms about their ability to lead. However, this is a bigger problem than just the Liberal's short-term issue of finding a stronger leader. A long-term shift away from partisan loyalty and toward the party leader makes it highly unlikely that the Liberal party will be able to put forward a stronger leader than any other party on a consistent basis. Although some Liberal leaders will be the strongest at certain times in the future, this will not occur consistently enough to dominate Canadian politics like the Liberals did in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is especially true in a system that now includes 5 major leaders in the election race, instead of the traditional two-party or two-leader system. The improbability of fielding a superior leader that appeals to dealigned voters almost every election may indicate that the Liberals will be unable to retain their tradition of dominating Canadian politics as the "natural governing party."

### **Shifting Core Support: Durable Partisans and Regionalism**

Leduc mostly focuses on the importance of Canada's dealigned electorate, however it is also important to include the "ties that bind" argument. The ties that bind argument recognizes that there is a key group of supporters that each party relies on almost every election for guaranteed votes.<sup>9</sup> I believe these core supporters or durable partisans have also played an important role in regards to the Liberal's historically dominant position in Canadian politics. The shift of core party identification during the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century was a telling sign of the fleeting base of traditionally strong Liberal core support. From 2004 to 2008, the Liberals lost 3.1% of their "durable partisan" identification which fell to 25.4%. On the other hand, the

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<sup>8</sup> Lawrence LeDuc, "Realignment and Dealignment in Canadian Federal Politics," in Canadian Parties in Transition: 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, eds. A. G. Gagnon and A. B. Tanguay (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2007), 168.

<sup>9</sup> James Bickerton, Alain Gagnon, and Patrick Smith, Ties that Bind: Parties and Voters in Canada (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Conservatives capitalized by increasing their “durable partisan” base by 7.7% to 25.7%; higher than that of the Liberals. To make matters worse, the Liberal’s “durable partisans” are only 85% likely to vote Liberal, compared to the New Democratic Party’s 90%, and the Conservatives 95%.<sup>10</sup> I do not believe that the Liberals can hope to consistently remain the “natural governing party” when their core base of support is lower than that of another party and shows a consistent downward trend.

It is also important to understand the reasons why Liberal core support has dwindled to show that it is a long-term problem, rather than short-term blip, for continued Liberal dominance. In Canada, much of this problem is due to changes in regional support. Strong regional support is critical for Canadian parties to capitalize on because the nature of the first past the post electoral system exaggerates the number of seats, compared to the proportional number of votes, given to a distinct regional area. The Liberals, for example, have traditionally enjoyed the regional support of French Canadians, predominantly in Quebec, since 1896. However, much of this key support has been eroded over recent years. As Bickerton suggests, the senate, voting system, and cabinet have become decreasingly able or willing to represent the concerns of different Canadian regions. This has forced different regions and provinces to take matters into their own hands. The nation of Quebec has moved towards a volatile one-party dominant system as a means of voicing its concerns to government.<sup>11</sup> Although this system is extremely beneficial for the Liberals when Quebec is on their side (as it was for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century), the Liberals loss of Quebec to the Bloc Quebecois during the quiet revolution and the build up of Conservative support in more recent times, has caused major losses to a large portion of Liberal core support. The loss of Quebec is a long-term problem for Liberal dominance, and one that will not be solved easily. The Liberal Party must again find a way to appeal to the Quebec electorate if it should hope to still be considered the “natural governing party” of Canada.

Not only has support from Quebec dwindled, but so too has Catholic support. Although not necessarily a geographically regional issue, bases of support structured around religious lines have become less important and reliable as the party systems of Canada have evolved. The historical appeal of Protestants to the Conservatives and Catholics to the Liberals was the product of a different time period with a different political and social framework. There was even a shift toward Catholics “preferring” the Conservatives in the last election.<sup>12</sup> This information implies that the Liberals have lost yet another piece of what was once a reliable, long-term vote that they could count on over numerous elections.

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<sup>10</sup> Joanna Everitt, Elisabeth Gidengil, Patrick Fournier, and Neil Nevitte, “Patterns of Party Identification in Canada,” in *Election*, ed. H. MacIvor (Toronto: Emond Montgomery Publications Limited, 2010), 275-280.

<sup>11</sup> James Bickerton, “Between Integration and Fragmentation: Political Parties and the Representation of Regions,” in *Canadian Parties in Transition: 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition*, eds. A. G. Gagnon and A. B. Tanguay (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2007), 426.

<sup>12</sup> Elisabeth Gidengil, Patrick Fournier, Joanna Everitt, Neil Nevitte, and Andre Blais, “The Anatomy of Liberal Defeat,” paper presented at the *Canadian Political Science Association Meeting* (Ottawa: May 2009), 4.

Yet another detriment to continued Liberal dominance is also the loss of their visible minority vote. Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper has made many inroads in terms of taking the support of immigrants and visible minorities away from the Liberals.<sup>13</sup> In the 2008 election, visible minorities were almost equally as likely to vote Conservative as they were to vote Liberal.<sup>14</sup> Both the loss of Catholic support and that of visible minorities affect the Liberal core base of support in similar ways to the Liberal's loss of French Canadian support in Quebec. These are long-term problems that hinder the Liberals ability to constantly hold power.

## **Conclusion**

The Liberal's title of being Canada's "natural governing party" is being tested by an evolving party system. Election triumphs and long stints in power throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century show a dominant historical trend, however the first 10 years of this century have told a different story. Changing institutional and legal framework has caused the Liberal's traditional method of success to become obsolete. A decrease of regional support in Quebec, religious support from Catholic Canadians, and the support from visible minorities has damaged the core support that the Liberals have counted on to dominate Canadian politics. The peripheral, dealigned electorate of Canada has also made Liberal dominance increasingly unlikely by being more concerned about selecting a leader, than a party, which makes any party dominating much less likely. A shifting legal framework, such as changes to fundraising laws, has also proven disadvantageous to the Liberal's historical method of elitist fundraising. I believe these long-term, structural disadvantages have made it nearly impossible to conceive that the Liberals will be able to dominate the 21<sup>st</sup> century as the "natural governing party of Canada," as they have done in the past.

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<sup>13</sup> CBC News, "Conservatives Extend Poll Lead over Liberals," October 8, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Joanna Everitt, Elisabeth Gidengil, Patrick Fournier, and Neil Nevitte, "Patterns of Party Identification in Canada," in Election, ed. H. MacIvor (Toronto: Emond Montgomery Publications Limited, 2010), 281.



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