CANADA: SEATS, VOTES, AND THE PUZZLE OF NON-DUVERGERIAN EQUILIBRIA

Richard Johnston
(rjohnston@politics.ubc.ca)

Fred Cutler
(cutler@politics.ubc.ca)

University of British Columbia

January 2006

CANADA: SEATS, VOTES, AND THE PUZZLE OF NON-DUVERGERIAN EQUILIBRIA

Canada is the oldest deviant case among Westminster First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) systems. Now that other countries are catching up, it is all the more vital to understand the template. And the country's long history of electoral coordination failure makes the case empirically rich. For years, Canada arguably sat in relation to FPTP systems much as the US Congress does to other legislatures: a place just enough out of control that the mechanisms of strategic coordination exhibit real variance and so can be studied empirically.

This chapter reveals, however, that the electoral record does not by itself authorize theoretically motivated generalizations. The obvious explanations for Canadian exceptionalism are not completely vindicated by the data. The leading claim—originating with Lipset (1954, 1960), elaborated by Riker (1976), and amplified by Chhibber and Kollman (2004)—covers only part of the case. This argument focuses on *cross-district* coordination failure: local Duvergerian bipartism accompanied by divergence across locales in the identity of the locally privileged alternatives.[1] This has certainly occurred, but at least as notable is the breakdown of *local* bipartism. This paper documents the local breakdown, shows that it implicates parties as they offer candidates and voters as they rise to the bait. It also shows that the pattern is ubiquitous: although multipartism started in the Western provinces, it now is the pattern everywhere. What is more, local multipartism rarely exemplifies the non-Duvergerian multicandidate equilibrium identified by Cox (1994).

The chapter concludes with speculation on where the truth might lie: the time orientation of voters, their access to adequate strategic information, the dimensionality of the choice space, the federal nature of the party system, possible interaction between across-district and within-district failure, and incentives for parties and candidates in the Canadian system of party finance.

THE SCOPE OF COORDINATION FAILURE

Canada has not had continuous Duvergerian outcomes since 1921. Figure 1 reveals the scale of the problem and its evolution by presenting the "effective number" of parties (Laakso and Taagepera 1979) nationally and locally. Down to and including the 1917 election, the system conformed exactly to type with almost pure bipartism at both levels. The 1917 result poised the system for breakdown, however. Note that local bipartism declined even as the national statistic suggested no shift: this reflected the evaporation of local competition in the aftermath of the formation of the Union (coalition) government and the Conscription election (English, 1977). The whirlwind was reaped in 1921, when the system acquired the effective equivalent of an additional party. Most of this was, in fact, one party, the Progressives. This party retreated over the next three elections, such that the status quo ante appeared to have been restored. The 1935 election confirmed that multipartism was here to stay, however. The new parties with staying power were the

---

[1] For an acerbic review of cross-district failure as a stylized but unexamined fact about the Canadian system, see Gaines (1999).

Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), later the New Democratic Party (NDP), and Social Credit. The 1993 election fragmented the system still further by adding the effective equivalent of yet another party. By this time, Social Credit had disappeared, but historical residues of its support resurfaced in the Reform (later Alliance) Party and in the Bloc Québécois. Reform and the Bloc had many other elements as well, and each was born out of the collapse of the Progressive Conservative (PC) Party. Notwithstanding the 2003 merger of the Alliance and the PCs as the Conservative Party, the 2004 election did not produce any effective electoral defractionalization, and the system continues to harbour the equivalent of four parties.

It is easy to see why the analytical emphasis has been on cross-district breakdown. That *was* most of the story at the outset, as indicated by the bottom line on the graph, the national – local gap. And it remained an important part of the story thereafter. The Progressive insurgency in and after 1921 mainly reflected complete displacement of one old party (usually the Liberals) by the Progressives. Histories of the period are full of stories about signaling and backroom negotiation over selective withdrawal of candidacies.[2] The rebirth of multi-party politics in 1935 similarly saw a jump in the gap, such that it oscillated around 0.5 "parties" until 1993. In 1993, the gap doubled in size.

But cross-district failure explains *none* of the 1935-88 growth in overall fractionalization. Over that period, the system's local basis relentlessly fractionalized. Where in 1930 the local effective number of parties was two, the canonical number, by 1988 it was 2.69. Although the big story of the 1990s was cross-district breakdown, the decade also brought further within-district failure. As of 1997, the effective number of local parties was one greater than in 1930. Although growth in local fractionalization looks like a long-term trend, it also seems clear that within-district breakdown increased quite sharply in years when cross-district breakdown also occurred. The advent of a sectionalist insurgent candidate would reduce the vote shares of nationally-oriented candidates but would not eliminate them.

Not only did the national/local gap not grow between 1935 and 1988, there is clear evidence of a force working to compress it. The force in question is the growth and spread of the Conservative vote. Note that the gap dropped or stayed low in 1930, 1958, 1984, and 1988. These are the only years since 1921 that the Conservatives won parliamentary majorities.

THE NATIONALIZATION OF CONTESTATION

Local fractionalization gains after 1935 also reflected nationalizing pressures on the pan-Canadian players. This is shown by Figure 2. Entries in the figure's three panels are election-specific standard deviations of vote share across ridings[3] and a lowess smoothed line for the statistic. Both the Liberal and the Conservative series show considerable, if fitful, nationalization over more than a century. This is so notwithstanding the adverse impact of 1917. Both old parties dramatically reduced geographic variance down to 1911.

---

[2] See, for instance Morton (1950), pp. 122-3, 243 and Saywell (1991), pp. 82-3, 96 and Figure 3 below. Mutual withdrawal seems to have possible mainly in Ontario.

[3] Alternative indicators of vote nationalization are reviewed in Caramani (2004), Chapter 2.

After the system blew up in 1917-21, the reduction of sectional variance resumed. The timing of the shift predates the most serious period of industrialization and so seems to confirm Caramani's (2004) claim that electoral nationalization reflects not so much sociological forces as the very logic of electoral competition. The story seems broadly similar, over a shorter period, for the CCF/NDP.

Some of the nationalization reflects willingness to nominate candidates, as indicated by Figure 3. Before 1960 it was quite common for at least one party to forego contesting a nontrivial number of seats. In part, this reflected the ebb and flow of a party's overall fortunes. In the 19th century, the Liberals declined to contest more seats than the dominant Conservatives did. Positions were reversed in the Conservatives' period of abject weakness after 1935. The Union coalition of 1917 led both parties to foreswear competing against each other, especially in rural Alberta and the West, even as Unionists declined to contest several seats in Quebec. The 1920s represent a special pattern, as the Liberals declined to contest seats where a sympathetic Progressive candidate enjoyed a strategic advantage. The CCF, which first contested federal seats in 1935, began life as a clearly sectional party. In its first few outings it left about half the House uncontested. In 1945 (which seemed at the time like a breakthrough) it dramatically expanded its pool, only to return to the earlier pattern in 1949.

But selective noncontestation by "pro-system" parties is now a thing of the past. For the Liberals this became true in 1935. The Conservative pattern shifted with the sense of anticipation created by John Diefenbaker's accession to leadership in late 1956. Almost all seats were contested in the minority-victory year of 1957, and all were contested in the landslide of 1958. Thereafter, the Conservatives scarcely faltered, apart from the nadir of their fortunes in 2000. The transformation of the CCF into the NDP was similarly critical. The number of uncontested seats was cut in half in the new party's first outing, 1963. By 1968, the NDP contested every seat, as it did almost without fail subsequently. The trend, in short, flatly contradicts the dominant prediction from the single nontransferable vote literature. Far from parties retreating from areas of weakness, they have instead spread their candidacies as widely as possible.

How this translates into regional/provincial party systems is shown by Figure 4.[4] The figure shows that coordination failure started in the West. This breakdown reflected the intrusion of sectionalist parties, the ones that created the national/local gap depicted in Figure 1. In Manitoba and Saskatchewan the initial insurgency did not utterly banish the old parties; instead the party systems in those provinces fragmented. In Alberta, the United Farmers, the provincial wing of the national Progressive movement, did brush the older competition aside. So there, no fractionalization was visible in the 1920s. British Columbia was not an agrarian economy, and so was largely immune to the Progressive tide. The 1930s, however, fragmented the Alberta and BC systems. In each province the effective number of parties shot up in 1935. For the next thirty years, all four Western systems varied from just over 2.5 to just over 3.0 parties locally per election. Elsewhere,

---

[4] The series in Figure 4 begin in 1908. There was little local breakdown before that year, and 1908 is the first election for a fully transcontinental system, as Alberta and Saskatchewan gained provincial status only in 1905.

the effective local number remained under 2.5 until the 1960s, although the Ontario system saw episodic fragmentation.

After 1960, all regions converged at quite a high level of local fragmentation. The Manitoba and Saskatchewan systems stabilized around 2.7 parties. The Alberta and BC systems underwent steady and dramatic reconsolidation, such that by the 1980s each had returned to local bipartism. In BC, this translated into mainly Conservative versus NDP contests. In Alberta, the pattern was not so much one of true bipartism as hegemonic Conservative domination opposed by weak and noncooperative Liberals and New Democrats.[5] The 1984 and 1988 elections were both Conservative victories, so the pattern of cross-district convergence, shown in Figure 1, was also reflected in within-district consolidation. In Alberta, the pattern weakened as Reform entered the lists in 1988. And in BC the 1990s restored a three-party pattern. The rest of the country, meanwhile, converged on the West. By the millennium, Ontario, Quebec, and Atlantic Canada harboured the effective equivalent locally of 2.7 parties.[6]

LOCAL STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

None of this matters if relatively weak candidates do not threaten to impinge on the choice between the frontrunners. The first indicator of difficulty is the ratio of the second runner-up's vote share to that of the first runner-up (henceforth the S/F ratio). This appears in Figure 5. Before 1935 this was not an issue, with the sole exception of 1921. 1921 was the *annus mirabilis* of the Progressive movement as winning candidates with that label outnumbered Conservatives and created the first hung Parliament since Confederation. It seems reasonable to infer that the high ratio that year simply reflected lack of information. By 1925, the S/F ratio was close to zero. Some of this drop reflected the rapid retreat of the Progressive popular vote. But some also reflects, as we have already mentioned, selective withdrawal of candidates, including by the Liberal Party (Figure 3). In 1935, however, the system underwent a phase shift: the S/F ratio moved up to about 0.35, with some ebb and flow but a strong hint of net upward drift. Then in 1962, it shifted up again, initially to about 0.5 and followed by a sawtoothed but unmistakable rise toward or beyond 0.6. In 2000 and 2004, it fell back to about 0.5.

The significance of this rise partly depends on how the first and second place parties stand relative to each other.[7] It is possible that both winners' and runner-ups' shares are dropping so that the system is simply converging on Cox's (1994) non-Duvergerian *M+2* equilibrium, where the second runner-up is so close to both leading candidates that strategic defection by his or her supporters makes no sense. Figure 6 shows that this is not the case. Winners' shares *have* dropped but not since 1962. From the system's early days to 1962, the mean share has dropped from over 60% to about 50%. Since 1962 the average has been 50.5% with remarkably little fluctuation. The drop in the runner-up's

---

[5] This illustrates a weakness in the Laakso-Taagepera index, as it can return similar values for quite different situations.

[6] The arguments here are fully consistent with the more nuanced presentation of distributions of effective numbers are ridings in Gaines (1999).

[7] A point made forcibly by Gaines (1997).

share has been essentially unbroken: about eight points in the first 84 years and five points in the last 42. Since 1993 there has been some reconsolidation. The average margin both before and after 1962 was about 20 points.[8]

The abrupt shifts in the in the S/F ratio indicated in Figure 5 were driven mainly by the rise in the share of the second runner-up. The share surged in 1921, dropped back in 1925, surged again in 1935, and surged yet again in 1962. In 2000 and 2001 it dropped slightly. The secular change that followed each phase shift mainly reflected the decline in the first runner-up's share.

Many Canadians now inhabit a world in which second runners-up command a share larger than the winner's margin. The first permanent shift in the S/F ratio, in 1935, left a clear majority of races where the third-place party was probably small enough not to matter much to the main event. After 1962, however, nearly half of all ridings featured a third-place candidate with a share larger than the margin. Ironically, as the position of first runners-up weakened after 1962, third runners-up (whose own average share did *not* shrink) became simultaneously more threatening but no more feasible. In 2004, however, the percentage of seats at risk shot back up, and this may be a portent.

Figure 8 hints that some players are aware of the difficulty, but the hint is weak. The figure is a histogram of third-place shares for the 1993, 1997, and 2000 elections. These elections were something of a piece, the high-point (to date, at least) in the system's deconsolidation. Superimposed on the histogram are two density functions, the normal (dashed line) and an Epanechnikov kernel (solid line). The normal plot implies that local third-place success is, in effect, a random draw from an electorate with a given overall degree of fractionalization. To the extent that the distribution conforms to the normal, voters appear to be unstrategic. The kernel density plot, in contrast, works with the data as given and is, in effect, a smoothed histogram. Strategic induction, of the sort implied by Cox (1994), would be indicated by modes or inflection points well away from the central one. Such inflection points do appear for the 1993-2000 data, so there is a suggestion of attraction toward both Duvergerian and non-Duvergerian equilibria.

To our eyes, however, the strategic forces seem weak. The distribution is, in fact unimodal. The scale of the problem is illustrated by focusing on third-place candidates with shares larger than the winner's margin. Of 896 contests inte 1993-2000 period, these represent 349, or 39%. If we set a 25% share as a threshold for plausibly describing the behavior of third-place-party voters as strategic in the *M+2* non-Duvergerian sense, only 38 seats, 10.9% of the total, qualify. The 75th percentile outcome is a 22.6% share of the vote. The median third-place share for such outcomes is 19%. Strategically speaking, the vast majority of these candidacies can only be described as mischevious.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Or can they? At a minimum the Duvergerian predictions presuppose that voters have access to adequate information and that they care only about the current result. Both of

---

[8] Somewhat masked by the figure is the fact that margins dropped in the 1960s and then gradually rose over the following decades. The peak was in 1993 but average has remained over 20 points for the last four elections.

these are problematic, of course. It is impossible, practically speaking, for voters to have current information on the race in their own riding. To the extent that geographic patterns are stable and riding boundaries change only a little, voters might be able to deduce the present situation by referring to a combination of history and swings in national or regional polls. This directs our attention to variation across the landscape in the stability of patterns and boundaries. It is striking, from this point of view, that party systems in all parts of Canada—slow- as well high-growth places—are generally fractionalizing.

The problem may be in the assumption of a short time horizon. Although some voters find pairs of parties broadly acceptable, and so are available for second-choice voting and strategic consolidation, many voters clearly do not. It seems pertinent that quasi-permanent local fractionalization dates from the advent of the CCF and underwent a furtjher upward shift with the CCF's transformation into the NDP. Although the NDP often seems to have much in common with the Liberals, the Liberal party has no formal link to the labor movement and is sometimes quite hostile to it, in contrast to the NDP.[9]

In any case, the strategic challenge is rarely to combine left and center to block the right. Most of the time, the party of the center, the Liberals, dominates the system. In the 1993-2000 period, for instance, the Liberal candidate placed either first or second in nearly 90 percent of all ridings. This is not atypical of postwar elections. But this leaves the principal opponents to the Liberals in a quandary: from a coalitional point of view the primary runners-up are even less acceptable to each other than the dominant Liberals are to each. Canada, in short, reproduces the conditions that Riker (1976) ascribed to the Indian case: for the Liberals to be defeated by a strategic combination, the ends must be combined against the middle.

This only begs the question, why are the Liberals so successful? That they cover the median on economic policy hardly seems like an answer. The dominant pattern in FPTP systems seems to be an empty center. To be sure, parties are drawn to the center by exigencies of campaigning but they rarely start there. Liberal strength may reflect that on a non-economic dimension, the Liberals are *not* the party of the center, not at least for any single electorate. In the domain of ethnic accommodation, the Liberals control a pole. On the great question of Quebec/Canada relations (historically French/English and Catholic/Protestant relations), the Liberals are the chief champion of Quebec and francophone interests outside Quebec and the chief champion of a united Canada inside Quebec. For the party itself, this is not an inconsistency, and on this dimension too the Liberals are centrist. But the electorate is bifurcated. Since 1993, the bifurcation is dramatized by the existence of the Bloc Quebecois, which contests elections only in Quebec and is unabashedly nationalist. Even before 1993, however, a pattern like this recurred: whenever the Conservatives made serious gains in Quebec it was by recruiting nationalists, notwithstanding the anti-Quebec cast of the rest of the Conservative base

---

[9] Moreover, as of 1988 this Canadian version of the Fabian strategy seemed to be working. The NDP vote share reached 20% that year, and over the preceding 25 years the gardually preempted almost all of the third-party space. The party was arguably on the brink of breaking through to official Opposition status. On long-term CCF-NDP growth, see Johnston (2005b), Figure 7. On the NDP as on the brink of major-party status in 1988, see Johnston et al. (1992), Chapter 1 and Figure 2-14.

(Johnston 2005b). This, of course, is also an ends-against-the middle move, just at the level of the country rather within regions or locales.

For voting outside Quebec, then, the two-dimensional space is a further impediment to strategic consolidation. Because the Liberals control the pro-Quebec pole for this electorate, there should be a block of voters for whom the party us basically unacceptable. Although a majority of New Democrats find the Liberals to be the next closest party, for a substantial minority, this is simply not true. The next adjacent party is the Conservative party, or from 1993 to 2000, the Reform/Alliance rump. A complementary minority exists inside the Conservative base (Johnston 1991).

None of this could happen but for the fact that Canada is federal state. More generally, it is natural to wonder if some of the multipartism is a byproduct of induction of some form from the other arena. This is still largely unexplored territory. The starting point should be the provincial strength of nationally-small parties. In all probability, this is a story about the NDP.[10]

There is no mistaking the fact that local and national fractionalization move together somewhat, at least in short run (Figure 1). There is, in effect, an interaction between across-district and within-district failure. The local fractionalization reflects *both* the sectionalist insurgency *and* the persistence of nationally-oriented or "pro-system" parties. The periodic defractionalization of the national system, the shrinkage of national-local gap, reflects consolidation pressures at the national level. Parties must coordinate across constituencies if they are to mount serious challenges in the government-formation game (Johnston 2005a, applying the logic of Cox 1987 to the Canadian case). But local fractionalization seems to be a one-way street. Although the national-local gap ebbs and flows, the local effective number of parties just seems to grow.

This brings us to the incentives for parties that want to contend for national power. The Canadian system of party finance may have come to underwrite both the nationalization of the party system and its fractionalization. Starting with the 1968 election, local candidates have been eligible for subsidy. They had to clear thresholds to be eligible for compensation, but the thresholds dropped over time. And now the national party organizations are also subsidized, and in direct proportion to their nation-wide vote total. Small parties now advertise to sympathizers that votes are dollars. Whatever impels voters to go their own separate ways, parties face no cost constraint in accommodating them. To be sure, subsidies cannot explain the pattern before 1968. Indeed, the institution of public financing is endogenous: it was occasioned by the fractionalization of 1962, the ensuing six years of hung parliaments, and the frequent dependence of Liberal minority governments on NDP support. But the 1968 move created a path dependency, and the system now may be subsidizing its own undoing.

---

[10] Gaines (1999) speculates that some of the induction could reflect electoral system experimentation in certain of the Western provinces. This seems like a stretch. For a sketch of a mid-range model along the lines of the main text, see Johnston (1991).
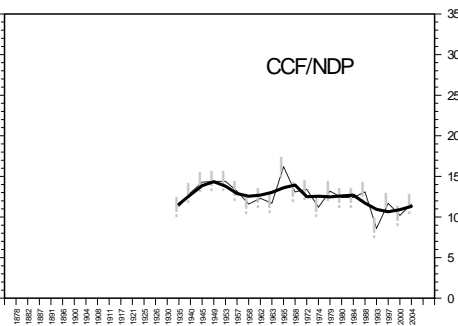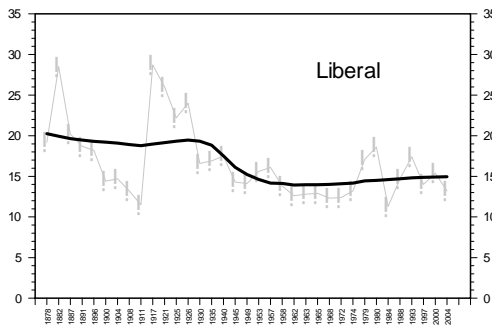
Figure 1
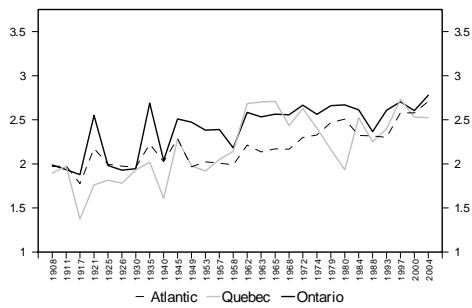**The Effective Number of Parties in the Electorate: Local vs National**
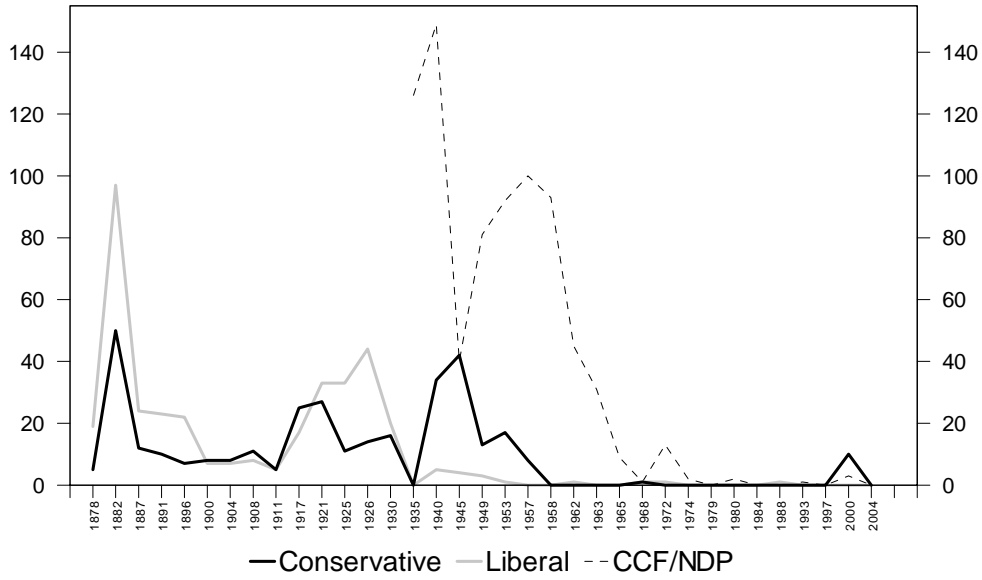
National

Local
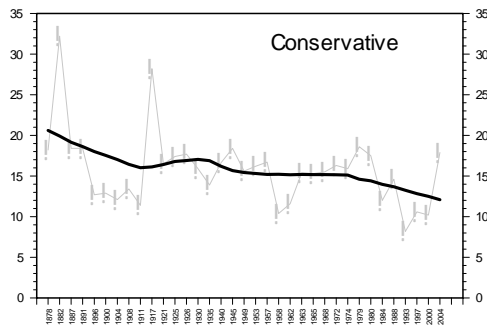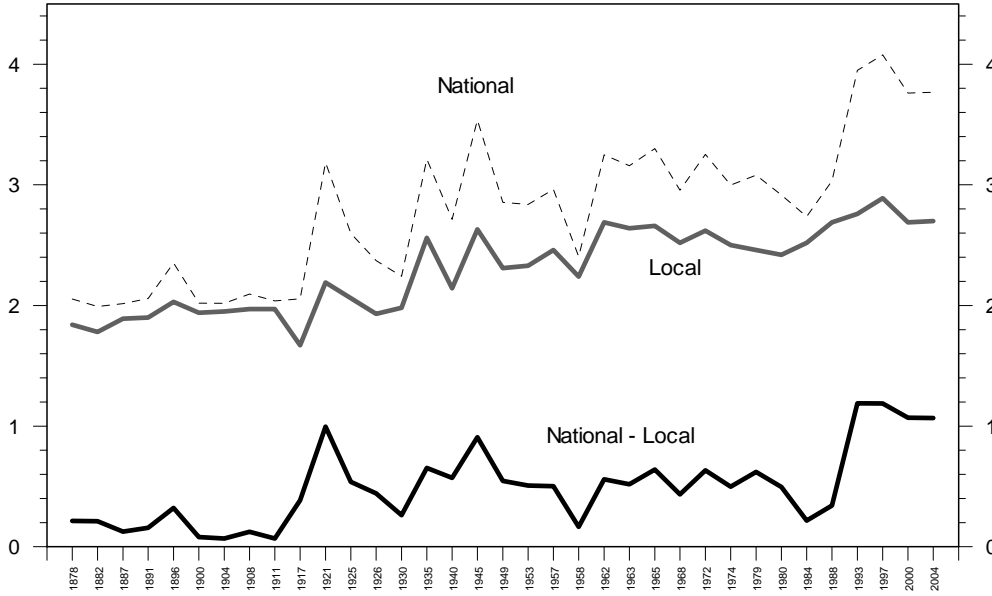
National - Local

Figure 2
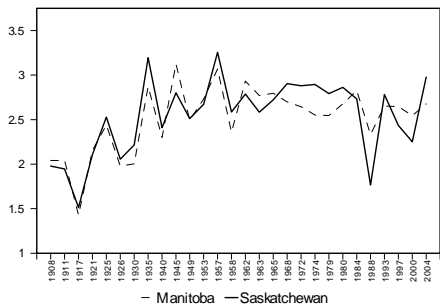**Nationalization of Forces**
for "Pro-System" Parties

Entries are standard deviations across ridings.
Smoothing by loess, bandwidth = 0.2

Conservative

Liberal

CCF/NDP

8

Figure 3
Uncontested Seats by "Pro-System" Parties

Figure 4
The Effective Number of Parties
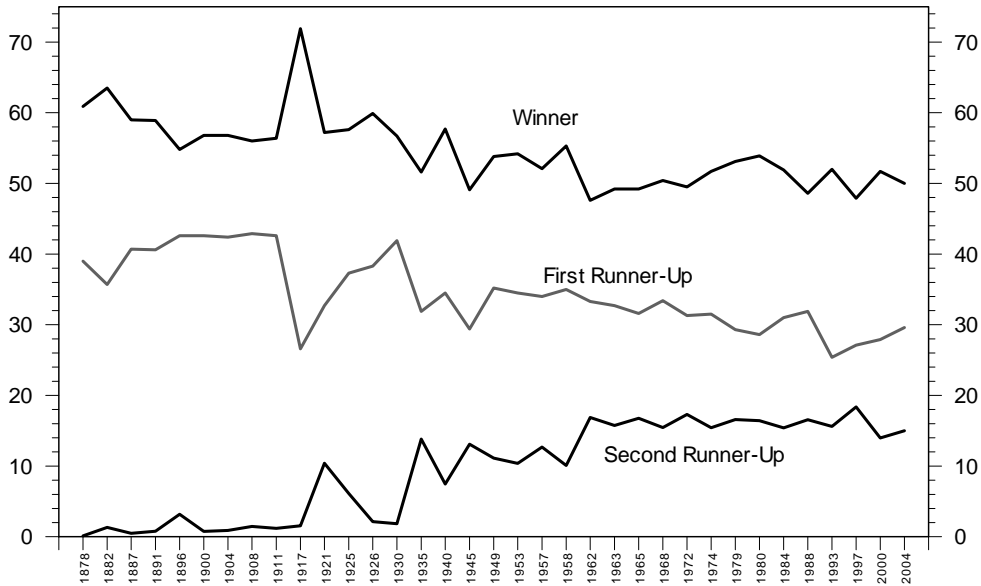**in Local Electorates, by Province**
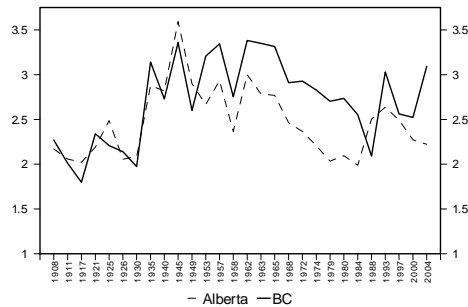
Figure 5
Second/First Runner-Up Ratio of Vote Share
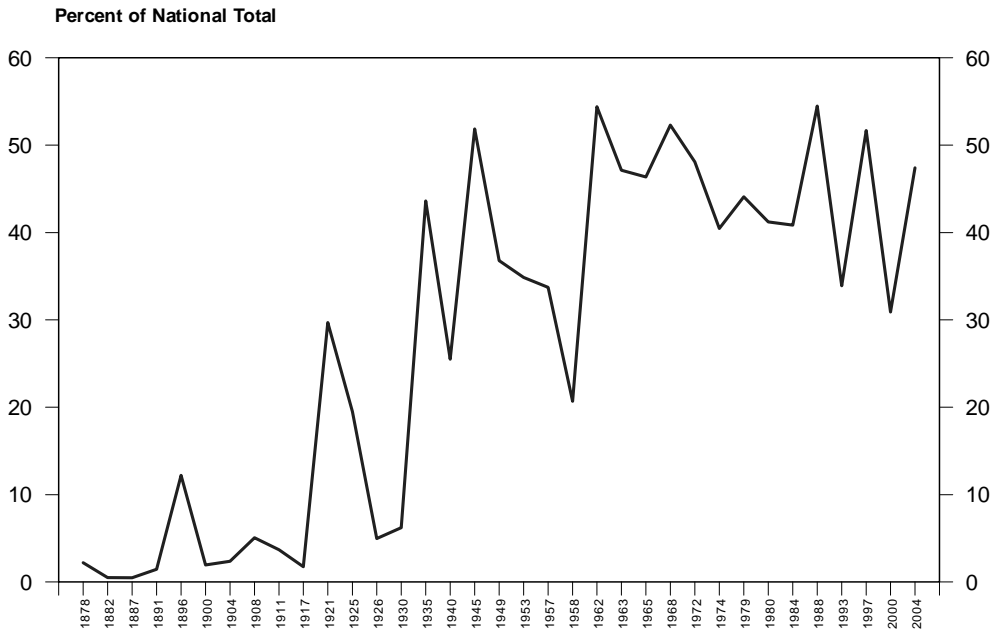
National mean by year

Figure 6
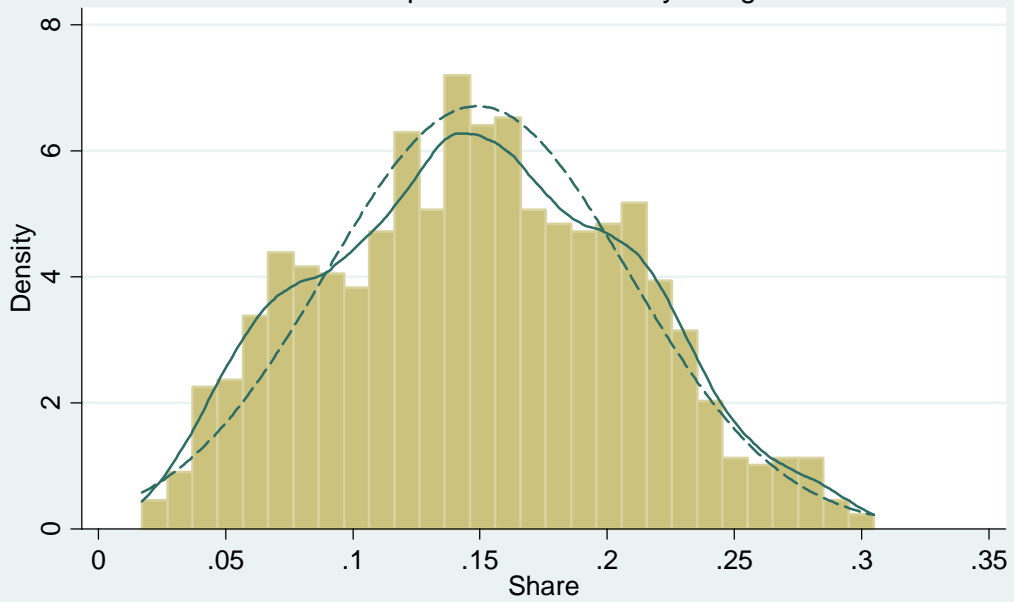**Vote Shares for First Three Parties**

National mean by year

Figure 7
Ridings where Third-Party Share Exceeds Winner's Margin

Percent of National Total

Figure 8. Strategic Induction
Third-place vote shares by riding

Note: 1993-2000 elections

<div align="center">**REFERENCES**</div>

Caramani, Daniele. 2004. *The Nationalization of Politics: The Formation of National Electorates and Party Systems in Western Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Chhibber, Pradeep K., and Ken Kollman. 2004. *The Formation of National Party Systems: Federalism and Party Competition in Canada, Great Britain, India, and the United States*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Cox, Gary W. 1987. *The Efficient Secret: The Cabinet and the Development of Political Parties in Victorian England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

_____ . 1994. "Strategic Voting Equilibria Under the Single Nontransferable Vote," *American Political Science Review* 88: 608-21.

_____ . 1997. *Making Votes Count: Strategic Coordination in the World's Electoral Systems*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

English, John. 1977. *The Decline of Politics: The Conservatives and the Party System 1901-20*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Gaines, Brian J. 1997. "Where to Count Parties," *Electoral Studies* 16: 49-58.

_____ . 1999. "Duverger's Law and the Meaning of Canadian Exceptionalism," *Comparative Political Studies* 32: 835-61.

Granatstein, J.L 1967. *The Politics of Survival: The Conservative Party of Caada, 1939-1945*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Johnston, Richard. 1991. "The Geography of Class and Religion in Canadian Elections," in Joseph Wearing, ed., *Voting in Canada*. Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman.

_____ . 2005a. "The Electoral System and the Party System Revisited," in Gerald Kernerman and Philip resnick, eds. *Insiders and Outsiders: Alan Cairns and the Reshaping of Canadian Citizenship*, pp. 51-64.

_____ . 2005b. "Canadian Elections at the Millennium," in Paul Howe, Richard Johnston, and André Blais, eds. *Strengthening Canadian Democracy*. Montreal: Institute for Research on Public Policy.

_____ , André Blais, Henry E. Brady, and Jean Crête. 1992. *Letting the People Decide: Dynamics of a Canadian Election*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press and Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Laakso, Markku, and Rein Taagepera. 1979. "'Effective' Number of Parties: A Measure with Application to West Europe," *Comparative Political Studies* 12: 3-27.

Lipset, Seymour Martin. 1954. "Democracy in Alberta." *Canadian Fourm* 406: 175-57 and 407: 196-8.

_____ . 1960. "Party Systems and the Representation of Social Groups." *European Journal of Sociology* 1: 50-85.

Morton, W.L. 1950. *The Progressive Party in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Riker, William H. 1976. "The Number of Political Parties: A Reexamination of Duverger's Law," *Comparative Politics* 9: 93-106.

Saywell, John T. 1991. *Just call me Mitch: The Life of Mitchell F. Hepburn*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press (The Ontario Historical Studies Series).