By-elections in Canada: We Don't Know What We Don't Know*

Frédérick Bastien
Département d'information et communication, Université Laval
frederick.bastien@com.ulaval.ca

Peter John Loewen
Département de science politique, Université de Montréal
peter.john.loewen@umontreal.ca

This version printed on May 26, 2008

1. Introduction

By-elections play a fundamental role within Canadian democracy. Just as in general elections, they allow citizens within a constituency to select from among several candidates a Member of Parliament who will go on to represent them until the next general election. In this sense, they do not differ at all from the hundreds of local races that occur in constituencies during each general election. However, we do have reason to believe that by-elections differ in other important ways from local races during general elections. For example, the a single by-election contest is likely to receive more attention nationally than a single race in a constituency would during a general election, but the overall attention to the race among local voters is likely to be lower. The races are also likely to be framed in different terms than during a general election, with parties perhaps making more localized and less nationalized appeals. By-election races may also be subject to different levels of participation. And they may provide a unique opportunity for otherwise marginal parties to highlight their platforms and appeal for votes. Finally, the races may act as referenda on the government, with voters giving the government a mid-point signal on their (dis)approval of its performance.

Unfortunately, the characteristics of by-elections in Canada are more or less unknown, for while we can speculate on how behaviour during these contests differs from general elections, we actually do not know much systematically about these contests. In other words, despite there being much common or accepted wisdom around by-elections, there has been little systematic and broad academic treatment of them in a Canadian context. The goal of this paper is to go some way in closing that gap. In particular, we set out to answer four sets of questions:

1. What causes the turnout in by-elections to converge/diverge from that witnessed in general elections? When is turnout higher or lower in a by-election?

2. Are by-elections really referendums on the government? That is, are by-election results significantly affected by the current popularity of the governing party? And do government candidates do worse in by-elections than non-government candidates?

*We contributed equally to this paper. We thank François Pétry for sharing data. We also acknowledge the ongoing financial support of SSHRC. Finally, we thank André Blais who gave us both office space at the time we started this paper.

3. Do minor parties do better in by-elections than in regular elections?

4. Do by-election victors face a different reelection rate than those incumbents who won in the previous general election?

While this is hardly an exhaustive study of by-elections, it does go some distance in answering important questions about these important events. To achieve this, we consider all federal by-elections held from 1963 until 2008. Where necessary, we have married these data with general election results from the same constituencies. We have also added in historical public opinion data necessary to test questions about the popularity of federal parties. All told, we have created the most comprehensive collection of data we know of related to Canadian by-elections in the modern era.

We take a similar approach to answering each of our four questions. After articulating the question, we outline approaches for testing the proposition statistically. We then weigh the results and provide an answer to the question at hand. Our aim is to consider a number of clear and transparent tests that together provide a comprehensive answer to each question. After considering each question in turn, we conclude by discussing the general nature of empirical knowledge about fundamental events in Canada politics and the need to bring knowledge to these empirical blind spots.

2. What do we know about by-elections?

Despite the great attention given to federal elections by political scientists in Canada (e.g. Blais et al. 2002, Dornan and Pammett, 2001), by-elections rarely reach the radar screen of scholars. The most substantive pieces of research devoted to this particular subject were published almost an half and a quarter of century ago. Their goal was to establish how well by-elections act as indicators of the state of public opinion in the whole country and how well they can be used to forecast the outcome of the next general election.

The first was a study undertaken by Scarrow (1961) on Canadian by-elections held from 1921 to 1958. Scarrow states that "while no particular significance can be placed on the result of a single by-election, a series of by-elections can be relied upon to reflect national opinion trends" (86). In doing this, Scarrow focused only on the performance of government party. He distinguished "favorable" and "unfavorable" by-elections on the basis of shifts in party vote. He found that government party increased its vote share at the next general election when the number of "favorable" by-elections was about twice the number of "unfavorable", and the reverse when the number of "unfavorable" by-elections was about twice the number of "favorable" ones. It must be underlined that Scarrow's definition of a "favorable" by-election is not limited to those where government party has increased or maintained its support, but also includes those where it held a loss below 5 percentage points. At best, this appears to be an arbitrary threshold.

The second study considered a more comprehensive number of parties. It also provided a different conclusion. Following an analysis of the performance of all federal parties in by-elections held between 1940 and 1980, Kay (1981) concluded that by-election returns are a better prediction of the outcome in the subsequent general election than the result in the previous general election. However, he also concluded that they are not good predictors of a party's performance in the whole country, or, even the whole region. On the basis of various bivariate analyses, Kay observed that shifts of parties support are greater in competitive multi-party systems (Ontario and British Columbia) than in traditional areas (Atlantic), where the absolute change in turnout is large rather than small, and where by-elections and general elections are separated by a longer time interval. Along the same lines, studying provincial by-elections in Qubec from 1867 to

1981, Massicotte (1981) concluded that by-elections are poor barometers of the outcomes of the next general election. For most of the 20th century, by-elections were won by the government party. However, in 1976 the Parti québécois lost all by-elections during its first mandate. Just as by-elections did not predict changes in provincial legislatures during the first three-quarter of the century, nor did they predict the PQ victory in the general election of 1981. Massicotte thus settled on the hypothesis that by-elections are more relevant predictors of the outcome of the next election when seats switch from one party to another. However, his study does not provide a clear test of this hypothesis, rather he only features a description of cases that fit and those that do not.

3. Data

Our data consist of all federal by-elections held between 1963 and 2008 inclusive. Smith (1985) and Carty (1988) have argued that a realignment occurred in 1963 with a new, more centralized, and more leader-centered party system. The brokerage role of major political parties between Canadian regions became less important with the rise of new institutions connecting federal and provincial governments. Thus, we see this as a useful starting point for our analysis.

In total, this represents 121 separate contests.[1] We marry to these data measures of party performance in the previous and subsequent election, as well as variables related to the government status of the party, the timing of the by-election, the number of by-elections held concurrently, etc. We describe variables in more detail when they are relevant in the analysis

In addition to information about each by-election and its contestants, we have also merged in incomplete data on the popularity of governments during by-elections. Presently, these data take the form of vote intention for the governing party. For the period from 1967 to 1978, the measured is based on quarterly figures on share of survey respondents willing to vote for the government party. These data are drawn from Gallup surveys.[2] The data between 1970 and 2005 are drawn from Environics data, stored at the Canadian Opinion Research Archive (CORA).[3]. We use the same data directly from Environics website for elections between 2006 and 2008.[4] These data, which will eventually be made public, represent the most comprehensive dataset on Canadian by-elections of which we have knowledge.

4. Basic facts about by-elections in Canada

Before turning to the analysis of our key questions, we present descriptive data for these political events in Canada (Table 1). By-elections were previously much more frequent in Canada than they are in the modern era. For instance, 225 federal by-elections occurred between 1921 and 1958. This is 5.9 per year, on average. Among these, 37% were uncontested by-elections. Until 1931, ministers newly appointed to the Cabinet had to resign from the House of Commons and run again as ministers of the Crown, often without opposition candidates (Scarrow 1961). The falling away of this custom almost certainly explains the reduced number of by-elections in the modern era. Since the 1960s, the frequency of by-elections has been reduced to just 2.6 by-elections per year, on average, and uncontested by-elections have disappeared. Curiously, by-elections occur

[1] We are currently missing data on turnout from four by-elections. Accordingly, they are omitted from the analysis of turnout.

[2] These data were made available to us by François Pétry.

[3] For all by-elections held in 2002, the latest available data were collected in December 2001.

[4] For two by-elections held in November 2006, we use figure of a survey conducted the following month, since there was no survey between the general election and these by-elections.

frequently in Newfoundland: though only about 2% of federal constituencies are in that province, close to 11% of by-elections (13 of the 121 by-elections, to be more precise) were contested there.

Table 1: *Descriptive statistics for by-elections in Canada*

Decade	Number of by-elections	Annual average number of by-elections	Average number of by-elections per day	Average number of candidates
1963-1969	19	2.7	2.4	3.7
1970-1979	36	3.6	3.6	4.4
1980-1989	19	1.9	1.7	5.4
1990-1999	22	2.2	2.2	7.1
2000-2006	25	2.8	2.5	5.9
All	121	2.6	2.5	5.3

Most often, the prime minister calls by-elections in one, two, or three constituencies at a time. On a given by-election day in Canada, there are, on average, 2.5 constituencies at stake. Since 1963, by-elections occurred simultaneously in more than four districts only five times, with five ridings in May 1967, six in May 1977 and March 1996, seven in May 2002, and a record-breaking of 15 by-elections on the October 16th, 1978.

Despite declining turnout, which we analyze in the next section, by-elections have become more contested events. The average number of candidates have steadily grown from the 1960s to the 1990s, followed by a slight reduction in the 2000s. Only one by-election, in the riding of Burin-Burgeo (Newfoundland) in 1966, was contested by two candidates. At the opposite end, the highest number of candidates running a by-election is observed for the riding of Hamilton-East (Ontario) in 1996. Following her resignation from Parliament over the failure of the Liberal government to abolish the GST, Sheila Copps rewon her seat against some 12 other candidates.

5. What increases or decreases turnout in by-elections?

By-elections are typically characterized by low levels of voter participation. For example, despite the national media attention paid to the most recent four by-elections - those which elected Bob Rae and Martha Hall Findlay to parliament, overturned a very slim Liberal general election win in northern Saskatchewan, and almost saw a Conservative victory in a previous Liberal stronghold in urban Vancouver - turnout levels did not exceed 34%. Generally speaking, we know that turnout in by-elections is lower than it is in general elections. But that statement alone masks some important facts. First, what determines how much lower it will be? That is, when is the ratio between general election turnout and by-election turnout larger and when is it smaller? Second, what is the trend in by-election turnout compared to general election turnout?

We begin with the question of trends. Two facts are to be noted. First, by-election turnout is declining since the 1980s, just as general election turnout is declining (Figure 1).[5] During the 1960s, by-election turnout was, on average, 54%. General election turnout was 72% . By-election and general election turnout both increased through the 1970s and reached their highpoints in the 1980. By-election turnout averaged 61% in this decade, while general election turnout averaged 72%. Since then, both general election turnout and by-election turnout have declined dramatically. By-election turnout declined to 44% in the 1990s and just 35% in the current decade. Obviously, turnout is (almost) always lower in by-elections. That rule suffers from only two exceptions since 1963 and, once again, Newfoundland is the exception! By-election turnout

[5]We calculate general election turnout here only in the ridings in which by-elections were contested. We use as our measure turnout in the general election prior to the by-election.

was higher than for previous general election in Bonavista-Twillingate in November 1967 (+4.3%) and in Labrador in May 2005 (+8.6%). Otherwise, turnout variation is consistently negative, varying from -51.2% to -0.7%, with an average at -19.3%.

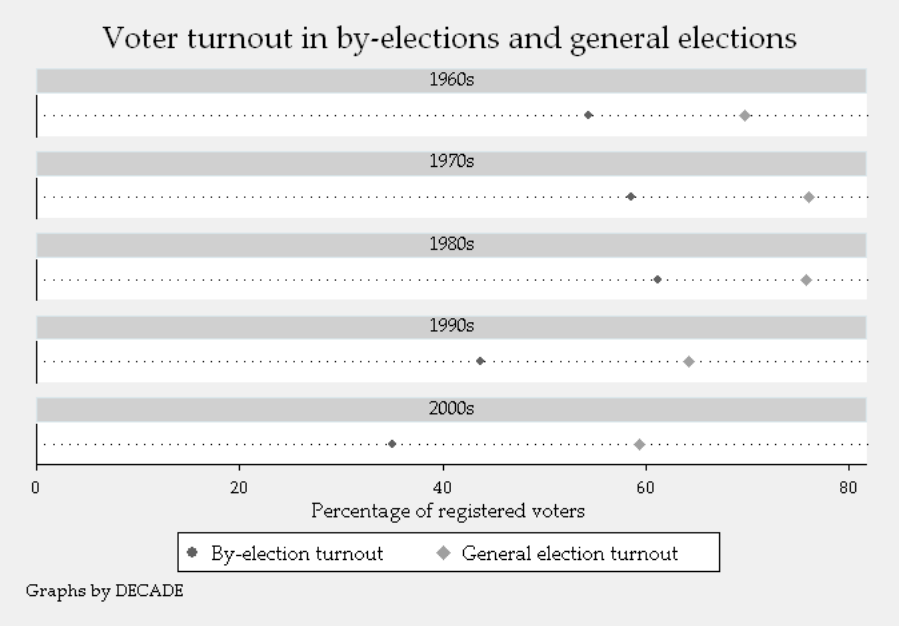

Figure 1: Voter turnout in by-elections and general elections

Not only is by-election turnout declining, but it is declining at a *faster rate* than general election turnout. To demonstrate the differences in decline, we calculate the ratio between by-election turnout and general election turnout. If by-election turnout is decreasing more quickly, then the turnout ratio should be growing. These ratios are shown in Figure 2. General election turnout was about 43% (not percentage points) higher than by-election turnout in the 1960s. In other words, for every one voter in a constituency who would vote in a by-election, 1.43 voters would cast a general election ballot. This difference declined to just 21% in the 1980s. But since 2000, it has averaged 87%, meaning that by-election voting is just a little more than half as frequent as general election voting.

What is causing this increased ratio? More generally, what causes by-election turnout to go up or down? Are these trends a function of the large societal changes affecting participation generally, or are they the result of a changing nature of competition in by-elections? To answer this question, we present two sets of regression results. In the first, we model by-election turnout. In the second, we model the by-election and general turnout ratio. Results from the first thus tell us what causes by-election turnout generally to rise and fall, while the second tell us what causes it to rise and fall in comparison to turnout in the previous general elections in the respective constituencies.

In each case, we consider the same schedule of independent variables. First, we control for the number of by-elections held concurrently. It can be reasonably hypothesized that a larger number of by-elections increases the interest of media (especially national media) and thus increases the awareness of the by-elections and the amount of relevant information needed to decide to vote. We also control for the number of candidates. We expect that as the number of candidates increases, so does turnout. We also control for whether the incumbent party in the by-election is currently in government. If by-elections act as a referendum on the government, then races in which the

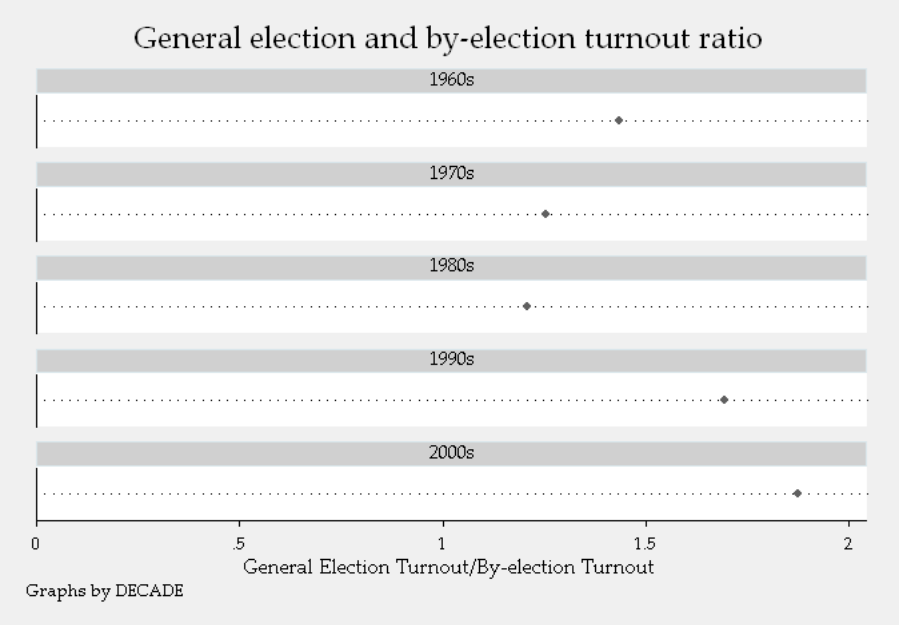

Figure 2: General election and by-election turnout ratio

governing party previously held the seat may act as a particularly good chance for voters to express their pleasure or displeasure with the government, thus encouraging higher turnout.[6] We also control for the turnout in the previous general election. We (obviously) expect by-election turnout to be higher in those constituencies where general election turnout is higher. We also expect this variable to stand in for the variations in turnout attributable to sociodemographic differences between constituencies. We also add dummy variables or fixed effects for each decade, with the 1960s acting as a reference category.[7]

Our results in Table 2 suggest that turnout in by-elections is driven by just two sets of factors. First, turnout in general elections appears to drive turnout in by-elections. By extension, the sociodemographic differences across ridings which drive a variation in turnout also appear to drive turnout in by-elections. We also note that our fixed effects for decades appear to be significant for the current decade and the 1990s. Our estimates suggest that by-elections in the current decade are, on average, 12 percentage points lower than those held in the 1960s. Those held in the 1990s are approximately 7 points lower. Aside from the variables that significantly predict turnout, it is important to note those which do not. According to our estimates, by-election turnout is not increased when several by-elections are held at the same time. By-elections are similarly unaffected when they are contested by a larger number of candidates or when the incumbent party in the constituency is also in government.

Our results in Table 3 present our results when we consider the ratio between the turnout in a constituency in the general election prior to the by-election and that of the by-election. A higher

[6]We have also run regressions including a measure of government popularity as a predictor of turnout. It is not significant though it is negative signed, as should be expected.

[7]We have also run regressions including a seasonal variable, which read 1 when an election occurs between December and March, and 0 otherwise. In their study of turnout in 4320 British local government by-elections occuring in the 1980s and 1990s, Rallings et al. (2003) found higher turnout from March to June, and lower level for November through January. We would expect lower turnout during the winter months, however we could find no effect, perhaps due to the fact that just one in five by-elections were held during this period. For the sake of simplicity (Clarke, 2005) we have left these predictors out.

Table 2: Determinants of By-election Turnout, 1963 to 2008 (OLS)

Variable	Coefficient	(Std. Err.)
Previous election turnout	0.665**	(0.136)
Number of by-elections same day	-0.128	(0.270)
Number of candidates	-0.512	(0.601)
1970s	4.914	(3.307)
1980s	6.936†	(3.733)
1990s	-7.009†	(3.835)
2000s	-11.631**	(3.781)
Government incumbent	-0.919	(2.024)
Intercept	9.506	(10.910)
N	117	
R^2	0.556	
$F_{(8,108)}$	16.876	

Significance levels : † : 10% ∗ : 5% ∗∗ : 1%

ratio indicates a greater discrepancy between the by-election turnout and the general election turnout. Accordingly, significantly positive coefficients indicate factors that are increasing the decline of by-election turnout relative to general election turnout. As with our more general effects, these results suggest that increased differences between general election turnout and by-election turnout are not the result of the changing characteristics of by-elections but of larger societal changes driving lower political participation. To wit, the only significant predictors of an increased ratio between by-election turnout and general election turnout are whether by-elections occurred in the 1990s or in this decade. The ratio is unaffected by the number of by-elections held concurrently, the number of candidates contesting the election, the government-status of the incumbent, or the turnout in the previous general election.

Table 3: Determinants of By-election/General Election Turnout Ratio, 1963 to 2008 (OLS)

Variable	Coefficient	(Std. Err.)
Previous election turnout	0.004	(0.005)
Number of by-elections same day	0.007	(0.010)
Number of candidates	0.007	(0.023)
1970s	-0.220†	(0.125)
1980s	-0.228	(0.142)
1990s	0.247†	(0.145)
2000s	0.477**	(0.143)
Government incumbent	0.034	(0.077)
Intercept	1.056*	(0.414)
N	117	
R^2	0.329	
$F_{(8,108)}$	6.62	

Significance levels : † : 10% ∗ : 5% ∗∗ : 1%

Taken together, these results suggest that changes in by-election turnout and its relation to

general election turnout is driven by the general decline in political participation witnessed in Canada, and indeed around the world. What is of particular note, however, is that these effects appear to be particularly acute for by-elections, suggesting that by-elections will experience even more pronounced declines in participation going forward.

6. Are by-elections a referendum on the government?

News reports often frame by-elections as referenda on the government party performance in office. Thus, many people believe that results from a given constituency may reflect public opinion of citizens from the whole country. Mughan (1986, 1988) tested this referendum hypothesis within the British case. He found that "the most potent predictor of government performance is precisely the proportion of the electorate satisfied with this record in the month of the by-election" (1986, 772). Is the referendum hypothesis sustainable in Canada, where regional forces impact the party system? In a comparative study of by-elections, Feigert and Norris (1990) tested the impact of national government popularity on its performance in by-elections. With data covering by-elections from 1945 to 1987, there results confirmed the referendum thesis in Britain and in Canada. Following the rise of regional parties in the 1990s (Carty, Cross, and Young 2000), is it still a relevant explanation for by-election results? In other words, how closely do referendum results reflect government popularity at the time of the vote? And do voters use by-elections to punish the governing party?

We present three tests. The first follows from Mughan's study (1986) and takes as its dependent variable the share of votes for the government party in the by-election less vote share in the preceding general election. Negative values thus indicate that the governing party is performing worse. We use as predictors the aggregate national vote intentions for the government. This variable should be positive, indicating that when government popularity increases, so does the difference between by-election results and general election results. If by-elections are a reflection of the national will, then government candidates should do better when the national government is more popular. We also control for the previous vote of the government candidate. This helps us avoid ceiling or floor effects. Finally, we include fixed effects for decade.

Table 4: Change in performance of government party in by-elections (OLS)

Variable	**Coefficient**	**(Std. Err.)**
Previous vote share	-0.270**	(0.079)
Vote Intention for Government Party	1.272**	(0.213)
1970s	-4.841	(4.692)
1980s	-3.639	(5.284)
1990s	-0.242	(4.996)
2000s	-2.798	(5.060)
Intercept	-32.045**	(8.409)
N	110	
R^2	0.348	
$F_{(6,103)}$	9.143	

Significance levels : † : 10% ∗ : 5% ∗∗ : 1%

We find that the difference in performance of the government candidate in a by-election versus the previous general election is positively related to aggregate national vote intentions for the

government. We take this as evidence that the results of by-elections are relatively responsive to national trends in popularity. In practical terms, these results suggest that each one point increase in national vote intentions accounts for a 1.27 percentage point increase in byelection results versus general election results. However, because of the large and negative constant, this means that by-election vote only begins to outstrip general election vote share when government popularity is above thirty-five percent and previous vote share is held at an average of 44.5%. We now consider two further tests.

Our next tests ask if government candidates are punished during by-elections. To test this, we have run a logit where retention of the seat by the incumbent party is the dependent variable, dummies for each incumbent party are included, and a dummy indicating membership in the governing party is included. If government party by-election candidates are punished disproportionately, then this dummy variable should be negative and significant. But it is not (Table 5. When we control for previous vote share, and vote intention for the government, the variable still fails to reach significance (Table 6).

By our lights, these final two tests are a more difficult hurdle to overcome, both because the dependent variable is dichotomous and because it perhaps considers the question of referendum too literally. Accordingly, we are inclined to rest with the evidence which suggests that variation in by-election results for the governing party appears responsive to national vote intentions. Accordingly, by-elections do act as a mid-course test or signal of the popularity of the current government.

Table 5: Punishment of government incumbents in byelections (Logit)

Variable	**Coefficient**	**(Std. Err.)**
Government incumbent	-0.820	(0.611)
Conservative incumbent	-0.978	(0.607)
NDP incumbent	0.363	(1.228)
BQ incumbent	-1.359	(0.903)
Reform incumbent	-0.889	(1.366)
Intercept	1.583**	(0.605)
N	118	
Log-likelihood	-71.522	
$\chi^2_{(5)}$	5.256	

Significance levels : † : 10% ∗ : 5% ∗∗ : 1%

7. Minor Parties and By-elections

Do minor parties do better in by-elections than in general elections? That is, do parties which are not represented in Parliament and/or which are polling at very low levels do better in by-elections than in general elections?

To test this, we compare the share of votes for minor parties with the sum of votes for minor parties in the same constituency in the general elections before and after the by-election. We consider as minor all parties but the Liberals, (Progressive) Conservatives, New Democrats, Social Credit, Reform, and the Bloc Quebecois.

Figure 3 presents our results. It appears that minor parties do about twice as well in by-elections as they do during normal elections. The average vote share of minor parties in a by-

Table 6: Punishment of government incumbents in by-elections, extra controls (Logit)

Variable	Coefficient	(Std. Err.)
Government incumbent	-0.276	(0.724)
Conservative incumbent	2.560*	(1.056)
NDP incumbent	4.494**	(1.703)
BQ incumbent	-1.561	(2.334)
Reform incumbent	2.046	(2.772)
Previous election % Liberal	-0.030	(0.076)
Previous election % Conservatives	-0.121†	(0.073)
Previous election % NDP	-0.141†	(0.076)
Previous election % BQ	-0.058	(0.079)
Previous election % Reform	-0.117	(0.074)
Turnout	-0.036	(0.024)
Vote Intention for Government	-0.028	(0.044)
Intercept	10.568	(7.039)
N	105	
Log-likelihood	-48.003	
$\chi^2_{(12)}$	34.716	

Significance levels : † : 10% * : 5% ** : 1%

election is 3.9%. The average in the elections before and after is 1.9% and 1.7%. The by-election vote share is significantly higher than either the before ($t = 2.35, p < .01$, one-tailed) or after vote shares ($t = 2.36, p < .01$, one-tailed). Before and after totals are statistically indistinguishable ($t = 0.71, p = .48$, two-tailed). Note too that there is no clear pattern about whether minor parties do better in the election after versus before a by-election. There does not appear to be a clear pattern of growth over time. However, the 1970s seemed to be a particularly hard time for minor parties. Minor party performance here is significantly lower than in all other decades. On the balance, then, there appears to be clear evidence that minor parties do better in by-elections than in general elections, though there appears to be no clear pattern of increase or decrease in this by-election advantage.

8. By-election victors and re-election rates

Our final question is whether incumbents who won their seat in a recent by-election receive the same benefits of incumbency as those who won in a general election. In other words, are by-election incumbents more or less likely to be reelected than incumbents who won in a general election? On one hand, we would expect them to do worse, as they clearly have spent less time as incumbents and have arguably accumulated less of a personal vote. But, on the other hand, they may be less easily tarred with the long-term actions of their party, so their chances may be better. Moreover, the particular attention that parties pay to the selection of candidates for by-elections may lead to higher quality candidates, on average. In sum, the expectations are not clear.

Our current test of this is the simple observed reelection rates of all incumbents and by-election incumbents in the election following a by-election. We capture these in Figure 4. There does not appear to be a systematic difference between the reelection rates of non-be incumbents

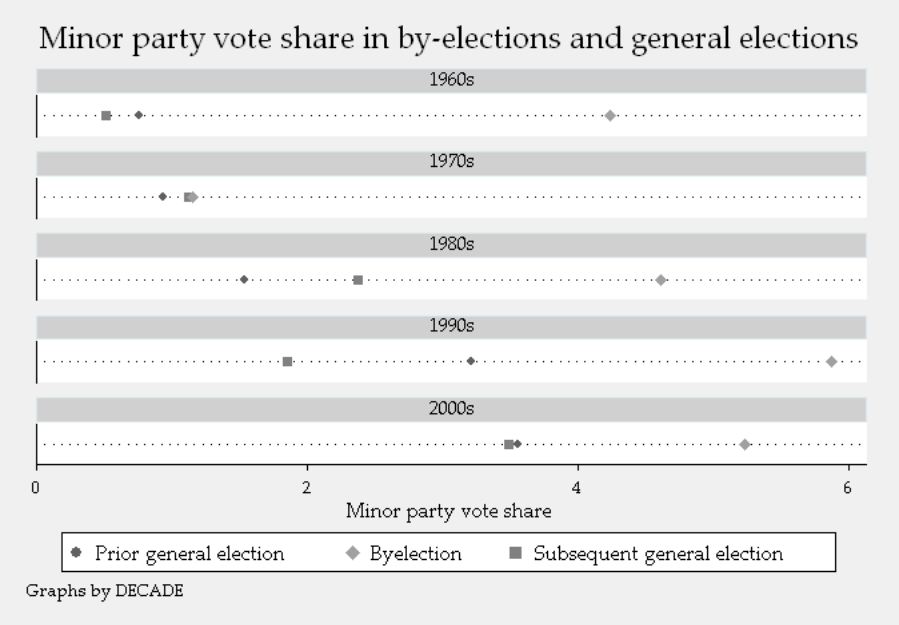

Figure 3: Minor party vote share in by-elections and general elections

and by-election incumbents ($t = 0.61, p = 0.27$, one-tailed). Though by-election incumbents have, on average, a reelection rate that is 3.9 percentage points higher, their observed reelection rate is lower in five of thirteen elections. Going forward, we plan an analysis which matches by-election winners with conventional incumbents across a number of variables and then estimates the "treatment" effect of being a by-election incumbent. For the meantime, we can find no systematic reelection advantage or disadvantage for by-election winners.

9. Conclusion: Empirical Blind Spots and Canadian Politics

We have set out in this paper to ask four rather basic questions about Canadian by-elections. First, what increases or decreases turnout in by-elections? Second, are by-elections referenda on the government? Third, do minor parties do better in by-elections than in general elections? And, finally, do by-election winners face a different reelection rate than conventional incumbents? And we have gone some distance in answering these questions. We have found that turnout for by-elections is in decline, indeed in a faster decline than general election turnout. But this decline does not appear to be due to the nature of by-elections. We have also found evidence that by-elections act as a referendum on the government. We have found rather clear evidence that minor parties do perform better in by-elections than in general elections. And we have presented preliminary evidence that there is no clear difference in the reelection rates between incumbents who won their seat in the previous election and thus who won their seats in a by-election. Taken together, this represents a small step forward in our knowledge about a rather fundamental set of events in Canadian politics.

We argue that answering these questions is important because it adds systematic knowledge to the study of by-elections. As with many processes in Canadian politics, we think there is a lack of systematic, scientific knowledge about these events. To put it differently, there are fundamental empirical blind spots in Canadian politics, of which by-elections are but one example. While this rarely stop journalists and political scientists alike from speaking about these processes without

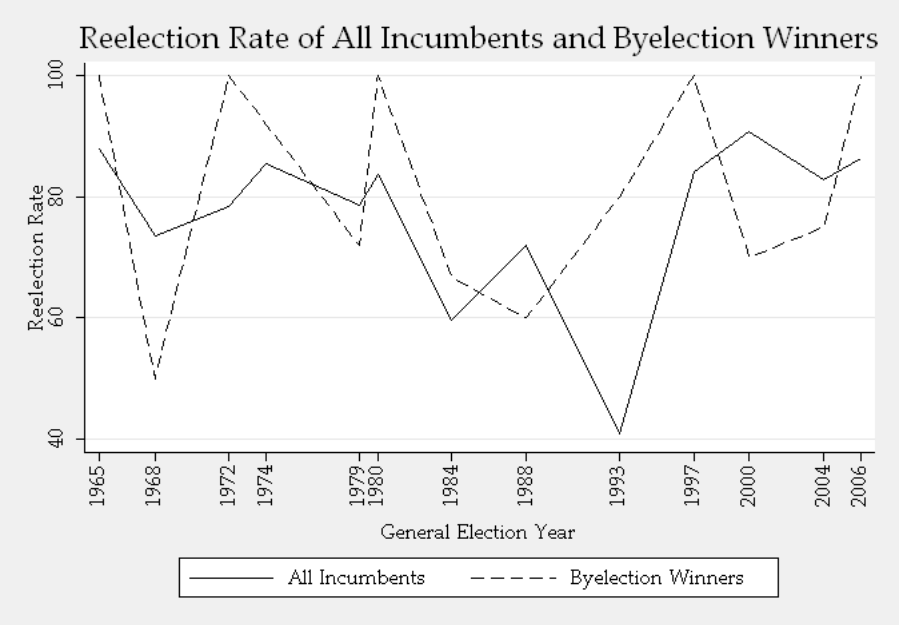

Figure 4: Reelection Rates of All Incumbents and By-election Winners

systematic knowledge, this remains true. To the extent that we can bring sight to these blind spots, we should.

It is our further contention that these blind spots are extensive. They can hardly be limited to by-elections. Let us highlight just five other examples. First, political scientists and observers of Canadian politics have regularly asserted that Question Period has become more rancorous and less substantive since the introduction of television. While this claim may have face validity, we know of no study that has systematically examined the content of Question Period before and after the introduction of television and convincingly isolated the causal effect of television. Despite the lack of systematic evidence for this claim, political scientists regularly advance arguments in the media along these lines. Moreover, they often make sweeping generalizations about the effects of this change on our political life.

Second, we know very little about trends in the regional politics of cabinet making in Canada. While it is regularly asserted that cabinet making is an act of balancing between regional interests, we know of no systematic studies that have quantified this phenomenon and shown its growth or decline over time. This is not to suggest that claims about regional balancing are untrue. But we cannot point to a study that demonstrates how true this claim is, namely through clearly specified and estimated parameters.

Third, we know very little about the adoption of Private Members' Business in Canada (save the recent work of Blidook (2007a, 2007b, 2008)). For example, we do not know whether private members' bills and motions are increasing or decreasing. We do not know if they are more or less likely to pass than in the past or what, if any, impact they have on the legislative/policy process. And we do not know what combination of local and national pressures motivate private members to bring forward these bills.

Fourth, we do not know whether national and local spending have differential effects during federal elections. Despite the important work of some scholars on the general effects of local spending (e.g. Eagles 2004), we still do not know what the effects of national spending are. Nonetheless, journalists and political scientists are willing and even eager to make claims about

the effects of these outlays. We would be on much better normative grounds if we could provide a clear description of the empirical effects of election spending.

Finally, we know very little about the relationship between committee service in Canada's parliament and electoral success. We cannot point to a single study that identifies whether committee service increases or decreases a federal politician's chances of reelection, let alone a theory that explains when and why a politician will accept a committee assignment. Despite this, committees play a rather fundamental role in our parliamentary system, particularly during minority governments.

It is not our intention to cast accusatory fingers or unnecessarily disparage our discipline. Rather, we are engaging in a justification for a project as seemingly trivial as laying bare the empirical facts regarding by-elections in Canada. Following the shopworn cliché, we are practicing what we preach. The fact of the matter is that we know very little about many fundamental if small processes and phenomena in our democracy. Yet, it appears that political scientists are willing to speak with authority on these topics. They are, in other words, willing to demonstrate that they do not know what they do not know. Our hope is that this paper would provide one example of how a small amount of effort can result in appreciable gains in knowledge when applied to otherwise unanswered questions. Our second hope is that some of the identified blind spots would then receive the attention of other scholars. We wish not to run down those who choose to answer"bigger" questions, though we might also reckon that they are often speaking from positions of concealed ignorance. If we want to expand our systematic knowledge beyond general elections and into other domains, then perhaps we should start with small questions.

References

Blais, André, Elisabeth Gidengil, Richard Nadeau and Neil Nevitte. 2002. Anatomy of a Liberal Victory: Making Sense of the Vote in the 2000 Canadian Election. Peterborough. Broadview Press.

Blidook, Kelly. 2008."The nature of representation in Canada - the 'focus' of MPs in Canada's Parliament." Paper presented at the Canadian Political Science Association Annual Meeting, Vancouver, BC, June 4-6, 2008.

Blidook, Kelly. 2007a."Dyadic Representation and Legislative Behaviour in Canada." Paper presented at the Canadian Political Science Association Annual Meeting, Saskatoon, SK, May 30-June1, 2007.

Blidook, Kelly. 2007b."Do the legislative actions of MPs matter?" Paper presented at the Canadian Political Science Association Annual Meeting, Saskatoon, SK, May 30-June 1, 2007.

Carty, Kenneth. 1988. Three Canadian Party Systems: An Interpretation of the Development of National Politics. In Party Democracy in Canada. The Politics of National Party Conventions. George Perlin (ed). Scarborough. Prentice-Hall.

Carty, Kenneth, William Cross, and Lisa Young. 2000. "Rebuilding Canadian Party Politics." Vancouver: UBC Press.

Clarke, Kevin. 2005. The Phantom Menace: Omitted Variable Bias in Econometric Research. Conflict Management and Peace Science 22: 34152.

Feigert, Frank B. and Pippa Norris (1990),"Do By-Elections Constitute Referenda? A Four-Country Comparison", Legislative Studies Quarterly 15(2): 183-200.

Kay, Barry J. (1981),"By-Elections as Indicators of Canadian Voting", Canadian Journal of Political Science 14(1): 37-52.

Massicotte, Louis (1981),"Les élections partielles provinciales au Qubec depuis 1867 : un bon thermomètre, un mauvais baromètre?", Recherches sociographiques 22(1) : 105-124.

Mughan, Anthony (1988),"On the By-Election Vote of Governments in Britain", Legislative Studies Quarterly 13(1): 29-48.

Mughan, Anthony (1986),"Toward a Political Explanation of Government Vote Losses in Midterm By-Elections", American Political Science Review 80(3): 761-775.

Pammett, Jon H. and Christopher Dornan (eds). 2004. The Canadian General Election of 2004. Toronto. Dundurn Group

Rallings, C., M. Thrasher, and G. Borisyuk (2003),"Seasonal factors, voter fatigue and the costs of voting", Electoral Studies 22(1): 65-79.

Scarrow, Howard A. (1961),"By-Elections and Public Opinion in Canada", Public Opinion Quarterly 25(1): 79-91.

Smith, David. 1985. "Party Government, Representation and National Integration in Canada". In Party Government and Regional Representation in Canada. Peter Aucoin (ed). Toronto. University of Toronto Press.