A Whole New Ballgame: The Rise of Canada's Fifth Party System

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Introduction

Canadian politics has long been defined by its political parties and its patterns of party competition. As Carty et. al maintain, "making sense of Canada has always meant making sense of its party politics" (2000: 3), while Jane Jenson and Janine Brodie have noted that "political parties are central actors in Canadian politics" (1996: 24). Indeed, there is little doubt that political parties play a central role in discourse on Canadian politics. Therefore, in order to understand present day Canadian politics one would be wise to look toward the country's political parties and party system for possible answers.

This paper asserts that Canadian politics underwent a major transition beginning in late 2003 and represents the rise of a new era in Canadian politics: the fifth-party system. In addition to a significant partisan re-alignment and new patterns of party competition, a number of other fundamental changes have occurred which suggest that the fourth party system has effectively come to an end. Amendments to the *Canada Elections Act* have fundamentally altered the system of campaign finance in Canada. This era has also witnessed the development of a new discursive framework of political campaigning which has centered on the family unit. In the fifth-party system, politics has increasingly been focused on the family as its predominant unit of analysis. Additionally, the rise of more democratic and accessible forms of two-way communication, known as Web 2.0, represents an important technological development. Taken together, these factors suggest the rise of a new fifth-party system.

Historical Understanding of Party Systems

There are a number of competing definitions of party systems. At some level, a party system refers to the competition between political parties in an attempt to garner support for their particular interests and gain electoral support in the process. As Leon Epstein has suggested, party systems can be viewed as the "competitive interaction patterns among party units" (Epstein, 1975: 234). The construction of party systems as the competitive interaction between political parties has received considerable attention from those studying parties and party systems. Viewed this way, party systems are often labeled as 'one-party dominance' in situations where there exists one near hegemonic party and little to no meaningful competition between the rival political parties and as 'two-party systems' where there exist two parties who each have a realistic chance at forming government and where meaningful competition occurs between the two (Duverger, 1954).

Many theories construct Canadian parties as brokerage parties, referring to their non-ideological nature, penchant for consensus building and elite accommodation, and their sole purpose of winning and maintaining office (Jenson and Brodie, 1996: 29). As Alexander Brady maintained, "as one party or the other maneuvers into a fresh position, the partisan battleground changes. The leaders who succeed in making the widest national appeal are those who rule" (1947: 94). In this sense, Canadian parties are devoid of any consistent theory, and instead constantly alter their platforms in an attempt to out due their opponent. Parties, therefore, attempt to build a national appeal and ensure that voters respond to their current vision for the country.

Following the rise of 'third parties' at the federal level, notably the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) and Social Credit in the 1930s, Canadian politics could no longer be viewed simply as a 'two-party' system. Although neither the CCF nor Social Credit ever formed government at the federal level, they clearly had an important influence on federal politics and the existing parties were forced to respond their growing influence. As a result, Canada's former 'two-party' system was seen as a 'two-and-a-half party system.' The addition

of the 'half-party' was to reflect the existence and relative strength of these new parties, but also to reflect that the fact that they would be unlikely to form government and forever be relegated to third-party status

These aforementioned constructions of party system, however, are limited in their scope. While they adhere to Epstein's basic conception of the party system as competitive interaction patterns among party units, they nevertheless fail to take into account other relevant factors that effect the operation of the party system. Patten refers to such a narrow construction as being one of "the simplest level" (2007: 55). In short, parties do not exist in a vacuum. Any understanding of party systems must extend beyond the narrow confines of parties themselves and include the structural and institutional factors that play an important role in the operation of political parties.

An Overview of Party Systems

R.K. Carty has noted the that there are many influences on parties, arguing that they "…have been primarily shaped by the politics of party governance: party system change has flowed from political change, and most directly from changes in the institutional arrangements for governing, within which the political parties have had to operate" (2001a: 30). What then, are these institutional and structural arrangements that have been referred to, and, more importantly, how do they affect parties and party systems in practice? Only in moving on to a more nuance analysis of party systems can one truly appreciate the complexities of a party system. Carty provides information on how to best conceptualize a more complex party system by asking the following questions:

> How do the parties organize and operate? How do they provide individual voters with the institutions and opportunity to participate in government? How do they conceive of their representational responsibilities? How do they mobilize support, and with what consequence for the underlying political equations that govern the nation's politics? How are they financed? How do they structure the communication necessary for democratic debate and choice? (Carty et. al, 2000: 4).

By asking these questions, one can gain insight into the components of a party system and a better understanding of how it operates.

Steve Patten has developed a similar overview of the structural and institutional factors that define a party system (2007: 56-57). The organizational structure and operational character of parties, including their method of leadership selection and policy development, has an important role in influencing the character of political parties and the party system. Equally important is the legal framework of rules that govern whom is eligible to vote and under what conditions. The norms and practices that define leadership, campaign and media behaviour are important, but so too is the discursive framework that creates the boundaries of salient political issues and interests.

In Canada, however, it is more appropriate to speak of party systems instead of a singular party system as each party system is distinctive from the one that preceded it. Building off David Smith's (1985) model of party-in-government in Canada, subsequent scholars have identified the existence of at least four distinctive party systems in Canadian history (Carty et. al, 2000; Carty, 2001a; Carty et. al 2001; Bickerton and Gagnon, 2004; Patten, 2007).

There is general agreement that Canada's first party system existed from the time of Confederation (1867) to the end of World War II (1917), but had its 'heyday' between 1896 and 1911 (Carty et, al 2000; Carty 2001; Bickerton and Gagnon, 2004; Patten, 2007: 57). The second party system emerged following the 1921 federal election and ended with John

Diefenbaker's election in 1957 (Carty et, al 2000; Carty 2001; Bickerton and Gagnon, 2004; Patten, 2007). Note that the years between 1917 and 1921 are not viewed as being part of either the first or second party system. This five-year period can be characterized as a transition phase from one party system to the next.

While there is a general consensus that the third party system began in 1963 (Carty et, al 2000; Carty 2001; Bickerton and Gagnon, 2004; Patten, 2007), establishing an end date for the third party system has proven to considerably difficult. For example, Patten suggests that the third party system "…began to unravel when Brian Mulroney swept the Progressive Conservatives (PCs) to power in 1984 (2007, 58)." Those who argue that the third party system ended in 1984 are unclear as to exactly what constitutes the rise of a fourth party system. Bickerton and Gagnon, for example, suggest that the 1984 and 1988 elections marked the return to "something more closely resembling a truly national party politics," but that this national system was "shattered" by the results of the 1993 election (2004, 250). The 1997 election, they maintain, "cemented the fourth party system in place" (Bickerton and Gagnon, 2004; 251).

For his part, Patten indicates that aspects of the fourth party system began to take shape during the Mulroney years (1984 to 1993), but that the 'tumultuous' politics of the 1990s may better reflect "an era of transition that may only have solidified in the first elections after the 2003 merger of the Canadian Alliance and the PCs into the Conservative Party of Canada (2007, 58). While earlier work by Carty (1993) suggested that the third party system ended in 1984, more recent work indicates that the third party system ended only with the watershed election of 1993 (Carty et. al 2000, Carty 2001). Viewed in this light, Carty et al. maintain that the fourth party system began in 1993.

Although the approximate time periods in which various party systems have existed has been established, it is also necessary to provide an overview of each system to properly contextualize the structural and institutional factors that existed within each system.

The First Party System

The politics of Canada's first party system (1867-1917) was defined by patronage, partisanship, and state building. There existed only two parties, the Liberals and the Conservatives, though they are often viewed as "little more than loose coalitions that took their form from the institutions of Parliament, rather than electoral competition" (Patten, 2007: 58; see also Siegfried, 1966: 114). Nonetheless, the two parties shared commonalties as "for both Macdonald, and then Laurier, party-building was simply the necessary political dimension of state building" (Carty, 2001: 17). The nation building strategy was largely achieved through the National Policy, a system in which a tariff wall between the USA and Canada was established with the result of fostering an east-west economy in which the railway was used to ship eastern-made manufacturer goods to western Canada (Brodie, 1990). Furthermore, the party was built around a dominant leader, elected by his caucus, and was responsible for building and maintaining any assemblage of a party machine.

Although there was a rudimentary campaign finance system in place- candidates had to disclose their spending and there were restrictions on union and corporate donations following 1908- they "were not carefully enforced, and they ignored the fundraising activities of the parties and their leaders (Patten, 2007: 60, see also Carty et. al, 2000: 131-32). Furthermore, there existed an intimate relationship between parties and the largely partisan media, as "politicians wanted and expected subservience…from the media [and] in return, the newspapers and their

proprietors received government patronage in the form of advertising and printing contracts" (Carty, 2001: 20). Restrictions on the vote were widespread, as only a limited segment of the population was able to vote. Quite simply, notions of universal suffrage were foreign to the first party system, which privileged socially and economically elite males of a predominantly British and French background.

The Second Party System

The rise of the second party system coincides largely with the 1921 federal election, which saw a number of important developments to both the institutional factors and the nature of partisan competition. First, the franchise was extended allowing most women to vote and run for office in federal elections. Secondly, the election saw the rise of the Progressives, a third-party based in Western Canada, representing agrarian protest and opposed to the 'National Policy' of Macdonald and Laurier (Morton, 1950). Throughout this party system, the birth of new parties-most notably the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) and Social Credit- sought to incorporate diverse interests into the political system.

Changes to the federal civil service also mark an important feature of the second party system. The professionalization of the civil service of the rise of merit-based appointments "deprived the party organizations of the glue that held them together" and caused them, and particularly the governing party, to "[lose] the power to dominate the administrative machinery of the state" (Carty, 2001: 22). Another important structural change in the second party system was the rise of brokerage politics, which refers to the parties' desire to build a national coalition through the balancing the competing interests of Canada's diverse regions. Led by William Lyon Mackenize King, the Liberal Party understanding of the need to build an effective and relatively united cross-regional electoral coalition eventually turned the Liberals into the natural "government party" (Carty, 2001: 22; Whitaker, 1977).

Campaign finance was still largely unregulated throughout the second-party system, which resulted in considerable differences between the parties. The upstart CCF, a mass-based party relying primarily on the dues of its members and their contributions, operated on a shoestring budget (Carty, 2001: 24). The Progressive Conservative Party experienced some financial hardship over throughout this party system and faced some periods of considerable uncertainty (Granatstein, 1967). The governing Liberal Party, on the other hand, faced far fewer financial worries. In fact, they were able to gain considerable access to the private sector while in government (Whitaker, 1977).

The Third Party System

Beginning in 1963, following a six-year transition period during the Diefenbaker era, the third party system is characterized by the increased role of technology (television) and polling, the rise of extra-parliamentary wings, leader-centered parties and campaigns, the introduction of meaningful campaign finance reform and the rise of pan-Canadian politics.

The end of Canada's second-party system "…opened up Canada to a new, modern, national politics" (Carty, 2001: 26). The rise of a more modern political system, characterized by the heightened role of television advertising and polling professional, grew slowly in the 1960s and did not fully emerge until the 1970s (Patten 2007: 67). The growing influence of these paid professionals within the party altered the way in which parties conduct business, notably connecting with potential voters and in determining and allocating political priorities.

Somewhat paradoxically, the third party system is also characterized by the expansion of extra-parliamentary organizations and enabling the parties' grassroots supporters to have a larger voice within the party. While the Progressive Conservatives and the newly formed New

Democratic Party also established more robust extra-parliamentary wings, the best example of this was the emphasis that the Liberals placed on growing the National Liberal Federation (NLF) and expanding the role of their local constituency associations.

Another important feature of the third-party system was the rise of a leader-centered party, which was aided by the ability to appear on television and provide a clear face and voice for the party. While in the past it was necessary to rely more heavily on local associations, regional 'cheiftains,' and allied provincial leaders, the new era of technology and polling allowed parties to "direct their appeal to individual citizens and seek to engage their support…" which in turn produced "…a pan-Canadian style of political leadership and governance" (Carty, 2001: 26, see also Smith, 1985).

Finally, the introduction of legislation that regulated- on some level- campaign finance represented an important political development of the third-party system, and helps to characterize it as a distinctly different era than previous ones. The passage of the *Election Expenses Act* in 1974 put an end to decades of virtually unregulated party financing and "…impacted most significantly on the operation of partisan politics" (Patten, 2007: 68).

The Fourth Party System

There is, admittedly, considerable disagreement over when the third-party system came to an end. The present author, in conjunction with Carty et. al (2000), believes that "Canadian party politics collapsed in the early 1990s" and that the 1993 federal election marked "…the first step in the establishment of the fourth Canadian party system" (Carty et al, 2000: 1).

The first, and perhaps the most obvious characteristic of the fourth party system, was the change in patterns of partisan competition, most clearly evident as a result of the "electoral earthquake" that was the 1993 federal election (Carty et. al, 2000: 13). Throughout the fourth party system, the Liberals re-established and maintained a position as the 'government party.' This success was related to the changing nature of partisan competition during this era, notably the rise of the Bloc Quebecois and Reform in the 1993 election. The rise of two new parties was accompanied by the decline of two established parties, the New Democratic Party and the Progressive Conservatives, who won a total of 9 and 2 seats respectively, and in the process lost status as an official party in the House of Commons. With both Reform and the Progressive Conservatives situated on the right-side of the political spectrum and vying for votes from similarly-minded voters, Canada's right-wing was effectively divided, aiding the Liberals in securing three-consecutive majority governments.

The fourth-party system was also a highly regionalized one, representing a shift from the emphasis on pan-Canadian politics of the previous era (Carty et. al, 2001: 34). This characteristic is closely related to the rise of Reform and the Bloc Quebecois. As a result of regionalization in the west and Quebec, the Liberals became an Ontario-centric party, winning 98 of Ontario's 99 seats in 1993, 101 of Ontario's 103 seats in 1997, and 100 of Ontario's 103 seats in 2000. The combined effects of this led to the Progressive Conservative Party "…being reduce to a party for Atlantic Canada" (Patten, 2007: 70).

A populist uprising was also a notable feature of the fourth-party system. This infusion of populism was originally and most forcefully articulated by the Reform party (and later the Canadian Alliance), although it soon caught on with all parties and helped to define this party system. As Carty et. al maintain, there existed during this era "…participatory impulses…[which helped to] make the parties themselves for democratic organizations," while the "…rising assertiveness and populism of the Canadian electorate contributed to the demise of the third party system" (2001: 34). Perhaps the clearest example of this is the transition from the

former method of leadership selection, the delegated convention, to a one member-one vote system in which all party members are afforded a direct vote in the leadership process.

The final characteristic defining the fourth party system was the rise of the 'virtual party,' a term that entails two features. The first feature of a virtual party is that parties are little more than empty vessels waiting to be filled by a leader and his or her advisors. Secondly, a virtual party is ideologically hollow and serves merely as a 'brand' that can be marketed to political consumers (see Whitaker, 2001 and Patten, 2007: 73).

The Fifth Party System: An Overview

Beginning in 2003, Canada experienced the rise of the fifth-party system, although this system developed more fully over the next few years. This party system is defined by a number of characteristics. The rise of social media and Web 2.0 is a defining feature of this system as it has allowed parties to connect to voters and spread their message in entirely new ways. The establishment of a new campaign finance regime in 2004- and further amended in 2006- significantly altered the amounts of money which parties can collect and who they can collect it from. Beginning in 2008 with the NDP, but most notably in 2011 with all the major parties, was the rise of a new discursive framework focused on the family, in which policy priorities became increasingly geared toward 'the family' or 'families.' Lastly, significant changes to patterns of party competition have resulted in a partisan re-alignment.

Social Media and the Fifth Party System

In much the same way that the rise of television broadcasting was a defining feature of the third party system, the rise of Web 2.0 is similarly a defining feature of the fifth party system and one that facilitates a direct and participatory connection with voters. In describing the differences between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0, Terry Flew notes that by 2003, the Internet underwent a transition from "…personal websites to blogs and blog site aggregation, from publishing to participation, from web content as the outcome of large up-front investment to an ongoing and interactive process, and from content management systems to links based on tagging" (Flew, 2008). In other words, Web 1.0 represented a one-way communication flow, whereas Web 2.0 was significantly more interactive, democratic, and participatory. As Tamara Small has noted, "In the 2004 federal election, Canadian sites were more dynamic and integrated into the overall strategy of the parties" than they were in previous election and Canadian political parties and their leaders have embraced the potential of Web 2.0 in subsequent election campaigns (Small, 2008: 85).

This became apparent during the 2011 election campaign, in which all five party leaders utilized Facebook and Twitter to connect with potential voters. Indeed, as Table 1 illustrates, over the course of the election campaign the online followers of all party leaders increased greatly. However, the table also illustrates that Twitter was a more popular communication tool than was Facebook for all party leaders. Each of Stephen Harper, Michael Ignatieff, and Jack Layton gained a similar number of 'followers' over the campaign, though Layton saw the highest increase in terms of the percentage of followers. The number of 'likes' received on Facebook was noticeably lower for Stephen Harper than for Michael Ignatieff and Jack Layton. Overall, while none of the candidates utilized social networking more so than their competitors, social network sites appear to have become a significant source of communication between party leader and potential voter, and these numbers are likely to grow over the next few years.

Table 1: Number of Facebook 'Likes' and Twitter 'Followers:" Five Party Leaders, 2011

| Leader/ Network | Feb 22 | Mar 31 | Apr 13 | Apr 22 | Apr 29 | May 3 | Gain: Feb 22 to May 3 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Harper. FB | 39 649 | 44 843 | 49 286 | 51 483 | 53 259 | 56 008 | 16 362 |

| Harper. Twit | 91 497 | 114 618 | 125 353 | 129 385 | 132 537 | 136 482 | 44 985 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ignatieff. FB | 33 198 | 44 275 | 56 323 | 62 662 | 67 214 | 70 342 | 37 144 |
| Ignatieff Twit | 58 030 | 76 327 | 89 584 | 94 392 | 96 584 (Eng.) 4134 (Fr.) | 97 769 (Eng). 4 237 (Fr.) | 39 739 (Eng.) |
| Layton FB | 31 518 | 35 366 | 42 008 | 49 312 | 59 860 | 70 940 | 39 422 |
| Layton Twit. | 54 619 | 69 451 | 79 648 | 85 932 | 91 631 | 98 940 | 44 321 |
| May FB | 7 304 | 8 430 | 9 631 | 10 292 | 10 675 | 11 766 | 4 462 |
| MayTwit. | 10 970 | 15 966 | 21 189 | 22 524 | 23 326 (Eng.) 775 (Fr.) | 25 348 (Eng.) 1 036 (Fr.) | 14 378 (Eng.) |
| Duceppe FB | 5 375 | 6 128 | 7 054 | 7 836 | 8 278 | n/a | 2903 *to Apr 29 |
| Duceppe Twit. | 42 247 | 49 853 | 53 489 | 55 760 | 56 886 | 58 282 | 16 035 |

These numbers should not be merely written off as a fad as they appear to allow parties and leaders to connect with supporters and potential supporters. Small, for example, asserts that "with Web 2.0, a politician [can] use the Internet to allow for considerable participation in the campaign by letting supporters contribute campaign content and interact with the party and with other supporters" (2008: 87). During the 2011 election campaign, it appears that there party leaders have been successful in doing this, though future research is needed to determine the exact impact of social networking in the political spectrum. Of note, however, is the fact that Web 2.0 has the possibility of allowing politicians to connect with the millennial generation, those born between 1980 and 2000, who are the least likely to vote and participate in traditional forms of political activity (Pammett and LeDuc, 2003; Tossutti, 2007).

Another usage of Web 2.0 is to allow supporters to donate to the party on-line. Indeed, all the parties prominently feature a link on their main page from which supporters can make a secure on-line donation. This represents a new medium from which to collect money, and may help to attract new individual financial backers to help offset the loss of corporate and union donations. While the on-line donations are no subject to public disclosure, the NDP reported that it collected over $350,000 over Easter weekend and the Tuesday after (n.a., Hamilton Spectator, 29 April 2011: A9). This data, however limited, suggests that the web-based donations represent a significant source of parties' income, and this figure is only likely to increase in the future.

The last feature of Web 2.0, and perhaps its most important, is the possibility of on-line voting. While the prospects for on-line voting have been touted for some time, it is only recently that this phenomenon has become a reality. During the 2011 campaign, Canada's Chief Electoral Officer, Marc Maynard, announced that on-line voting could be used in a by-election as early as 2013 (n.a, Hamilton Spectator, 5 April 2011). While it is too early to speculate on whether or not Parliament will consent to testing on-line voting in a by-election, let alone implementing it in a general election, the prospect of on-line becoming a reality represents yet another important feature of Web 2.0. Although on-line voting will not extend the franchise to anyone who previously was not legally afforded that right, it is quite possible that its implementation will represent a symbolic extension of the franchise in the sense that it may engage Canadians who have not previously voted, especially younger Canadians.

Campaign Finance and the Fifth Party System

Money is essential to the operation of party politics in Canada because, as Young et. al rightly note, "…parties require financial resources to communicate with voters, mobilize their supporters, and maintain their party organization" (2007: 335). Not surprisingly, campaign finance is of considerable importance to the nature of partisan competition and the functioning of a party system.

In 2003, in the immediate aftermath of the sponsorship scandal, Parliament made sweeping changes to the *Canada Elections Act*, which has had significant effects on the way that parties can raise money and contributes to the rise of a distinctly new fifth party system. (Young et. al, 340). The most notable change to the *Canada Elections Act* limited the role of unions and corporations in funding political parties, forcing parties to increase their reliance on individual donations. As a result of these changes, union and corporate donations were banned at the national level, limited to $1,000 per year to electoral district association and individual candidates, and individual donations were capped at a maximum of $5,000 per year. To compensate for the lost revenue, the legislative changes also extended to parties an annual allowance of $1.75 (indexed to inflation) for each vote won in the most recent election.[1] The effect of this shift from corporate financing (and union financing in the case of the NDP) to state-funding and individual funding has "…turned Canadian parties into wards of the state, albeit to varying degrees," with smaller parties (such as the Green Party) receiving virtually all of their funding from the state, though larger parties still receive a considerable portion of their funding from the state (Young et. al, 341).

These changes have had demonstrable effects on all of Canada's political parties and their interactions with civil society organizations. The Green Party and Bloc Quebecois received little funding from business or labour prior to 2004, and have therefore benefitted greatly from the regime of public finance. While the New Democratic Party has fared "reasonably well under the new system" it has "…essentially ended the financial relationship between organized labour and the NDP…[and]…the elimination of this money constituted a tangible loss for the party" (Young et. al, 344, 349, 350). Meanwhile the Liberal Party, which historically had the closest relationship with business, has had "…little choice but to emulate the Conservative Party's success in developing an extensive base of individuals willing to give small donations" (Young et. al, 348). Lastly, the Conservative Party, which never shared the same ties to Canada's corporate elite as the Liberals, have fared particularly well under the new system and have continued the Canadian Alliance's success of tapping into grassroots, individual-based donations. The additional public funds for the Conservatives, which are by far the most financially viable of all the parties, serve as a mere bonus.

Further changes to Canada's regime of campaign finance occurred in 2006, in which the *Federal Accountability Act* (Bill C-2) was passed as part of the Conservative Party's broad election promise to make government more transparent and accountable. The 2006 changes went beyond those introduced in 2004 to fully eliminate all donations from civil society organizations, as well as reducing individual donations from $5,000 to $1,100.

While the per-vote subsidy to parties was seen as a trade-off for the lost revenue form the prohibition on union and corporate donations, it has become an increasingly important element of the fifth-party system. In an effort to deal with the economic recession of 2008 (and, perhaps, to derail the opposition), Finance Minister Jim Flaherty announced a number of cuts to government spending, including the public subsidy to political parties in late November 2008 (n.a., 27 November 2008). The move to cut this subsidy, in part, led the opposition to parties to threaten a defeat of the government and a coalition, though this was eventually put to rest following Governor General Michaelle Jean's decision to prorogue parliament.

The issue of public subsidies for political parties reared its head again during the 2011 election campaign, when Prime Minister Harper once again suggested that this subsidy should be

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[1] This was subject to the party winning 2% of the vote nationally or 5% of the vote in the ridings in which they fielded candidates. As of 2010, this figure has increased to approximately $2.00 per vote.

ended.  On a campaign stop near Moncton, New Brunswick in March, 2011, the Prime Minister asserted that the "…per-vote subsidy…means we're constantly having campaigns…[because]….the war chests are always full for another campaign" (Chase and Galloway, 2011).  To be sure, in 2010, the per-vote-subsidy awarded $10.4 million for the Tories, $7.6 million for the Liberals, about $5 million for the New Democrats and over $2.8 million for the Bloc Quebecois.  Now that the Conservatives have won a majority government, it is likely that this subsidy will end.  Regardless of what happens to the subsidy, the changes to the *Canada Elections Act*  "have heightened the incentive to raise money from individuals to an imperative for the largest two parties," which has in turn forced parties to "…maintain or even strengthen their connections to their social base" (Young et. al, 336).  These connections will become ever more important in the event that the subsidy is ended, a distinct possibility following the Conservatives' victory in the 2011 election.

Fixed-Term Elections

In May 2007, a bill introduced by the Conservative government was passed which required Canadian federal elections to be held every four years, on the third Monday in October, in the fourth calendar year after the previous poll.  The first fixed-date election was to be held on October 19, 2009.  Prior to the passage of this law, an election needed to be held at least every fifth year (according to section 4.1 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*), though according to convention the Prime Minister was able to request a dissolution of Parliament at any point and call an election prior to the five-year limit.  Prime Ministers would often call an early election at a time when it was politically advantageous for them to do so.

Amendments to the *Canada Elections Act* in 2007 made the calling of such snap elections illegal, and in theory regulated the electoral to cycle to every fourth year, similar to the fixed-term electoral system of the USA.  In Canada, however, which operates under a parliamentary system, the government can govern only as long as it retains the confidence of the House of Commons.  When this confidence is lost, convention stipulates that an election is held, regardless of a fixed-term election law.  Indeed, the law clearly states that it does not affect "…the powers of the Governor General, including the power to dissolve Parliament at the Governor General's discretion."

The proliferation of minority governments in the early part of the fifth-party system has thus far prevented an election from occurring under the conditions established by the fixed-term law.  To be sure, the 2008 election was called following Stephen Harper's request to dissolve parliament and the 2011 election was called following the defeat of the government at the hands of an opposition non-confidence vote.[2]  Harper's justification for calling an election in 2008 was that Parliament had become "dysfunctional" and that he could no longer govern given the fractious nature of the House (cited in Mintz et. al, 2011: 248).

However, now that a majority government has been achieved, it is worth examining if this new law will have affect and prevent the Prime Minister from calling an election in advance of the fixed-date (currently set for October 19, 2015), given the likelihood that a majority government will not become dysfunctional or fractious.  Despite the law, constitutional

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[2] Democracy Watch, a Canadian organization dedicated to democratic reform and government accountability, challenged the Prime Minister's ability to request and the Governor General's ability to dissolve parliament, arguing that under the terms of the new law, an election could be called only when the government's term expired or the government lost the confidence of the House.  This case was dismissed by the Federal Court of Canada.  See n.a. "Court challenge of 2008 election dismissed," CBC News.  Available on-line at: http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2009/09/17/democracy-watch-case.html?ref=rss

convention dictates that the Governor General has little wiggle room and generally must accept the advice given by the Prime Minister. According to Curtis Johnson Cole that while "theoretically…a Governor General has discretionary powers in this situation… in practice [he or she is] bound by law and convention to dissolve the House when asked to"(n.a. "How we head to the polls, fixed dates or not," August 27, 2008). This point has also been widely supported by constitutional expert Ned Franks.

Thus, it would appear that the Prime Minister can legally call an election in prior to the end of the four-year fixed-term, but in the absence of a dysfunctional or fractious Parliament, one may expect the Prime Minister to refrain from requesting an early dissolution. In any event, the new law has limited the maximum length of a parliament from five years to four years. While this institutional change may have less of an impact on the fifth-party system than the rise of social media or the changes to campaign finance, it is a change that should not be overlooked.

A Focus on the Family in the Fifth Party System

One of the important criteria of the classification of a party system is the substance of politics, or the major issues that politicians structure their policies around. Steve Patten refers to the substance of politics as being the "…discursive framework that delimits the boundaries of political debate by establishing what are to be the core issues, interests, and identities that animate partisan competition" (2007: 56). In this sense, certain political issues are salient in certain eras. Historically, the substance of each party system has been different, and Carty refers to this as the 'focus' of the party system (2001: 31).

The fifth-party system has its own discursive framework or focus, and thus represents another important change from the comparatively unfocused fourth-party system (Carty et. al, 2001: 24). Rather than a focus on larger units of analysis such as the constituency, the region, or the nation- as was the case with previous party systems- the focus of the fifth-party system is on a much smaller unit, the family. This is perhaps consistent with neo-liberalism, which tends to atomize politics and focus on the smallest possible unit of analysis (Harvey, 2007). To varying degrees, all the parties have adopted the family as their central unit of analysis, though this is more noticeable amongst the three largest parties.

The adoption of the family did not occur overnight and correspond directly with the rise of the fifth-party system, but rather, has slowly been adopted as the focus of politics as the system matured. This became apparent during the 2011 election. To be sure, two of the parties- the Liberals and the NDP- have the word family directly in the name of their 2011 platforms.[3] To varying degrees, each of the parties has highlighted the importance of the family/families to their election strategy, making it a salient political issue and the defining unit of analysis of the fifth-party system. Indeed, the words family/families are frequently used in the parties' platforms. The Conservatives uses the word 'family' 15 times and the word 'families' 43 times in their 67 page platform (Conservative Party of Canada, 2011a), while the NDP uses the word 'family' 26 times and the word 'families' 7 times in their 28 page platform (NDP, 2011a). These words are utilized most by the Liberals, who used the word 'family' 67 times and the word 'families' 75 times in their 98 page platform (Liberal Party of Canada, 2011a). The focus on the family has not extended, however, to the Green Party, who only uses the word 'families' twice in their 12 page platform (Green Party of Canada, 2011) or the sovereignist Bloc Quebecois, who

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[3] The Liberal Party's 2011 platform was entitled "Your Family. Your Future. Your Canada" while the NDP's 2011 platform was entitled "Giving Your Family a Break: Practical First Steps." In 2008, the NDP's platform was entitled "Jack Layton and the New Democrats: A Prime Minister on your family's side, for a change."

only uses the word 'familles' once in their 28 page platform (Bloc Quebecois, 2011), though it can be argued that the Bloc's focus is on the nation or the centre-periphery conflict.

Table 2: Usage of the words 'family and 'families' in party platforms, 2006 to 2011

| Year/Party | Family | Families | Total | Number of Pages | Family/Families per page |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **2006 NDP** | 11 | 25 | 36 | 52 | 0.69 |
| **2006 Cons.** | 11 | 19 | 40 | 25 | 1.6 |
| **2006 Libs.** | 32 | 18 | 50 | 86 | 0.58 |
| **2008 NDP** | 22 | 28 | 50 | 56 | 0.89 |
| **2008 Cons.** | 6 | 16 | 22 | 44 | 0.50 |
| **2008 Libs.** | 13 | 16 | 29 | 74 | 0.39 |
| **2011 NDP** | 26 | 7 | 33 | 28 | 1.18 |
| **2011 Cons.** | 15 | 43 | 58 | 67 | 0.87 |
| **2011 Libs.** | 67 | 75 | 142 | 98 | 1.45 |
| **2011 Green** | 0 | 2 | 2 | 12 | 0.17 |
| **2011 Bloc** | 0 | 1 | 1 | 28 | 0.04 |

A noticeable campaign strategy has been to simplify platforms by creating five-point plans that are emphasized by the parties. The focus on the family has factored into these five-point plans and has been a central feature for each of the Conservatives, NDP, and Liberals. The Conservatives' "Here for Canada" five-point plan lists "supporting families" as the second point (Conservative Party of Canada, 2011b), while the NDP's "Practical First Steps" lists "help your family budget" as the fourth point (NDP, 2011b). In much the same way that the words family and families were most frequently used in the Liberals' platform, their five-point was entitled the "family five-pack," and listed the post-secondary learning passport, early childhood learning, family care, stronger public pensions, and the green renovation tax credit as its' five points (Liberal Party of Canada, 2011b). Each of these parties relied heavily on the family as the predominant frame or focus of their political priorities during this election, suggesting that it may become the defining discursive framework of the fifth-party system.

Party Competition, Partisan Re-alignment and the Fifth Party System

One of the defining features of the fifth party system is the changing notions of party competition and the corresponding partisan re-alignment. Although the existence of minority governments is nothing new, they have become increasingly common in recent years. In each of 2004, 2006, and 2008, elections produced minority governments, indicating the beginnings of partisan re-alignment in the new party-system. After three elections which produced minority governments, Canadians elected a majority government in 2011 for the first time since the 2000 election. The 2011 election, which saw the Conservative Party win its first majority after being elected to two minority governments, altered patterns of party competition and re-aligned the existing partisan system (Radwanski, 2011).

Changing notions of party competition and partisan re-alignment began in late 2003, when the former Canadian Alliance (CA) and Progressive Conservative (PC) parties announced their decision to merge into the newly formed Conservative Party of Canada (CPC) (Laghi, 2003: A1). The merger of these two parties not only reduced the number of parties contesting elections by one, it also united the right-wing of the political spectrum. The merger of these two parties into the CPC began to shift partisan competition and represents an important feature of the fifth party system.

The changing nature of partisan politics as a result of this merger has had a significant impact the proliferation of minority governments that occurred in the early part of this era.

Jennifer Smith has noted that one of the reasons for the 2004 minority parliament was the merger of the CA and the PC parties in 2003 (Smith: 2005). There are additional reasons besides the current party structure that explain the frequency of minority governments in the early party of the fifth-party era (Pammett and Dornan, 2006; Clarke et. al, 2009), they will not be examined here. However, in the early part of this era, there was no clear choice amongst the electorate for a majority government. As one observer has rightly noted, "when a minority is elected in Canada, it's obvious that it results from a divided electorate" (Norquay, 2009: 24). This was the case in 2004, 2006, and 2008, though the 2011 election suggests that the electorate is less divided and sees itself having two real choices. Indeed, it appears that Canada is once again in into a 'two-party system' and a clear choice exists between a left-wing party in the NDP and a right-wing party in the Conservatives (Radwanski, 2011; Hebert, 2011).

Of the 2011 election, one observer has remarked that "voting realignment like this comes only once in a generation" (Naumetz, 2011). While the 2011 election may represents a clear partisan re-alignment, Table 3 illustrates that patterns of partisan competition have been shifting over the course of the fifth-party system, with a steady rise of support for both the Conservatives and the NDP, and an equally steady decline of support for the Liberals and the Bloc Quebecois. These changing patterns of party competition began in 2004 and continued to evolve, becoming most apparent in 2011. Although it is too early to comment on the long-term impacts of this shift, there is little doubt that the competitive interaction between Canada's parties has been greatly altered over the course of the fifth-party system.

Table 3: Party Support by Popular Vote, 2004 to 2011

| Party | 2004 | 2006 | 2008 | 2011 |
|-------|------|------|------|------|
| Conservative | 29.6% | 36.3% | 37.7% | 39.6% |
| NDP | 15.7% | 17.5% | 18.2% | 30.6% |
| Liberal | 36.7% | 30.2% | 26.3% | 18.9% |
| Bloc | 12.4% | 10.5% | 10.0% | 6.0% |
| Green | 4.3% | 4.5% | 6.8% | 3.9% |

The long-term fates of both the Bloc Quebecois and the Liberal Party have been put into question following the 2011 election. Each party lost 43 seats, reducing the Liberals from 77 seats to 34 and the Bloc from 47 seats to 4. Furthermore, the Bloc Quebecois also failed to qualify for official party status, meaning that its members will be officially recognized as independents, will only be able to ask a few questions each week in question period, cannot sit as voting members on parliamentary committees and will not have any additional money for research and staff. The Green Party's share of the vote also dropped significantly, though it did elect an MP for the first time in the party's history.

The fifth-party system has also illustrated a shift in regional patterns of party competition, though this is most notable after in the aftermath of the 2011 election. The Bloc Quebecois has lost its once firmly-held grip on Quebec, and the NDP has become the party of both the social-democratic left and the party of federalists in Quebec, winning 58 seats in 2011 after previously winning only one seat in a general election in the party's history. The Liberals, for their part, have witnessed significant loses in Ontario, largely at the expense of the Conservatives and to a lesser degree the NDP. After winning 98, 101, and 100 seats in Ontario in the three elections in the fourth party system (1993, 1997, and 2000), the party has seen its numbers in Ontario drop to 75, 54, 38 and 11 in the four elections held during the fifth-party system. Meanwhile the Conservative Party has made gains in Ontario- especially in the seat rich Greater Toronto Area- and has seen their Ontario-based seats increase from 24 in the 2004 election to 73 in the 2011

election. While it may also be too early to predict the long-term regional effects of this shift, there is little doubt that Canada's fifth-party system has witnessed a partisan re-alignment at both the national and regional level.

<u>Conclusion</u>

Canadian politics, long-defined by its political parties and its party systems began to evolve into a new era in late 2003. The merger of the Canadian Alliance and the Progressive Conservative party in December 2003 helped to usher in this era by uniting Canada's right-wing parties, the new party-era had not fully developed until further technological and institutional changes that occurred beginning in 2004. While the early part of this era was defined by the election of minority governments, the fifth-party system continued to mature right through the 2011 election. In addition to the changes to partisan competition at both the regional and national level that occurred as early as 2003 and culminated in 2011 with the rise of the NDP to the official opposition and the possible demise of both the Liberals and the Bloc Quebecois, there are many other factors which indicate that Canada is experiencing a new party system. Changes to the *Canada Elections Act* radically altered the prevailing system of financing for political parties and established fixed-term elections. The major parties have also elected to utilize the family and families as the focus or framework of their political discourse and policy priorities during this era. Lastly, the rise of Web 2.0, which has fostered instantaneous two-way communication between party leaders and voters, has provided a new medium for parties to connect with the populace. While it is unclear how long this system will last for, it is evident that Canadian party politics has evolved into a new era, the fifth such party-system in Canadian history.

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