

Crossing the Floor

The Electoral Fortunes of Floor-Crossing MPs in the Canadian House of Commons, 1867-2015

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Abstract

We investigate the phenomenon of “floor-crossing” in the Canadian House of Commons. Since 1867, 273 MPs left the political party with which they were elected to sit as independents or as members of rival parties. All but 72 of these MPs contested the next election, and 47 percent went on to contest multiple elections. What are the electoral trajectories of floor-crossers? How have their prospects changed across time? What can we infer from these changes about the historical dynamics of the Canadian party system? Following Godbout and Høyland (2011)’s analysis of party consolidation in the House of Commons, we hypothesize that the rate of floor-crossing declines over time. Building on Aldrich (1995), we hypothesize that the electoral fortunes of floor-crossers decline as well. The evidence accords with our second hypothesis more strongly than our first. Floor-crossing is slightly less common, but the consequence much more severe, than it used to be. We submit our data to an open repository of historical data about Canadian parliament.

Introduction

Canadians report lower levels of attachment to political parties. Party membership rates are down. And parties do little to broker the diverse interests in Canadian society. From this historical perspective, the evidence in Canada, as elsewhere, supports the thesis of party decline (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000).

By anchoring the analysis to what parties used to do, the historical perspective misses domains where parties play increasingly important roles. Nowadays, parties are organized less around connecting citizens to government and more around getting politicians elected. Contemporary parties are professionalized campaign machines tuned to complex information environments (Aldrich, 1995). To a greater extent than before, party officials fundraise, develop brand images, conduct market research, advertise, and, if successful, manage the affairs of government (e.g., Carty et al., 2000; Flanagan, 2009).

How do floor-crossing MPs fare in Canada’s evolving party system? We define a floor-crosser as an MP that changes party affiliations while in office, whether to sit for a new party or as an independent. We do not include party mergers, where the leader of the former party switches along with the members. Given what Godbout and Høyland (2011) find about party consolidation in the House of Commons, we hypothesize that the likelihood of floor-crossing declines over time. Given the growing centrality of parties for electoral politics (Aldrich, 1995), we hypothesize that the cost of defection increases over time.

Evidence

The data for this project covers the period from 1867 to 2015 and includes the universe of 3442 MPs in the *Parlinfo* database and 39942 general election candidacies (24139 unique individuals) in the *Elections Canada* database. We enriched these data with qualitative evidence about the circumstances of party defections and additional biographical information about candidates and MPs.

Frequency of Floor-Crossing

Figure 1 displays the rates of floor-crossing in the lead up to each Canadian election since 1867. Except for the elections of 1872 and the conscription election of 1917, the rate of floor-crossing does not reach 10% in any parliament. Neither gender nor age affects the likelihood of crossing the floor. In total, 273 MPs have crossed the floor since Confederation; of these, 55 crossed the floor twice and 9 crossed three times. Most “floor-crossing” actually occurs on the same side of the floor, between ranks of the opposition. Literal floor-crossing, from the opposition to the government or the government to the opposition, constitutes about 40% of the party switching of sitting MPs, and is equally common in both directions.

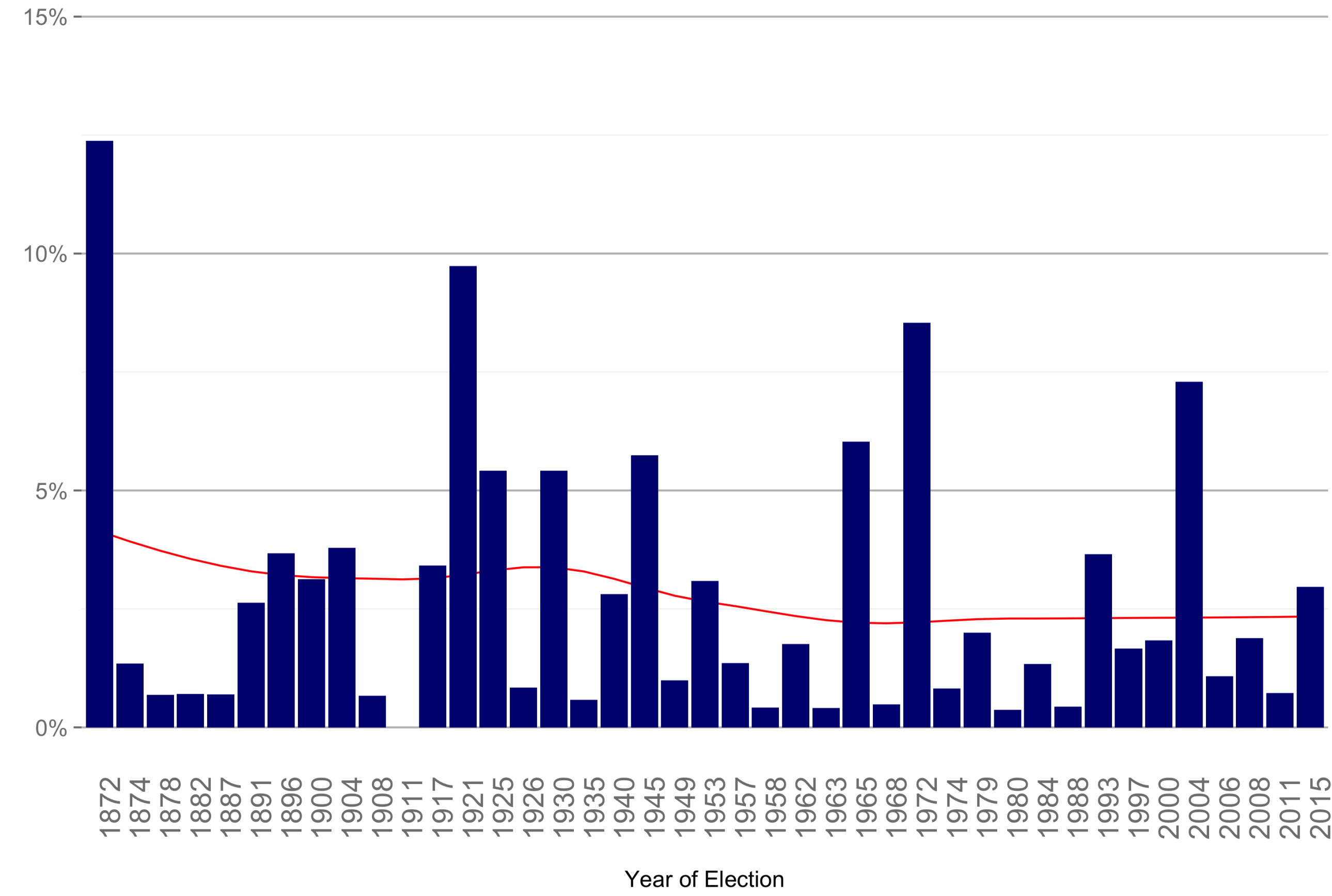


Figure 1: Rates of Floor-Crossing, 1867-2015

Consequences of Floor-Crossing

Figure 2 displays the consequences of floor-crossing by comparing the vote shares of floor-crossing MPs, in the nearest subsequent election, to three benchmarks. These benchmarks are: (1) the floor-crossing MP’s vote share in the previous election; (2) the mean vote share of incumbents in the current election; and (3) the mean vote share, again in the current election, of incumbents from the MP’s former party.

Until the mid-twentieth century, as Figure 2 shows, floor-crossing MPs performed as well as other incumbents (–1%), including incumbents from their former party (+2%). Floor-crossers also received nearly the same vote share in the election immediately after they crossed the floor as in the election immediately before they crossed (–6%). After 1950, and especially after 1975, the fortunes of floor-crossers declined. Since 1975, floor-crossing MPs have received, on average, 17% less popular support than they received in the election prior to crossing the floor, and 13% less than other incumbents, including incumbents from their former party.

Rates of re-election fit the same pattern. Although floor-crossers as equally likely to contest a subsequent election, regardless of time period, they were less likely to win re-election after 1975 than before 1975 (41% vs. 66%).

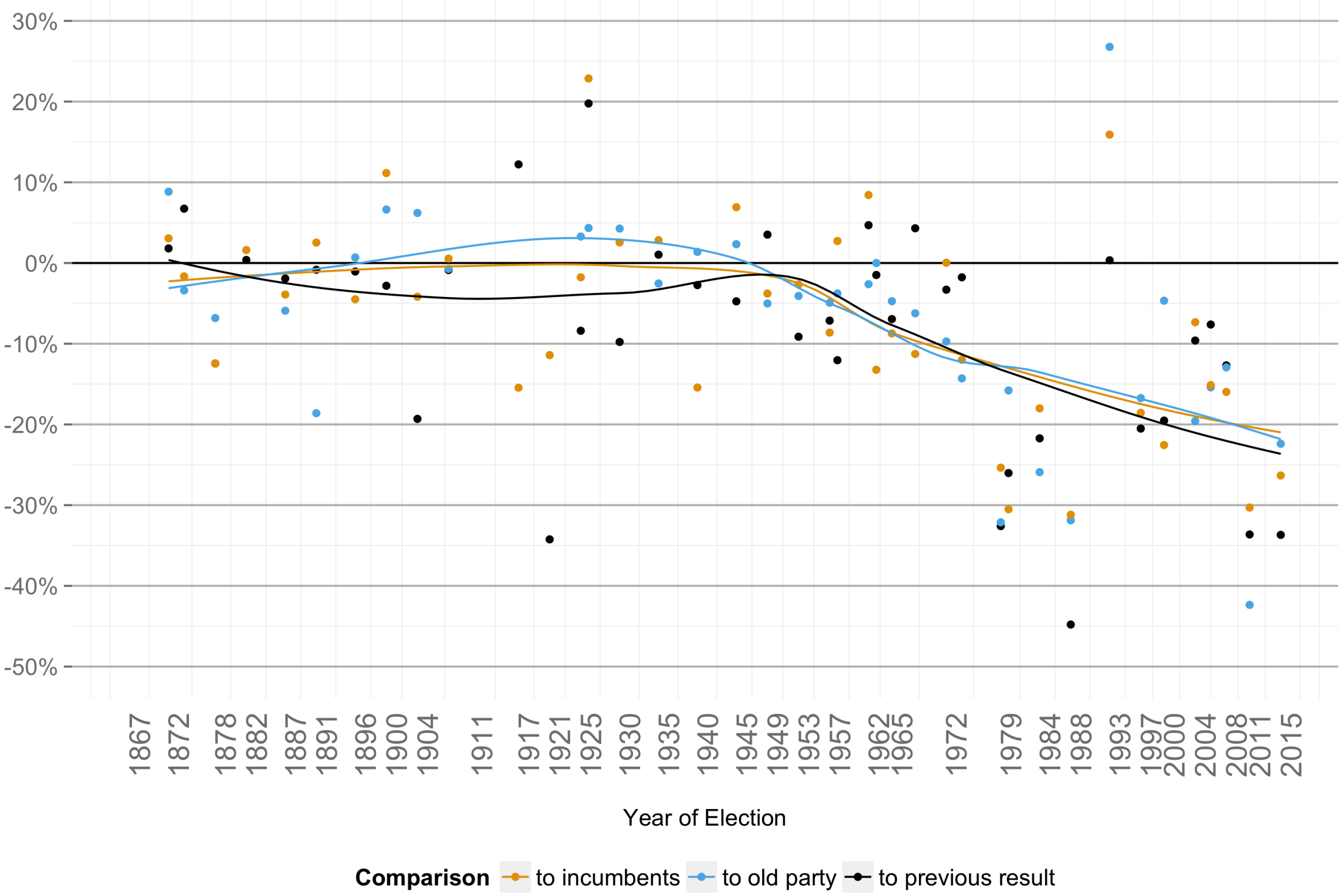


Figure 2: Average Vote Shares of Floor-Crossing MPs, 1872-2015

Conclusions

- Crossing the floor is an unlikely and increasingly costly manoeuvre for Canadian MPs. We are currently working to explain the declining fortunes of floor-crossing MPs.
- The evidence is consistent with the hypothesis that the fates of MPs are bound increasingly to the party with which they were elected. For most of Canadian history, the extent to which MPs carry their support from election to election was unaffected by floor-crossing. This has not been the case in recent decades.
- Electoral calculations cannot explain most instances of floor-crossing. Identifying the reasons for floor-crossing will require more research.

Forthcoming Research

After adding qualitative depth to our understanding of floor-crossing, we aim to contribute to existing research investigating the evolution of parties and party systems in Canada and other democracies.

References

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