

The Anatomy of a Liberal Defeat

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Abstract

This paper uses data from the 2000, 2004, 2006 and 2008 Canadian Election Studies to analyze the causes of the Liberal party's historic defeat in the 2008 federal election. The analyses reveal the importance of long-term factors for understanding the change in the party's electoral fortunes since 2000. The paper ends with a consideration of the implications for the Liberals' future electoral prospects, as well the larger literature on voting behaviour in Canada.

Introduction

Coming out of the 2000 federal election, Liberal dominance seemed assured. For the Liberals to lose, two things had to happen: the right would have to re-unite and short-term factors would have to be strongly against the Liberals. Both conditions were in place by the time of the 2004 election. The right had re-united in 2003 when the Alliance and the Progressive Conservatives merged to form the new Conservative Party of Canada and the sponsorship scandal had angered many Canadians. In the 2004 election, the Liberals managed to hang on to power. In the 2006 election, they did not. And in 2008, they suffered a crushing defeat. Indeed, the party long considered Canada's "natural governing party" recorded its lowest ever share of the vote. In this paper, we examine why the Liberals' fortunes changed so dramatically over so short a time span.

Using data from the Canadian Election Studies (CES)¹, we model Liberal vote choice in each of the four elections. Comparing the effects of the various explanatory factors across elections makes it possible to test a variety of hypotheses about the sources of the Liberals' electoral woes. It also enables us to offer some insights into the potential for a Liberal resurgence. Given the differences in the party system, we are not including Quebec in the analyses presented here.

The Roots of Liberal Dominance and Decline

The place to start is with the 2000 election. A close look at the sources of Liberal dominance in that election reveals that the support of Catholics and visible minorities was a critical ingredient (Blais et al. 2002). Social background characteristics may seem like an odd place to begin the search for an explanation of the decline in Liberal fortunes. According to conventional wisdom, the distribution of social background characteristics changes too slowly to explain electoral dynamics, at least in the short term (Archer and Kanji 2002; Campbell et al. 1960). Certainly, people are much more likely to change their vote from one election to the next than they are to change their religion. What conventional wisdom misses, though, is the fact that the *effects* of social characteristics can change, depending on the circumstances of a particular election. This offers a plausible explanation for the drop in Liberal support in the 2004 and 2006 federal elections: the sponsorship scandal may have strained the loyalties of traditional Liberal supporters.

The fact that the Liberals' electoral woes persisted in 2008 raises larger questions about Liberal partisanship. In 2000, the Liberals enjoyed a significant head start because they could count on many more partisans than any of the other parties (Blais et al. 2002). All the Liberals had to do to win an election was to mobilize their core supporters and to do at least as well as the other parties among non-partisans. Does the continuing slide in the Liberal vote share between 2000 and 2008 mean that the Liberal core has been shrinking? In other words, has it become harder to win elections because there are simply fewer staunch Liberals?

Looking to partisanship for an explanation of Liberal decline runs counter to conventional wisdom once again. The notion that Canadians develop psychological attachments to political parties has been hotly contested (Gidengil 1992). Indeed, John Meisel (1975) went so far as to argue that the concept of party identification is "almost inapplicable" to Canadian voting behaviour because it appeared to be "as volatile ... as the vote itself" (p. 67). Harold Clarke and

his colleagues (1979, 1991) offered a more tempered assessment, recognizing the existence of a core of “durable partisans”. Still, they concluded, “The keynote of partisanship in Canada was its flexibility” (Clarke et al. 1984, 56). Subsequent panel analyses, using data from the 1974, 1979 and 1980 elections seemed to confirm the instability of Canadians’ party attachments (Leduc et al. 1984). If too many Canadians are prone to changing their partisan allegiances along with their vote, then explanations relying on party identification risk being tautologies.

It is possible, though, that the flexibility of Canadians’ partisan ties has been overstated.² Some of the apparent instability in party identification in Canada seems to have stemmed from the fact that the traditional party identification question did not explicitly offer the option of not identifying with any political party (Johnston 1992). This may have encouraged some people to name the party they were voting for even though they lacked any meaningful sense of psychological attachment to that party. The effect would be to make party identification appear quite unstable. When the phrase “none of these” was added to the traditional question in the 1988 CES, the proportion of non-identifiers increased.

The acid test of party identification is partisans’ willingness to vote at odds with their party identification. In the original Michigan conception, a person’s vote in a given election is the outcome of the interaction between their long-standing predisposition to support a particular party and the short-term attitudinal forces particular to that election (Campbell et al. 1960). If the pull of short-term forces—such as the issues of the day or the leaders’ personalities—is sufficiently strong, a voter may be persuaded to opt for a different party. It is this tension between the longstanding predisposition to support a given party and the short-term attractions of particular personalities or issues that makes the concept meaningful (Miller 1983). The key point is that the sense of party identification endures even when people vote for a party other than the one with which they identify. If party identification typically changes along with the vote, the concept is clearly meaningless.

The post-2000 federal elections offer a useful opportunity to revisit the applicability of the concept of party identification to voting behaviour in Canada. If Liberal partisanship could withstand the sponsorship scandal in 2004 and the new revelations about the extent of corruption that emerged in the run-up to the 2006 election, the case for the applicability of Michigan-style party identification in Canada would be more credible. And, of course, the prospects for the Liberal party would look brighter.

The sponsorship scandal was not the only short-term force that might have swayed voters. In fact, there are three types of short-term forces that have been highlighted in the literature: perceptions of the economy, issue attitudes and leaders evaluations. According to the reward-and-punish model, voters reward the incumbent party for good economic times and punish them for bad times. However, the impact of the economy has often proved more limited than this simple model might suggest (Blais et al. 2002; Gidengil et al. 2006). First, economic voting is conditional on voters’ attributing responsibility to the government (Clarke and Kornberg 1992), a task that is more complicated in a federal system (Anderson 2006; Gélinau and Bélanger 2005; Godbout and Bélanger 2002). Second, voters are less likely to assign responsibility when the incumbent party has a new leader (Nadeau and Blais 1993; Gidengil et al. 2006). Finally, attributions of responsibility tend to be asymmetrical: voters are much readier to blame the

government when the economy is doing badly than they are to give it credit for better times. This means that the governing party does not necessarily reap the electoral rewards when the economy has been doing well. It may, though, pay a price for poor economic performance. This raises an interesting possibility: did the stock market crash help save the Liberals from an even worse defeat in 2008 by limiting the scope of the Conservative victory?

Issues typically matter more than economic evaluations (Blais et al. 2004). And some issues matter more than others. While the net effect of issues was quite minor in 2000, the sponsorship scandal was clearly a major factor in limiting the scope of the Liberals' victory in 2004 (Gidengil et al. 2006). Did the revelations that emerged during the Gomery Commission hearings inflict even greater damage on the Liberals' chances in 2006? In 2008, Stéphane Dion and the Liberals made the "green shift" the centrepiece of their campaign: did it help them or did it hurt them? Much depends on the distribution of opinion. Even a high-profile issue may matter little to the election outcome if opinion is evenly divided because the votes of those on each side will be self-cancelling.

Voters' reactions to the leaders typically have a powerful influence on their individual vote choice, but this does not necessarily translate into a substantial impact on aggregate vote shares (see Blais et al. 2002; Johnston 2002). Leader evaluations are likely to have the most impact on an election outcome when one leader is markedly more—or less—popular than the others. Given the Conservatives' strategy of targeting Dion and portraying him as a weak leader, the conditions may well have been in place for leadership to be a significant factor in explaining the Liberals' historic defeat in 2008.

Data and Methods

The analyses are based on the bloc-recursive approach developed by Miller and Shanks (1996). This approach entails sequentially adding blocs of variables to the explanatory model. Variables are retained in the model if they are statistically significant (at $p < .10$) for at least one election when first entered. The basic insight underlying these multi-stage models is that explanatory factors differ in their proximity to the vote. Where we stand on the issues of the day and how we feel about the party leaders, for example, are closer in time to the actual vote than longer-term predispositions such as party identification and ideological beliefs. These longer term predispositions can have a direct effect on vote choice: some voters are such strong partisans that their vote is decided long before the election is called. Importantly, though, they can also affect vote choice indirectly by influencing more proximate factors: a social conservative is likely to oppose same-sex marriage. If all of these explanatory factors are included in a single model, we are very likely to underestimate the effects of those that are more distant from the actual vote choice. By estimating the model in stages, we are able to estimate the total impact of each explanatory factor, as opposed to only that portion that is not mediated via more proximate factors. Of course, this is not to imply that voters necessarily reason in stages or that they all factor the same considerations into their decision calculus. In fact, it is very likely that they do not (see Johnston et al. 1996; Roy 2009). Rather, the multistage model is intended as a heuristic device that enables us to simplify a complex decision calculus.

[Figure 1 about here]

The dependent variable is Liberal vote choice, with Liberal voters coded one and all other voters coded zero. There are two reasons for choosing a binary specification. First, our interest here is in why people did or did not vote Liberal, rather than why they preferred, say, the Conservatives to the NDP or the NDP to the Greens. Second, there are computational complications in trying to capture the inter-party dynamics of support. Ideally, we might want to use multinomial probit since this would make it possible to estimate the effect of adding or removing parties from the choice set. In particular, it would enable us to examine the effect of the growth in Green support on the Liberals' electoral fortunes in 2008. Unfortunately, though, the small number of Green voters, even in 2008, results in too many empty cells for reliable estimation.

Since the dependent variable is binary, the models are estimated using binary logistic regression. In order to facilitate interpretation, we use the models to estimate each variable's independent impact on the probability of voting Liberal. For example, we compute the mean probability of voting Liberal, first assuming everyone is a member of a visible minority and, then assuming nobody is, keeping other social background characteristics unchanged. The difference in the mean probabilities provides an estimate of the average impact of being a visible minority on voting Liberal, everything else being equal.

An explanatory factor can have a strong impact on the probability of voting for a party and yet have little effect on the party's share of the vote. Feelings about the party leaders, for example, can strongly affect how people vote, but unless one leader is much more (or much less) popular than the others, the net effect on party vote shares will be small (see Blais et al. 2002; Johnston 2002). The impact on vote shares can be estimated by setting the coefficient for a given explanatory factor to zero (leaving all other coefficients unchanged) and observing how much the average estimated probability of voting Liberal changes. In effect, we are asking: what if a given variable had simply not mattered? For instance, if opinions about the green shift had been irrelevant to people's choice of party, would the Liberals have won more votes?

Findings

Social Background Characteristics: The Shrinking Liberal Core

The Liberals were able to coast to victory in 2000 with the support of two key groups: visible minorities and Catholics. By 2008, the Liberals could no longer count on their loyalty. The visible minority vote dropped 14 points between 2000 and 2004 (see Figure 2).³ The main beneficiary was the NDP. The Liberals did not lose any further ground in 2006, but in 2008, they lost a massive 19 points. And now it was the Conservatives who benefited. In fact, minority voters were almost as likely to vote Conservative in 2008 as they were to vote Liberal.

[Figure 2 about here]

Even controlling for a variety of social background characteristics, the loss of visible minority support is evident (see Table 1). According to our estimations, the probability of voting Liberal in 2000 was 26 points higher among visible minority voters than among other voters; in 2008, the probability of a Liberal vote was only 12 points higher. The net contribution to the Liberal vote share was less than one percentage point.

[Table 1 about here]

The Catholic vote tells a similar story (see Figure 3). Catholic support has dropped a massive 24 points since 2000. In 2006, Catholics were as likely to vote Conservative as Liberal. In 2008, they clearly actually preferred the Conservatives to the Liberals. Controlling for other social background characteristics reveals that the drop in Liberal support among Catholics is even more dramatic than the loss of visible minority votes. According to our estimations, in 2000 the probability of voting Liberal was 15 points higher among Catholics than among non-Catholics; by 2008, it was only five points higher.

[Figure 3 about here]

The fact that Catholics have traditionally been much more likely than Protestants to vote Liberal has been a critical ingredient in the Liberal party's record as "one of the four most successful parties in contemporary democracies" (Blais 2005, 821). The persistence of this cleavage has long puzzled students of Canadian voting behaviour. However, it may be premature to bid farewell to this "moderately interesting, but strikingly peculiar, houseguest" (Irvine 1974, 570): even in 2008, Catholics were still more likely than Protestants to vote Liberal and their support boosted the Liberal vote share by over two points.

Still, we may well be witnessing the emergence of a new religious cleavage based on Christian fundamentalism. Christians who believe that the bible is the literal word of God preferred the Alliance to the Liberals by a margin of 15 points in 2000.⁴ By 2008, they preferred the Conservatives by a margin of almost 50 points. Even controlling for a variety of other social background characteristics, fundamentalist Christians have clearly become less and less likely to vote Liberal (see Table 1). At the same time, voters who profess no religion have become more important to the shrinking Liberal vote. But for their votes, the Liberal vote share would have been two points lower in 2008.

The Liberal vote, of course, remained highly regionalized in 2008, with vote shares ranging from a low of 11.4% in Alberta to a high of 47.7% in Prince Edward Island. To some extent the variations in vote share across the country reflect variations in socio-demographic composition: there are more Catholics, for example in Atlantic Canada than there are in western Canada. Even controlling for a variety of social background characteristics, lack of appeal in the West is a serious drag on Liberal fortunes. If the Liberals fared as well in western Canada as they do in Ontario, their vote share would have been fully seven points higher in 2008, other things being equal. Similarly, if they had had as much appeal to rural Canadians as they did to urban Canadians, they might have garnered two points more. In this respect, little has changed since 2000.

Indeed, despite decades of electoral flux, religious and regional cleavages continue to "supersede class almost entirely as factors differentiating the support for national parties" in Canada (Alford 1963, xi). However, class effects were not entirely absent in 2008. Low income voters were significantly less likely to vote Liberal and this cost the party over a point. In 2000, it was low income voters who were more likely to vote Liberal. A second interesting change relates to the effect of education: university graduates were significantly more likely to vote Liberal in

2008. Their support, which may have reflected more favourable views of the Liberals' plan for the environment,⁵ netted the party an additional two points. However, the most consequential change relates to union households. In both 2000 and 2004, voters from households with at least one union member were as likely (or not) to vote Liberal as those from non-union households. Since then, the party has seen its union vote cut in half. The big beneficiary has been the NDP, which has seen its share of the union vote double, but the Conservatives have also been attracting more votes from union households. In 2008, lack of appeal to these voters cost the Liberals over two points.

The other troubling development for the Liberals relates to age. Younger voters were significantly less likely to vote Liberal in 2008 and this cost the party one and a half points. The loss of support in the under 35 age group is linked to the emergence of the Green party: younger voters were significantly more likely to vote Green than older voters, even controlling for other social background characteristics (analyses not shown).

Values and Beliefs: Still the “Party of the Centre”?

The Liberals' claim to be Canada's “natural governing party” has traditionally rested on the party's appeal to the median voter. Certainly, since 1993, the deepest ideological divides have occurred between the NDP on the left and Reform, the Alliance and now the Conservatives on the right. Still, social conservatism and beliefs about free enterprise both played at least some role in Liberal voting in 2000 (see Table 2). The Liberals fared better among people who are socially liberal on matters like gender roles and sexual orientation and among people who are sceptical of the virtues of the free enterprise system.⁶ Given the balance of opinion, this helped the Liberals, but the net impact on the Liberal vote share was less than one and a half points. By 2008, even these modest effects had disappeared. The Liberals had failed, in particular, to capitalize on the Conservatives' major weakness, namely their perceived social conservatism.

[Table 2 about here]

Still, the Liberals benefited from the fact that they were no longer a lightning rod for political disaffection,⁷ and in contrast to 2006, they actually attracted the votes of people who feel that their province is treated unfairly. Indeed, regional alienation boosted the Liberal vote share by over one and a half points. The other important change relates to Quebec. People who have very positive feelings about Quebec and believe that much more should be done for the province had a 21-point higher probability of voting Liberal.⁸ But for their support, the Liberals would have lost another point.

Party Identification: The Liberals Lose their Head Start

In 2000, the Liberals had twice as many partisans as the Alliance, three times as many partisans as the Progressive Conservatives, and four times as many as the NDP, giving the party a significant head start over the competition (see Figure 4).⁹ Provided that they were able to mobilize their partisans and do at least as well as competing parties among non-partisans, the Liberals looked hard to beat. Two things changed in 2004. First, the Liberals began to lose partisans. Second, and more importantly, the merger of the Alliance and the Progressive Conservatives gave the new Conservative Party almost as many partisans as the Liberals. Since then, the number of Conservative partisans has continued to grow and the number of Liberal

partisans has continued to decline. In 2006, the Conservatives had as many partisans as the Liberals; by 2008, Conservative partisans clearly outnumbered Liberal partisans. So the Liberal ‘head start’ has vanished. Some of our survey respondents were interviewed in 2004, in 2006 and again in 2008. Fully one third of those who said they were Liberals in 2004 were no longer Liberals in 2008.

[Figure 3 about here]

This begs the question, of course, of whether Canadians *do* have meaningful attachments to political parties. It turns out that close to one-third (32%) of Liberal identifiers voted for a party other than the Liberals in 2008 and yet continued to identify themselves as Liberal when interviewed right after the election. So it appears that party identification is not as volatile as the vote itself. The pull of short-term forces in 2008 was sufficient to strain Liberal loyalties, but not to cause partisans to abandon the party altogether. There were defections, of course, as the aggregate distributions suggest and the panel data confirm, but enough Liberals remained steadfast—despite voting for a different party—to suggest a meaningful attachment.

[Table 3 about here]

The tendency of Liberal partisans to vote Liberal has clearly diminished since 2000 (see Table 3). According to our estimations, other things being equal, the probability of voting Liberal was 43 points higher for a Liberal identifier in 2000 (compared with a non-partisan); in 2008, the probability was only 36 points higher. To compound their problems, the Liberals lost an estimated 12 points among non-identifiers between 2000 and 2008, and since 2004, they have been outpolled by the Conservatives. So the Liberals failed on two fronts in 2008: they failed to mobilize their partisans and they failed to appeal to non-partisans. The only positive news here for the Liberals is that many of those who voted against the party still considered themselves to be Liberals.

The Economy

The Liberals’ victory in 2000 owed little to the fact that the economy was doing well. This was because relatively few voters credited the Liberals for the healthy state of the economy (Blais et al. 2002). Voters who felt that their own financial situation had been improving were more likely to vote Liberal (see Table 4), but the impact on the party’s share of the vote was trivial. Meanwhile, perceptions that the country’s economy was doing better had no effect whatsoever on the propensity to vote Liberal. In 2004, neither type of evaluation mattered. This was just as well for the Liberals, given the deterioration in economic conditions. The party may have escaped punishment because voters are less likely to attribute responsibility to the incumbent party when there is a new leader (Nadeau and Blais 1993).

[Table 4 about here]

In 2006, economic judgments were relatively favourable. Close to half of those interviewed thought that the economy was doing better than it had been. The Liberals reaped the rewards: positive perceptions of the country’s economy boosted the party’s share of the vote by over three points and helped offset the damage caused by the sponsorship scandal (see below).

Part way through the 2008 campaign, the stock market crashed. Not surprisingly, people's perceptions of the economy were quite negative. Indeed, close to half believed that the economy was doing worse. Since they were no longer the incumbents, the Liberals should have benefited, and they did. But for the economic situation, they might have suffered an even worse defeat. Negative judgements gave the party a boost of one and a half points at the Conservatives' expense. The Liberals might have reaped more benefit but for the fact that people's evaluations of their own financial circumstances had not changed much.

The Issues

Like the economy, issues had not played much part in the Liberals' 2000 victory. The one issue that had a significant effect on the propensity to vote Liberal was health care: people who opposed having private hospitals in Canada were more likely to vote for the party (see Table 5). However, the effect was of borderline statistical significance and contributed less than a point to the Liberal vote share.

[Table 5 about here]

The story was very different in 2004. The sponsorship scandal had erupted and voters punished the Liberal party at the polls. The scandal cost the Liberals almost seven points and was clearly a major factor in denying the Liberals another majority.¹⁰ Had this been the only issue that affected the Liberal vote, the party would likely have lost the election. Fortunately, for the Liberals, they were able to benefit from the votes of people who supported the decision not to send troops to Iraq and who favoured increased spending on health and social housing and opposed private hospitals. Were it not for the issue of health spending, the Liberal vote share would have been four points lower. Meanwhile, the Iraq issue netted the Liberals over two points.

The damage wrought by the sponsorship scandal was not confined to the 2004 election. In 2006, the probability of voting Liberal was 35 points lower among voters who were very angry about the scandal, believed that there had been a lot of corruption under the Chrétien Liberals, judged Martin's handling of the scandal negatively and lacked confidence in his ability to prevent future scandals. This was even stronger than the effect registered in 2004, but luckily for the Liberals, judgments were not as harsh as they had been two years earlier. Still, but for the scandal, the Liberal vote would have been over three points higher in 2006, enough to make the difference between a bare plurality and defeat.

In 2008, the scandal was more or less behind the Liberals and now attention focused on the green shift. It proved to be of no help at all in reviving the party's fortunes. The Conservatives were very successful in framing the Green shift as a tax and painting it as just too risky an undertaking in a time of economic uncertainty. We mimicked the Conservative strategy by posing two different versions to random half samples in order to assess how framing the Green Shift as a tax affected people's perceptions of the plan. When asked whether the green shift would hurt Canada's economy, 43% of respondents agreed that it would. When the phrase "carbon tax" was substituted for "green shift", the figure rose to 58%. While the issue did affect the propensity to vote Liberal, the net impact on the party's vote share was trivial. The Liberals did benefit, though, from the votes of people who favoured more spending on the environment.

Their supported boosted the Liberal vote share by almost three points. In other words, projecting an image of environmental concern did more for the party than coming up with a detailed plan.¹¹

In 2006, the Liberals had benefited from their promise to introduce a nationally funded daycare programme, something that Canadians clearly prefer (by a margin of two to one) to the Conservative policy of paying money directly to parents. However, this issue did not have a significant effect on Liberal voting in 2008. The same was true of other issues that have helped the Liberals in previous elections, such as health and social spending and the deployment of troops.

[Figure 5 about here]

Focusing so much on the issue of the environment was clearly a strategic blunder. The environment was not a high priority issue for many voters. Dealing with the economy was and so was improving health care. These are issues that the party has traditionally “owned”. Indeed, coming out of the 2000 election, the Liberals were in the fortunate position of “occupying all the available ground in terms of owning political and economic issues in the public mind” (Bélanger 2003, 555) . By the time of the 2008 election, the picture had changed dramatically (see Figure 5). In 2004, for example, the Liberals had a decisive advantage on health care. In 2008, voters were more likely to name the NDP or the Conservatives as the best party for improving health care. And the Conservatives had the advantage when it came to dealing with the economy, creating jobs and fighting crime. In fact, there was not one single issue on which the Liberals ranked first and that included protecting the environment where the Liberals lagged far behind the Greens.

The Leaders

Leadership was also a drag on Liberal fortunes. Paul Martin was less popular in 2004 than his predecessor, Jean Chrétien, in 2000 (see Figure 6). Martin’s popularity declined in 2006, but he still received higher mean evaluations (on a 0 to 100 scale) than his successor, Stéphane Dion. The Conservatives were very successful at portraying Dion as a weak leader: almost two-thirds of those interviewed agreed with that characterization. They were much less successful, though, in portraying Dion as a leader who only cares about the environment: barely one in five shared this sentiment. Meanwhile, both Stephen Harper and Jack Layton saw their mean ratings rise, making them exceptions to the so-called “fallen heroes” phenomenon whereby a leader’s popularity drops with each successive election (Clarke et al. 1991; Gidengil and Blais 2007; Turcotte 2001). Positive evaluations of both leaders easily outweighed negative ones.¹² By contrast, almost half (46%) of those interviewed gave Dion a negative rating.

[Figure 6 about here]

However, leader evaluations did not have much impact on voting Liberal in 2008 (see Table 6). Certainly, they were much less of a factor than they had been in 2000. In particular, how voters felt about Jack Layton made no difference to their odds of voting Liberal. The same was true of their feelings about the Green leader, Elizabeth May.¹³ Other things being equal, a voter who rated Dion very positively had a 25-point greater probability of voting Liberal than a voter who gave him a neutral rating, while a voter who rated him very negatively had a 17-point

lower probability of casting a vote for the Liberals. This underlines an important point: voters who did not like Dion were not likely to be voting Liberal anyway and so negative ratings had less effect than might be expected. The bottom line, though, is that in 2000, the Liberals could count on a popular lead to boost their vote; in 2008, that advantage had evaporated.

[Table 6 about here]

Concluding Discussion

Clearly, we cannot understand the drop in the Liberal vote share in successive elections unless we take account of the shrinking Liberal core. The Liberals can no longer take the support of Catholics or visible minority voters for granted.¹⁴ The second reason why the Liberals lost so much ground is related to the first. In 2000, the Liberals could command the loyalty of almost as many partisans as the other three parties combined. This gave the party a significant head start. By 2008, not only did the Liberals have fewer partisans, but they could not count on the loyalty of many of those who remained. To compound their electoral woes, they failed to perform as well as the Conservatives among those who lacked any party attachments.

There is reason to believe that the onset of the economic crisis saved the Liberals from an even worse defeat in 2008. Incumbents are apt to be punished when the economy takes a turn for the worse. That is what happened in 2008 and it helped the Liberals. This was just as well as the party reaped little or no benefit from its plan for the environment. Moreover, the plan deflected attention from other issues, like health and daycare, which might have won the party more votes. The party was also hamstrung by the lackluster performance of its new leader.

These findings provide some interesting insights into the larger topic of voting behaviour in Canada. Mark Franklin (1992) has characterized Canada as being “at the forefront of a development that appears to be ubiquitous” (p. 390). According to Franklin, Canada, like the USA, qualifies as an “historical decline” country where social cleavages have effectively ceased to structure vote choice. Certainly, this is in line with conventional wisdom about the role of social background characteristics in structuring vote choice in Canada (see, for example, Clarke et al. 1979, 1984, 1991; LeDuc 1984). And it remains true of social class. However, regional, religious and ethno-racial cleavages continue to shape Canadians’ voting behaviour and it would be difficult to understand recent election outcomes without taking voters’ social background characteristics into account (Nevitte et al. 2000; Blais et al. 2002; Gidengil et al. 2006). It turns out that it would also be difficult to make sense of the stunning reversal in Liberal fortunes without considering the changing effects of characteristics that have traditionally been critical to the party’s success.

The second major implication of our findings relates to party identification. Even in the face of powerful short-term forces, forces that were powerful enough to induce a vote for a different party, many Liberal partisans retained their attachment to the party. There were defections, certainly. However, party identification did not prove to be as volatile as the vote itself. Enough Liberal partisans voted at odds with the party to establish that they have a party attachment that is independent of their vote choice in a given election. What needs to be unpacked now is why some partisans remain completely loyal, some are willing to vote for a different party, and still others desert their party entirely.

This leaves the question of whether the Liberals can rebound. Part of the blame for the party's historic defeat in 2008 clearly rests with the leader and with the decision to focus the campaign on the green shift. The timing could hardly have been worse and Dion did a poor job of explaining the policy. However, our findings suggest that the Liberals' problems run much deeper. It was not just the leader. The party began to lose its head start in 2004 and its core of loyal partisans has continued to shrink. Catholics and minority voters have been the twin pillars of Liberal dominance, but their support is clearly crumbling. The Liberals' failure to own a single major issue in 2008 underlines just how serious the party's situation has become.

Still, there are some positive signs for the party. When we asked people after the election which party was their second choice, the Liberals were the most common choice among NDP voters and vice versa. The Conservatives received many fewer mentions, suggesting the limits to their potential growth. Moreover, the economic situation will probably help the Liberals. The big strike against the NDP is that they are perceived to be poor economic managers. Only 12 per cent of the people we interviewed thought that the NDP would be the best party for dealing with the economy. And in the current context, that has to hurt. But to return to power, the Liberals have to recognize that simply replacing the leader and forgetting about the green shift is not going to be enough. They have to go back to basics and rebuild their partisan base.

Figure 1

The Multi-Stage Explanatory Model

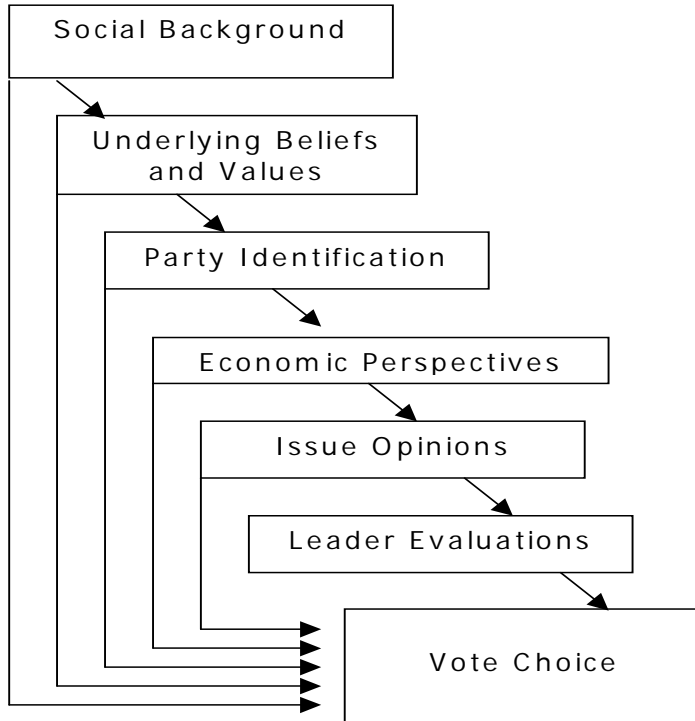


Figure 2: The Shrinking Liberal Core--Visible Minorities

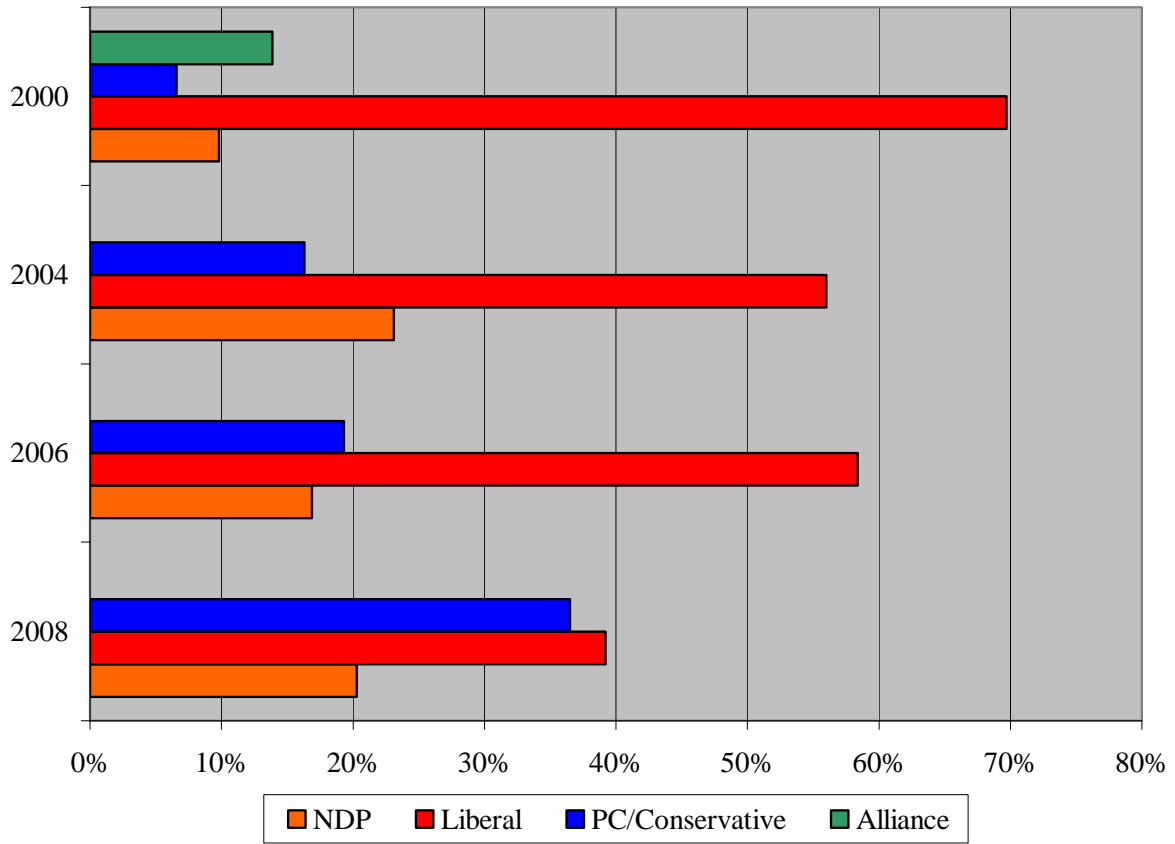


Figure 3: The Shrinking Liberal Core--Catholics

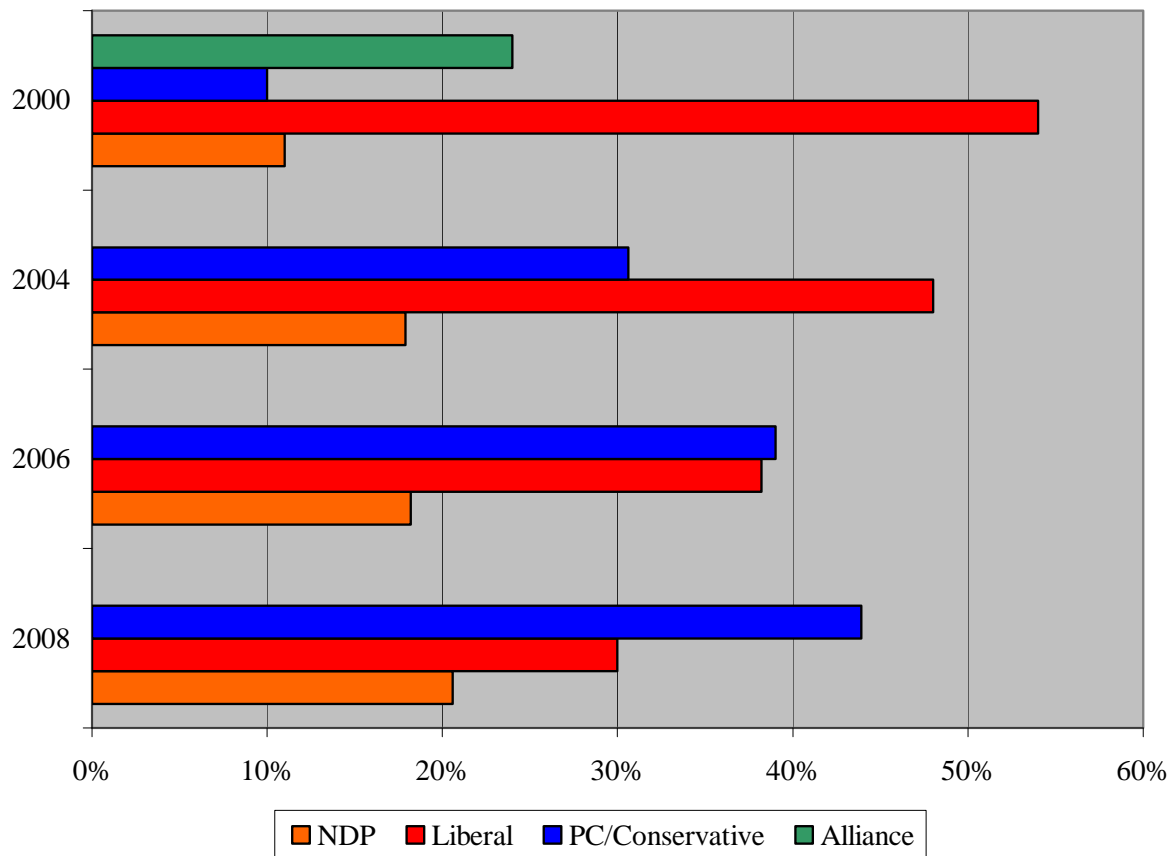


Figure 4: Party Identification by Election

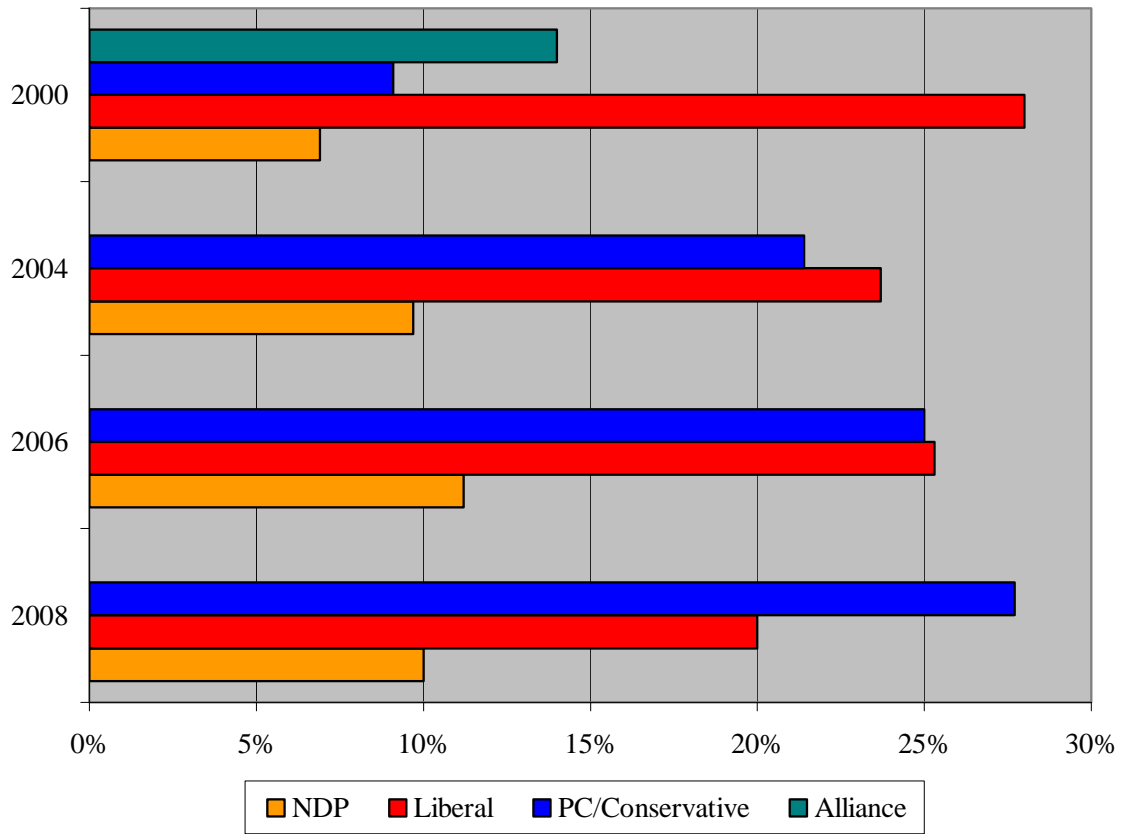


Figure 5: Issue Ownership, 2008
(% naming the party as best able to deal with the issue)

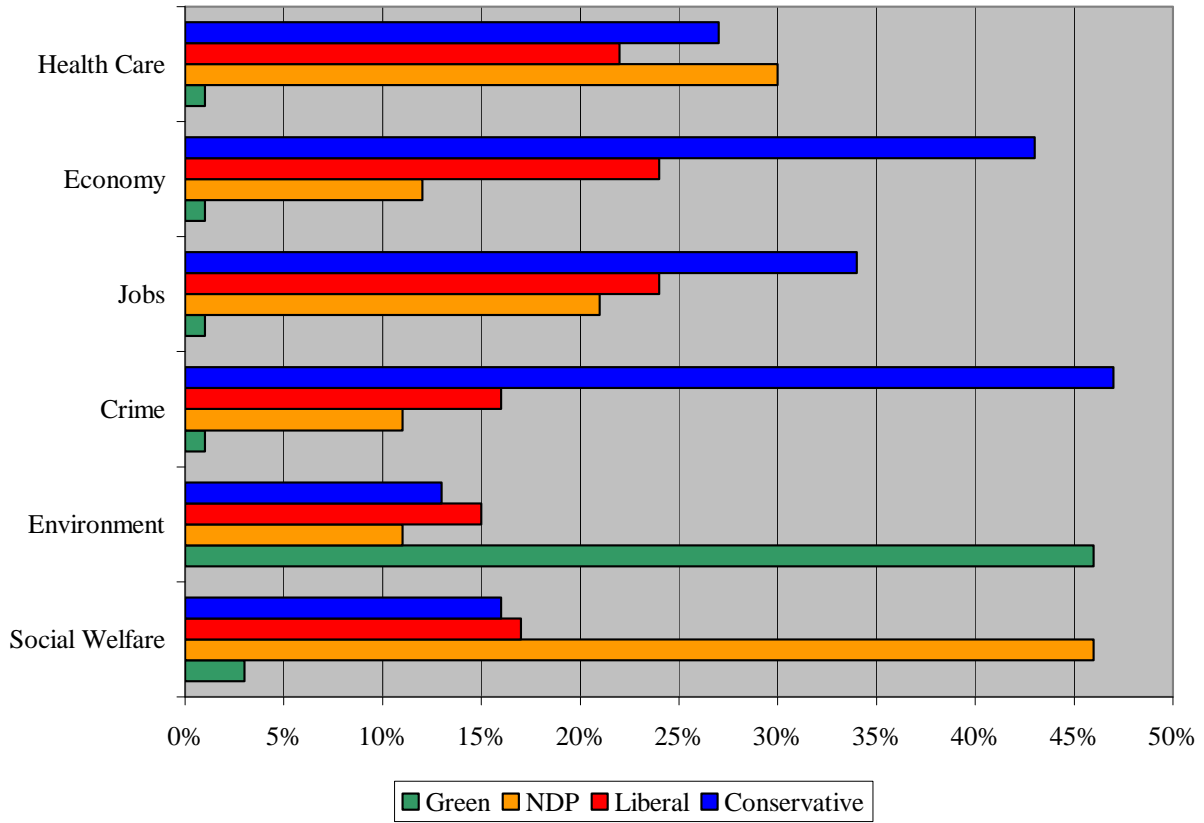


Figure 6: Leader Evaluations

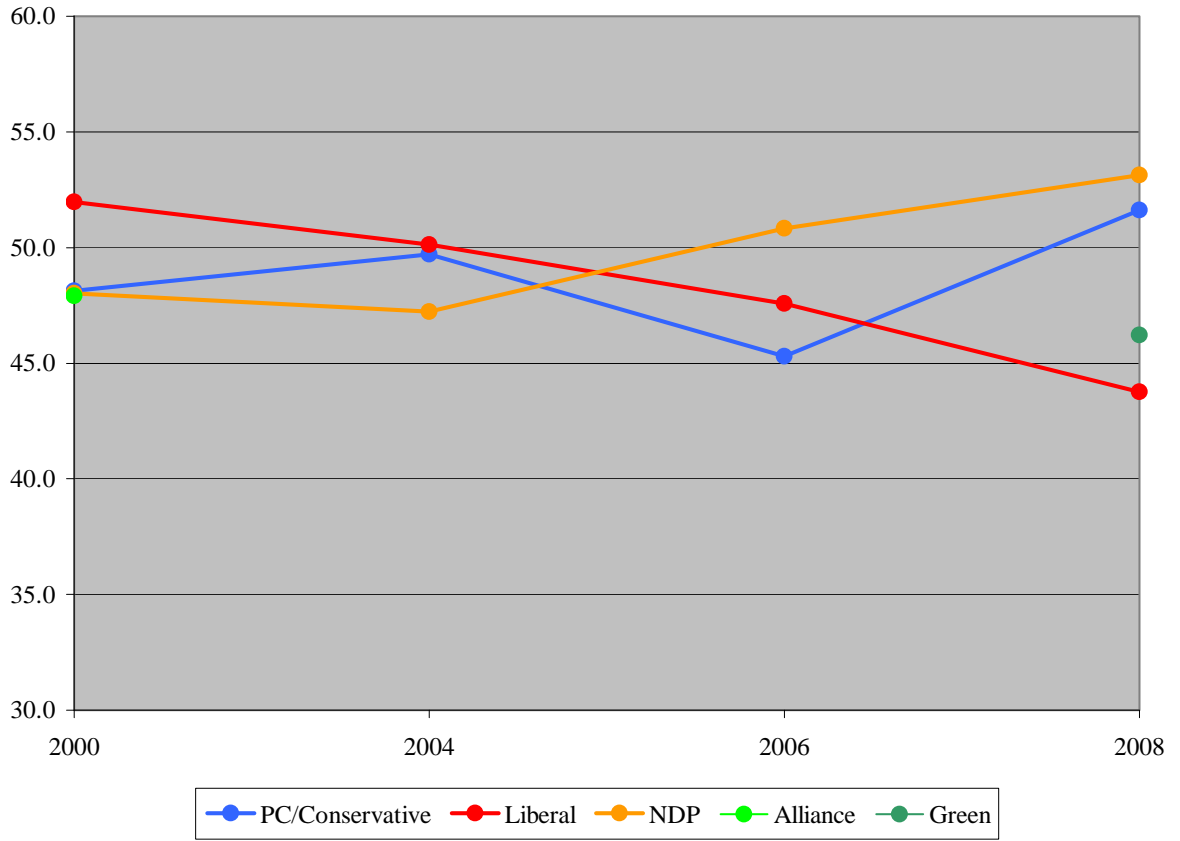


Table 1: Social Background Characteristics and the Liberal Vote

	2000	2004	2006	2008
Visible minority	1.19 (.33) ^{***}	0.65 (.24) ^{**}	1.15 (.22) ^{***}	0.66 (.31) [*]
Catholic	0.78 (.18) ^{***}	0.41 (.16) [*]	0.10 (.17)	0.46 (.21) [*]
Fundamentalist	-0.34 (.18) ^a	-0.30 (.17) ^a	-0.64 (.18) ^{***}	-0.74 (.25) ^{**}
Non-Christian	0.43 (.25) ^a	0.74 (.29) [*]	0.01 (.35)	0.54 (.35)
No religion	0.25 (.21)	-0.20 (.19)	-0.08 (.19)	0.50 (.22) [*]
Atlantic resident	-0.41 (.19) [*]	0.38 (.21) ^a	0.13 (.20)	0.41 (.26)
Western resident	-1.10 (.16) ^{***}	-0.74 (.14) ^{***}	-0.87 (.15) ^{***}	-1.11 (.19) ^{***}
Rural resident	-0.51 (.18) ^{**}	-0.17 (.16)	-0.29 (.17) ^a	-0.46 (.21) [*]
French speaker	0.50 (.34)	0.61 (.31) [*]	0.54 (.30) ^a	0.51 (.36)
Under 35 years	-0.10 (.19)	-0.31 (.19)	0.07 (.20)	-0.51 (.24) [*]
Over 54 years	0.09 (.18)	0.22 (.15)	0.36 (.16) [*]	0.15 (.20)
Public sector	0.10 (.22)	0.03 (.17)	0.42 (.18) [*]	0.12 (.24)
Union household	0.01 (.17)	0.02 (.17)	-0.50 (.19) ^{**}	-0.49 (.23) [*]
University graduate	-0.05 (.17)	0.03 (.15)	0.05 (.15)	0.31 (.18) ^a
Low income quartile	0.43 (.19) [*]	0.22 (.18)	0.17 (.19)	-0.52 (.29) ^a
High income quartile	0.00 (.17)	0.32 (.15) [*]	0.39 (.16) [*]	0.10 (.18)
Constant	-0.28 (.21)	-0.66 (.19) ^{***}	-0.83 (.20) ^{***}	-0.85 (.24) ^{***}
Wald Chi ²	106.77 ^{***}	93.07 ^{***}	111.26 ^{***}	98.92 ^{***}
Pseudo R ²	0.10	0.07	0.08	0.10
Number of cases	1,168	1,432	1,524	1,146

Note: The column entries are logistic regression coefficients with robust standard errors shown in parentheses. All variables are dummy coded with the named category coded one.

*** p<.001 ** p<.01 * p<.05 ^ap<.10

Table 2: Values, Beliefs and the Liberal Vote

	2000	2004	2006	2008
Free enterprise	-0.37 (.22) ^a	0.05 (.21)	-0.49 (.22) [*]	-0.20 (.27)
Social conservatism	-0.63 (.18) ^{***}	-0.02 (.17)	-0.20 (.18)	-0.05 (.23)
Quebec	-0.34 (.21)	0.49 (.19) ^{**}	-0.04 (.21)	1.09 (.29) ^{***}
Regional alienation	-0.32 (.13) [*]	-0.18 (.11)	-0.25 (.12) [*]	0.36 (.16) [*]
Political disaffection	-1.27 (.23) ^{***}	-1.48 (.21) ^{***}	-1.27 (.23) ^{***}	0.12 (.27)
Constant	-0.52 (.22) [*]	-0.40 (.21) [*]	-1.02 (.22) ^{***}	-0.98 (.25) ^{***}
Wald Chi ²	138.11 ^{***}	142.89 ^{***}	148.26 ^{***}	100.41 ^{***}
Pseudo R ²	0.15	0.12	0.12	0.13
Number of cases	1,103	1,357	1,413	1,085

Note: The column entries are logistic regression coefficients with robust standard errors shown in parentheses. The variables are all scaled to run from -1 to +1. Controls are included for social background characteristics.

*** p<.001 ** p<.01 * p<.05 ^ap<.10

Table 3: Party Identification and the Liberal Vote

	2000	2004	2006	2008
Liberal identification	2.14 (.15) ^{***}	1.89 (.12) ^{***}	1.97 (.14) ^{***}	1.79 (.14) ^{***}
Constant	-0.56 (.29) ^a	-0.22 (.26)	-1.26 (.29) ^{***}	-0.89 (.31) ^{**}
Wald Chi ²	294.56 ^{***}	309.59 ^{***}	293.49 ^{***}	242.71 ^{***}
Pseudo R ²	0.41	0.35	0.37	0.35
Number of cases	1,100	1,356	1,412	1,073

Note: The column entries are logistic regression coefficients with robust standard errors shown in parentheses. The party identification variable is coded 1 for respondents who identified very or fairly strongly with the Liberal party, -1 for those who identified very or fairly strongly with another party and 0 for non-identifiers and weak identifiers. Controls are included for social background characteristics and values and beliefs.

*** p<.001 ** p<.01 * p<.05 ^ap<.10

Table 4: Economic Perceptions and the Liberal Vote

	2000	2004	2006	2008
Sociotropic retrospective	0.05 (.15)	0.12 (.13)	0.59 (.16) ^{***}	-0.36 (.16) [*]
Egocentric retrospective	0.28 (.15) ^a	0.18 (.12)	0.04 (.15)	0.21 (.17)
Constant	-0.60 (.29) [*]	-0.20 (.26)	-1.49 (.31) ^{***}	-1.05 (.31) ^{***}
Wald Chi ²	289.91 ^{***}	312.06 ^{***}	305.11 ^{***}	244.97 ^{***}
Pseudo R ²	0.41	0.35	0.39	0.36
Number of cases	1,097	1,355	1,412	1,071

Note: The column entries are logistic regression coefficients with robust standard errors shown in parentheses. The economic evaluations are coded +1 for better, -1 for worse and 0 for the same or do not know. Controls are included for social background characteristics, values and beliefs and party identification.

^{***} p<.001

^{**} p<.01

^{*} p<.05

^a p<.10

Table 5: Issue Attitudes and the Liberal Vote

	2000	2004	2006	2008
Oppose private hospitals	0.24 (.10) [*]	0.17 (.10) ^a		
Spending on health		0.41 (.19) [*]		
Spending on housing		0.26 (.14) ^a		
Oppose Iraq war		0.26 (.14) [*]		
Sponsorship scandal		-1.77 (.27) ^{***}	-2.45 (.32) ^{***}	
Favour national daycare			0.28 (.12) [*]	
Decrease corporate taxes			-0.47 (.15) ^{**}	
Green shift				0.50 (.17) ^{**}
Spending on environment				0.37 (.19) ^a
Constant	-0.60 (.29) [*]	-0.34 (.31)	-1.16 (.35) ^{***}	-1.03 (.33) ^{**}
Wald Chi ²	284.70 ^{***}	380.30 ^{***}	301.21 ^{***}	247.55 ^{***}
Pseudo R ²	0.41	0.39	0.44	0.38
Number of cases	1,095	1,348	1,400	1,069

Note: The column entries are logistic regression coefficients with robust standard errors shown in parentheses. Issue attitudes are coded on -1 to +1 scale. Since issues are election-specific, only statistically significant issue attitudes were retained in the model for a given year. Controls are included for social background characteristics, values and beliefs, party identification and economic perceptions.

*** p<.001 ** p<.01 * p<.05 ^ap<.10

Table 6: Leader Evaluations and the Liberal Vote

	2000	2004	2006	2008
Liberal leader	1.66 (.24)***	2.05 (.28)***	2.14 (.30)***	1.81 (.33)***
Alliance leader	-1.42 (.23)***			
PC leader	-1.07 (.28)***			
Conservative leader		-1.23 (.22)***	-1.12 (.24)***	-0.87 (.24)***
NDP leader	0.19 (.29)	-1.24 (.25)***	-0.92 (.26)***	-0.16 (.30)
Green leader				-0.36 (.33)
Constant	-0.72 (.32)*	-0.78 (.31)*	-1.50 (.35)***	-0.77 (.35)*
Wald Chi ²	249.19***	385.63***	330.20***	255.55***
Pseudo R ²	0.49	0.46	0.50	0.43
Number of cases	1,071	1,357	1,399	1,047

Note: The column entries are logistic regression coefficients with robust standard errors shown in parentheses. Leader evaluations have been re-scaled to run from -1 to +1. Controls are included for social background characteristics, values and beliefs, party identification and economic perceptions, as well as the issue attitudes listed in Table 5.

***p<.001 **p<.01 *p<.05 ^ap<.10

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¹ Information on the 2000, 2004 and 2006 CES is available at <http://ces-ec.mcgill.ca/ces.html>. The 2008 CES consists of a campaign survey conducted in the final two and a half weeks of the campaign plus a post-election survey. The post-election survey also included interviews with respondents who had participated in the 2004 and/or 2006 CES. The analyses presented here are confined to the non-panel respondents. The interviews were conducted by telephone. The campaign sample consisted of 2,377 eligible voters; 78% of these respondents were re-interviewed for the post-election survey. The field work was conducted by the Institute for Social Research at York University with the financial support of Elections Canada.

² The criteria for qualifying as "durable partisans" include having the same identification at both the federal and provincial levels. Given the differences in the party systems in several provinces, this criterion is arguably too stringent. Also, people who do not identify with any particular party are considered to be flexible partisans, the assumption being that they are in the process of moving from one party to another. This overlooks the possibility that there are people who simply do not feel any attachment to any political party.

³ Visible minorities are operationally defined as Canadians of non-European ancestry.

⁴ The question about the bible was only asked of mail-back respondents in 2000. The values for respondents who did not complete the mail-back were imputed using UVIS (see Royston 2004, 2005).

⁵ Thirty-nine percent of university graduates rejected the notion that the plan would be bad for the economy, compared with only 24 % of those with a high school education or less.

⁶ To examine the impact of social conservatism, we combined feelings about gays and lesbians, feelings about feminism, and conceptions of gender roles ($\alpha=.56$). In 2000, views about gay marriage were substituted for feelings about gays and lesbians. The free enterprise measure combined responses to questions about government action to narrow the gap between rich and poor, labour mobility and job creation, the profit system and individual responsibility ($\alpha=.52$).

⁷ The cynicism scale included whether government cares, ratings of politicians and parties, whether parties differ and whether parties keep their promises ($\alpha=.66$).

⁸ We combined these two items to form a scale ($\alpha=.52$).

⁹ Prior research suggests that the inclusion of weak identifiers is problematic (Blais et al. 2001). Accordingly, only respondents who said that they identified very strongly or fairly strongly have been coded as partisans.

¹⁰ To assess the scandal's impact, we combined responses to questions about anger over the scandal, corruption under Jean Chrétien, Paul Martin's handling of the scandal and confidence in his ability to prevent future scandals ($\alpha=.65$).

¹¹ Note that the green shift had a trivial estimated impact on the Liberal vote share whether the environmental spending variable was included or not.

¹² Positive evaluations of Harper outnumbered negative ones by a margin of 49% to 34%. In Layton's case, the margin was 46% to 30%.

¹³ Even in the closing weeks of the campaign, only 36% of respondents could name the Green party leader.

¹⁴ This begs the question of why. The sample does not include sufficient numbers of minority voters for a separate analysis, but we can look at Catholics. The common assumption has been that the same-sex marriage issue cost the Liberals the support of many Catholics. This is simply not the case, at least in 2004 and 2006. Opposition to same-sex marriage did not have a significant effect on the probability that a Catholic vote would vote Liberal, but in 2006, views about abortion did. What really mattered, though, in both 2004 and 2006 was the sponsorship scandal. But for the sponsorship scandal, the Catholic vote would have been eight points higher in 2004 and five points higher in 2006. The story is different in 2008. It was not Dion and it was not the green shift. In contrast to 2004 and 2006, Catholics who oppose same-sex marriage were less likely to vote Liberal. And for the first time, Catholics who believe that the Bible is the literal word of God were significantly less likely to vote Liberal.