FEDERALISM, UNITY FROM RIGHT TO LEFT: IS THE CANADIAN IDEOLOGICAL SPECTRUM EVOLVING?

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ABSTRACT

This essay considers whether the success of the New Democratic Party in the 2011 federal election indicates a shift on the part of Canadians away from the centre of the ideological spectrum and a growing polarization around the right and the left. Based on several public opinion surveys, it is suggested that the erosion of the federal Liberals was likely accompanied by some decline of Canadians identifying with the Centre. The continued success of the Federal Conservatives in 2011 was accompanied by an expansion of their base amongst those persons identifying with the ideological centre. In the absence of national unity as a priority issue for Canadians, it is contended that social and economic perspectives have increasingly defined the national political agenda. If national unity stays off the top of the political agenda we will pay increasing attention to the ideological spectrum to help understand voter motivation.

RÉSUMÉ

Ce texte considère le succès du Nouveau Parti démocratique à l'élection fédérale de 2011 et si celui-ci indique un mouvement des Canadiens loin du centre du spectre idéologique et une polarisation croissante autour de la droite et de la gauche. Sur la base de plusieurs sondages d'opinion publique, il est suggéré que l'érosion des libéraux fédéraux a probablement été accompagnée par une baisse du nombre de Canadiens s'identifiant avec le centre. Le succès continu des conservateurs fédéraux en 2011 s'est accompagné d'une expansion de leur base parmi les personnes s'identifiant avec le centre idéologique. En l'absence de l'unité nationale comme question prioritaire pour les Canadiens, il est affirmé que les perspectives économiques et sociales ont de plus en plus défini l'agenda politique national. Si l'unité nationale demeure une priorité politique, nous porterons une attention croissante au spectre idéologique pour aider à comprendre la motivation des électeurs.

INTRODUCTION

The 2011 federal elections have generated considerable discussion about whether the traditional perspective of Canada as a country that fashions itself as ideologically in the centre is shifting. The results of the election have contributed to growing interest in this issue as there is speculation that the record drop in support of the historically "centrist" federal Liberals implies an increasing number of voters make choices on the basis of whether they perceive the party to be more to the right or to the left

of the spectrum. Some observers contend that the federal election was characterized by the inability of the Liberals to hold down the centre ideologically, thus resulting in the third place finish behind the governing Conservative majority—widely identified with the ideological right or centre right and the opposition New Democratic Party (NDP) usually associated with the left or the left of centre. The inability of the federal Liberals to insist that only they can bridge Quebec and the rest of Canada may also contribute to reinforcing ideology in guiding voter choices.

Another political victim of the 2011 federal election was the Bloc Quebecois. That political party is generally associated with the ideological left was largely displaced by the NDP in Quebec. Some assume that the historic rise of the NDP in Quebec will encourage collaboration with the ideological left or centre-left elsewhere in Canada around a set of shared concerns even if this is not the reason that Quebecers voted massively for the NDP. For the time being, it is the NDP that is best able to leverage Quebec support and claims it is best positioned to bridge the francophone and non-francophone Canadians on a nation-wide basis.

The political erosion of the federal Liberals may be less attributable to the declining popularity of the ideological centre than it is a function of the ability of the other political parties to redefine the centre's meaning and target voters identifying with its contours (i.e. the right and left of centre). That which follows will employ public opinion surveys conducted in the months of March and April 2012 by the firm Leger Marketing in order to examine whether there has been a shift away from the centre and how Canadians situate themselves on the ideological spectrum in 2012.

THE ISSUE OF FEDERALIST GOVERNANCE AND NATIONAL UNITY

Debates around national unity are often described as pitting federalists against sovereigntist or put another way those who defend a federalist system of governance versus those rejecting this form of governance. Underlying this assumption is the idea that federalism is at the root of Quebec sovereigntist discontent. However accurate that may be, it does not follow automatically that supporting an independent Quebec requires rejecting federalism as a system of governance. As observed in the table below those surveyed who indicate that they would vote for sovereignty narrowly favour a federal form of government.

The manner in which responsibility/jurisdiction is divided between different levels of government has been the object of considerably greater discussion in relations between the Government of Quebec and the Federal Government. When such issues arise they are closely associated with questions of Quebec identity as the case is frequently made that the province needs the authority in order protect its identity (i.e. on language or related issues). Hence the resolution of such matters is often become part of the agenda of national unity. That is not the case elsewhere in the country, where discussions over jurisdiction are not about protecting regional identity and hence not regarded as matters of national unity. Our intention is not to diminish the importance of issues of division of powers between the governments of Quebec and Canada, but rather that such questions arise from concerns articulated around identity.

	IF A REFERENDUM ON QUÉBEC SOVEREIGNTY WERE HELD TODAY, WOULD YOU VOTE FOR OR AGAINST QUÉBEC SOVEREIGNTY?		
A FEDERAL FORM OF GOVERNMENT IN WHICH POWER IS DIVIDED BETWEEN A NATIONAL GOVERNMENT AND STATE/PROVINCIAL AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IS PREFERABLE TO ANY OTHER KIND OF GOVERNMENT	FOR	AGAINST	I DON'T KNOW
Strongly agree	16.1%	16.0%	7.2%
Somewhat agree	35.1%	49.8%	30.6%
Somewhat disagree	22.7%	16.0%	18.9%
Strongly disagree	7.9%	5.6%	5.4%
I don't know	14.0%	11.2%	32.4%
I prefer not to reply	4.1%	1.5%	5.4%

DEMOGRAPHIC FEATURES OF CANADA'S IDEOLOGICAL SPECTRUM

How do such characteristics as age, gender, education, income and language background affect the ideological preferences of the Canadian population? On the basis of age the survey reveals that it is the baby boomers that are more likely to stake out some ideological ground than those Canadians under the age of 55. Across the age spectrum, shades of left seem more popular than right until retirement age. The 18-24 group are considerably more left-leaning than right.

	RIGHT WING	CENTRE-RIGHT	CENTRE	CENTRE-LEFT	LEFT WING	I DON'T KNOW
18-24 years of age	8.4%	6.2%	21.9%	16.9%	12.4%	34.3%
25-34 years of age	7.4%	10.3%	21.9%	18.2%	7.9%	34.3%
35-44 years of age	3.7%	13.3%	25.9%	17.7%	6.8%	32.7%
45-54 years of age	7.9%	11.9%	29.0%	15.2%	2.6%	33.3%
55-64 years of age	7.6%	13.4%	28.6%	23.2%	5.8%	21.4%
65-74 years of age	9.5%	19.4%	27.5%	23.2%	5.7%	14.7%
75 years of age or older	3.7%	27.8%	33.3%	25.9%	3.7%	5.6%

Women seem much less inclined to position themselves ideologically than do men. Men opt near equally for the left and the right while women clearly prefer the left over the right.

FROM AN IDEOLOGICAL STANDPOINT, DO YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF TO BE…?	RIGHT WING	CENTRE-RIGHT	CENTRE	CENTRE-LEFT	LEFT WING	I DON'T KNOW
A man	8.5%	18.6%	27.4%	20.2%	5.8%	19.5%
A woman	5.9%	8.0%	25.2%	18.0%	6.8%	36.1%

The more educated segments of the population are more likely to situate themselves on the ideological spectrum. The most educated have a marked preference for the left over the right.

FROM AN IDEOLOGICAL STANDPOINT, DO YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF TO BE…?	RIGHT WING	CENTRE-RIGHT	CENTRE	CENTRE-LEFT	LEFT WING	I DON'T KNOW
High school, general or professional (8 to 12 years)	10.1%	8.5%	22.6%	17.3%	5.0%	36.5%
College pre-university, technical training, certificate (CEP), {br} accreditation (ASP) or proficiency diploma (DEP)	6.9%	11.5%	32.6%	13.3%	4.1%	31.7%
University certificates and diplomas	7.5%	16.3%	28.7%	30.0%	2.5%	15.0%
University Bachelor (including classical studies)	5.3%	16.9%	24.5%	23.5%	8.8%	21.0%

The lowest income groups (earning under 40k) prefer the left over the right (though the center is their principal preference). The highest income earners (100 000 and over) show a slight preference for the right.

	RIGHT WING	CENTRE-RIGHT	CENTRE	CENTRE-LEFT	LEFT WING	I DON'T KNOW
$19,999 or less	12.9%	5.9%	30.7%	13.9%	7.9%	28.7%
Between $20,000 and $39,999	6.8%	10.2%	23.3%	19.1%	6.4%	34.3%
Between $40,000 and $59,999	6.9%	13.0%	27.5%	21.5%	8.1%	23.1%
Between $60,000 and $79,999	9.2%	15.5%	24.3%	18.0%	5.8%	27.2%
Between $80,000 and $99,999	6.5%	14.1%	26.1%	21.2%	4.9%	27.2%
$100,000 or more	8.5%	19.6%	29.5%	19.9%	4.4%	18.1%

As to those born in Canada and those born outside of the country, the March Leger survey reveals that non-immigrants are equally split in the degree to which they would openly describe themselves as to the right or left at just above one-quarter each. Immigrants are more likely to describe themselves as being on the right with some one in three doing so openly than they are on the left with some one in four doing so.

		DO YOU PERSONALLY CONSIDER YOURSELF AS A PERSON WHO IS… / …TO THE RIGHT?		
		YES	NO	I DON'T KNOW
Were you born in Canada?	Yes	27.0%	40.4%	32.7%
	No	32.3%	39.5%	28.2%
		DO YOU PERSONALLY CONSIDER YOURSELF AS A PERSON WHO IS… / …TO THE LEFT?		
		YES	NO	I DON'T KNOW
Were you born in Canada?	Yes	27.3%	38.8%	33.9%
	No	24.9%	47.2%	27.9%

As observed below, Francophones situate themselves far more on the left and centre-left than on the right and centre-right. Anglophone Canadians are slightly more to the left and centre-left than to the right and centre-right and allophones are more inclined to the left and centre-left than to the right and centre-right.

FROM AN IDEOLOGICAL STANDPOINT, DO YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF TO BE…?	RIGHT WING	CENTRE-RIGHT	CENTRE	CENTRE-LEFT	LEFT WING	I DON'T KNOW
French	7.3%	8.9%	24.8%	21.7%	8.3%	29.1%
English	7.8%	14.4%	26.8%	19.1%	5.6%	26.2%
Other	5.3%	13.3%	26.9%	16.3%	6.6%	31.6%

Over the period May 2011 to April 2012 Quebecers appear to have moved slightly more to the left.

LEGER MARKETING	QUEBEC	
D'UN POINT DE VUE IDÉOLOGIQUE, VOUS CONSIDÉREZ-VOUS COMME ÉTANT UNE PERSONNE…? FROM AN IDEOLOGICAL STANDPOINT, DO YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF TO BE…?	MAY 2011	APRIL 2012
De droite/ Right wing	5%	6%
Du centre-droit/ Centre-right	14%	9%
Du centre/ Centre	22%	24%
Du centre-gauche/ Centre-left	20%	21%
De gauche/ Left wing	8%	11%
Je ne sais pas/ Je préfère ne pas répondre	26%	32%

FEDERALISM AND REGIONAL POSITIONING ON THE LEFT AND THE RIGHT

The data from the 2012 surveys suggest that on the ideological spectrum the country can be divided into four parts. Some one in five Canadians situate themselves on the right and it's that there is a powerful right wing current

that affects Western Canada and which results in a wide ideological gulf with Quebecers. The table below suggests that this observation oversimplifies the reality and indeed the westernmost province of Canada, British Columbia has considerable ideological affinity with Quebec and far less with Alberta, the province that is clearly the source of the political gulf to which many Quebecers are purportedly averse. Like Quebecers, for every British Columbian that situate themselves on the right of centre of it, two persons position themselves to the left of the centre. For Albertans, the inverse of that pattern emerges wherein for every individual that associates with the left- and left of centre-there are more than two that picture themselves in shades of right. Manitobans appear closer to Albertans whereas Ontarians seem to be somewhere in the middle of it all with near equal percentages of persons on the left and the right of centre, just one over four right in the centre, one in five on the left and its centre and nearly 28% either don't know or refuse to respond. Some Quebec observers have repeated.

FROM AN IDEOLOGICAL STANDPOINT, DO YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF TO BE…?	RIGHT WING	CENTRE-RIGHT	CENTRE	CENTRE-LEFT	LEFT WING	I DON'T KNOW
Canada	7.2%	13.1%	26.2%	19.1%	6.3%	28.2%
Alberta	12.9%	22.6%	24.5%	12.9%	4.5%	22.6%
British Columbia	5.5%	11.4%	26.4%	27.9%	6.5%	22.4%
Manitoba	9.3%	18.5%	20.4%	9.3%	5.6%	37.0%
Ontario	7.7%	13.8%	27.4%	17.0%	5.3%	28.7%
Quebec	6.1%	8.7%	24.3%	21.2%	10.6%	29.1%

FEDERAL POLITICAL PARTY SUPPORTERS ON THE LEFT AND THE RIGHT

The 2012 Leger survey reveals that Liberal supporters identifies predominantly with the left and its centre. The Liberals ideologically resemble the NDP with the exception that a far more important percentage of the support base of the latter party does not define themselves on the ideological spectrum. For their part, the majority of the Conservatives ideologically identified supporters are on the right or its centre.

LEGER APRIL 2012	RIGHT WING	CENTRE-RIGHT	CENTRE	CENTRE-LEFT	LEFT WING	I DON'T KNOW
Liberal Party of Canada	3.1%	9.0%	33.6%	37.2%	6.7%	10.3%
Conservative Party of Canada	17.6%	32.4%	27.1%	2.1%	1.6%	19.2%
New Democratic Party	1.5%	6.4%	23.6%	31.0%	8.7%	28.7%
Bloq Quebecois	4.7%	4.7%	21.2%	31.8%	15.3%	22.4%
Green Party of Canada	8.2%	6.2%	25.8%	17.5%	16.5%	25.8%

Yet further insight into the current success of the Conservatives is illustrated in the table below. It reveals that over 60% of Canadians surveyed by Leger Marketing that identify as either right or to centre of it say they support the Conservatives. More telling perhaps is that the largest plurality of those identifying with the ideological centre supports the Conservatives although they only hold a slight advantage over the NDP who in turn are ahead of the Liberals.

LEGER APRIL 2012	LIBERAL PARTY OF CANADA	CONSERVATIVE PARTY OF CANADA	NEW DEMOCRATIC PARTY	BQ	GPC	OTHER / I WOULD NOT VOTE / DON'T KNOW / REFUSE
Right wing	6.4%	61.5%	5.5%	3.7%	7.3%	15.6%
Centre-right	10.1%	62.1%	12.6%	2.0%	3.0%	10.1%
Centre	19.0%	26.1%	23.3%	4.6%	6.3%	20.7%
Centre-left	29.0%	2.8%	42.3%	9.4%	5.9%	10.4%
Left wing	15.6%	6.3%	35.4%	13.5%	16.7%	12.4%

LEFT, RIGHT AND THE PLACE OF QUEBEC WITHIN CANADA

It is interesting that on the issue of support for Quebec sovereignty, the March 2012 Leger Marketing poll reveals that those Francophones endorsing the idea are far more likely to describe themselves as being on the left of the ideological spectrum (63.4%) than they are on the right (35.9%). Indeed, it may be suggested that when there is erosion of support for sovereignty it is amongst those segments of the francophone population that position themselves ideologically to the right of the spectrum. This is not without significance since the sovereignty option traditionally aimed at uniting the right and the left ideologically around a societal project-"projet de société"—that trumped potentially divergent orientations for State when tackling economic and social concerns. Still, both the right (82.6%) and the left (69.5%) in Canada agree that they've grown tired of the national unity debate and this applies to Francophones and non-Francophones alike.

	DO YOU PERSONALLY CONSIDER YOURSELF AS A PERSON WHO IS…	
IF YOU HAD TO CHOOSE, WOULD YOU PREFER THAT QUÉBEC REMAIN IN CANADA OR BECOME A SOVEREIGN COUNTRY? FRENCH	RIGHT	LEFT
Remain in Canada	58.6%	32.2%
Become a sovereign country	35.9%	63.4%
I don't know	5.5%	4.4%

The ideological left and right hold somewhat different views on Quebec's place within Canada. When asked whether because of their language and heritage, Quebec is different from the rest of the country, on the right some 62% of Canadians agree compared with 74% on the left. Amongst Francophones, the ideological right (47.5%) is more likely to agree with the view that no concessions to Quebec will ever be satisfactory, compared with one in four Francophones that identify with the left ideologically. That view is held amongst a significant majority of non-Francophones in Canada on either end of the ideological spectrum.

	RIGHT	LEFT
AGREE THAT	NO MATTER WHAT CONCESSIONS ARE MADE TO QUÉBEC, THIS PROVINCE WILL ALWAYS BE DISSATISFIED	
French	47.7%	27.5%
English	83.2%	63.9%
Other	82.0%	72.2%
AGREE WITH THE STATEMENT THAT	FOR CANADA, DO YOU FIND QUÉBEC TO BE MORE OF AN ASSET…	
French	63.3%	55.2%
English	34.9%	58.3%
Other	26.2%	47.2%

Quebec is most frequently identified by English Canadians when asked to name one province they believe gets more than its fair share in the Canadian federation. Quebec is also identified more often by those Anglophone Canadians on the right (53.3%) than those on the left (33.7%). These views nonetheless represent an important gulf with Quebec Francophones and notably those on the left where there is a far greater inclination to claim that it is Alberta (14.2%) and Ontario (15.7%) than Quebec (4.4%) that get more than their fair share within the Canadian federation.

	FRENCH		ENGLISH	
IF YOU HAD TO NAME ONE PROVINCE OR REGION WHICH GETS MORE THAN ITS FAIR SHARE WITHIN THE CANADIAN FEDERATION, WHICH ONE WOULD IT BE?	RIGHT	LEFT	RIGHT	LEFT
The Atlantic Provinces	5.5%	5.5%	4.4%	6.2%
Québec	11.0%	4.4%	53.3%	33.7%
Ontario	15.7%	18.2%	11.9%	12.8%
Western Canada	14.2%	27.1%	3.2%	3.8%
Alberta	14.2%	18.2%	4.2%	8.1%
British Columbia	0.8%	1.7%	1.0%	1.0%
I don't know	22.0%	15.5%	9.1%	21.1%

CONCLUSION

The 2011 Federal Election was a historic contest given the rise of the New Democratic Party to the status of Canada's official opposition. The NDP succeeded in securing an important number of seats in Quebec and it became by far the principal political vehicle through which that province's electorate engages with the federal government. Most of the NDP's support is situated in the ideological space previously occupied by the Federal Liberals who saw considerable erosion of their traditional political base amongst people identifying with the centre. Although we lack time-series data to track the change in identification along the ideological spectrum it is very likely that the erosion of the federal Liberals was accompanied by a decline in the percentage of Canadians identifying with the political centre. The ongoing success of the federal Conservative in the 2011 election is from an ideological standpoint likely attributable to an increase in its constituency on the centre and to its immediate right. The lack of urgency of the national unity issue has undoubtedly contributed to the electoral fortunes of the Conservatives. Were that issue to again become a national priority it would no doubt be an advantage to the NDP given its potential influence in Quebec. Otherwise we can expect that the social and economic priorities of the national population will trump the importance attributed by the electorate to relations between Quebecers and other Canadians.