

**Declining Political Survival Rates Among Parliamentary Party Leaders, 1867-2006:  
A Federal and Provincial Trend**

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## ABSTRACT

The study examines whether federal party leaders' political survival rates have diminished over time. Leaders' political survival rates also are known as measures of political longevity, and both refer to a politician's ability to retain his or her position as party leader. These findings are drawn from a dataset containing information for 45 federal party leaders in the period 1867 to 2005. Using intergroup comparisons and means calculations, the decline in leader longevity is measured and summarized. The empirical data are clear: federal party leaders now spend much less time in office than their predecessors, and this trend holds regardless of partisan stripe. Moreover, leaders' longevity has decreased sharply in the postwar era, and it has decreased particularly since 1980.

Then, the political longevity of provincial leaders is examined to probe whether the trend in declining political longevity appears only at the federal level. Data describing the careers of 221 provincial party leaders who were in office from 1945 to 2006 are examined. These data reveal the trend in declining political longevity also is present in provincial politics. Leaders of major provincial parties now spent much less time as party leader than their predecessors, and this phenomenon occurs across all ten provinces. The paper considers some of the institutional implications of declining longevity for Canada's legislatures, party systems and policy making processes, and briefly summarizes some of the salient and irrelevant explanatory factors.

## INTRODUCTION

The Canadian political leadership literature is rather small, and attention to studying leaders has moved in and out of fashion. The purpose of this paper is to illuminate a leadership trend that merits serious treatment and further investigation. This article concerns party leaders' political survival, which is defined as how long politicians are able to retain their office as party leader. (Within the literature, political survival also is referred to as political longevity.) Some recent, highly publicized cases where national politicians have left the party's helm shortly after assuming it suggest leaders' official tenures may be diminishing. This study's main research question asks: are today's party leaders less durable, and more transient, than in the past? In other words, has the ability of Canadian political leaders to hold onto the party leadership declined over time?

This question first attracted my attention in 2000, when the Canadian Study of Parliament Group commissioned an article on the requisites of leadership in the House of Commons. Since then I have collected much information about federal and provincial party leaders, especially concerning for how long they are able to hold on to the leader's office. While the larger data set remains incomplete at the time of writing, there is enough extant information to facilitate a basic examination of leader survival rates at the

federal and provincial levels. As discussed in more detail below, there is a clear trend in declining political survival rates, and it occurs at both the federal and provincial levels.

The overall amount of time the average politician now spends in the office of party leader now is far less than earlier, and the magnitude of the decline is striking. For example, in the case of provincial politicians as explained in more detail below, the average party leader selected since 1976 now spends 36% less time as leader than her or his predecessors in the period 1945-1975. The decline in political survival rates at both levels of government is substantial and until this point the trend has not been noticed by social scientists. The analysis begins with a discussion of federal leaders and then considers provincial party leaders. While the paper focuses on identifying and evaluating the trend under study, it is briefly noted that the institutional implications of declining survival rates are significant. As well, while it is beyond the scope of this paper to explain why this trend in declining party leader survival is occurring, the data supporting this study allow us to exclude some possible hypotheses, and identify certain institutional factors for further study. This discussion is presented in the paper's summary section.

### **Two Cases of Federal Party Leadership Turnover: Stockwell Day and Jean Chrétien**

There has been a tradition of extended service in party leadership positions within federal politics. Politicians such as Sir John A. Macdonald, Mackenzie King, Pierre Trudeau and Tommy Douglas each led their parties in the House of Commons for a decade or longer. Recently, however, it seems that several party leaders have been introduced to the Commons only to resign their positions a short while later. Sometimes, a leader's abbreviated tenure clearly results from interparty dynamics, such as in 2003 when the Progressive Conservative (PC) leader Peter MacKay agreed to merge his party with the Canadian Alliance. MacKay did not contest the new party's leadership, and so facilitated the ability of Stephen Harper to assume command of the new party structure housing the merged parties.

It is more usual that a political leader's survival is compromised owing to intraparty tension. Often this tension originates in caucus dissatisfaction, or in the actions of a challenger vying for the leader's crown, and in the history of Canadian politics there have been several notable cases. The friction between Liberal leader John Turner and Jean Chrétien in the 1970s is one example.<sup>1</sup> Another is found in the campaign to unseat Conservative Party leader Joe Clark in the late 1970s.<sup>2</sup> Certainly, the power of many Canadian party leaders has been challenged frequently since 1867. However, some recent cases have provoked speculation that the office of party leader has changed, that today's leaders really are less successful than their predecessors in surviving challenges to their leadership. One such case concerns the Reform/Canadian Alliance Party and its leader, Stockwell Day.

Elected to the Alberta legislature in 1986, Day subsequently served the Progressive Conservative government in several portfolios. He decided to participate in

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<sup>1</sup> Christina McCall-Newman, 1982, *Grits: An Intimate Portrait of the Liberal Party*, Toronto, Macmillan of Canada, p 228-230.

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Simpson, 1980, *Discipline of Power: The Conservative Interlude and the Liberal Restoration*, Toronto: Personal Library Publishers.

federal politics, and chose to contest the leadership of the new Canadian Alliance party (which was created from the existing Reform Party of Canada) in the spring of 2000. In this vote Day won a stunning victory over the incumbent Reform party leader, Preston Manning.<sup>3</sup> As the head of the Canadian Alliance as well as Leader of the Opposition in the House of Commons, Day enjoyed much popularity among voters in the summer of 2000.

He and the Alliance failed, however, to defeat the governing Liberals in the general election held that November. His caucus split, and some prominent members left to sit in coalition with the PC's led by Joe Clark. Criticism of his leadership style had begun to appear in the media that summer and continued to escalate in the wake of the disappointing election results. Day's shortcomings became part of each day's news headlines across the country, and this divided the parliamentary caucus further, generating additional news stories. Leader for only seventeen months, Day resigned in December of 2001 and was replaced by Stephen Harper.<sup>4</sup> Although it is not unusual for parties to replace their leaders after disappointing election returns, the case of Stockwell Day is notable because of the briefness of his tenure and the open division within the parliamentary caucus over his leadership.

One may be tempted to attribute Day's fate to his inexperience in federal politics, or to the pitfalls of leading a party that has been relegated to the opposition benches for a long time. Experienced party leaders who are in government are, as they say, altogether a different kettle of fish. It is a truism among analysts of parliamentary systems that party leaders who are in government are notoriously difficult to unseat because "nothing succeeds like success": the power conferred by securing the role of government leader reinforces one's ability to hold on to the party's leadership. Until recently this axiom has reflected the Canadian experience, where no sitting prime minister has ever been unseated from the leadership by his or her party. In the case of the Liberal Party of Canada under Jean Chrétien, however, the axiom failed to endure. It is worth briefly considering this case of a leader's abbreviated tenure precisely because this was a highly experienced politician who was forced from the party leadership while he was occupying the prime minister's office. This latter position historically has been a formidable defence against potential challengers.

Jean Chrétien was first elected to Parliament in 1963 and was re-elected in seven subsequent general elections.<sup>5</sup> He contested the party leadership in 1984, lost to John Turner, and ran again for the top job in 1990. In this race he won a first ballot victory over the second place finisher, Paul Martin Jr. Immediately assuming his role as party leader as well as leader of the Official Opposition, he then led his Liberals to majority government in the 1993 general election over the incumbent Progressive Conservatives. Under Chrétien's leadership the Liberals secured two additional majority governments in

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<sup>3</sup> Brian Bergman, "The lonely warrior," *Maclean's*, November 13, p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> Government of Canada, House of Commons, *Members of Parliament Profiles*, "Stockwell Day," at <http://webinfo.parl.gc.ca/MembersOfParliament/ProfileMP.aspx?Key=78682&SubSubject=1004&Language=E>

<sup>5</sup> Susan Delacourt, 2003, *Juggernaut: Paul Martin's Campaign for Chrétien's Crown*, Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd, p.28.

the 1997 and 2000 general elections. He seemed unbeatable, and irreplaceable, in the wake of the 2000 election because he had won a rare third majority government, because his party continued to be popular among Canadians and because no Liberal leader occupying the prime minister's office had ever been removed from the leadership. However, in June of 2002 his rival, Paul Martin Jr., left the cabinet and began to campaign to replace Chrétien. In an unprecedented series of events, an internal battle between the Chrétien and Martin factions consumed the Liberal caucus and party organization.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, the sitting prime minister and Liberal party leader announced his resignation. In 2003, his rival replaced him after a leadership race that was merely a pale imitation of a genuinely competitive contest.

On the one hand, these seem to be extreme cases. Day's meteoric rise to the head of the Alliance was followed by an unusually quick exit from the leader's office seventeen months later. Chrétien, as the incumbent prime minister and leader of the governing party, controlled the two most powerful offices in federal politics for ten consecutive years before announcing his resignation in the face of pressure exerted by his rival within the caucus and the party. On the other hand, despite the different circumstances marking each case, they are similar in that each politician was unable to survive a significant intraparty challenge and resigned after caucus division became public knowledge. Interestingly, both men were forced from the office of party leader despite retaining mandates to lead that were bestowed upon them by the party faithful in convention. Neither was forced from office owing to an unsatisfactory leadership review ballot, as in the case of PC leader Joe Clark's exit in 1983. (Grassroots discontent with a leader usually is expressed and measured in such review ballots, which are mechanisms embodied in a party's constitution for removing unwanted leaders). Despite their different experiences and resources, both Day and Chrétien failed to survive a serious leadership challenge that was initiated within each party's senior ranks and parliamentary caucus.

### **Leaders and Political Survival**

To help establish the overarching context for the empirical study conducted in the latter part of this chapter, it is worth spending some time reviewing the literature on leadership generally and leaders' political longevity specifically. We know very little about political leadership. Many of the central works authored by Canadian social scientists first appeared in the late 1960's and 1970s. John Porter's classic study of the determinants of power and class appeared in 1965.<sup>7</sup> An important study containing much deep analysis of the social background of political leaders, it has not been replicated. In 1968, Léon Dion published a foundational conceptual study of the phenomenon of leadership in the *Canadian Journal of Political Science*.<sup>8</sup> Thomas Hockin's edited collection of essays about the *Apex of Power* appeared in 1971 and John Courtney's 1973 study of *The Selection of National Party Leaders in Canada* was the first book length

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<sup>6</sup> See Delacourt.

<sup>7</sup> John Porter, 1965, *The Vertical Mosaic: An Analysis of Social Class and Power in Canada*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press.

<sup>8</sup> Léon Dion, 1968, "The Concept of Political Leadership: An Analysis," *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 1, no. 1, p. 2-17.

treatment of this important topic.<sup>9</sup> In 1977, R.M. Punnett published a work on the prime minister's role in Canadian government and politics which considered prime ministerial tenure in office.<sup>10</sup> Later, George Perlin edited wrote a book on leadership politics in the Progressive Conservative party, and edited a collection of essays on national party conventions.<sup>11</sup> This work was followed, in 1992 and 1994, with the appearance of two edited collections devoted to discussing Canadian party leaders and leadership.<sup>12</sup> Courtney's latest party conventions book appeared in 1995. Elisabeth Gidengil and Joanna Everitt have published several papers in the last few years examining media reporting about women leaders, and de Clercy has analysed how leaders may generate support for innovative policies through manipulating public uncertainty.<sup>13</sup>

While the extant literature on leadership in Canada is thin, we know even less about why political leaders leave office. Maureen Mancuso notes that political scientists have paid scant attention to studying patterns of exit from leadership positions.<sup>14</sup> While this fact might seem surprising, it reflects the paucity of attention that has been devoted generally to the study of Canada's political leaders. Perhaps no more than twenty Canadian scholars located in political science, sociology and economics devote some attention to the subject of political leadership as a social science phenomenon. Moreover, the core literature in this area is fairly spotty, and a good portion of it constitutes occasional essays, historical retrospectives, biographies and autobiographies. Within the leadership literature, a fair amount of attention has been devoted to studying the universal membership vote (UMV) method of selecting party leaders, which has replaced some delegated party conventions. In 1995, after reviewing the new process, John Courtney suggested that it might denigrate the capacity of leaders to lead, and so the "switch [to UMV ballots] could ultimately prove problematic for the health of local political organizations and the larger political community in Canada."<sup>15</sup> David Stewart

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Hockin (dir.), 1971, *Apex of Power. The Prime Minister and Political Leadership in Canada*, Scarborough, Prentice Hall. John C. Courtney, 1973, *The Selection of National Party Leaders in Canada*. Toronto, Macmillan.

<sup>10</sup> R.M. Punnett, 1977, *The Prime Minister in Canadian Government and Politics*, Toronto, Macmillan.

<sup>11</sup> G George Perlin, 1980, "The Tory Syndrome," Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press; George Perlin (ed), 1988, *Party Democracy in Canada*, Scarborough, Prentice Hall.

<sup>12</sup> Ken Carty, Lynda Erikson and Donald E. Blake (eds), 1992, *Leaders and Parties in Canadian Politics: Experiences of the Provinces*, Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Canada; Maureen Mancuso, Richard G. Price and Ronald Wagenberg (eds.), 1994, *Leaders and Leadership in Canada*, Toronto, Oxford University Press.

<sup>13</sup> Elisabeth Gidengil and Joanna Everitt, 2002, "Damned if You Do, Dammed if You Don't: Television Coverage of Female Party Leaders in the 1993 Federal Election," in William Cross (ed) *Political Parties, Representation and Electoral Democracy in Canada*, Don Mills, Ontario, Oxford University Press; Cristine de Clercy, 2005, "Leadership and Uncertainty in Fiscal Restructuring: Ralph Klein and Roy Romanow," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 8, no. 1, 1-28.

<sup>14</sup> Maureen Mancuso, 1994, "The Politics of Shame: Leaving in Disgrace," in Maureen Mancuso, Richard G. Price and Ronald Wagenberg (dir) *Leaders and Leadership in Canada*, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 266.

<sup>15</sup> Courtney, 1995: 293.

was among the first to study the Alberta Progressive Conservative party's move to a UMV ballot in the contest that brought Ralph Klein to power.<sup>16</sup> A few additional studies have been generated on this topic, including a research note by R.K. Carty and Donald E. Blake reviewing the growing popularity of UMV methods, which was published in 1999. For the most part the literature on UMV methods does not focus on the effects of such systems on leaders' tenure in office. Although more than ten years has passed since Courtney's observation that UMV systems may be reducing leaders' political survival, to date there has been relatively little effort expended on testing this proposition. We cannot say that there is firm empirical evidence that this system is undermining leaders' tenure in office.

On the specific topic of leaders' political survival there is surprisingly little research, and extant works and references are scattered across several fields of political science. Some eminent political philosophers and theorists have discussed the subject. Machiavelli's *The Prince*, for example, can be read in part as a guide to maximizing leaders' political tenure.<sup>17</sup> In his rational choice model of the political marketplace, Anthony Downs assumes that all actions taken by political leaders are motivated by their desire to retain power.<sup>18</sup> As well, treatment of leaders' political survival occasionally appears in empirical studies of related topics, such as how leadership succession occurs.<sup>19</sup> In a new comparative treatment, Bruce Bueno de Mesquita et al. present a study of institutions, leadership incentives and governance that proceeds from the assumption that "the politics behind survival is. . . the essence of politics."<sup>20</sup> In a short paper authored for the Canadian Study of Parliament Group in 2001, de Clercy probed leadership turnover among parliamentary parties, and expanded this study in a chapter length study.<sup>21</sup> Beyond these few works there has been little attention to studying political survival among Canadian leaders.

So, much of the small body of literature concerning leaders' tenure in office constitutes treatments that bear only partially on the subject. There are few treatments

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<sup>16</sup> David Stewart, 1997, "The Changing Leadership Electorate: An Examination of Participants in the 1992 Alberta Conservative Leadership Election," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 30, no. 1, p. 107-128, also David Stewart, 2002, "Electing a Premier: An Examination of the 1992 Alberta PC Universal Ballot" in Joanna Everitt and Brenda O'Neill (dir.), *Citizen Politics: Research and Theory in Canadian Political Behaviour*, Don Mills, Ontario, Oxford University Press.

<sup>17</sup> Niccolo Machiavelli, 1985, *The Prince*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

<sup>18</sup> Anthony Downs, 1957, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, New York, New York, Harper & Row.

<sup>19</sup> Valerie Bunce, 1985, *Do New Leaders Make a Difference? Executive Succession and Public Policy under Capitalism and Socialism*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press.

<sup>20</sup> Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, Alastair Smith, Randolph M. Siverson and James D. Morrow (ed), 2003, *The Logic of Political Survival*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, The MIT Press.

<sup>21</sup> Cristine de Clercy, 2001, "The Requisites of Leadership in the Modern House of Communes," *Parliamentary Perspectives* 4, Ottawa, Canadian Study of Parliament Group, 1-26, Cristine de Clercy, "Declining Political Survival Among Parliamentary Party Leaders, 1867-2005," in Hans J. Michelmann, Donald C. Story and Jeffrey S. Steeves (eds) *Political Leadership and Representation in Canada: Essays in Honour of John C. Courtney*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 60-80.

concentrating mainly on the topic of political survival, and very little empirical or comparative research. The measly amount of attention devoted to leaders' political survival constitutes an odd gap in the science of politics, particularly because it is central to the exercise of power. As discussed in more detail in the next section, leaders' political survival is an underappreciated element within political study.

### **The Importance of Political Survival**

At first blush the subject of political survival may seem rather unimportant, but in fact it merits much attention from students of party politics, leadership and Canadian government. Historically, political scientists have agreed that party leaders in Canada enjoy unusual pre-eminence.<sup>22</sup> Leaders generally dominate their parties and have much say in a range of important areas, such as: the content of party policy; whether candidates may stand for election as party representatives; the structure of the party's senior hierarchy; the award of patronage; the award of legislative portfolios including cabinet and critic roles; legislative strategy; and public policy proposals. If leaders' survival rates decline significantly, this means there is more turnover in the office of leader, and so more politicians enter and exit the leader's office more frequently. Such a trend may in turn affect other areas of politics and government, and it is worth considering a few specific examples before proceeding with the empirical analysis.

Declining political survival rates may have detrimental effects on party unity. Normally, leadership campaigns are periods of heightened intraparty division, as the quest for power factionalizes the membership and leadership contenders seek to marshal support. Such divisions, however, usually are assuaged once a new leader is chosen because the new leader must bring the party together to pursue political goods such as public support and campaign donations. The process of unifying the membership in the wake of a leadership campaign may require a fair amount of effort devoted toward reuniting former allies, rewarding supporters and compensating those who supported other candidates. The passage of time is a critical resource in the party unification effort, because it facilitates the renewal of alliances among internal member networks, and allows for the party "team" to refocus its attention on external opponents.

However, if new leaders serve for much shorter periods, and so there is less time between leadership contests alongside more frequent leadership races, then party unity likely will be deeply affected. Without an adequate span of time to reunite, party factions well may end up engaging in a continual struggle for power that severely diminishes party unity. Naturally, one expects that such disunity in turn will undermine leaders' tenure further, because each new leader then will face a deeply factionalized membership that is much more difficult to unify. In this situation, the party factions well may be impossible to unite if their members continue to focus on winning (or retaining) power within the party without regard for the party's external opponents. Of course, in such conditions one expects new leaders to be perceived as failures owing to their inability to unify overcome the factionalism, and so leaders' tenure at the party's helm may be further diminished and churn in the leader's office may increase.

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<sup>22</sup> See for example Courtney 1995, Perlin 1980.



To consider another example, it has been well documented that politicians require a substantial entourage of supporters to capture the party leadership.<sup>23</sup> New leaders reward their caucus supporters by various means such as promoting them to new cabinet or critic portfolios, or ensuring they are able to serve on choice committees. Each new leader who promotes friends and demotes competitors necessarily compromises caucus unity and focus, at least briefly, as the new leader's team assumes control. At the same time, the old leader's supporters may decide to support the new leadership, or may elect to quietly resist change. While leadership transitions bring many benefits with them, such as giving junior politicians opportunities to advance through the ranks, the process of change disrupts the party's routines in the House to a greater or lesser degree. It is fairly common that in such periods of transition at least a few experienced members of the old guard decide to exit from politics, through resignation or simply not seeking re-election. As a result, the party's stock of experienced members is reduced.

Declining political survival rates may significantly alter the legislative process in several ways. The selection of a new leader, for example, usually is accompanied by change in the composition of the party's legislative leadership group, as supporters are rewarded and competitors are punished. Because new appointees require time to adapt to their new cabinet or critic positions, the party's legislative effectiveness may be compromised during this adjustment period. In the case that new leaders are more frequently assuming office and changing the party's legislative leadership structure, then these adjustment periods also become more frequent. If the party is in government, this may severely constrain decision-making in the legislature, as the churn among cabinet ministers undermines the party's ability to execute decisions, and the legislative agenda is compromised. Decision-making paralysis in the legislature, in turn, may stall key public policy initiatives and render the bureaucrats unwilling or unable to serve the government, particularly if ministerial accountability is compromised by frequent turnover.

Further, the routine business of the House of Commons very much depends upon party leaders. The heads of parties have much say in many critical areas. For example, they ultimately approve or reject proposals concerning party voting strategy. In circumstances where it may be beneficial for two parties to co-ordinate their efforts, say, in criticizing the governing party, such plans proceed only with the approval of both leaders. It is reasonable to expect that a leader who has enjoyed a long period as party chief will have had time to build relationships with leaders of other parties and so interparty co-ordination may be effected more easily than if a leader has only recently arrived into this office and so has little connection with the other parliamentary leaders.. While necessary adjustments in the party caucus always accompany changeover in the party's leadership, the point here is that such transition periods can be costly in several areas, such as a loss of policy focus, additional competitive friction within caucus and a reduction in the stock of experienced MPs. It is rational to expect that if a party's leaders are unable to survive in office for more than a couple of years at a time, frequent leadership transition periods may seriously undermine the party's capacity to participate effectively in the business of government. Such compromised performance, in turn, then may undermine public support for the party at election time. One can go on at length reviewing the many facets of government and politics that are directly or indirectly

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<sup>23</sup> S.J.R. Noel, 1996, "Patronage and Entourages, Action Sets, Networks," in A. Brian Tanguay et Alain-G. Gagnon (eds.), *Canadian Parties in Transition*, second edition Scarborough, Ontario, Nelson.

influenced by leaders' survival in office. For our purposes, let us simply underscore that because political parties are the hinge that joins government and society, fundamental change in their structure or process necessarily implies change in the other spheres.

To summarize this section, there is relatively little study of the phenomenon of political leadership, particularly in Canada. There is even less attention paid to examining what sorts of factors determine a leader's political survival as the head of a party, and what sorts of effects might be produced if leaders' survival declines dramatically. However, the quest for political survival affects all leaders regardless of unique or specific conditions. It is the most basic requirement necessary to exercise power, and it often preoccupies politicians: Howard Elcock complains that "nowadays political leaders seem to be concerned with their political survival above all else."<sup>24</sup> Because political parties are at the very center of our democratic process, change in their composition, process and function necessarily affects the other elements of our political system. Specifically, a reduction in leaders' survival rates may carry very large consequences that affect the party, and the business of politics, in a number of important ways.

### **Is Political Survival Declining Among Federal Party Leaders in Parliament?**

In light of the recent experiences of Stockwell Day and Jean Chrétien described above, here we pursue an answer to the question: is political survival declining among Canadian parliamentary leaders? Probing leaders' political longevity sheds some light on whether Canada's current leaders in the Commons are as successful as their predecessors. To this end, information was gathered about MPs who officially held office as party leader and who sat in the House of Commons from 1867 to 2006. Then, in this time period, all the cases of party leaders who had left their positions were reviewed. Party leaders currently serving in the Commons are excluded from the analysis because they have not yet exited the position. So, Stephen Harper, Stéphane Dion, Jack Layton, and Gilles Duceppe are not included in this study.

After removing sitting leaders from the data set, a total of forty-five leaders remain eligible for study. Their names appear in Appendix A. Interim leaders were excluded from the analysis because their very title suggests that this sort of leader, empowered only for a short term, is supposed to exit his or her office once the party selects another "regular" leader through its internal processes. As well, initially Paul Martin is excluded from the analysis to clarify the trend; his case then is considered in the section on the Liberal party, below. So, most of the evaluation focuses on forty-four national party leaders. To examine whether the political longevity of modern leaders generally is diminished in comparison to their predecessors, the entire collection of leaders was divided at different "cut" points, and then the two subgroups are compared with one another. This allows us to test whether leaders' survival has declined across time and, if so, whether the decline has been steady or if it has occurred in particular periods.

The first cut point selected is 1937, which represents the halfway mark in the period 1867 to 2006. The leaders were divided into two sub-groups: those who became leaders of their party before this date and those who became leaders after January 1, 1937.

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<sup>24</sup> Howard Elcock, 2001, *Political Leadership*, Cheltenham, UK, Edward Elgar, 106.

Each leader's total years in his or her position were added and then the sum total was divided by the number of leaders in the particular subgroup under study. The calculation yields the average number of years that party leaders in each of the two subgroups retained their office. The results allow us to compare the two groups of leaders to determine whether leaders' longevity in office is increasing, decreasing or remaining the same over time.

The results, presented in Table 1, communicate two salient pieces of information. First, note that while fourteen party leaders sat in the Commons during the first sixty-nine years of its existence, in the last sixty-nine years a total of thirty leaders have been present. There has been a more than a two-fold increase in the number of cases since 1935. Clearly, the increasingly crowded party environment is reflected in the inflated absolute numbers of party leaders in the chamber over the last half of its life.

**Table 1**  
Leaders' Average Political Survival, 1937 Cut Point

	Number of Cases	Average Number of Years As Leader
Group #1: Before 1937	14	10.96
Group #2: After 1937	30	7.0

N=44

Second, from 1867 to December of 1936, average leadership tenure was 10.96 years. However, from January of 1936 to November of 2001 (which marks the last eligible case), this figure declines to an average of 7.0 years. This suggests that leaders' longevity since 1937 is somewhat reduced as compared to leaders in the 1867-1936 period.

However, simply dividing the history of the House of Commons into two equal periods is a rather crude test that ignores important factors such as the changing party system. To address this concern, two more cut points were selected and used to compare subgroup longevity. Interestingly, both confirmed the trend identified in Table 1: modern leaders hold their leadership offices for a much shorter period of time than their predecessors. One cut point was selected in view of a widely employed perspective on the evolution of Canada's party system. Here the history of the party system is divided into four periods. During the first two periods, from 1867 to 1957, the political landscape changed from a situation of Conservative one-party domination to a classic two-party system in which Liberals and Conservatives competed on equal terms.<sup>25</sup>

The 1957 election marked another sea change, characterized by the formation of majority and minority governments in a three-party competitive system. In the fourth period, from 1993 to the present, five competitive parties in the House seem to signal the arrival of a multi-party system. To account for the emergence of the third and fourth party systems, 1957 was selected as another cut point. As in the first test, the group of forty-four leaders were sorted into two groups based on whether they became leader before this date. Then the sub-groups' average longevity was calculated and compared.

<sup>25</sup> R.K. Carty, 1996, "Three Party Systems: An Interpretation of the Development of National Politics," in Hugh G. Thorburn (ed) *Party Politics in Canada*, seventh edition, Scarborough, Ontario, Prentice Hall, 128-145.

**Table 2**  
**Leaders' Average Political Survival, 1957 Cut Point**

	Number of Cases	Average Number of Years as Leader
Group #1: Before 1957	21	9.98
Group #2: After 1957	23	6.7

N=44

As the results presented in Table 2 suggest, the 1957 cut point suggests a greater disparity in tenure between the two groups. Here the group selected before 1957 has an average tenure of 9.98 years, while the political longevity of the post-1957 group declines to 6.7 years. This change represents approximately a 33% decline in an average leader's tenure at the party's helm. The 1957 cut point is helpful also because it cuts the cases almost exactly in half, allowing us to compare the averages of two subgroups each containing about the same number of leaders.

Some scholars have pointed out that Canada's party system moved sharply toward a true multiparty system over the last two decades.<sup>26</sup> So, a third cut point was selected: 1981. This date represents the midway point between 1957 and 2005. While there are relatively few cases in the post-1981 period as compared to those leaders in office before 1979, this cut point serves to confirm the overall trend. As the results presented in Table 3 suggest, the sub-group of thirty-one politicians who served in the period 1867 to 1981 averaged 9.3 years as party leader. In stark contrast, the sub-group of leaders holding office from 1981 to 2001 averaged a mere 5.76 years in office. All three comparisons of leaders' average longevity in the office of leader confirm that this measure has been declining steadily over time, and has declined sharply since 1981.

**Table 3**  
**Leaders' Average Political Survival, 1981 Cut Point**

	Number of Cases	Average Number of Years as Leader
Group #1: Before 1981	31	9.3
Group #2: After 1981	13	5.76

N=44

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<sup>26</sup> David Docherty, 1998, "On est terriblement serrés par ici! Les difficultés que pose la Chambre des communes à cinq parties," *Perspectives parlementaires*, 4, Ottawa, Le Groupe canadien d'étude des questions parlementaires, 3-20; also David Docherty, 1997, *Mr. Smith Goes to Ottawa: Life in the House of Commons*, Vancouver: UBC Press.

To address concerns that comparing leaders across such a large period is improper because older cases of party leadership occurred in a different context, another comparison was performed. Here only party leaders serving since 1945 are examined. This group of 26 leaders was divided into two groups. The cut point used here —1975— was selected for two reasons. First, it marks the halfway point between 1945 and 2005. Second, the 1976 election of the Parti québécois had a large effect upon Canadian politics in many areas, and so this cut point occurs at a time when the nation’s politics began changing in a new direction. The results are summarized in Table 4. Here again we see the same pattern as in the preceding tables. Politicians serving as party leader in the period 1945 to 1975 survived in this office for 8.4 years on average. However, party leaders serving in the period 1976 to 2001 survived as party leader for only 5.8 years, and this difference represents about a thirty percent reduction in leaders’ tenure.

**Table 4**  
Postwar Leaders’ Average Political Survival, 1975 Cut Point

	Number of Cases	Average Number of Years as Leader
Group #1: 1945-1975	12	8.4
Group #2: 1976-2001	14	5.8

N=26

So, the results from all four comparisons indicate that party leaders’ political survival rates are declining. This trend appears consistent across time, but is particularly pronounced since 1981. The findings lead us to ask whether this trend affects all the parties equally? In view of the axiom noted above, which states that leaders of parties in government have a more secure hold on the helm than those leaders who are not in power, we ask: are Liberal leaders experiencing declining political longevity on par with other party leaders? As well, and borrowing from Maurice Duverger’s categorization of party types, we wonder whether “mass” parties such as the New Democratic Party are being affected by this trend in the same way as “elite” parties such as the Liberals or Conservatives?<sup>27</sup>

To answer these questions, additional calculations were made using the same data set containing information for forty-four federal party leaders. Again, interim leaders and those leaders currently in office were excluded from the calculations. The leaders were grouped according to their partisan identification. Owing to a lack of sufficient cases for smaller parties such as Social Credit, the Bloc and the Reform Party, entries for these parties were removed. This left a total of thirty-seven leaders representing the Liberals, Progressive Conservatives and the New Democrats.

The year 1981 was again used as a cut point for the calculations because it seems to mark a significant decline in survival rates as depicted in Table 3 above, and because for all three parties at least two leaders left in the period 1981-2001 (this would not be true of a later cut point, such as 1991 or 1996). The results of these calculations are summarized in Table 5. First, for the Liberals the comparison of leaders’ average tenure before 1981 and after 1981 fits the pattern of declining political survival rates illustrated

<sup>27</sup> Maurice Duverger, 1964, *Introduction à la Politique*, Paris, Éditions Gallimard.

in Tables 1 through 4 above. The seven Liberal Party leaders who served up to 1981 averaged 15.85 years in office. However, the two Liberal leaders who served since 1981 average only 9.75 years at the helm.

Similarly, in the case of the Progressive Conservative Party (and its predecessor conservative parties), the fourteen leaders serving before 1981 averaged 7.42 years each at the helm while those six leaders serving after 1981 spend an average of only 4.58 years in office. The same trend is evident in the calculations for the CCF/NDP. The six leaders who served the party from its founding to 1981 were at the helm for an average of 9.5 years each, while those in the leader's office after 1981 averaged only 6.25 years in power before leaving.

**Table 5**  
Leaders' Survival Rates by Party, 1981 Cut Point

<b>Party</b>	<b>Before 1981</b>	<b>After 1981</b>
<i>Liberals</i>	15.85 years (n= 7)	9.75 years (n=2 )
<i>Progressive Conservatives</i>	7.42 years (n=14)	4.58 years (n=6)
<i>CCF/NDP</i>	9.5 years (n=6)	6.25 years (n=2)

So, it appears that the general trend in declining political survival among party leaders is reflected within the three largest, established parties represented in the House of Commons. Interesting, the magnitude of the decline is fairly consistent across the parties. Since 1981, the decline in leaders' official tenure is approximately 38% for the Liberals as well as the Progressive Conservatives, and about 34% for the New Democrats. Although the actual number of leaders exiting the leadership is different for each party both before and after 1981, leaders' tenures for all three parties seem to be similarly shortened in the same degree. On the face of it, partisan affiliation and party type do not seem significant variables in explaining the trend toward declining political survival rates.

Also, to this point the leadership of Paul Martin has been excluded from the analysis because he left office fairly recently, and because his abbreviated tenure could be considered a highly unusual case. If we include him in the calculation of Liberal leadership averages, the tenure of Liberal leaders since 1983 clearly is shorter than in the years before this point. As Table 6 suggests, the seven Liberal leaders in office from 1867 to 1983 averaged 15.5 years at the helm, while the three Grit Leaders in office from 1984 to 2006 retained power for a mere 7.2 years each.

A necessary caveat when considering these averages is to note the small number of cases, and the temporal inequality between Jean Chrétien's fifteen years in office as compared to Turner and Martin's much shorter term. One could suggest that both Turner and Martin are aberrations, and that Chrétien's time as leader falls nicely into line

with historical Liberal leader averages. On the one hand, there is some merit to this position, and we must look to events over the next decade or so to confirm or deny the trend in declining leader longevity as examined in this paper. On the other hand, there is some trouble generated by removing « outlier » cases, because we quickly run into trouble in terms of establishing what sorts of cases represent unacceptably short periods in office and which are acceptable cases of abbreviated tenure.

These findings are surprising in part because they contradict received wisdom. Within the admittedly scant literature on federal political leaders, only the Tories have been considered to be somewhat prone to frequent turnover in the office of the party leader.<sup>28</sup> Most analysts have argued that there is a low turnover rate among Liberal leaders, and this is explained by the party's "dominant" status in federal politics.<sup>29</sup> For the NDP, it has been argued that this party's low leadership turnover rate is rooted in what Robert Michels described as the strong oligarchic tendencies that are found in socialist parties.<sup>30</sup> However, the data do not support either argument. All three parties have experienced declining political survival rates among party leaders. The decrease has occurred steadily over time, but has sharpened since 1980. Clearly, the trend is durable at the federal level. What about party leadership in the provinces?

### **Is Political Survival Declining Among Provincial Party Leaders ?**

To study whether the trend in declining leader survival rates exists at the provincial levels, information for provincial party leaders was collected. It is worth underscoring at the outset that it is quite time consuming to collect information about provincial party leaders generally. There have been approximately 720 leaders of significant provincial parties from 1867 to 2006. While records for those party leaders who have held power are easy to locate owing to role of legislative libraries in recording and disseminating such information, it can be quite challenging to locate reliable information for party leaders who have not held power. The most difficult records to locate are those pertaining to leaders of minor parties that have never held power, or that have been out of power for a very long time. Most of this information can only reliably be collected by painstakingly searching local newspapers, historical party documents, and a few academic papers. As well, provincial records for the period 1867 to 1919 are quite incomplete and some of the few official sources (such as the *Parliamentary Handbook* series) present dubious or contradictory information.

Partly owing to the difficulty in locating reliable historical records, and partly because the trend under study here seems to be more severe in recent history as per Table 4 above, the dataset was limited to information concerning leaders of the three major provincial parties active in each province from 1945 to 2006. So, all provinces the parties under study included the Liberal. As well, all functioning Progressive Conservative wings were included (or viable contemporary competitors such as the Saskatchewan Party). The NDP was included in all provinces except Quebec and PEI. The Social Credit Party was included in calculations for BC and Alberta, and the PQ

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<sup>28</sup> Courtney, 1995; also Perlin, 1980

<sup>29</sup> For example Perlin, 1980, 200.

<sup>30</sup> See Keith Archer and Alan Whitehorn, 1997, *Political Activists, the NDP in Convention*, Scarborough, Ontario, Oxford University Press.

appears in the data for Quebec. Because the focus here is on major party leaders, minor “fringe” parties are not included in these calculations. So, for example, no Green party leaders are included in the data discussed below (despite evidence of recent growth in their public support).

For each province, data for the period 1945 to 2006 were collected. Then, 1975 was selected as a cut point because it is the halfway mark in this sixty-year period. Leaders who assumed the party leader’s office after 1945 were selected for analysis. Those who currently hold office were removed from the analysis, as were all interim leaders. There are some difficulties associated with choosing such an arbitrary cutpoint as the one used here. For example, what should be done with a leader who was elected to lead in 1939 and who remained in office until 1955? Should he be counted as part of the post-1945 study? For the sake of analytical consistency, leaders who were in office before 1945 were excluded from the analysis. (Note that including them in most cases would have produced a somewhat sharper decline in longevity than that calculated below). As noted in Table 6, for Alberta and Saskatchewan the first period under examination began in 1943 and 1942, respectively, to accommodate the presence of newly selected leaders.

For each province, the leader pool was divided into those who became party leaders in the period 1945 to 1975, and those who became leader in the period 1976 to 2006. Then, the average length of time each group of leaders occupied the leadership was calculated, and the percentage increase or decrease in change across time was calculated. The results are summarized in Table 6, below.

**Table 6: Change in Political Longevity Among Provincial Legislative Leaders, 1945-2006**

	<b>Total Number of Leaders in Calculation</b>	<b>Average Years in Office, 1945-1975</b>	<b>Average Years in Office, 1976-2006</b>	<b>Percentage Increase or Decrease Across Time (rounded)</b>
<b>Province</b>				
PEI*	15	9.0	5.12	- 43 %
New Brunswick	15	7.85	4.48	- 43 %
Nova Scotia	14	10.42	5.0	- 55%
NFLD and Lab.	27	6.04	4.45	- 26 %
Quebec*	16	7.71	4.72	- 39 %
Ontario	19	7.18	6.71	- 7%
Manitoba	20	7.3	6.5	- 11%
Saskatchewan**	21	9.7	6.55	- 32 %
Alberta***	30	7.16	4.5	- 37 %
British Columbia	44	6.67	2.46	- 63 %

\* For PEI and Quebec, there are no NDP party leaders in the calculation.

\*\* For Alberta, the first period begins 1943 to 1976



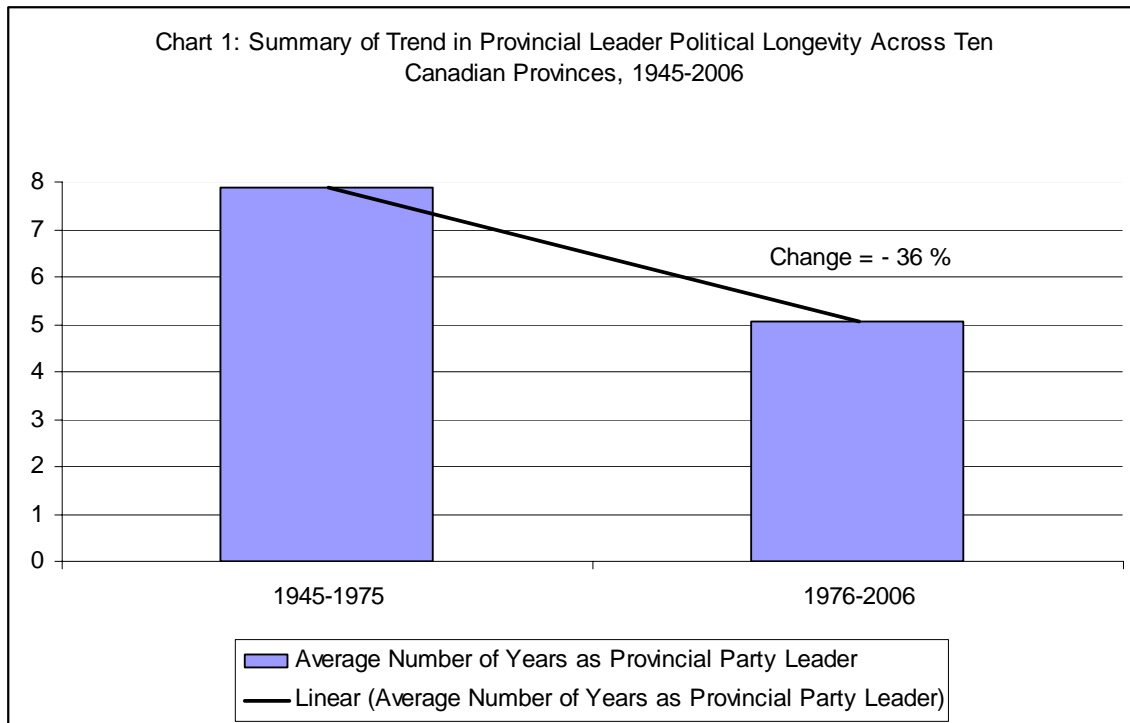
\*\*\* For Saskatchewan the first period beings 1942 to 1976. If Tommy Douglas, who became party leader in 1942, is excluded, the 1945-1975 average decreases to 7.96 years, and the overall percentage decline in Saskatchewan becomes - 17.7 %.

The provincial results are stunning. In every province, leaders' survival rates have declined across the last sixty years. In some areas these declines are somewhat marginal, such as Ontario's 7% decline, while in others they are substantial, on the order of thirty or forty percent. British Columbia records the most substantial declines, with leaders there spending 63% less time in the leadership than their predecessors. These data confirm the declining trend in leader survival rates for federal party leaders as discussed in the first part of this paper.

When examining these results, it is worth communicating a few salient points. First, while it may seem rational to lay the blame for the decline in political survival rates on new parties or well-established but politically unsuccessful third parties, the data in the table contradict this hypothesis. In PEI, for example, data on the provincial NDP were excluded because the extant information was not considered reliable enough to analyse. (Sources gave contradictory information on leaders' entry and exit dates, probably because the PEI NDP is not large enough to have generated sustained attention from an authoritative data-collection source.) The data for PEI concern the Liberal and PC parties only, yet there is a 43% decline in political survival rates in this province. So, the presence of a perennial third party such as the NDP is not a sufficient explanatory factor to account for the trend identified here.

Second, it is worth remembering that only leaders of well-established parties with some reasonable opportunity to secure power were included in the analysis. The wide assortment of fringe parties that regularly register as official parties are not included in this analysis. So, the explanation for the trend identified here may rest in part with the mainstream parties and party systems.

Another way to consider these results is to summarize the Table 6 summary, or calculate an overall average magnitude of decline in provincial party leader survival rates. This calculation was made and its results are communicated below in Chart 1. As suggested in this chart, the leader of a major provincial political party on average spent 36% less time in the office of party leader than her or his predecessors. While leaders in the period 1945 to 1975 averaged 7.9 years at the party's helm, those leading parties in the latter period were in office about 5 years on average. So, whereas the average party leader once could anticipate almost eight years, or two normal legislative terms, in office, most of today's leaders last a mere five years, or basically one legislative cycle.



### Summary

This chapter set out to measure whether the political survival rates of party leaders in the House of Commons and in provincial legislatures are declining. Information about major party leaders at the federal and provincial levels was collected and analysed. The total time in party office for each leader was calculated and then leader group averages were compared across time. Overall, there seems to be a clear trend: modern party leaders spend much less time at the helm of their party than their predecessors. On the basis of these measures it appears clear that modern party leaders in Canada are much less entrenched in power than they have been historically.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to identify the factors that have produced this change, the existing literature, as well as the data used in this study, offer some insight. First, scholars such as John Courtney have suggested that some institutional changes (such as the universal membership leadership selection procedures) might change how party leadership occurs. At the current time these first results do not indicate whether such changes account fully for the downward trend, or whether other factors also are working to shorten leaders' political survival rates.

The large number of leaders under study here – 266 leaders representing 7 parties and all eleven governments - does allow some hypotheses to be ruled out. For example, this trend is not limited to region, provincial political culture, or type of party system. The decline in leader survival rates seems as significant in Alberta as it does in Quebec, despite their very different party systems and political cultures. As well, there are some interesting patterns in the larger data set that merit additional study. On the basis of one of these patterns, it seems to be the case that the “decline of deference” hypothesis does not fully explain the trend documented here.<sup>31</sup> In other words, diminished leader longevity is not simply the product of a change in general societal attitudes toward authority. The preliminary data set suggest differences among provincial leadership survival rates are explicable in institutional terms. However, much more careful analysis of the data is necessary to explain definitively why political survival rates among Canadian federal and provincial party leaders have declined so sharply over time.

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<sup>31</sup> See Neil Nevitte, *The Decline of Deference*, (Broadview, 1996).

**Appendix A**  
 Party Leaders in the House of Commons, 1867-2005,  
 (Interim Leaders Excluded)

1. John A. Macdonald
2. John J.C. Abbott
3. John Thompson
4. Mackenzie Bowell
5. Charles Tupper
6. Robert Borden
7. Arthur Meighen
8. R.B. Bennett
9. R.J. Manion
10. Arthur Meighen
11. John Bracken
12. George A. Drew
14. John G. Diefenbaker
15. Robert L. Stanfield
16. Joe Clark
17. Brian Mulroney
18. Kim Campbell
19. Jean Charest
20. Joe Clark
21. Peter McKay
22. Stephen Harper\*
23. Alexander Mackenzie
24. Edward Blake
25. Wilfrid Laurier
26. William Lyon Mackenzie King
27. Louis St. Laurent
28. Lester B. Pearson
29. Pierre Elliot Trudeau
30. John Turner
31. Jean Chrétien
32. Paul Martin \*\*
33. S. Dion \*
34. Preston Manning
35. Stockwell Day
36. J.S. Woodsworth
37. M.J. Coldwell
38. Hazen Argue
39. Tommy Douglas
40. David Lewis
41. Ed Broadbent
42. Audrey McLaughlin
43. Alexa McDonough
44. Jack Layton\*
45. Lucien Bouchard
46. Gilles Duceppe \*
47. Réal Caoutte
48. C.A. Crerar
49. Robert Thompson

\* = currently in office;

\*\* initially excluded from calculations in Tables 1-5.