

Introduction

This book argues that distinctive motifs launched by signal events characterize different eras in the history of Canada's political parties. An implicit theory undergirding the book is that political parties have adjusted, adapted, and sometimes reinvented themselves in order to respond to significant social and economic changes and cultural cues. Sometimes the parties have shaped or reinforced those social forces. Motifs or recurring elements in distinct eras of Canadian party politics speak to particular dominant ideas. The story begins by reviewing the rise of four different types of parties in the nineteenth century after the establishment of representative governments in British North America late in the eighteenth century and before the creation of the Canadian state. By the turn of the twentieth century two national parties that continue to this day, the Conservatives and Liberals, became firmly established. The book concludes by examining some changes in how the ever-evolving parties have operated.

Nineteenth-century party leaders, activists, and voters would not recognize today's political parties. The historical arc of Canada's political parties reflects the arc of Canadian history. Using largely secondary sources, this chronologically organized and easy-to-follow book, something of a primer, explores how the parties have emerged and addressed the conflicts and tensions of a society permanently under construction. Attention is focused on overarching themes and some of the ideas, personalities, social forces, and institutional structures that have driven the parties. Inevitably much is left in the shadows.

This book aims to enlighten non-specialist students of Canadian politics and general readers who have some knowledge or are somewhat innocent of Canadian history. Academic specialists will also find it interesting, encountering some things unfamiliar to them. Offering an accessible yet substantial understanding of the development of the

parties, this study will be useful to politically engaged citizens, journalists, and anyone else who wants to know more about the history of Canada's political parties, how they came to be, and what and whom they have represented. On offer is a broad factual synthetic picture of the parties as historical and legal organizations. Specific aspects of any one party or of precise periods are not of primary importance; motifs structure the book to make the principal argument that the parties have changed in what they stand for and how they have operated as Canada and the values, concerns, and interests of Canadians have changed.

There are many histories of the leading parties and many biographies of party leaders, ranging from magisterial studies such as Donald Creighton's two-volume chronicle of John A. Macdonald's career to John English's equally admirable two tomes on the life of Pierre Trudeau.¹ Political scientists such as Richard Johnston, William Cross, and R. Kenneth Carty have provided richly textured quantitative and qualitative analyses of Canada's party systems.² An objective of this book, careful and granular in its historical approach, is to add value to and complement these insightful studies. Thick in description and examining a wide reading of materials, this book may be read as a history of the parties through the lens of Canadian history or as a history of Canada through the lens of the history of the parties. The story of Canada's political parties, like the story of Canada itself, is one of continuity as well as disruption, transition, and change.

A political party is a group of people with similar political goals and opinions whose purpose is to get party candidates elected to public office.³ The world views, policies, leaders, strategies, and organizational forms of a party must adapt to changing times and to competitors. If a party does not, it fails and fades away. A party therefore must often recalibrate its message so that followers remain faithful and adversaries might be won over. Ideas drive parties because they serve as a compass, indicating a party's purpose and direction. The principles of a party feed the emotions and intellects of party supporters, many of whom have a sense of belonging to a tradition that will continue after they are gone. To remain relevant, however, parties must often re-examine and revise their ideological underpinnings and policy postures.

Party leaders may come and go, but their parties generally persist. Among their various functions in a democratic society, parties are the critical connective link between the public and its government; they are transmission belts between official and non-official wielders of power. Society, economy, culture, institutional structures, and leaders all contribute to shaping parties and the party system. At the same time, we must remember that the thinking propelling political parties and their

behaviour also influences society, the economy, how institutions operate, and culture generally. The causal arrow points both ways; party and society are interrelated and interact. For example, the Depression of the 1930s led to the emergence of new parties and a reorientation of the older parties on issues of social policy and wealth distribution. The arrow also points the other way, from party to society; the Liberal party's project for a charter of rights in the 1980s led to the rise of "Charter patriotism" and "Charter Canadians" who see themselves as bearers of constitutionally entrenched rights.⁴

Most of Canada's federal parties have endeavoured to be national parties. The Liberals and Conservatives have long-established pedigrees, having emerged in colonial legislatures. Other parties, like the Progressives, the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), Social Credit, and the Greens arose outside of Parliament. The Bloc Québécois, composed originally of defecting Conservative and Liberal MPs, was a federal party born in Parliament. So too was the Ralliement des créditistes, composed of defecting Social Crediters. Styling itself Quebec's national party, the Bloc Québécois has offered no candidates in the rest of the country. The Greens are a relatively recent arrival in Parliament. The Communist party, which once had an MP and several MLAs, was for a time an outlawed party, its leaders imprisoned, its publications shuttered.

A potent reflection of continuity in Canada's most successful party, the Liberals, is the apostolic parade of its leaders; Paul Martin, who governed in the twenty-first century, served in the Cabinet of Jean Chrétien, who served in that of Pierre Trudeau. Trudeau in turn served in Lester Pearson's government, and Pearson served in Louis St. Laurent's. St. Laurent was a member of Mackenzie King's government and King a member in Wilfrid Laurier's, whose first Cabinet was formed in the nineteenth century. Paul Martin Sr., bested for the party leadership by Pierre Trudeau, had attended Laurier's funeral in 1919, the same year Trudeau was born. Justin Trudeau, born to Pierre when he was prime minister, came to lead a Liberal government a century later. Another example of continuity is the legacy of Social Credit; although now long gone, the party governed one province for thirty-six uninterrupted years and another for two decades. The party's founder in the 1930s, Alberta Premier William Aberhart, was the godfather of Preston Manning, the founder of the Reform Party in the 1980s. Preston's father, Ernest Manning, succeeded Aberhart as premier, and Preston's principal acolyte, Stephen Harper, became a twenty-first-century prime minister.

Every party that began as a protest party has had a distinct regional or sectional base of popular support. The Progressive Party represented

distressed farmers; the Reform Party championed an aggrieved region. The Reconstruction party captured a significant share of the popular vote in its one election campaign in 1935, outpolling the equally embryonic CCF and Social Credit parties, but it came and went quickly. It left no trace precisely because it had no regional or sectional anchor. The Progressives, the Reform Party, Social Credit, and the CCF have departed the political landscape in name, if not in spirit. The CCF's successor party, the New Democratic Party (NDP), firmly embedded itself in Canada's political culture; despite being a perpetual also-ran in federal elections, it has held the reins of government in a majority of the provinces and in one territory.

This book tells the story of these federal parties but also touches on some of the more prominent provincial parties like Quebec's Union Nationale and Parti Québécois. In places there are references to some of the provincial kin of federal parties such as the provincial United Farmers parties and the Alberta, British Columbia, and Quebec Social Credit parties. Repeated success in federal elections points to the strength of the Liberal brand and the party's resilience. However, Liberal success masks the party's vulnerability and the actual competitiveness of the Conservatives. Despite their election victories, the Liberals have experienced long-term erosion of support since winning power in 1896.⁵ In the thirty-six elections between 1896 and 2015, the Conservatives won 47 per cent and Liberals only 40 per cent of the seats in English Canada.⁶ In Quebec, Conservatives have won only 15 per cent of the seats since 1896, 45 per cent of them in three elections: 1958, 1984, and 1988. This made Quebec the most common pivot in determining which party governs in Ottawa.

The following synopsis is a roadmap of the study that follows. It runs from the turn of the nineteenth century to beyond the 2015 election, concluding with observations about some ways in which parties and voters have changed over time. The chapters explain as well as describe critical developments in the history of Canada's parties.

Chapter 1 traces the development of parties, presenting four types of parties that emerged sequentially in British North America in the nineteenth century. The growth of a democratic impulse and the struggle to create permanent, unified, national parties are recurring elements or motifs in this chapter. Institutional changes and socio-economic conditions at home and abroad informed the issues, parties, and party types that arose after the establishment of representative governments in Upper and Lower Canada in 1791 and, before that, in the Maritime colonies. Four party types – court, competing, coalition, and consolidated – took shape, with each party type dominant in each quarter of the

nineteenth century. By century's end, a national party system loosely linking federal and provincial parties of the same name and orientation, Liberal and Conservative, had materialized. Ties binding them persist to this day. Contemporary Conservative and Liberal partisans continue to revere early leaders of their parties, John A. Macdonald and Wilfrid Laurier, referring proudly to some of their principles and accomplishments.

Chapter 2 examines competing nationalist narratives presented by the two parties at the turn of the twentieth century. They offered contrasting visions of Canada's place and affinities in the world, of the country's destiny as it could and should be. The central motif of party politics in this era was the debate between imperial federationists and continentalists. In an age corresponding with Britain's gradual decline as an imperial power and the rise of the United States as an economic behemoth, the salient issue was whether Canada was a familial part of a British global enterprise or a country whose primary interests lay in North America. The First World War resulted in Canada's exit from the cocoon of British colonialism, but English Canadians continued to value the British connection and the British Commonwealth despite the dissolution of the empire. As the economy became increasingly tethered to the United States and continental economic integration proceeded rapidly, partisans divided over Canada's identity and fate.

The motif in chapter 3 is the rise of third parties to challenge the established Liberals and Conservatives after the end of the First World War. The politically stormy 1920s and 1930s produced radical new parties, transforming the party system. The Progressive party reflected more than agrarian-driven politics; it challenged the partisan conduct of politics and the conventions of parliamentary government. However, the party withered, most of its MPs and supporters returned to their original home, the Liberal party. Nevertheless, the Progressives laid the foundations for other upstart parties. As regional and sectional grievances drove sharp changes in the behaviour of voters during the Depression, a more dynamic multiparty Parliament took hold, with ideology playing a more significant role. Some provincial farm organizations and labour-socialist parties federated to form the CCF. Proposing monetary reform as the tonic for economic ills, Social Credit arose first as a movement and then competed as a party, becoming the third largest in Parliament. The CCF and Social Credit grew beyond their roots, but the first-past-the-post electoral system undid the Reconstruction Party, and the Communist Party was never able to attract more than minor support.

Chapter 4 begins with all the parliamentary parties rallying to Britain's side at the outbreak of the Second World War. A change in public attitudes towards social welfare led the parties to accept that government had an obligation to provide for the economic security of citizens; the governing Liberals promised a new social order and the Conservatives promised social security from the cradle to the grave. The motif in this chapter is the success of the Liberals in situating themselves as ideologically equidistant from the Conservatives on their right and the CCF on their left. The Conservatives suffered from having less stable leadership than the Liberals and turmoil in their thinking. Both parties pilfered proposals from the CCF, whose fortunes rose and fell with public perceptions of the Soviet Union. Social Credit gave lip service to monetary reform but redefined its mission as opposition to socialism. French Canada remained in the Liberals' corner, despite the party's imposition of conscription and the emergence of the nationalist Bloc populaire canadien.

Chapter 5 scrutinizes the parties during the series of four minority governments produced by five elections over the course of eight years in the 1950s and 1960s. This era begins with the Conservatives winning power in 1957. The motif in this chapter is the competing conservative, liberal, and social democratic visions of Canadian nationalism. The CCF, rebranded as the NDP, and Social Credit played critical roles in determining the fate of Liberal and Conservative governments. Chief protagonists Conservative John Diefenbaker and Liberal Lester Pearson reshaped their parties. Diefenbaker opened his party's ranks to citizens of non-Anglo-Celtic or French ancestry. The prairies, at the time the country's most ethnically diverse region, became the strongest base of support for the Conservative party. Pearson recruited new Québécois voices during the Quiet Revolution and led a more urban-based Liberal party. For the first time, Quebec broke significantly with the older parties, electing a contingent of Social Crediters who, frustrated with their party's western leadership, broke away to form their own party, the Ralliement des créditistes. During this period, television revolutionized the coverage of parties.

Chapter 6 engages issues of language, national unity, and economy during a period when parties opened themselves to greater participation by party members. Trudeauomania in the 1968 election is the start of this era, and the motif in the chapter is the rise of Quebecois nationalism amid stagflation. Canada's centennial and her made-for-television prime minister caught the world's attention. In selecting Pierre Trudeau and Robert Stanfield as their new leaders, the Liberals and Conservatives departed from the managed leadership contests of the

past. Trudeau, unpopular in English Canada, almost lost power in 1972 but succeeded in keeping the Liberals in office because of Quebec's overwhelming support. Trapped in a syndrome of opposition, the Conservatives were wracked by self-lacerating factionalism over leadership. The NDP took a nationalist turn, and Social Credit, in both English Canada and Quebec, virtually disappeared. Revisions to the Canada Elections Act greatly empowered party leaders, reducing the independence of candidates for office by requiring that they secure the signature of their party's leader in order to carry the party's name on the ballot.

The resounding victory of Brian Mulroney's Conservatives in 1984 starts the era in [chapter 7](#). During his tenure, the Conservatives abandoned their long-held aversion to economic continentalism. Motifs in this chapter are the rise of neoconservatism and battles about free trade with the United States and the Constitution. Mulroney's ill-fated attempts to upstage Trudeau by securing Quebec's approval for the Constitution led to the implosion of the Conservative party and the rise of two new regionally based parties. Western Canadian Conservatives felt betrayed by their party and gravitated to the Reform party, which declared "The West Wants In" while the independantist Bloc Québécois served as the federal incarnation of the provincial Parti Québécois. The historic balance between Confederation's two parties ended. The Liberals became the major beneficiary of the collapse of the Conservatives in the 1990s, and the NDP reached its nadir. Unable to secure official party status in Parliament, it verged on irrelevance.

[Chapter 8](#) begins with a fragmented Parliament in which the once Quebec-centred Liberals became Ontario-centred, benefitting from divisions among Ontario's conservative voters. The recurring element in this chapter is the entrenchment of regionalism. Regionalization of the parties intensified with the Bloc Québécois dominating Quebec, the Reform-cum-Canadian Alliance party supreme in the West, and the Progressive Conservatives competitive only in Atlantic Canada. The NDP was going nowhere but not going away, while the Bloc Québécois spoke exclusively for Quebec's interests in Parliament. The Liberals presented themselves as the only truly pan-Canadian party. After fighting and undercutting one another, the two partisan branches of the conservative movement reconciled. Dropping the qualifier "Progressive," the newly rebranded Conservative party led by Canadian Alliance leader and former Reform MP Stephen Harper billed itself as a merger but was more of an appropriation of the Conservative brand by Harperites. Infighting over the Liberal party's leadership and a major scandal opened the door to office for the refurbished Conservatives.

With the melding of the Progressive Conservatives and the Canadian Alliance, [chapter 9](#) shines light on the conservatism of the old and new Conservative parties. The motif here is an uncompromising right-wing government opposed by a divided left that includes an uncharacteristically strong NDP. As Liberal support shrank during Harper's tenure as prime minister, support for the NDP rose dramatically; in 2011 the party leapfrogged over the Liberals to become the official opposition in Parliament. The humiliated Liberals suffered their worst-ever performance. Michael Ignatieff, who had returned to Canada to serve as Liberal leader, soon left the country once again. The NDP, which had never been a force in Quebec, became a Quebec-centred party in 2011 at the expense of the Bloc Québécois. Parliament's newest party, the Greens, began as a tiny party of one. Undermining predictions of their demise, the Liberals demonstrated their capacity to recover quickly in the 2015 election. Justin Trudeau swept into the leadership of his party and the prime ministership, partially because of popular memories of his father.

The concluding chapter looks at the nimble and enterprising modern party as a reinvented institution. Over time, parties transformed how they select their leaders, and the role of party members changed; party membership numbers now expand and contract like accordions. The financing of parties has also been remade, as have the ways parties relate to media. Links between federal and provincial parties of the same name have become more tenuous. Declining party loyalty and rising voter volatility have coincided with the increasing power of party leaders, reinforced by an unprecedented level of party discipline in Parliament. Indeed, more than ever before, leaders pull MPs along in their slipstream.

Political parties have been essential vehicles of Canada's parliamentary democracy. This study of the circumstances surrounding the emergence, development, and character of the parties points to their future; they will continue to mirror and shape Canada's diverse political culture.

PARTISAN ODYSSEYS

Canada's Political Parties

