

## The Influence of Media in the Evolution of Canadian Political Parties

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*The types of political parties in Canada have drastically changed over the last 150 years, and so too has the dominant forms of media. My research explores the role the media has played in the evolution of the Canadian party system, and attempts to answer the question: How has media contributed to the changes in the party system over time, and how has it facilitated a shift between the types of parties? The federal system has seen elite parties, mass parties and brokerage parties, and the market-oriented party, and my research examines how the media has influenced the way parties communicate their platform and policies with the electorate. As well, I explore the dominant types and modes of media present in each type of party system: from newspapers, to the introduction of broadcast radio, to television, to the recent phenomena of social media. Media influence is the most significant factor in the evolution of the Canadian party system, as it is the primary vehicle for the delivery of information to Canadian citizens.*

### Introduction

The party system in Canada has drastically changed since Confederation, and so too has the dominant forms of media. The ability of the Canadian media to interact and influence citizens is significant in the current age of social media, but media influence has been of import since the beginning of the Canadian political system. Indeed, the media has played a central role in the evolution of party systems in Canada, and this research attempts to answer how technological advances in media spawned changes to the Canadian party system over time. Being the primary vehicle for the delivery of information to Canadian citizens, mainstream media and its influence is the most significant factor in the evolution of the Canadian party system, and has facilitated a shift in the types of parties between the party system eras.

### Literature Review

The work of Dan Azoulay (1999) and Carty, Cross and Young (2000) overlap in that they both recognize the first period of political communications is marked by partisan newspapers. Azoulay goes into more depth as he discusses specific publications and how they reflected the interests and agenda of the competing political parties. However, Carty, Cross and Young (2000) examine the first party system further as they discuss ways that politicians of the time would seek to attract media attention.

Also, Carty, Cross and Young (2000) provide an in depth look at the media, particularly broadcast radio, of the second party system. Tanguay and Gagnon discuss how the third party system is marked by the onset of television, and its ability to reach into every household. Although from different party systems, the two works can be considered similarly, as they both discuss the ability of political parties to reach a

broader audience. It is the work of Khayyam Zev Paltiel (1996) who examines how the mechanics of political marketing and mass communication have contributed to the erosion of party infrastructures. It is noted that scholarly works addressing the advent of social media are limited, as social media is a relatively new phenomenon; research on how social media influences the party system is lacking.

William Cross, and Carty, Cross and Young argue that there is a fourth party system in Canada from 1993 onwards, influenced by new computer based communication technologies. Cross examines the recent phenomenon of “narrowcasting,” while Carty, Cross and Young’s work, published in 2000 focuses more on the impact of the internet, use of emailing and democratic dialing. Carty, Cross and Young discuss at length tracking polls and electronic voter files, and they acknowledge that more sophisticated technologies will be used in the future.

When considering the types of political parties that have historically marked the party systems in the Canadian federal political scene, it is important to define what a party system is. Alex Marland and Jared J. Wesley (2016) present that a party system can be defined as “a particular constellation of political parties guided by a unique framework of behaviour” (351). In the Canadian federal context, Marland and Wesley (2016) further posit that while the start and end dates of the party systems in Canada are disputable, they suggest the following framework for the Canadian party system: “1867 to 1917 - first party system era; 1921 to 1957 - second party system era; 1962 to 1993 - third party system era; 2011 onward - fourth party system era” (353). While the transition periods are marked by a host of social and economic developments in society, among other factors, Carty, Cross and Young (2000) identify that when considering campaign communications in the first three party systems, “the transition periods marking the adoption of new technological techniques roughly coincide with the transition periods for party systems, as changes in party activity have largely paralleled the introduction of new communication technologies” (181). Herein lies the preeminent thought underpinning the thesis of this paper: that it is in fact changing technologies in large part, adapted for political use, that marks the shift in party systems, resulting in the transformation of Canadian political parties.

For the purpose of this paper, the definitions of the political parties as discussed are defined below.

**Table: Canadian Political Parties**

Dominant Party Type	Definition	Party System Era
Elite Party	“A small political party run by people with ascribed social status.” <sup>*</sup>	First party system
Mass Party	“A grassroots political party characterized by its efforts to sign up members.” <sup>*</sup>	Second party system
Brokerage Party	“The Canadian term for a catch-all party that brokers competing regional demands.” <sup>*</sup>	Third party system
Market-oriented Party	“A political party that uses market intelligence to identify voter needs and demands, and design its policies, candidates and behavior to provide voter satisfaction; does not try to change what people want, but give people what they want.” <sup>*</sup>	Fourth party system

<sup>\*</sup> Marland, Wesley 2016, p. 341

<sup>\*</sup> Marland, Wesley 2016, p. 343

<sup>\*</sup> Marland, Wesley 2016, p. 344

<sup>\*</sup> Stromback, Lees-Marshment, Rudd 2016, p. 2

## Findings

### *Media in the First Party System*

The first party system in Canada, according to Dan Azoulay, (1999, 52) is “distinguished by several main themes, among them the emergence of national parties, [and] the remarkable stability of the party system.” The emergent national parties – Liberals and Conservatives, are “elite” parties, and are to be considered, as reported by Marland and Wesley (2016, 341) “closed cadres of the upper class.” The party system of the time was dominated by white, wealthy, land-owning males. During this first party system political communication took place in the absence of national media, as Carty, Cross and Young (2000, 181) report and that “without national newspapers, television, or radio, the parties and their leaders were dependent upon personal contact to convey their messages to voters.” In May of 1884, Sir John A. Macdonald (1884, Library and Archives Canada) addressed electors of Toronto in an amphitheatre:

*“Sir John Macdonald: Yes; as a friend says behind me, a larger crowd; because, thanks to the N.P., Toronto has grown larger, the population has increased, you are all richer, you have better looking hats (laughter) and better looking coats. (cheers and laughter) And, I really must say as a bloated aristocrat and office-holder, that I myself am not a bit the worse for my three year's salary. (renewed laughter)”*

The immediacy of a public speech, and the camaraderie it invited is apparent in the jocular exchange with a group of electors Macdonald addressed. That he himself recognizes his own elite status and privilege, as well as the status of the group he addresses, highlights the restrictive nature of the elite political parties in the first party system.

It is within this context that partisan newspapers, backed by one or other of the elite parties, become the primary media tool in the delivery of information to the electorate; partisan newspapers were of utmost importance to political leaders, as it allowed them to disseminate their message and platform to a larger audience. That the partisan papers were closely integrated with the parties and leaders themselves is apparent in light of George Brown's (1867, The Globe) Confederation Day editorial in The Globe, where his article celebrating Confederation included: “As a not uninfluential organ of public opinion, we may be pardoned for claiming that The Globe has contributed, in some degree at least, to the successful result over which we this day rejoice.” As he sees it, The Globe itself shares in the success of bringing Confederation to fruition. This era of elite party stability transitioned however, as Dan Azoulay (1999, 62) notes, “the party press was losing its usefulness . . . as voters increasingly turned to the many independent papers that appeared after 1900.” With the advent of new technologies in printing, coinciding with growing rates of literacy, newspapers transitioned to advertisement based “penny press.” As Marland and Wesley (2016, 437) further explain, as readership grew, “this increased the expectation for non-partisan news, and by the early twentieth century, the party press was fading away.” Elite parties were forced to change along with the social and technological developments of the day, resulting in a transition to mass parties of the second party system.

### *Media in the Second Party System*

There were several factors at play simultaneously as elite parties of the first party system gave way to the mass parties that mark the era of the second party system, and the role emerging media technology played in this transition is crucial. As Dan Azoulay (1999, 59-61) presents, the election of 1911, the start of the First World War, and the “decline of traditional ‘partyism’” all contributed to the significant change in the Canadian party system. This decline of traditional “partyism” brings the elite parties to an ideological convergence where, as Dan Azoulay (1999, 61) further presents, “party leaders realized that only moderate, middle-of-the-road “brokerage” parties able to accommodate a variety of groups and regions under one roof could hope to form a government.” Within this growing demographic, along with female suffrage by 1918, the advent of radio as a form of political communication is significant.

As social changes in the country were occurring, radio gave party leaders the ability to communicate simultaneously with voters throughout various communities (Carty, et al., 2000). Political parties could now campaign and broadcast their messages to more people in a region, without relying on the face-to-face interactions that marked the prior party system. Radio created a bridge for political messaging that was previously unavailable, engaging more of the electorate in federal politics. In a radio broadcast speech of May 30, 1945, Mackenzie King (1945, CBC Digital Archives) appeals to Canadians as he seeks re-election: “Today we face a greater opportunity than ever before - to advance the cause of social reform.” The shifted emphasis from appealing to other land-owning elites to societal reform is evident in this excerpt. As a medium of political communication, radio broadcasting was able to promote and bolster the goals of the mass parties of the second party system era in Canadian politics.

### *Media in the Third Party System*

The advent of television was instrumental in facilitating the change from mass parties to brokerage parties that characterize the third party system. Brokerage parties can be considered, according to Marland and Wesley (2016, 344) Canada’s “shock absorbers” as they seek to “reconcile the wide variety of regional interests found in Canadian society.” Pan-Canadian politics was emerging in the 3rd party system, and as the shift from regional to national parties took hold, so did the NDP party as Canada’s third federal party. As televisions appeared in homes across the country, this medium of communication continued what radio broadcasting had established - an immediate link with vast numbers of the electorate. Khayyam Zev Paltiel in *Canadian Parties in Transition* (1996, 406) illuminates the impact television had, as it can “bring the national leaders directly into the homes of the electorate.” With television, the persona of the leader was immediately realizable; the images of party leaders became a priority, and political parties quickly recognized the potential to reach a new source of support. A 1968 television clip from the Archives of Ontario, (Footage of Pierre Trudeau election coverage, 2017) depicts Trudeaumania - the nickname given to the enthusiasm that was generated around the young Pierre Trudeau, and TV stations were able to capture and broadcast the event. The role television media plays in this party transformation must thus be considered significant; parties and their leaders were now reaching out to all Canadians. As seen on the leaders debate coverage of CBC’s *The National*, (1988, CBC Archives) Prime Minister Brian Mulroney debates John Turner over the negotiated free trade agreement with the United States; in defending his actions, he appeals: “You do not have a monopoly on patriotism . . . I believe that in my own modest way I am nation building, because I believe this benefits Canada, and I love Canada!” Televised leaders’ debates

had become a way for Canadians to interpret the leadership of party leaders, and nationally televised coverage of campaigns served to cement elections as a national event. (Carty et al., 2000, 184)

### *Media in the Fourth Party System*

At the onset of the 21st century, Canadian society witnessed an evolution in media technology that has promoted drastic change in the federal party system and the parties themselves. The fourth party system emerged after the 1993 federal election where Jean Chretien's Liberal Party won a strong majority, but the period immediately following saw the emergence of regional parties, including the Bloc Quebecois and the Reform Party. It is in this period of multipartyism that new and pervasive media becomes entrenched in society: digital technology.

Digital technology can be divided into Web 1.0 - the Internet; e-mail; and other technologies that according to Cross (2004, 119) include electronic voter files and automated calling machines and operators, and Web 2.0 - largely social media technologies, including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and blogging. Digital technology has impacted political parties, as they now have immediate, precise and detailed information on the electorate. This has forced a change in how parties communicate and campaign, and society today is witnessing the emergence of a new type of political party, the market-oriented party. As Stromback, Lees-Marshment and Rudd (2016, 3) observe, parties may be moving toward the market-oriented model, where "the use of targeting new markets and . . . a move away from selling ideologically driven policy" is becoming more prevalent. The availability of voter information has allowed parties to use new campaign strategies and modes of communication, including narrowcasting, which is, according to William Cross (2004, 131), "the sending of tailored messages to specific groups of voters.". The public is engaged as never before and market-oriented parties strive to provide messages tailored to their targeted audience, rather than sell their own ideologies.

As the electorate embraces changing and emerging technologies, so too must parties and politicians, in order to remain relevant. Following the newest social media trend Tik Tok, Jagmeet Singh (2019, Oct. 17) utilized the technology to appeal to younger voters by posting a video in which he expresses "who he's in it for." His meme garnered 1.3 million views within a day, and drew praise from even his opponents. This is one of the many examples that prove that the immediacy and effectiveness of digital media cannot be overstated. Small, Giasson and Marland (2014, 5) present political communication in today's digital age as "a triangular process that includes political institutions and actors, the news media, and importantly, citizens . . . It is the interactions between these three groups that matter in political communication." How the fourth party system will evolve within ongoing and emerging digital technologies, will be an exciting new chapter in the Canadian political realm.

### **Discussion**

It is apparent through this research that mass media today, including a significant number of digital technologies, is opening political engagement to more people, and more importantly to younger people. As evidenced, media technology in the fourth party system gives an intimate look into the lives of our political leaders (which are the faces of political parties) and makes them more transparent, and

importantly, relatable. The ability for political parties, because of digital technologies, to engage as never before with the electorate impacts the party system in Canada. As it has been noted, the trend today is for many parties to be moving toward a market-oriented model, where parties will be likely to use advanced technologies to not only discern what the electorate wants, but to deliver a party platform and leader that will adapt to those wants. Will the ever-evolving technologies cause the party system to become less stable, as historically media technologies endured for significant time? As well, it is younger Canadians that embrace changing technologies more readily, and the possibility for media marketing technology to engage with a younger electorate, may contribute to a less stable party system as well. The future of the Canadian party system will be significantly influenced by media technologies.

### **Conclusion**

The Canadian party system has evolved since Confederation, along with changing technologies and modes of media. It has been, in fact, the dynamic changes in media that have impacted shifts in the party system, and in Canadian political parties themselves. Media has progressed from the partisan press of the late 19th century to digital technologies today that invite political engagement at unprecedented levels. What has not changed is the power that the media and news press plays in the Canadian political scene; it has been, and always will be, the primary agent for the delivery and receipt of political communication, and as such must be considered the most significant factor in the changes evidenced in the party system in Canada.

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