

ABSENT MANDATE

Change in Canadian Elections

Second Edition

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ABSENT MANDATE

Interpreting Change in Canadian Elections

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Preface

In 1984, shortly after the first edition of this book was published, Canadian voters handed the fledgling Liberal government of John Turner a crushing electoral defeat. It was the third consecutive election in which the governing party had been defeated, a pattern which was thoroughly consistent with one of the main themes of *Absent Mandate: the Politics of Discontent in Canada* — that an electorate which had become disenchanted with politics and politicians would not hesitate to “throw the rascals out” when given the opportunity to do so. The 1984 election outcome also seemed to confirm at least two other findings from our studies of past elections. It demonstrated the high degree of volatility in Canadian voting patterns by showing that “landslide” elections were products of an established pattern of dealignment in Canadian politics, not isolated events associated only with periods of great political change. Further, the nature of the 1984 Conservative victory also supported the thesis that a “mandate” to carry out particular policies in government could be as “absent” in a landslide as in other circumstances.

We here welcome the opportunity to test some of these arguments in another election which on the surface seemed very different from others in recent Canadian history. In 1988, the Mulroney government became the only Canadian federal government to obtain a second consecutive parliamentary majority since that of Louis St. Laurent in 1953. More importantly, the dominance of the free trade issue in the campaign gave the impression to many observers of an election turned into a referendum on a single policy, thereby allowing the victors to claim a more specific type of mandate from the voters than had been possible in a typical election. But we will demonstrate in this book that a careful analysis of data from surveys of the Canadian public does not support many of these interpretations. Rather the 1988 election, like others that we have studied, was one in which volatility, uncertainty, and negative attitudes predominated. With 43% of the popular vote and 169 seats in Parliament, the Conservative government did indeed win a second term in office. But, in the process, it effectively failed to win anything more, including a mandate for its core project — the Canada/U.S. Free Trade Agreement.

The analyses in this book are based primarily on data collected in

large nationwide surveys of the Canadian public which have been conducted following every national election since 1965, with the exception of 1972. All of the National Election Studies were funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, whose continued support for this valuable research is gratefully acknowledged. The 1965 National Election Study was conducted by John Meisel, Philip Converse, Maurice Pinard, Peter Regenstreif, and Mildred Schwartz, and the 1968 study was conducted by John Meisel. The 1974, 1979, and 1980 studies were conducted by the present authors. Analyses based on these earlier studies may be found in Harold D. Clarke, Jane Jenson, Lawrence LeDuc, and Jon H. Pammett, *Political Choice in Canada* and in the first edition of *Absent Mandate*. The 1984 National Election Study was conducted by Ronald Lambert, Steven Brown, James Curtis, Barry Kay and John Wilson. A reinterview of respondents from this 1984 study was organized following the 1988 election by Ronald Lambert, Steven Brown, James Curtis, Barry Kay, Lawrence LeDuc and Jon Pammett, many of the results of which are reported in this book. A larger 1988 study of different design was directed by Richard Johnston, André Blais, and Jean Crête, but was not available for secondary analysis at the time of this writing.

Field work for the 1965-1984 election studies was carried out by Canadian Facts, Ltd. under the direction of Mary Auvinen, and for the 1988 reinterview by the Carleton University School of Journalism Survey Centre under the direction of Alan Frizzell. We also draw upon the 1983-90 Political Support in Canada Study conducted by Harold Clarke and Allan Kornberg, which was supported by grants from the National Science Foundation, Duke University, and the Canadian Embassy (Washington, D.C.). We have also made occasional use of surveys conducted by the Canadian Institute for Public Opinion (Gallup) and by other polling organizations. Neither the principal investigators of any of these studies, the SSHRC and other granting agencies, nor the survey units are responsible for the analyses or interpretations of the data presented here.

In conducting the extensive analyses of data which have formed the basis for this book and for its predecessors, we have acquired debts to many individuals and organizations. At various times during the course of our work, a number of universities have provided research facilities and support — Carleton University, the University of Toronto, the University of North Texas, the University of Windsor, the University of Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier University, Virginia Polytechnic Institute, Duke University, Essex University, Florida State University, Harvard University, and the European University Institute. We are likewise grateful to the many students from these institutions and others who have worked with this vast body of data and have helped to shape our understanding of voting and elections. Thanks are also due to the many skilled and enthusiastic

people at Gage with whom we have worked on both the first and second editions of this book. And finally, we acknowledge the contribution of thousands of Canadians whose responses to our questions and to those of other researchers have provided the raw material for our work. This book is about them, and the political world in which they live.

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CHAPTER ONE

On the Political Sidelines

During the decades spanning 1970–1990, governments were challenged to find workable responses to their citizens' demands for improved economic conditions. By the mid-1970s, inflation, unemployment, and low rates of economic growth had become intractable problems. Many electorates, tired of governments' floundering responses, turned them out of office, hoping that a change in party would finally bring better times. But the deep recession of the early 1980s, which many observers likened to the Great Depression of the 1930s, dashed any lingering hopes of reviving traditional postwar economic and social policies. New thinking and new programs were now in demand.

In most advanced industrial countries, the decade of the 1980s was one of restructuring by business in order to allow it to compete better in international markets, to take advantage of innovative technologies, and to respond to changing labour forces. The goal was to increase productivity, even if it meant moving to new locations or hiring new kinds of workers. At the same time, governments revamped their relationships with the business sector, deregulating and privatising many activities, lowering corporate taxes, and seeking ways to help business compete better in international markets. These new strategies meant that long-standing government spending in costly areas such as social programs and housing became the subject of intense controversy. So, too, did support for regulation of workplaces and collective bargaining rights.

Canada was no exception to these international trends. Plagued by rising inflation and unemployment, balance of payments difficulties, and productivity problems, the country experienced intense popular discontent about the actions of governments and political parties. Yet the range of possible responses was limited by the position of the Canadian economy in the international economic order. This included a weak manufacturing base, strong resource-exporting sectors sensitive to international price changes and protectionism, and dependence on the American economy. A manufacturing sector largely organized as branch plants of foreign corporations did little research and development to respond to the challenges of new technologies. It was also vulnerable to decisions made outside the country about worldwide rationalization of production.

At the same time, however, some Canadian corporations with particular market niches, seeking an advantage in the American market, became fearful of the rising tide of protectionist sentiment in the U.S.A. These companies joined with resource exporters, many of whom had already felt the pinch of American barriers to their products, to press for new trade arrangements.

The voting population grew impatient with political failures to improve economic conditions. Opinion polls reported a reluctance to grant high approval ratings to any political party, especially the governing one, for its handling of the economy. For most Canadians, however, elections were the major opportunity to express dissatisfaction. Campaigns provided arenas for controversy, much of which revolved around economic problems. The 1974 election, for example, focussed on inflation, with the Progressive Conservatives proposing to combat that evil with wage-and-price controls, and the Liberals retorting that the cure might prove worse than the ailment. A year later, the Liberal government imposed controls. The 1979 election, although partially focussed on concerns of national unity, saw the opposition parties taking pot shots at how the government was managing the economy. However, the success of this campaign strategy, leading to the first Tory victory since 1962, turned to ignominious defeat. Nine months later, the Conservatives were forced into an election over the very budget intended to translate some of their economic promises into action. All this campaign rhetoric led people to believe that economic difficulties had not been resolved.

Elections provided a forum for public discontent over the economy and engendered expectations and hopes for improvement. Because of the nature of the Canadian party system and culture of politics, however, this discontent manifested itself in specific, short-term formulations of "grievances." These included the high costs of food and energy, and the lack of jobs, for example, for which all parties professed to have some kind of remedy. Voters rarely understood — nor did parties describe — such grievances as arising from long-term patterns or structural relationships in the economy. Instead, problems tended to be attributed to short-term dislocations that could be fixed if only the "right" formula or leadership were found. Canadian politics can be described, then, as a patchwork in which leaders offer quickly stitched-together solutions to allay the public's concerns.

By the time the paired elections that ended one decade and opened the next had occurred, there was a widespread sense that enough was enough. In 1980, the newly returned Liberal government declared that it would take serious action. Immediately after the defeat of the Parti Québécois' referendum on sovereignty-association, which seemed to have eliminated the threat of *indépendantiste* politics coming from Quebec,

the government announced a series of initiatives which have been termed a "Third National Policy."¹ Although it had not proposed much in the 1980 campaign, the government later designed an elaborate project. This would give it greater control over the future trajectory of the Canadian economy and strengthen its constitutional position. Basic to this whole package were the 1982 Constitution (including an amending formula and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms) and the National Energy Program (NEP), developed in 1980 as the centrepiece of a resource-led development strategy. But this initiative, unusually bold for the Liberals, went down in flames within a few years — opposed in all quarters, including much of the energy sector, many provincial premiers, and the American government. However, the project's final deathblow was dealt by the worst recession since the 1930s.

The Liberals quickly retreated from the most innovative parts of the initiative. They transferred responsibility for sorting out Canada's economic prospects to the Royal Commission on the Economic Union and Development Prospects for Canada, headed by Donald Macdonald. But before the Royal Commission's report, and the 1984 election, both major parties already decided that they needed leaders whose business experience clearly attuned them to business concerns.² The Progressive Conservatives chose Brian Mulroney, who had had a successful corporate career before entering politics. The Liberals brought back John Turner, who had retired from Parliament to Bay Street in 1975. He would replace Pierre Trudeau, the leader who had dominated Canadian politics for a decade and a half.

Despite public demand for action, Liberal initiatives, and new leaders, the 1984 election was one in which the Liberal and Conservative leaders looked very much alike. Voters were asked to choose between two men who advocated better management of the economy, some trade liberalization, more jobs, and more co-operative federal-provincial relations. In the campaign, media attention focussed on controversies over Liberal patronage appointments and a notorious "bum-patting" incident. After the Tory victory, Mulroney, perhaps having learned from the 1974 election that one could reject something in an election campaign and then do it anyway, began pursuing a free trade agreement with the United States, despite having declared his opposition during the campaign to free trade with the Americans. The Tory government presented the Agreement to Parliament in the summer of 1988, but the legislation was blocked by the Liberal majority in the Senate. The government reacted by calling an election for the fall of 1988.

In the first weeks of the campaign, the free trade issue did not immediately take off, as the parties' campaigns often dwelt on other matters. Nevertheless, Turner passionately opposed the deal negotiated by the

Mulroney government, and promised to get a better one if he were elected. In other words, for all his fire and brimstone rhetoric, Turner was actually advocating a free trade arrangement — but adjusted at the margins. The voters recognized this essential similarity between the two parties. Only a quarter of them thought that a Liberal government would abandon free trade by “tearing up the deal.”² The rest expected some sort of new agreement with the Americans, but were not at all sure that even such an agreement could solve the economic problems of the country.

As the dust cleared and observers tried to sort out whether the voting had settled the issue, it was debatable whether the Tories had actually won a popular mandate for free trade, or whether the Liberals and NDP had truly flushed out a majority of opposition to it.³ The confusion came first from the opposition parties’ positions. Although Turner had come to oppose the Free Trade Agreement, or FTA, many Liberals still favoured a free trade deal of some sort. The NDP, although a long-time opponent of arrangements that would reduce Canadian economic and political sovereignty, had throughout the campaign sent mixed signals by trying to run on other issues.

Moreover, many people considered that the existence of a mandate depended not only on the party positions; they also looked to public opinion and behaviour. By the end of the campaign, public opinion was clearly divided on the FTA, and a majority did not vote for the one party that had unambiguously favoured the Agreement. Nevertheless, the Conservatives commanded a clear majority of seats; therefore, by all the rules of parliamentary government, they could eventually pass the legislation. After the election, while there was never any question that the FTA would pass, there was still some uncertainty about how “fair” this outcome actually was.

How could it be that after an election focussed on a single issue, the outcome was still so murky, its meaning so uncertain, its mandate so unclear?⁴ This question can be asked after any election in which complex matters are reduced to simple choices. The 1988 election, however, seemed to pose this question more sharply. Indeed, such a question is not surprising in the context of Canadian electoral politics. All recent elections have occurred in circumstances which measure up only partially to some of the basic principles of democratic theory.

POLITICAL PARTIES AND LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

Theorists differ widely in their prescriptions for institutional arrangements to maximize democracy, and thereby achieve self-government, self-development, and equality for individuals. Some emphasize reducing