

The Conservative Party and the 2004 Election

Laura B. Stephenson
University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario N6A 5C2
lstephe8@uwo.ca

Abstract

In the 2004 federal election, the right-wing interests of Canadians were represented by a new party, the Conservative Party of Canada, the result of a recent merger between the Progressive Conservatives and the Canadian Alliance. This party, despite having only chosen a leader in March and not having an official constitution, did very well in the election (29.6% of the popular vote, 99 seats), at times appearing to be in sight of winning a majority government. The Conservative Party's popularity and success suggest that voters were able to identify with the party despite their lack of experience with it - even though the party did not have clear statements of its overall ideology, many voters aligned themselves with the party and voted accordingly. What factors contributed to this outcome? In this paper, I address this question by looking at how voters perceived the new party. Did they see it as a reincarnation of the Canadian Alliance or the Progressive Conservatives? Did the familiarity of the party label add a level of recognition? Or, alternatively, was the party simply seen as the only viable alternative to the governing Liberals? These issues are discussed through an analysis of poll and survey data from the 2004 election.

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In December 2003 it seemed like the future of the political right in Canada was brighter than it had been in years. After more than a decade of political separation, the long-standing Progressive Conservative (PC) Party and the newer Canadian Alliance (CA) Party joined forces to create a united, conservative alternative to the governing Liberals. The union was not, however, without controversy. There were lawsuits by former PC members to disallow the union and considerable grumblings from former PC stalwarts that the new party was not a suitable replacement for the PC Party. It was not until March of 2004 that the party chose a leader, settling on the Canadian Alliance's former leader, Stephen Harper, and after that the fledgling party had only two months before it was thrust into an election campaign by the governing Liberals.

Despite the newness of the party, the recentness of the leadership convention, and the party's lack of a constitution, the party did very well in the election (29.6% of the popular vote, 99 seats) and became the Official Opposition. The success of the party suggests that voters were able to overcome the newness and lack of information about the party to identify with and vote for the party. This paper investigates the accuracy of this suggestion, questioning just how well voters understood the Conservative party they voted for during the election. How did perceptions of the new party develop in the time between the merger and the election? How did former PC and Alliance voters react to the new party? Did they perceive the party as a reincarnation of the Canadian Alliance or Progressive Conservatives? Did the familiarity of the party label add a level of recognition? Or, did voters simply see the party as the only viable alternative to the governing Liberals?

Background

Ever since the Reform Party emerged as a political force in 1993 and split conservative support with the Progressive Conservatives, it was clear to conservative-minded Canadians that the Liberal Party would not have a real opponent/rival until the two parties were able to overcome their differences and reunite. The difficulty, of course, was that the Reform Party was made up of individuals who specifically chose NOT to be PCs – those who felt alienated and/or clearly different from the centrist PCs. The Reform Party’s platform left no doubt that the party was positioned much further to the right than the PC Party. The party’s strong economic and social conservatism, as well as predominant Western flavour, created a real divide between voters on the right of the spectrum.

Nevertheless, when the election of 1997 once again produced a Liberal majority after conservative vote-splitting between the two parties, an attempt was made to unite the parties by the Reform Party’s leader, Preston Manning. His “United Alternative” assemblies brought together Reformers, federal PCs and provincial PCs. In January 2000, the assembly voted to create a new party, the Canadian Reform Conservative Alliance, which eventually merged with the Reform Party. While the Alliance was a new and separate party, its policies were little different from those of the Reform Party, save for small modifications (such as support for bilingualism) that were engineered to improve the chances of the party outside of the West (Flanagan 2001, 289). Importantly, as Flanagan notes, the federal PCs chose to have nothing to do with the new party (ibid, 290). Despite the efforts of Manning and the other organizers, the Canadian right remained fragmented and the Liberals once again won a majority government in 2000.

One reason for the continued schism between conservative-minded voters was the lack of difference between the Alliance and the Reform parties. When the Reform Party emerged on the

scene, it was criticized for some of its extreme views regarding Quebec separation, bilingualism, and other social values. It was also seen as a magnet for extremely radical conservatives, who were often public about some of their more off-colour (non-politically correct) views towards minorities and others. Even as the mainstream Reformers worked to avoid these stereotypes, the radicals continued to play a role in how people perceived the Alliance. Furthermore, because of these negative stereotypes, conservative-minded people who saw the Reform and Alliance parties as essentially the same were unlikely to abandon the PC Party to put an end to vote-splitting. This is reflected in data from the 2000 Canadian Election Study. Of those intending to vote for the PC party in 2000, 51.5% thought there was “hardly any” difference compared to only 7.8% who felt there was “a lot” of difference. Similarly, 25% of PC voters indicated that they felt the Alliance was simply too extreme. Thus, the extremist image of the party was not improved by 2000, despite having a new name and new leader.

In 2003, PC leader Peter Mackay and Alliance leader Stephen Harper made definitive steps toward merging the two parties and uniting the conservative right. Despite protests from some PCs¹, these two leaders were finally able to reach an agreement to create a new party, the Conservative Party of Canada, in October 2003. The agreement-in-principle that structured this party contained elements from both parties. Some of the founding principles included a “balance between fiscal responsibility, progressive social policy and individual rights and responsibilities” and a “belief that it is the responsibility of individuals to provide for themselves, their families and their dependents, while recognizing that government must respond to those who require

¹ David Orchard, for example, was a former PC leadership candidate who adamantly opposed the merger. He had dropped out of the leadership race in favour of Mackay under the clear understanding that Mackay would NOT enter into merger talks. Orchard and a group of disgruntled PC members took the case to court but the judge determined the case had no merit.

assistance and compassion.”(Harper and MacKay 1993, 2-3) Both parties ratified the agreement in December.

While the agreement-in-principle articulated several of the new Conservative party’s founding beliefs, it did little to indicate just how those beliefs would translate into practical policies and ideological direction. The election of Stephen Harper as leader of the party in 2003, over former-PC members Tony Clement and Belinda Stronach, led to further uncertainty about how different the party was going to be from the former Alliance.² In fact, some commentators went so far as to call the merger a takeover of the PCs by the Alliance.

Unexpected Success?

From the start of the 2004 federal election campaign, it was clear that the Liberals were not going to be able to hold onto a majority government without a fight. The sponsorship scandal and infighting among the pro-Martin and pro-Chrétien Liberals made the party much weaker. Polls showed that Conservative support was strong at 28% immediately after the election was called on May 23, despite the party having very little in the way of official policy or a track record.³ As early as May 27-29, the party was within 3 points of the governing Liberals.⁴ This level of support was, for many, somewhat surprising. Although there were many reasons for voters not to support the Liberal Party (the sponsorship scandal, for example) there were not a similar number of reasons for voters to lend their support to the Conservatives. As Clarke, Kornberg, MacLeod and Scotto (2005, 248) note, success for the Conservatives relied upon a)

² Greg Watson in the Ottawa Sun (7 Dec 2003, C3) wrote: “One of the most enduring fallacies of all “unite-the-right” propaganda has been that a merged conservative party would attract all votes – and seats – of the old Tories and Alliance combined. Fact is, a majority of Canadians who supported the Tories in the last election have consistently indicated they would rather vote Liberal than Alliance as their second choice....Unless the Tories quickly find a savior to lead the new party and spare them from a Harper win, yesterday’s vote won’t have been for a merger, but an assisted suicide.”

³ SES Research/CPAC Poll, May 23-25.

⁴ SES Research/CPAC Poll, May 27-29.

the electorate losing faith in the ability of the Liberals to govern and continue to deliver a healthy economy and public services, and b) the Conservative Party convincing voters that it would continue to supply those public services, despite the history of its forebearers promising to do the opposite. Clarke et al. argue that while the first condition came true, because of the sponsorship scandal and the Ontario Liberal government's renegeing on its promise of no new taxes, the second condition proved to be the party's downfall.

This paper is less concerned with explaining the election's outcome than with understanding why a party that was clearly underdeveloped and at an organizational disadvantage in comparison to its competitors received such strong support during the election campaign period. I propose two possible reasons as to why this support was given, related to the way that voters related to the party. First, it is possible that the support given to the party had little to do with the party itself, and more to do with the desire of Canadians to end over a decade of Liberal rule. Seeing that the party had more support than any of the other opposition parties (especially the NDP, the only other national, long-standing, competitive party), voters may have seen support for the Conservatives as the only way of bringing about change in government. Especially given the sponsorship scandal and charges of corruption in government, voters may simply have wanted to bring about change – and thus turned to the party mostly likely to make this happen. If this was the case, then we should see little change to support for the party over the course of the campaign.

The second possibility is more complex and more involved. Because the party was expected to be the salvation of conservative Canadians, there may have been high expectations of what the party was, what it stood for, and who it would attract. These expectations may have, in turn, produced a high level of support that was not based in policy or ideology but in the

expectations of voters who had previously supported one of the two parties that merged to form the Conservative Party. If this is the case, support may have either strengthened or eroded as more was learned about the party. Jenkins (2002), for example, found that the Reform Party's success in 1993 was due in part to the amount of learning that occurred over the course of that campaign,⁵ specifically the spread of information about the party's beliefs regarding the role of government. At the beginning of the 1993 campaign, the relatively unknown party received little media coverage. However, Jenkins found that as coverage increased and the party's stances became better known, voters were more likely to draw upon their opinions about the role of government when deciding how to rate the Reform Party on a 100-point scale.⁶ Thus, one might expect that as learning took place over the course of the 2004 campaign, the expectations of voters regarding the new Conservative Party would either be confirmed or refuted, and thus there may have been an increase or decrease in the party's support.

In the following pages I will examine both of these scenarios to see whether there is support for either. One limitation of this study is that the 2004 Canadian Election Study survey has yet to be released. Thus, there are many analytic angles that are not possible to pursue at this time. However, I am grateful to Harold Clarke, Allan Kornberg, Thomas Scotto and John MacLeod for allowing me limited access to some of the results from their Political Support in Canada 2004 survey.⁷ As well, I have utilized polling results and some of the few analyses that have been published about the election in compiling this paper. Thus, the next sections contain a

⁵ Johnston et al. (1996) echo this, arguing that only when the Reform Party's commitment to attack the deficit became clear was it able to gain support from those outside of its ethno-religious base.

⁶ Jenkins clearly separates his conception of learning from that of priming, arguing that priming requires some knowledge in order to work. In the case of the Reform Party, there were many voters who did not have the requisite knowledge in order to be primed by particular issues, and therefore required more information in order for the key stances of the party to be important for their own opinions. He draws a comparison with the party's stances on minorities and Quebec, which were better known and primed during the campaign.

⁷ The author would particularly like to thank Tom Scotto for his assistance.

preliminary, although I think interesting and informative, analysis of the support of the Conservative Party in the 2004 campaign.

Kick the Rascals Out

In order to understand how much of the support for the Conservative Party was related to getting the Liberals out of office, it is important to examine what kind of support the party enjoyed immediately after its creation. Figure 1 shows Environics poll results for the political parties from the time of the 2000 election until the 2004 election. As is clearly evident, before the Conservative Party merger, the Canadian Alliance and Progressive Conservatives were in no position to call themselves viable alternatives to the governing Liberals. The Canadian Alliance enjoyed the support of 26% of Canadians at the time of the 2000 election, compared to only 12% for the PCs, but by 2003 the parties were neck-in-neck. In January 2003 the CA had 17% support, the PCs 15%; immediately before the merger, the parties sat at 14% and 13% respectively. Meanwhile, the Liberals continued to enjoy the support of over 40% of the electorate. Even after the Conservative Party merger, it is still clear that the Liberals were still the party of choice – 51% compared to 24% for the new party.

Once the details of the Auditor-General's report of the sponsorship program were made public on February 10, 2004, there was a definite turn of voter support in the Conservative Party's favour. In April 2003, the Conservative Party had 29% support compared to only 39% for the Liberals – while not extremely close, the polls show that the Conservatives were able to pick up support due to voter dissatisfaction with the Liberals.⁸ This is confirmed by COMPAS polls in Figure 2, which show the convergence of support for the Liberals and Conservatives.⁹

⁸ Environics Polls, various dates.

⁹ COMPAS Polls, various dates.

Thus, the Conservatives were the beneficiaries of the Liberal's misfortune, and represented for many voters an attractive alternative.

Another way of looking at this question comes from a question asked by Harold D. Clarke, Allan Kornberg, and Tom Scotto in their Political Support in Canada 2004 study of the 2004 election. The question asks: "Would you say that you are going to vote X mainly because it has the best chance to keep a party you dislike from winning?" Of those who indicated their intent to vote Conservative, 47% said 'yes', compared to 42% of Liberal supporters, 17% of NDP supporters, 43% of BQ supporters and 10% of Green Party supporters. However, a more enlightening way of looking at the data is to consider the vote intentions of those who said yes. Of those who said they would vote for a specific party to prevent another from gaining power, 37% were going to vote Conservative, 26% said they would vote Liberal, 5% supported the NDP, 20% were BQ voters, and less than 1% were in favour of the Greens. Furthermore, 11% of voters in the study indicated that they voted for a party other than the one they really preferred, on the basis of strategic considerations (Clarke et al 2005). These findings appear to indicate that Conservative support was buoyed by anti-Liberal sentiment.

Turning to whether support for the Conservative Party maintained significant levels throughout the campaign, there does not appear to be anything significant about the Conservative Party as compared to the others. As mentioned above, if support did not waver significantly, then this could be a sign that much of the support for the party was based in how voters felt about the Liberals. Returning to Figure 1, the poll results show that after the Auditor-General's report, the Conservatives experienced a healthy increase they maintained until the election, albeit with some mild movement. What is crucial, however, is that the support did not fall below where it had been in April 2004, the first poll after the sponsorship scandal was publicized. In other

words, the reaction to the scandal provided a baseline level of support for the party that did not diminish. Thus, there appears to be some support for the argument that the Conservative Party did so well, so early in its existence, due to the particular campaign circumstances (i.e., overwhelming anger at the Liberal Party).

Voter Perceptions and Familiarity

The second possible explanation for why the Conservative Party enjoyed as much support as it did, despite not having a constitution or clear policy statement, is rooted in voter expectations for the party formed from the Canadian Alliance and Progressive Conservative parties. It is clear that the distinction between the Progressive Conservatives and Conservatives should not have been lost on the general public. From the time of the merger, several prominent PC members made public their displeasure with the new party and distanced themselves from it. Early dissenters included NB MP John Herron, Quebec MP Andre Bachand, and NS MP Scott Brison, who chose to join the Liberals. In January 2004, BC MP Keith Martin also abandoned the party. As well, a group of former Manitoba MPs released a public statement indicating their support of the federal Liberal Party. They wrote, “We are concerned that people that have supported the tolerant, moderate Progressive Conservative party may be misled by the name of the new Conservative party. The new party is not the Progressive Conservative party for whom many have worked and voted in the past.” (Canadian Press 2004)

Others were even more vocal. Former prime minister Joe Clark got the most publicity, telling CTV’s *Question Period* that he “would be extremely worried about Mr. Harper. I personally would prefer to go with the devil we know.” (Scofield and Fagan 2004) Flora MacDonald, a former PC minister of foreign affairs, argued that “The party’s future lies not in

some right-wing alliance that would violate the progressive and moderate traditions of its former leaders, but with a renewed emphasis on the values that the great majority of Canadians feel represent their views.” (MacDonald 2003, A25) Even in the Senate the new party caused problems. Senators Lowell Murray and Norman Atkins chose to sit as Progressive Conservatives, rather than Conservative members, and Murray spoke strongly about his concerns:

The merger of the Reform/Alliance and the Progressive Conservative parties purports to unify two parties whose core convictions were not only different but also fundamentally opposed and contradictory, one to another. The Reform/ Alliance and the Progressive Conservatives were fundamentally opposed in their respective views as to the role of politics and government and fundamentally opposed also with regard to the nature of this country... I am incredulous that some former Progressive Conservatives would believe that these are matters of mere detail to be negotiated by reasonable people in the spirit of compromise or...that the responsible people in the Reform/Alliance will be so easily separated from their principles... It is nothing short of astounding to me that the leading people in the Progressive Conservative Party would have abandoned a political tradition that was 150 years old, of which they were the trustees, and surrender to a party 15 years old without having overcome the fundamental contradictions between the two parties... The truth is that the new party seems neither progressive nor conservative in the Canadian tradition. (Murray 2004)

Furthermore, the legality of the new party was challenged on two grounds: by former PC ministers with respect to violations to the Canada Elections Act, and by David Orchard, a former MP and PC leadership candidate, who alleged that the merger did not abide by the PC Constitution.

Despite the controversy surrounding the merger and the uncertainties of the party's policy platform, it appears that voters though they understood the new Conservative party despite the lack of concrete information. In two student studies conducted by Merolla, Stephenson and Zechmeister in 2004, the new party was placed at 5.5 on a 7-point ideological scale in April (just after the leadership race), and in June (just before the election) the party was still placed at 5.5. The only indication of increased clarity about the party's position was that the June respondents

only ranked the party in the 4 to 7 range, instead of the entire scale used by respondents in April. In addition, respondents were only marginally more familiar with the party during the election campaign, moving from 3.31 on a 1-6 scale of familiarity (1 indicating most familiar) to 3.23. Thus, despite the media coverage and obvious uncertainty surrounding the party, voters felt confident that they understood the party even before the election campaign began.

However, it is important to note that the voting base for the Conservative party was certainly not the sum of its constituent parts, namely those who had supported the PCs and Alliance in the past. Evans (2004) points out that across the country, support for the new party was less than the combined totals of both parties in 2000: in Ontario, the party got 94% of votes cast for right wing parties in 2000; in Alberta, 86%; and in B.C., the party received only 66% of the combined 2000 total. From the Political Support in Canada data, of those who said they voted for the Canadian Alliance in 2000, 78.8% said they intended to vote Conservative in 2004. Of those who voted PC, however, only 54.5% said they would vote Conservative, while 9% said they would vote Liberal. In addition, some respondents in the study by Clarke, Kornberg, and Scotto said they voted “Conservative” in 2000. Given that the term Conservative and Progressive Conservative were often used interchangeably prior to 2003, it is likely safe to assume that these respondents were referring to the same party. The data bear out this assumption: 54.4% said they would vote Conservative, and 6.3% said Liberal, numbers which are remarkably similar to those saying they voted PC. One thing to note about this data is that while the Conservative percentage is almost the same as for PC voters, the Liberal percentage is lower. This suggests that more voters may have seen the new Conservative Party as the rightful successor of the old (because they were less likely to switch to the Liberals), and not a separate entity at all.

The perception of the Conservative Party as the natural successor of both the Alliance (same leader, strong support) and the Progressive Conservative Party may have been helped by two things. On the Alliance front, the Conservative Party had the same leader as the Alliance Party had had, and received strong support from Alliance members. On the PC front, the situation may have been influenced, in part, by the party's familiar name and the media's use of the term "Tory" to refer to the new party. As mentioned above, the term "Conservative" was often used interchangeably with "Progressive Conservative" in the past when referring to the party of John A. Macdonald and Brian Mulroney. An editorial in the St. John's Telegram highlighted just this issue:

I become very concerned when I hear people speak of voting Progressive Conservative in the federal election. Many appear to believe that today's Conservative party, led by Stephen Harper, is the same that many of them have been supporting for years. Of course, that isn't true...The new Conservative party, as they like to call themselves, is really the old Reform Alliance party of Preston Manning, Stockwell Day and – we must never forget – Harper. Even though they called it uniting the right, it was really a takeover of the Progressive Conservative party by the Alliance. (Ingram 2004)

Others noted that because "Tory" is a designation used to denote "conservative" in Canada, it is a natural fit for the new Conservative Party, despite its differences from the moderate Progressive Conservative party of the past (Brown 2003). The data also suggest that those who were clear that they had supported the *Progressive* Conservatives in the past were more acutely aware of the differences between the two parties, as evidenced by the higher support (9%) for Liberals from these former PC supporters (compared to those who indicated voting "Conservative" in 2000).

This brings up the question of campaign effects and learning, as discussed by Jenkins (2002). Did voters, regardless of their confidence in their opinions of the party prior to the campaign, change their attitude toward the party as the election campaign progressed? The

discrepancy between the polls right before the vote and the actual outcome of the election suggest that something happened to make people abandon the Conservative Party and seek more familiar ground. One explanation, offered by Clarke, Kornberg, Macleod and Scotto (2005, 249), is that as the Liberal campaign turned toward negative advertising (beginning with the “Harper and the Conservatives” commercial on June 9), the Conservative Party committed “two acts of abject political stupidity:” they accused PM Paul Martin of not taking a hard line against child pornography, and Ralph Klein told Alberta reporters that his Conservative government was considering a two-tier health system that included significant privatization. As healthcare was a key issue in the campaign this did little to reassure voters that a vote for Harper’s party was not going to radically change the Canada they knew. These political gaffes, combined with strong language from the Liberals about the likely result of a Conservative victory, no doubt made several voters think twice about casting a Conservative vote.

Another related explanation is that the campaign acted as a period of learning for individuals. Entering into the campaign, former PC and Alliance voters could only make inferences and assumptions about the Conservative Party. There was no hard data by which to decide if a Conservative government was an attractive possibility. Throughout the campaign more and more information came to light, not only through political mistakes, but also as policy ideas were discussed and voters were wooed. Specifically, the Liberal campaign did much to educate the public about what it saw as the new Conservative Party’s policies; it could be argued that the Liberals did more than the Conservative Party itself to bring to light many stances of Conservative members on key issues such as healthcare and the use of the Charter to protect the traditional definition of marriage. The Conservatives ran a “tight” campaign, as Harper kept control of his party members and prevented many of the embarrassing comments that had

plagued Reform and Alliance campaigns in the past. The Liberal Party, of course, did not want to allow this type of “clean” campaign to happen, as it only reinforced for voters that the Conservatives were a viable alternative to the Liberals in light of the sponsorship scandal. It did everything in its power to convince voters a) what the Conservative policies were, and b) that they were not policies that would benefit or be familiar to Canadians. As one commercial put it, “Stephen Harper says when he’s through with Canada you won’t recognize it. You know what? He’s right.” (Liberal Party of Canada 2004)

Did this increase in information (misleading or otherwise) lead to a change in voter preferences? If so, it would provide further support for the findings of Jenkins (2002). One thing we know for sure is that many voters were undecided going into the campaign, and according to the Political Support in Canada data, a full 15% decided on the actual day of the election (24% decided in the last two weeks). According to Fournier et al. (2004, 675), voters who decide during the course of a campaign “form a relatively interested, attentive, informed, and less committed group which is more likely to be reached by, to be receptive to, and to be responsive to campaign stimuli.” Kay and Cattle (2005) find that something dramatic did happen to voter intentions during the last weekend of the campaign. In a comparison of advance poll results (June 18-21) and the last polls conducted (June 17-24), it is clear that the trends reported in the newspapers (that turned out to be so misleading) were in fact reinforced by early voting data; thus, the effects of the campaign were felt down to the wire and did bring about a change in voter preferences. The data in Figures 1 and 2 confirm this.

Some preliminary data from the Political Support in Canada 2004 survey reveal that there is a very faint pattern to Conservative support over the course of the campaign. Figure 3 shows the average feeling thermometer ratings by week of the campaign. It is clear that the

Conservative party enjoyed a surge in popularity in the middle of the campaign that dropped off and then partially returned at the very end. The Liberal party also experienced a loss of popularity by the end of the campaign, while the Bloc Quebecois and NDP had the opposite experience. The midpoint of the campaign, when the Conservatives' popularity increased, corresponds to June 8-14, during which time the Liberals launched their first negative ads. That support fell after this time lends some support to the idea that learning did in fact occur, but that the learning was a result of the Liberal campaign efforts to "educate" the public about the Conservative Party, rather than the Conservative Party attempting to educate voters about itself. As Darrell Bricker of Ipsos-Reid was quoted as saying after the election, "You have to give the Liberal campaign credit. It was ruthless, and it did what it had to do in the right place at the right time. Those attack ads really worked." (Scofield and Sallot 2004)

In terms of vote breakdown, Table 1 shows vote intentions by week for those who reported voting Alliance, PC and "Conservative" (see discussion above) in 2000. It is clear that Alliance supporters were the most likely to support the new party throughout the campaign. It is interesting to see the increase in support for the Conservatives and decrease in support for the Liberals from former PC voters as the campaign progressed, and at the same time see an increase in "Conservative" voter support for the Liberal party in the last week of the campaign. Earlier I mentioned that former PC voters were likely to be more aware of the difference between their former party and the new Conservatives. What these data show, however, is that former PC voters did eventually decide to support the new Conservative Party in significant numbers, while "Conservative" voters found themselves a bit more torn. For these individuals, who I hypothesized above may have seen the new party as simply an extension of the old, the campaign may have "taught" them what was different about the new party, especially after the

Liberals launched their negative ads, and thus their expectations for the party were refuted instead of confirmed. In sum, there also appears to be some support for the idea that learning over the course of the campaign can explain some of the Conservative Party's support.

Conclusion

The 2004 Canadian election was exciting and surprising. Most importantly, it marked the debut of a united right-wing party that hopes to unite conservative Canadians and pose a real alternative to the Liberals. This paper has examined the basis of support for the new Conservative Party during this election, provoked by the disconnect between the amount of concrete information known about the party before the election and the amount of support it received. What this paper has shown is that the party gained support in three ways: from those who were disenchanted with the Liberals and wanted a clear change in government; from previous Alliance voters; and from those who supported the PC party in the past *and* were not scared off by the increasing amount of information, toward the end of the campaign, that linked the new party to some of the Alliance Party's more extreme aspects. The information about the Conservative Party that came out over the course of the campaign, accurate or not, played a role in deciding the outcome of the election.

What does this mean for the next Canadian election, likely to happen sooner rather than later? Simply put, the Conservative Party has a fine line to walk. It is clearly the party of choice for those angry at the Liberals or those who agree with former Alliance principles. As more time passes, however, and the party is called upon to reveal more of its social policy intentions,¹⁰ it

¹⁰ This did not occur at the Conservative Party Convention in March 2005. Despite expectations from many that this would be the party's opportunity to lay out a clear social policy, the party did little other than reaffirm (as Harper had promised during the campaign) that the party would not seek to introduce abortion legislation. Other controversial policy areas, such as bilingualism, multiculturalism, immigration, etc., were not commented on.

may not be possible for the party to be ambiguous enough for former PC supporters to support it without reservation. Thus, in uniting the right the party may have solved one dilemma only to be faced with another.

Figure 1: Environics Poll Results, 2000-2004

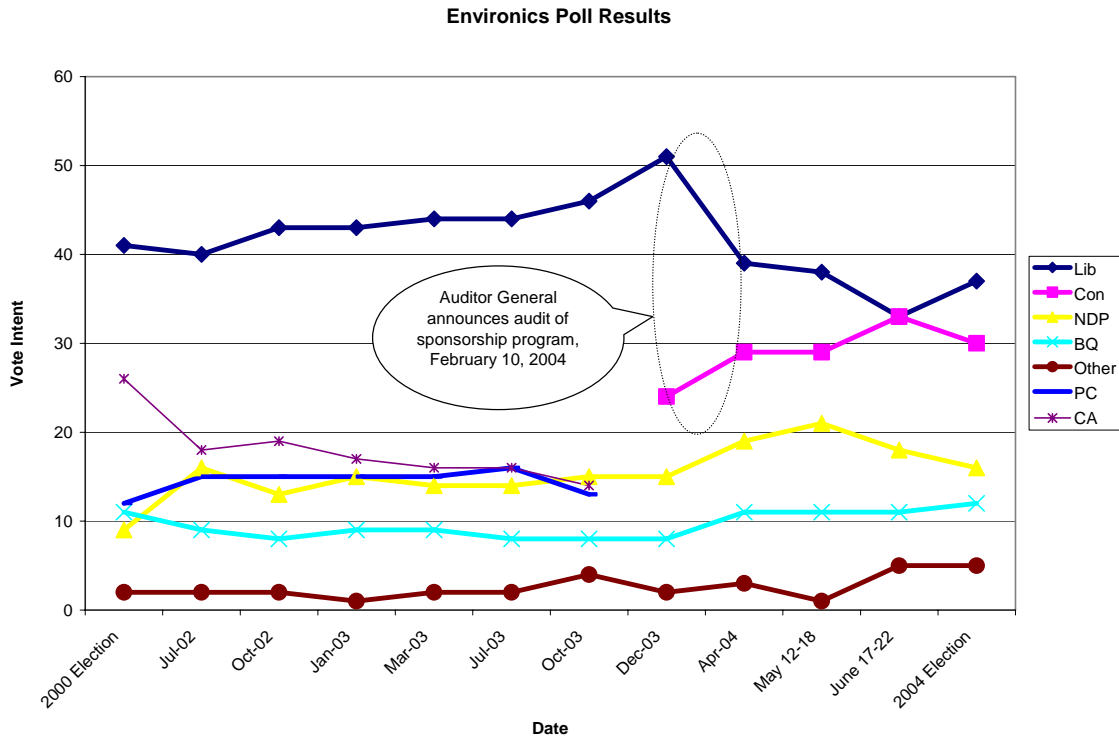


Figure 2: COMPAS Poll Results, 2000-2004

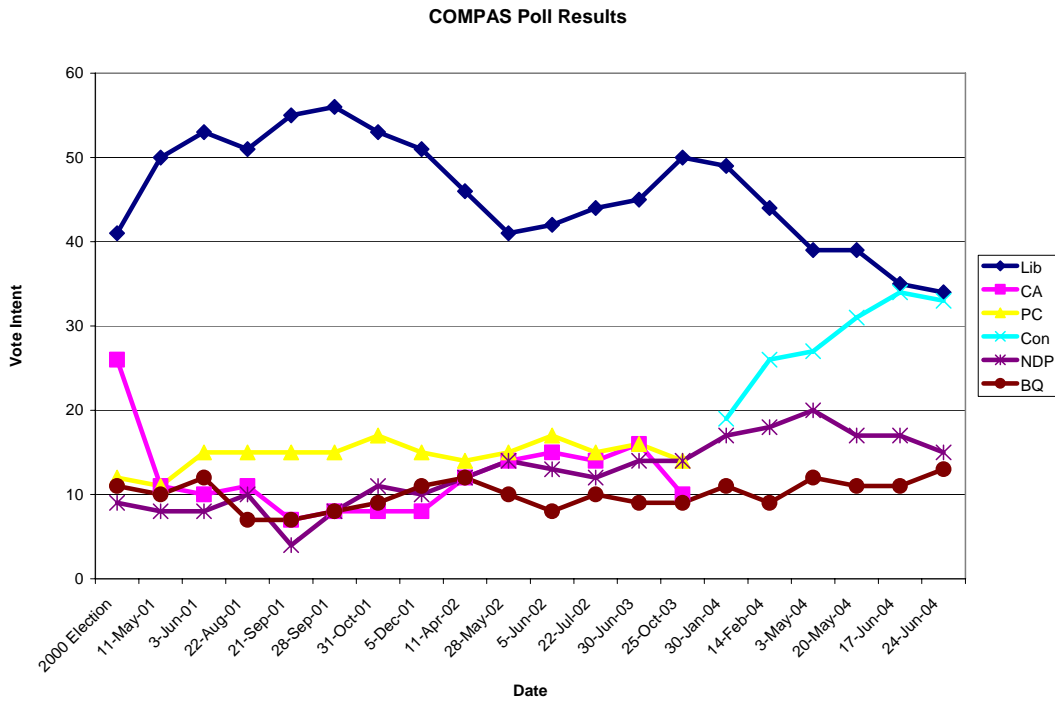


Figure 3: Feeling Thermometer Ratings by Campaign Week

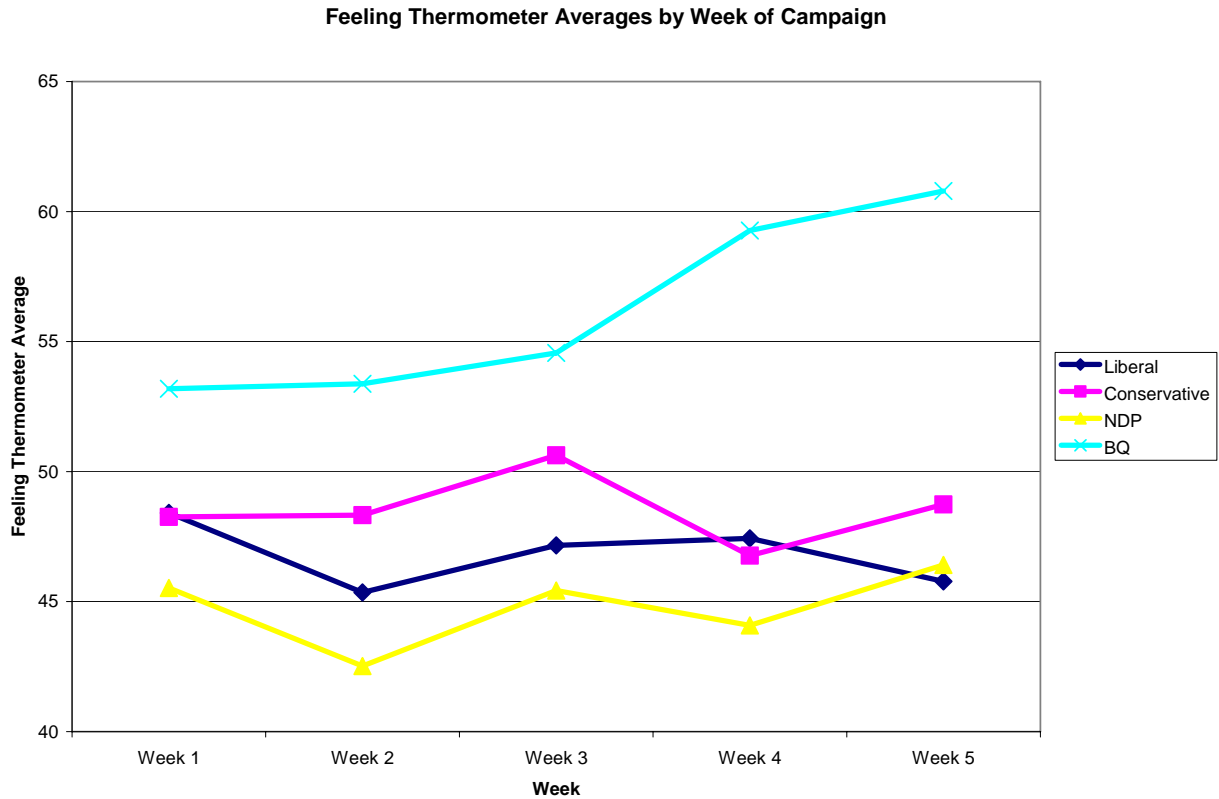


Table 1: Vote Intention by Reported Vote in 2000

Vote Intent of those who voted Alliance in 2000					
	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5
Liberal	0%	0%	4%	2%	0%
Conservative	67%	67%	86%	80%	81%
NDP	0%	4%	0%	4%	0%
Undecided	8%	15%	6%	4%	16%
Vote Intent of those who voted PC in 2000					
	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5
Liberal	67%	20%	0%	8%	9%
Conservative	33%	50%	59%	38%	73%
NDP	0%	10%	0%	0%	0%
Undecided	0%	10%	31%	31%	0%
Vote Intent of those who voted Conservative in 2000					
	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5
Liberal	0%	6%	5%	6%	16%
Conservative	56%	47%	66%	48%	64%
NDP	0%	6%	3%	3%	0%
Undecided	33%	18%	20%	24%	4%

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