Conclusion: Déjà Vu All Over Again?

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Abstract The final concluding chapter offers a synthesis of the main points put forth in the book but also considers Canadian elections and election research within the framework set out by Leduc et al. It concludes that the 2019 election fits within the historical flows of elections and that stable keys to the Liberal minority government victory were identifiable.
It also considers this election and its impacts on our understanding of political marketing and frames how political parties might conduct future Canadian election campaigns.

**Keywords** Justin Trudeau • Andrew Scheer • Jagmeet Singh • Yves-François Blanchet • Liberal

The morning after the election, Canadians were awakened to the news that they had elected a minority government. This scenario had been almost unimaginable a few months prior when all signs pointed to another Trudeau victory. Elected just four years before, the Trudeau government had created expectations of hope and change which turned out to be difficult to implement.

The irony of this opening paragraph is that it can be describing the morning of October 31st, 1972 or the morning of October 22nd, 2019. The parallels between the two periods are striking. As most Canadians may have studied or can remember, Pierre-Elliott Trudeau was elected in 1968; carried by a wave of Trudeaumania. Four years later, the first time he faced re-election; he barely managed to hold on to a minority. His son, Justin, did not create the same level of enthusiasm when he was elected Prime Minister in 2015 but nevertheless won a solid majority of the seats. Just like his father, he was reduced to a minority situation the first time he sought a renewed mandate.

There are many factors influencing election outcomes. In this book, we have reviewed several issues and variables from the field of political marketing which contribute to making sense of elections. For instance, Jennifer Lees-Marshment (in Chap. 2) focuses on the importance of political branding and how this can help explain the Liberal election performance. She mentioned that the branding efforts around Justin Trudeau’s image had mixed results. She pointed out the differences between party branding and leadership branding and how the Liberals – as a party – successfully demarcated themselves apart from the Conservatives. While Trudeau’s brand suffered from the “Brownface” fiasco, this successful demarcation in positioning may have saved the party. Kenneth Cosgrove also looked at the issue of branding in politics. This author raises different perspectives. He links branding to campaign dynamics and how it can mobilize voters as well as providing a useful heuristic to explain what parties have to offer. Cosgrove makes the pertinent argument that such forces
may be more relevant than ever as voters are going through the relatively new phenomenon of social sorting along lifestyles, geographic and demographic clusters. But while those two chapters bring unique perspectives, one cannot help but feel echoes of the past. Discussions of values and beliefs in politics go back to Almond and Verba’s The Civic Culture (1963) and have been examined ever since. Moreover, Lees-Marshment’s discussion of the 2019 Liberal slogan – Choose Forward – suggest that it might have been as vacuous as the 1972 The Land is Strong and how both may have contributed to the similarity in electoral outcome.

Other chapters evoke similar reactions. James McLean examines the NDP campaign and chronicles its efforts to adjust its approach to the new realities of big data and sophisticated tools such as dynamic creative optimization. But the author himself admits that in the end, the result may well be the product of an old norm of Canadian politics: “federalist francophone voters don’t need the NDP when the prime minister is a Liberal: and nationalists don’t need or want the NDP when the Bloc Québécois is on its game”. The consequences of the strength of the Bloc is made clear in Lachapelle’s chapter and points to the fact that contrary to speculations and maybe wishful thinking for some, the Québec/Ottawa struggle remains a reality of Canadian politics. And we cannot fail to mention that according to Coletto, the newest and latest in market intelligence in Canada is to use technology to allow campaign to go “knock on doors”.

There is no denying that the political marketing literature has opened up new areas of inquiry and as the chapters in this book demonstrates, provide unique perspectives on the study of electoral behaviour. A potential next area of analysis could be about reconciling the innovations from political marketing with the stable, almost immutable forces which appear to frame the context of elections, at least in Canada.

In Dynasties and Interludes (2010), LeDuc et al. introduced a framework within which the historical flow of electoral behaviour in Canadian federal elections could be evaluated. While Canadian voters have demonstrated weak political identification, little attachment to social cleavages and a propensity to vote to “throw the rascals out” from time to time, the authors identify a series of constraints on electoral behaviour that may not be obvious or apparent. When federal elections are put in historical context – looking at elections not in isolation but over the period starting in 1867, a few patterns emerge.

According to LeDuc et al., despite the vagaries and particularities of each election going back to 1867, it is possible to identify stable keys to
victory in Canadian federal elections. For the authors, while “the parties have had considerable freedom in [structuring the choices available to voters in an election]… the parties are not totally free to structure electoral choice in any way that they wish” (2010: 35). Accordingly, to be successful in Canadian election, political parties must be favorably positioned on three main dimensions:

(1) The key economic questions of the time;
(2) Issues of national integration or national unity; and
(3) Preservation or expansion of the welfare state (Ibid.)

The authors suggest that “sustained mastery of the three issue areas of economic, national unity and social welfare issues provides the key to the reasons why some political leaders and their parties have been able to establish dynasties that stand the test of time, while others have not” (41).

Evidence of successful dynasties can be clearly identified. Of note, four of the six dynasties in Canadian history have been Liberal dynasties. Conservative Leader John A. Macdonald was the first to rule for an extended period of time and arguably defined the process through which political parties can manage to win repeatedly. His National Policy was designed to address the three key policy areas of economic prosperity, social welfare and national unity. Macdonald’s success was not lost on his Liberal successors and both Laurier and King adopted the same blueprint to establish their respective dynasties. In some ways, we can also find similarities with both the Trudeau and Chrétien eras. Further support for this framework is found when examining the dynamics of those governments which were not as successful. Throughout the years, Alexander Mackenzie, Robert Borden, R.B. Bennett, Arthur Meighen, John Diefenbaker, Joe Clark and Brian Mulroney failed to stay in power for extended period. The Diefenbaker and Mulroney examples are particularly insightful. Both leaders were elected with massive majorities and both had support across the countries. Mulroney in particular possessed all the necessary characteristics; bilingual, with a strong base of support in Quebec and a clear focus on improving the economy. For his part, Diefenbaker’s appeal was more limited with his lack of control of French and his smaller western base of support but he nevertheless rode a significant wave of support from Quebec. In the early days of his administration, Diefenbaker moved expertly on the welfare front with salary increases for federal employees and government assistance for depressed sectors of the economy. But
within a couple of years, he demonstrated his inability or unwillingness to address the stable constraints of Canadian politics. After his 1958 sweep, Diefenbaker refused to appoint a Quebec Lieutenant in his Cabinet. In fact, he appointed only three Francophones to his Cabinet and all in minor roles (Ibid, 207). He appeared tone-deaf to most of the struggles facing Canadians and shrugged off signs of economic downturns. This led to the creation of two new political parties – one from the West and one from Quebec – and by 1963, the Liberals were back in power.

The similarities with the Mulroney years are, once again, eerie. Like Diefenbaker, PC Leader Brian Mulroney was also elected with a massive majority. Unlike Diefenbaker, he understood the importance of Quebec and regional representation. He had a very ambitious agenda on two of the three key dimensions: a free trade agreement with the U.S. and bringing Quebec back into the Constitution. While he managed to get re-elected in 1988 mainly on the strength of the Free Trade Agreement, by 1993, Mulroney had exhausted all of his political capital in trying to deal with national unity and resigned. The turmoil created by the constitutional wrangling led to creation of two new political parties – one from the West and one from Quebec – and by 1993, the Liberals were back in power.

Leduc and Pammett further refined their analysis and applied it to the Harper years (2011, 2016). Conservative Leader Stephen Harper managed to win three consecutive elections and was in office for almost ten years. This makes him the second most successful Conservative leader in Canadian history, only behind John A. Macdonald. The road to the Harper Dynasty was tortuous. It was built on the remnants of a very divisive period for Conservatives. When the Reform Party and its Leader Preston Manning burst on the political scene in the late 1980s, their success decimated the Progressive Conservative Party. It took more than a decade to put the pieces back into place. When he became Conservative Leader in 2003, Harper inherited a party with questionable credentials on the three pillars of electoral success in Canada. The Party had some bona fides on the economy and Harper immediately provided some credentials on that front. It was perceived as antagonistic towards the Canadian welfare system and had little credibility in Quebec.

It is in the 2006 election that Harper re-positioned his party. As Leduc and Pammett demonstrate: “In the social and economic policy areas, the Conservatives retreated from the large-scale funding and tax cut pledges which had caused them so much grief in 2004 and announced smaller-scale targeted promises in both areas” (Leduc and Pammett 2011: 321).
And with regards to the other pillar – national unity – “the conservatives saw a major opportunity because of the continuing of the continuing problems of the sponsorship scandal was causing the Liberals” (ibid; 322). Harper embraced improved provincial autonomy and for a while, benefited from that positioning. More importantly, the Conservatives successfully repositioned themselves using many of the lessons that were germinating in the political marketing field. (See Flanagan 2007). Their successful alignment lasted until 2015. But their defeat in that election can be attributed to the reality that by that time the Harper Conservatives no longer had control of any of the three key electoral issues: “the sputtering economy made it difficult for the party to get mileage out of claiming credit for past performance […] the focus on balanced budgets and deficit reduction made it impossible for the Conservatives to propose new social programs […] and finally, the Conservative Party found itself on the wrong side of a number of national unity issues” (Pammett and Leduc 2016: 377).

In some ways, this book opens the door for a further examination of the potential analytical marriage between political marketing and a more traditional look at electoral behaviour. The 2019 Canadian Federal Election shows that some forces and dynamics do play a role in securing some continuity in electoral behaviour. It would be interesting to investigate how political marketing internalizes those apparent constraints in explaining outcomes. At the same time, change does occur and political parties engage in transactional politics with some success as illustrated in the chapter by Turcotte and Moore in this book. We may be at a point in time when the two fields reconnect to further contribute to our understanding of all the disparate elements which coalesce to influence how people vote.

Going forward into 2021, the response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the emergency response by the Trudeau government will weigh heavily on voters and on how the other political parties and leaders approach the next election. Canada has not had wartime-style government since 1945 and future political marketing and branding may be framed entirely through the lens of this crisis. For Justin Trudeau’s part, his legacy and how he might run and lead the Liberal Party of Canada for a third mandate will likely depend on the party framing the campaign as a referendum on the response to the global pandemic. The brand durability and the
marketing of that brand will be on full display should public opinion be positive following the crisis. If the response is seen as a failure, opposition party strategies will shift to accommodate that sentiment. The 2020 U.S. presidential election will likely be a harbinger of things to come.

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