

What the parties stand for in an election

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Canadian political parties have evolved within a system of parliamentary government and since the creation of Canada in 1867, a federal constitutional structure. Such a government is based on the principle of the majority vote of a constituency electing one candidate as representative in parliament. The parties have operated with different degrees of success at the federal and provincial levels. Canada's five regions have distinct political traditions and different social and economic problems, and this fact has fostered the tendency of politics in each region to be somewhat introverted. Jurisdictional disagreements between the provincial and the federal governments have always been part of internal political diplomacy. Among the major social determinants, the French-English cleavage has been a dominant factor in the development and fortunes of the parties.

It is difficult to pinpoint the date of origin of Canadian political parties. In their early years, Upper and Lower Canada, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island were all governed by oligarchies which controlled the economic and political power in their particular areas. The little opposition that existed was fragmented and fractional. Only after the advent of responsible government in the nineteenth century (when the executive became responsible to the legislature) did the factions and interests begin to mature into what could be called parties. As legislative responsibilities were extended and the franchise expanded, the pressures for party cohesion and organisation increased and recognisable political parties emerged.

Even today, history and traditional loyalties rather than the logic of ideology are the distinguishing features of Canadian political parties. The actual labels of the parties are practically insignificant, as even a cursory examination of their platforms reveals. The two major parties have traditionally acted as brokers or middlemen selecting and editing ideas they consider to have widest appeal to the electorate.

Two dominant parties

Two major parties, the Progressive Conservatives and the Liberals, originated in the

context of parliamentary activity and have dominated federal politics since the earliest days. The Conservative Party was pre-eminent in the nineteenth century and the Liberal Party has formed the government for most of the twentieth. Fragment and movement parties have appeared, sometimes briefly, in this century. The most significant have been the CCF-NDP and Social Credit which both emerged as protest parties. Although neither has ever come close to forming a federal government, they have experienced considerable success at the provincial level. Moreover, in periods of minority government in Ottawa they have also had more significance than their numerical strength would indicate.

The Progressive Conservative Party

The oldest Canadian party, the Progressive Conservative, can be traced back to 1854 when John A. MacDonald brought together a working alliance called the Liberal-Conservative which included eastern commercial interests, conservative French Canadians, and Ontario Tories. Their objective was to bring about Confederation and then implement a National Policy which entailed encouraging national unity and development of the country by promoting a national railway, industry and commerce. Maintenance of the British connection and establishment of relatively high tariffs were fundamental to their political stance.

French Canadians were traditionally cautious of the Conservatives because of the party's strong British interests. The execution of Louis Riel — the rebel French-speaking métis leader — and later the imposition of military conscription on reluctant French Canadians in 1917 drastically reduced the party's popularity in French Quebec. Robert Borden, who had become Conservative Prime Minister in 1911 before the war, continued after the 1917 election as head of a Union government, a coalition of Conservative and English-speaking Liberals.

Neither Arthur Meighen nor his successor, R. B. Bennett, was able as party leader to

make new inroads in Quebec. In the 1920's the party structure rapidly became over-centralised in Ontario. Westerners, who lacked a strong party tradition, formed the temporarily successful Progressive Party with a labour-farm oriented platform, and undermined Conservative strength in the prairies. In power again during the worst of the depression years, 1930-1935, the Conservatives were assured of further unpopularity and loss of support.

In 1942, the Conservatives tried to consolidate their forces by choosing John Bracken, the Progressive premier of Manitoba, as their leader and renamed their party the Progressive Conservatives. However, party fortunes did not improve until 1957 when they formed a minority government under a new leader from the west, John G. Diefenbaker. This upset victory preceded a landslide in 1958. In that election the party captured not only the western vote, but also 50 seats in Quebec. However, the victory was ephemeral, and in the 1963 election the Conservatives were defeated.

Robert Stanfield replaced John Diefenbaker, but conflict over the leadership created factions within the party and disrupted the organisation at the local level. Mr. Stanfield was unable to reunite the party or gain strength in the province of Quebec. In 1972 the Conservatives won 18 per cent of the popular vote in Quebec but only 2 of its 74 seats. They lost again in 1974 following a campaign for wage and price controls, which paradoxically were instituted by their opponents the next year. Joe Clark, a 36 year old Albertan, replaced Robert Stanfield following a leadership convention in 1976.

The loss of French Canadian support has been the single most important factor in the decline of Conservative strength in the twentieth century. Quebec, the second most populous province in Canada and the only one that is predominantly French and Catholic, traditionally votes as a bloc, so that it is virtually impossible for a party to form a government without its support. Since 1891 the Conservative Party has won a majority of the Quebec seats in a federal election only once, in 1958. The Conservative challenge today is to build a significant electoral base in Quebec and