

Canada's Government Party: A Century of Four Liberal Parties

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Blais dedicates his CPSA Presidential address to searching for an explanation for the success of the Liberal Party of Canada – described as one of a small club of very successful parties.

He does this by exploring voting patterns since 1965, recognizing that the party “does not dominate everywhere”. He reports it is “weak in the west”, “extremely successful in Ontario” and more recently no longer the plurality party in Quebec. After a careful analysis of the social bases of Liberal voting (in English Canada) he admits that explaining the mystery of Liberal dominance remains an open issue.

Here I want to take up Blais' search for the LPC. I am interested in examining a wider story of the party, rather than its individual supporters, in order to map something of its basic shape and character over the full century of its domination of national politics in Canada.

Preface

A setting in 13 bullet points . . .

The LPC as a party

- with an uneven electorate
- and distinctive east-west gradient
- in expanding party system (growing effective # parties)
- enjoying regular electoral system (FPTP) bonuses
- surviving three major collapses forcing reorganization and remobilization
- facing long-term secular decline

Liberal dominance

- never extended to the provinces
- declined at provincial level over the century

By comparison

- its post WW II dominance was not unusual (Jp, It, In, Sw, NZ, Ir are >)
- the electoral system does not seem to be the story
- not rooted in particular origin, context or practice
- its long-term decline not unusual
- its century-long dominance is distinctive

A Century of Four Liberal Parties

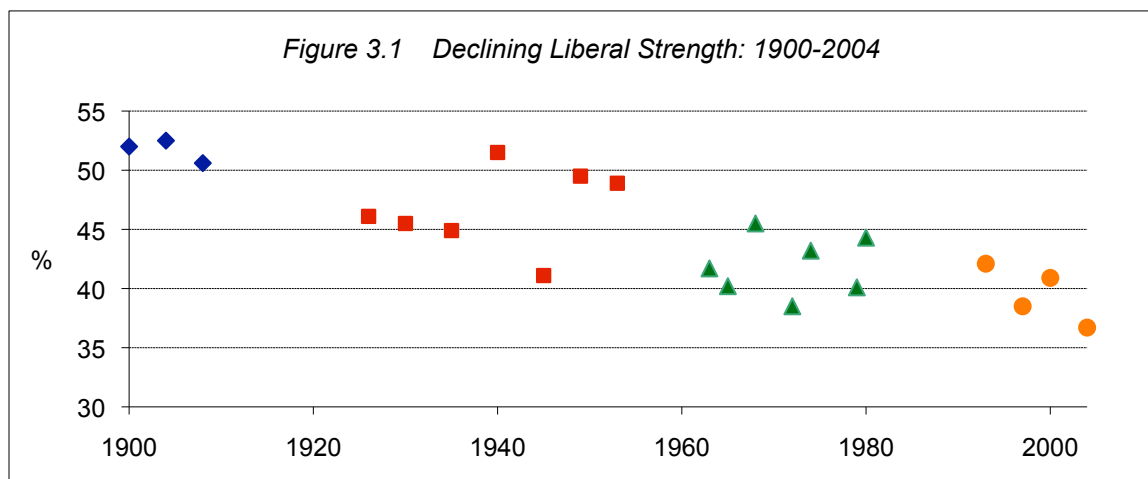
“The 20th century Canada may have belonged to the Liberal Party but, by its end, the Liberals belonged to Ontario”

Canada’s twentieth century electoral politics was Liberal party politics. The party’s long dominance of the national government was unique. While political parties in other democracies also emerged as the preeminent players in their national political systems none dominated so long as the Liberals. Yet a reading of the party’s record as one of seemingly unchallenged supremacy is misleading. Its dominance was never easy or guaranteed: three times during the century its Conservative opponents won overwhelming electoral victories and the party was forced to reorganize and rebuild in a reshaped electorate. But each time it did so it emerged a different party, one both smaller and narrower. The result was a series of four distinctive Liberal eras, each characterized by a party that was increasingly representing and articulating the regional realities that underlay Canadian society.

The Shrinking Party

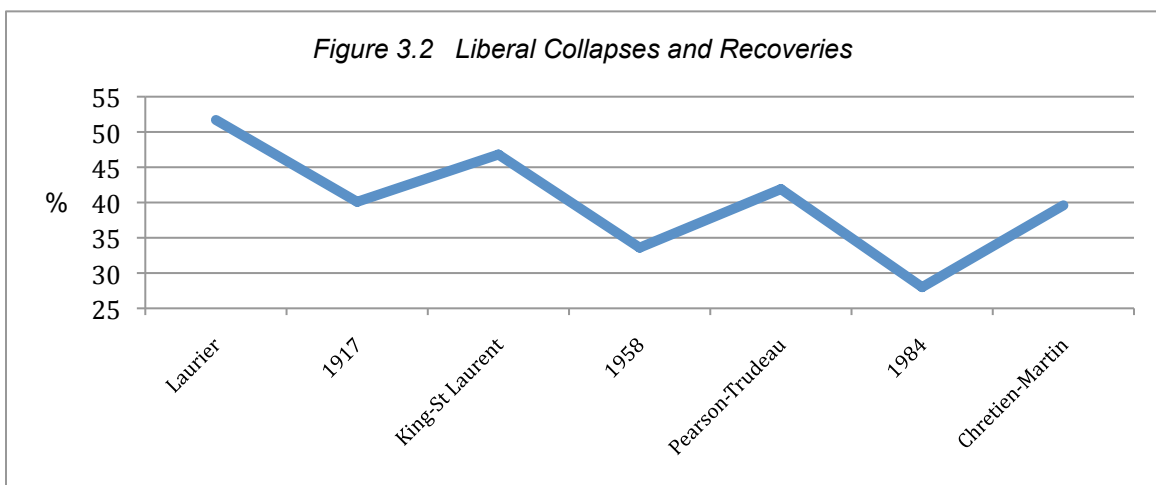
Wilfrid Laurier’s Liberals commanded over half the total vote in winning the 1900 general election; one hundred years later Jean Chrétien’s Liberals held on to office but managed to do so with just forty percent of the vote. While the party saw its vote shrink by over twenty percent over the century, the losses were not the result of a gradual erosion in support that left its vote steadily declining from decade to decade. The pattern was more complex: years of steady support were broken by shorter periods of sharp decline after which the party would regroup and then establish a new equilibrium position, only to see the cycle repeated again. Thus the Liberal’s century-long story is characterized by a pattern of step-by-step deterioration. This can be seen in the record of their vote shares (Figure 3.1) that clearly identifies four distinctive Liberal eras.

The first of the periods of Liberal dominance began with the party's victory in 1896, when it came to office with fewer votes than the Conservatives, and ran through the end of the first decade. Under Laurier's leadership the party averaged about fifty-two percent of the vote in the first elections of the century. A second long Liberal era started in the first post-World War I election, was really consolidated by 1926 and then continued until the mid 1950s. Over a series of seven elections the party, led by McKenzie King and then St. Laurent, averaged forty-seven percent of the vote, enough to keep it in office for all but one term during the Great Depression. The third distinctive period of Liberal ascendancy began in the mid-1960s and ran into the 1980s. During these two decades the party, first under Pearson and then Trudeau, again dominated another seven election cycle. However with only forty-two percent of the vote, it did so with considerably less support than it had in its earlier incarnations. Finally, the party ended its remarkable century by winning four consecutive elections under the leadership of Chrétien and Martin but its support had again been reduced and it had to manage with a vote share under forty percent.

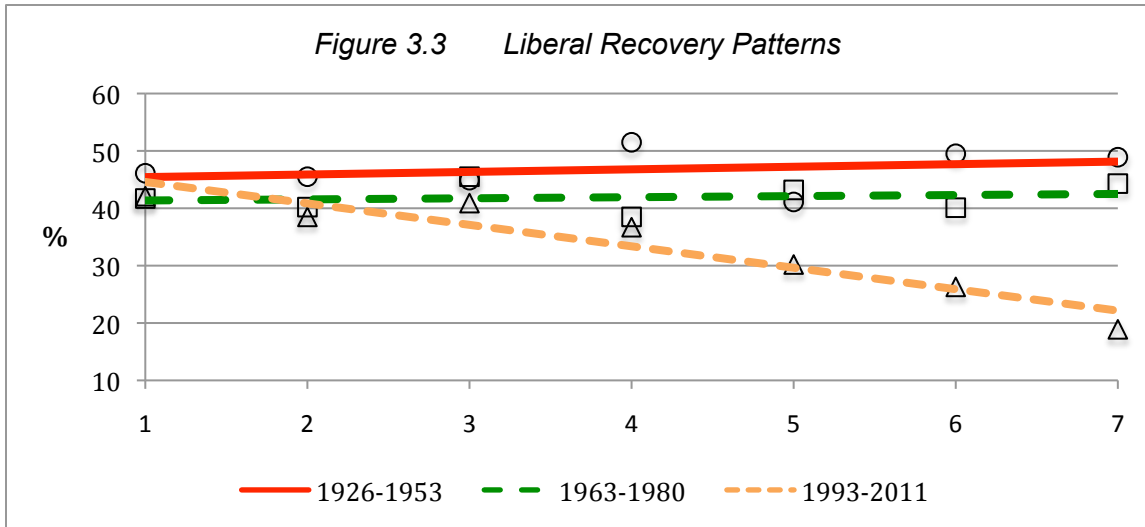


Each of these Liberal eras was interrupted by Conservative election victories. More significantly, each of these Conservative interruptions of the Liberal's hold on the electorate involved a dramatic landslide victory by the Conservatives in which it won at least half the national vote; and in each case the Liberals were

reduced to an historic low in popular support. While the Liberals then managed to recover from these devastating defeats in 1917, 1958 and 1984, each Conservative landslide drove the Liberals to successively smaller vote shares making it difficult for them to restore the *status quo ante*, ensuring that the downward step cycle of decline in their support would continue. The cumulative impact of these cycles of a big vote collapse followed by an incomplete recovery (see Figure 3.2) was the gradual shrinkage of the Liberal presence in the electorate and a more precarious dominance in each subsequent era.



The Liberals remarkable capacity to respond to major defeats and slowly rebuild their organization and electoral base allowed the party to maintain its unprecedented century-long mastery of national politics. While the party's strong base in Quebec may have facilitated the recovery processes the first two times, it did not guarantee them. In the King-St. Laurent, and then again in the Pearson-Trudeau eras, the Liberal revitalization involved a slow but steady improvement in the party's support. However the experience during the fourth, Chrétien-Martin era was dramatically different (Figure 3.3). While the party did recover from its historically low 1984 vote to regain office in 1993, its support trajectory from the beginning of this last era was one of steady decline.



It ought also to be noted that the Liberal's ability to maintain its continuing preeminence while suffering a long-term decline in its support levels reflected its position as the largest party in system that was itself expanding. Over the first two decades of the century the effective number of parties competing in a general election was two. Then, for the following seven decades – the period of the second and third Liberal party eras – the number grew to three. During the last decade and the early years of the twenty-first century, the effective number of parties grew to four, twice what it had been in the period when a larger Liberal party had established its dominance. This fragmentation of the electorate, and particularly its opponents, helped keep the shrinking party in office.

As the Liberal party went through these cycles of collapse and recovery that, in each successive iteration, left it with a smaller electoral base it was also being reshaped. The support decline wasn't regular or evenly spread across the country. The result was a party that was demonstrably less national over time, operating as a governing party from an increasingly distinctive and narrower base.

The Narrower Party

The four Liberal party eras were separated by the three greatest electoral landslides of the twentieth century, each a massive Conservative party victory. Fashioned on the backs of massive Liberal vote collapses, the Conservative over-sized electoral coalitions that generated those victories soon proved unsustainable. Yet the very dynamics of these electoral events, and the Liberal's rebuilding response to them, did more than leave the Liberal party smaller than before. They led to fundamental shifts in the partisan alignments of the electorate and to a shifting delineation of the party's core constituencies.

Conscription is understood to have been the defining issue of the 1917 general election and the policy initiative that divided English and French speaking Canadians response to the Conservative led Unionist government. In this it would be easy to see the Liberal's subsequent decades long dominance of Quebec. However Quebec's attachment to the party was not much changed by this election. During the core years of the Liberal era that followed (from the mid-1920s through the mid-1950s) the Liberal vote share in Quebec was only a couple of percentage points higher than it had been during the years of Laurier's ascendancy. As the largest party in the province it continued to benefit from an electoral system seat bonus but not one that was markedly unlike the advantage it had enjoyed in the earlier period. What was really different in the post-1917 period was a significant shrinkage in the Conservative vote in the province, leaving it at only about sixty percent of what it had been in the decade before and uncompetitive in most electoral districts.

Ultimately, it was a reshaping of the prairie electorate that proved more significant for the Liberals. There the Conservative vote simply plummeted leaving it in an even weaker position than it was in Quebec. The destabilizing consequences of the 1917 contest, magnified by the pernicious impact of the War-time Elections Act that temporarily disenfranchised many prairie voters, ushered in new political parties and movements that ended two-party competition (in the region) and faced the Liberals with new opponents. The pattern of

competition varied across the three Prairie Provinces, and took a decade or so to crystallize, but by the mid-1930s both Social Credit and the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation had emerged as major players in the region. Their strength undermined the Liberal's presence on the prairies, establishing the distinctive east-west gradient that would mark the party's national base from that point on.

A second great Conservative landslide occurred in 1958, producing the largest parliamentary majority in the country's history. Quebec swung sharply towards the Conservatives and so for the first time in the century the electoral system punished the Liberals, giving them a smaller share of the province's seats than a proportional result would have. This Conservative resurgence in the province did not last. It initially opened space for the *Ralliement des Creditistes* to emerge but while the Liberal's average support in the province dropped a couple of points from its mid-century era high, over the next seven general elections it matched the party's position in the first decade of the century.

The greatest impact of the Diefenbaker Revolution, as the realignment of the Canadian electorate came to be called, was the restoration of Conservative party fortunes on the prairies. It was transformed from being the party's weakest region to an area of strength and home to its strongest: the Conservatives won six prairie seats in 1953, twenty years later they owned thirty-four and were unchallenged in Alberta which had emerged as the largest and most prosperous province in the region. The result was that the Liberals lost their place on the prairies – they captured only three of its forty-five seats in 1972 – and the region lost its voice in the Liberal party.

With the Conservatives now having an electoral fortress nearly equivalent to the Liberals' Quebec base¹ the electoral system typically provided both parties with a seat bonus – the Conservatives missing only in 1968, the Liberals in 1979.

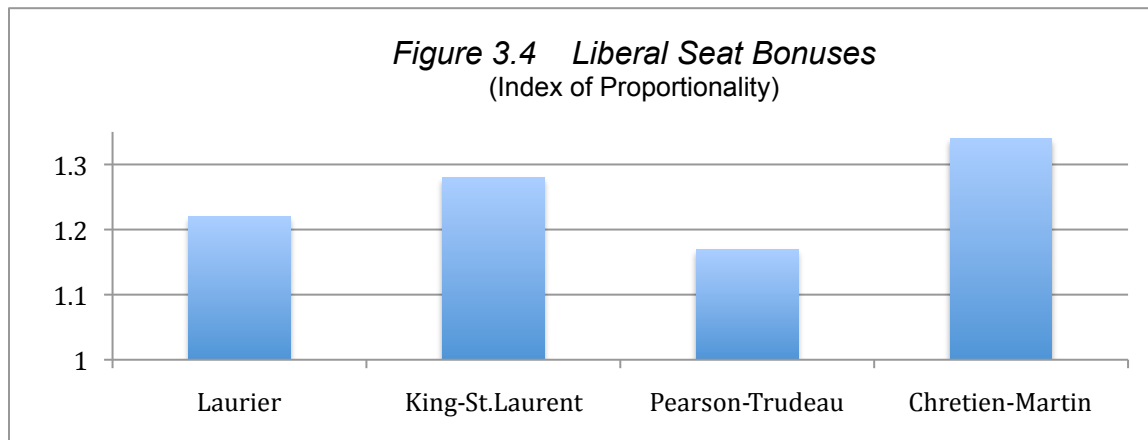
¹ Representation from the prairie provinces did not equal Quebec but with the addition of British Columbia, long disposed to the Tories and ambivalent (at best) about the Liberals, the west provided the Conservatives a counter-balance to the Liberal's Quebec,

This meant that the translation of seats into votes in an increasingly urban Ontario became the focus of electoral competition between the two major parties, each of which depended on overwhelming support in one other region from which to launch its claims to office.

By the standards of national breadth the Conservatives third landslide victory of the century, in 1984, may be seen as the greatest by any Canadian political party. For the first time ever one party won a majority of the seats in every province and territory. The Liberals were devastated, winning only forty seats, the smallest number the party had ever received since Confederation. While the party recovered to regain office within a decade it did so as a very different party in a distinctive environment. With the appearance of Reform and the *Bloc Québécois* the number of parties contesting general elections had grown so that its opposition was more fragmented than ever before.

However, other features of the Liberal's return to their dominant position indicated that this fourth Liberal party was significantly different from its predecessors. Perhaps most obviously, the party managed to win the next series of elections without recapturing Quebec: the province had supplied half the total number of seats needed for a majority during the Laurier era, and about forty-four per cent of the Liberal majorities since the first World War, but given the rise of the Bloc Quebec provided less than twenty per cent of those required for a majority by the Chrétien-Martin led party. After 1984 the party only once enjoyed a seat bonus in Quebec. Unlike its earlier reconstructions the Liberals had to remobilize without a dependable core, forcing it to depend on the ability to win seats in the more competitive Ontario. And with its smaller support base this new Liberal party required larger seat bonuses from the electoral system for its majorities. These were delivered only as long as the divided opposition left it the largest single party in the largest province (see Figure 3.4). The electoral system had generously rewarded the Liberals during the King-St.Laurent era when the party's opposition was fragmented and no other national party commanded a region that could balance Liberal Quebec. But with shrinking support and a reorganized Conservative opposition the Liberal's reliance on extraordinary seat

bonuses left it particularly vulnerable and far less of a national governing party than any of its predecessors.²



The figure reports the average seat bonus measured by an Index of Proportionality (seat shares/vote shares) for the Laurier (1896-1908), King-St.Laurent (1926-1953), Pearson-Trudeau (1963-1980), and Chrétien -Martin (1993-2004) periods of Liberal ascendancy.

As the century opened Laurier won a great Liberal victory with over half the popular vote. Equally important for the party's claim to be a natural government party it was a genuinely national victory: the Liberals won the majority of seats in six of the seven provinces and in the Northwest Territory that they were soon to transform into two new provinces. Ironically the one province in which it didn't command a majority of seats was Ontario but the Liberals could take some comfort in knowing that they won a plurality of that province's vote. The story at the end of the century was rather different despite the fact that the Liberal party won another big victory with an equally comfortable parliamentary majority. This time, however, they managed do win a majority of seats in only four of the ten provinces – Ontario and three of the small Atlantic provinces. This was no national victory for, with almost sixty per cent of its seats from one province, the party now belonged to Ontario.

² The Conservatives, with about 40% support, also depend on a large seat bonus for their majorities. Their (current) advantage is that they have a strong base in the west that the Liberals can no longer counter from Quebec.

The Parliamentary Parties

Conventional wisdom casts the Liberal party as the natural governing party because of its distinctive representational capacity. The party's ability to encompass and speak for a broad range of divergent groups, rather than articulating the interests of a particular constituency, is seen as its primary political virtue in a heterogeneous society like Canada that boasts no natural political community. While there has always been a plethora of interests demanding consideration, from the very beginning Canadian politicians have recognized the power of the competing demands of French and English speakers and the regional rivalries structured by the divergent interests of provincial societies.

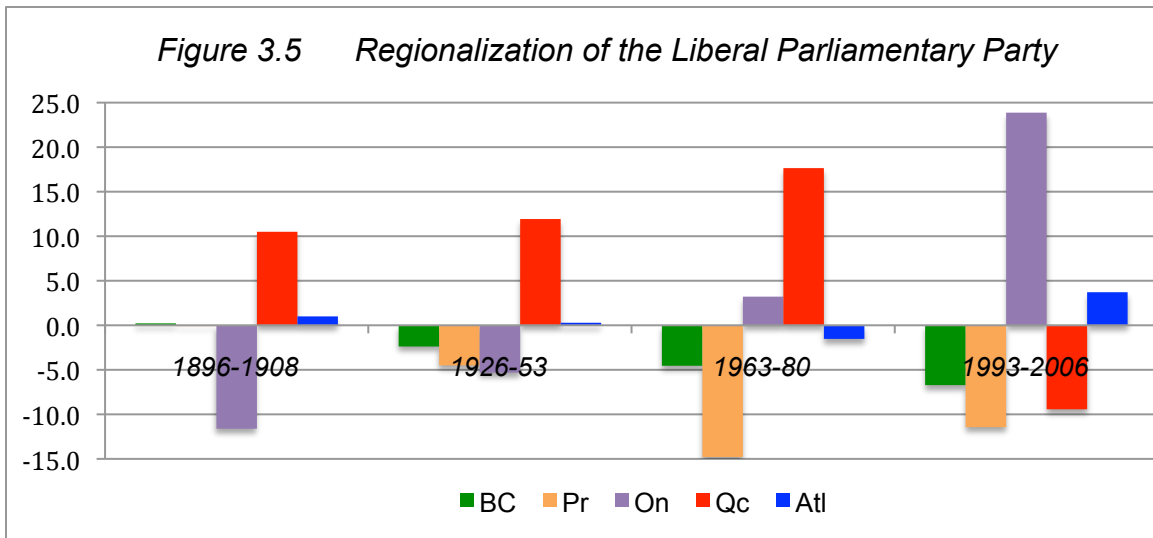
For a governing party the constitution of its parliamentary caucus gives clear definition to its ability to represent the constituencies it seeks to accommodate. For the Liberals the primary challenge was to incorporate the interests of both French and English communities. With the former essentially defined in terms of Quebec, this meant that the parliamentary party had to include substantial numbers from that province. Thanks to the party's high levels of support in the province, and the electoral system bonus that it produced, Quebec Members typically constituted about forty percent of Liberal caucuses during the first eight decades of the century. This substantial presence –it was more than ten points larger than the province's place in the House– established the Liberals as the only party capable of ensuring that the interests of the French speaking community would not be swallowed up by the larger English majority. The Liberals loss of Quebec's support in 1984, and its subsequent inability to recapture it as it had after a similar collapse in 1958, was transformative. Depriving the parliamentary party of its defining characteristic, this realignment left the Liberals a party no longer capable of brokering the country's linguistic divide as it had for four generations.

Fundamental as the 1993 realignment was in reshaping the Liberal parliamentary party the reality is that it had been reshaped for each of the eras that marked its long dominance of Canadian political life. Figure 3.5 illustrates

these differences by charting the regional over or under-representation of Members of Parliament in the caucus. A positive score indicates that there were a larger proportion of MPs from the region in the Liberal caucus than in the House as a whole, a negative score indicates that a region's MPs were less likely to be in the Liberal party than another. The pattern reflects the consequence of the working of the electoral system on the shifting electoral base of the party. It illustrates the distinctive character of the party in each of the four periods and reveals the increasing regionalization of the party as it marched across the century.

Laurier's caucus that grew up in the nineteenth century and lasted through the first decade of the twentieth had the most national character of all four Liberal parties. British Columbia, the Prairies (both admittedly small regions during this period) and the Maritime Provinces were all present in the Liberal's parliamentary party in about the same proportion that they enjoyed in the Commons as a whole. Quebec was somewhat over-represented, Ontario under-represented but not in the large way they would come to be in subsequent Liberal formations.

The Liberal party that came to dominate the decades after the First World War had a different shape and content. Despite the reliance of the party on substantial numbers of MPs from Saskatchewan (by then the third most populous province) and Manitoba the parliamentary party reflected the Liberals growing weakness in western Canada. Although the figure suggests that Ontario remained under-represented in the party in these years, this was the period in which Ontario began to play a disproportional part in the party. For the first three decades of the century the electoral system punished Ontario Liberals, giving them a smaller proportion of seats than votes. This changed in 1935 and for the next five elections the system produced a seat bonus so that the province's MPs came to occupy more than their share of the space in the parliamentary caucus. Like the earlier period, it was the over-sized Quebec contingent that defined much of this second Liberal party.



If the Diefenbaker realignment installed the Conservatives on the prairies it also eliminated the Liberals as a significant force in the region. As a result their voice was not heard in the parliamentary party during the Pearson and Trudeau years. It proved to be the most under-represented region in all of the Liberal parties over the century. While Ontario now contributed more than its share to the caucus, once again Quebec's over-representation in the party increased. The result was a party that, representing the populous provinces of the historic centre against those of the peripheries, could hardly claim to be a national political instrument.

The reinvention of the Liberal organization in its fourth manifestation produced a very different parliamentary party. For the first time in a century Quebec was under-represented in the caucus as were the four western provinces. The party was now overwhelmingly an Ontario political instrument, buttressed by support from the traditionally underdeveloped provinces of Atlantic Canada.

This picture of the Liberal's parliamentary party brings into sharp focus the shifts in the party as it went through the cycles of collapse and reorganization that saw it become an electorally smaller and narrower party. The Liberals managed to dominate Canadian politics for most of the century by effectively reinventing themselves over-and-over again, creating a series of distinctive

parties that restored enough of their political heritage to maintain their privileged position in the electoral and political life of the country.

Four Liberal Parties

If their century of electoral and governmental domination was maintained by Liberals successfully rebuilding new parties in the face of shifting and shrinking support, the organizational dynamics of these new versions of an ongoing Liberal Party of Canada took on their own distinctive features reflecting the imperatives of the socio-economic, institutional and political context of the time. Some dimensions of party life survived, knitting together a story of party continuity. Thus the central position and power of the leader is a recurring theme: John Dafoe reports that Laurier began as “the chosen chief of his associates” but soon came to dominate as the party was “transformed into an absolute monarchy” an account that surely presages Jeffrey Simpson’s portrait of Jean Chrétien’s government as “the friendly dictatorship”.³ What differed was the evolving character of the linkages that connected leaders to activists, the centre to the peripheries of Liberal organizations. Each new manifestation of the party reshaped these relationships and in, the process, redefined the way Canadians practiced party politics in their time.

Of the four Liberal parties, the most nationalized was also the most decentralized and parochial. Patronage was the central animating principle and the organizational lifeblood of Laurier’s successful party. This was an era in which government patronage –jobs, contracts and services– provided individuals with direct incentives to work for their party. The patronage benefits delivered were local and personal, producing a network of intense relationships between local partisans and the politicians who exploited their command of government offices to provide them. The result was a set of powerful, if informal, links between individual activists at the grassroots and party leaders at the centre. Despite the myriad parochial connections of a small-scale society, deferential

³ Dafoe, J.W., 1963[1922], 83; Simpson, J., 2001

intra-party relationships left the caucus free to make policy choices and leadership decisions.

The Conservatives massive wartime victory in 1917 brought an end to the political world that Laurier's Liberals had so easily mastered. The new government reformed civil service practices, ending the patronage that had fueled earlier party organizations; its politics stimulated populist demands for new forms of political participation; and its policies aggravated growing regional tensions. Much of this came together in western protest against the existing system but it was the Liberal's new party that best responded to its challenges. To provide for more balanced and democratic party decision-making it allowed grassroots members to choose the party leader through a regionally representative convention. This process redefined the relationships between Liberal activists and elected politicians but it also altered the dynamics of the parliamentary party by highlighting the special position and authority of the leader. By establishing a cozy relationship with the nascent advertising industry, and firms anxious to do business with the government, the Liberals found the expertise and funds necessary for the party's electoral campaigns. Enscorced in office, the party organization was held together and managed at the centre by a set of powerful individuals who combined the roles of regional political boss and government minister.

After the realignment of the electorate in the wake of the Conservative's 1958 victory, continuing with a Liberal organization dependent on semi-autonomous regional machines was impracticable. With a smaller and more geographically constrained base the party could no longer depend on a team of locally influential political leaders to organize and command a party organization in their province or region. To attract and involve partisans the party sought to build a membership-base participatory organization. Regular conventions to discuss policy and hold elected politicians accountable were instituted, local nomination meetings again became open contests inviting local supporters to choose party candidates, and fractious, competitive leadership contests that penetrated individual riding associations allowed members a strong voice in this critical party

decision. While the national party did not abandon its reliance on corporate support, new election expense legislation worked to expand local constituency associations' financial strength and autonomy. This structure could not constrain the power of the parliamentary leadership, and its increasing dependence on electoral campaign wizards drawn from the advertising and polling worlds. The inevitable tension between a mobilized base of local activists and national politicians determined to control policy was expressed in a growing crystallization of intra-party competition centred on the leadership itself.

During the fourth Liberal era the party was riven by ongoing intra-party competition that centred on the rival leadership claims of Turner, Chrétien and Martin. Fighting these battles led to the creation of large, semi-permanent organizations that penetrated into all corners of the newly shrunken party structures. While these highly personalized networks tied centre and periphery closely together, they did so by dividing the party against itself, focusing its energy and resources –both personnel and financial– inwardly rather than encouraging it to concentrate on engaging external opponents by reconstructing its base as it had in its previous rebuilding episodes (recall Fig 3.3). The centralizing dynamic implicit in this development was reinforced by changes to the election and party financing regimes that strengthened the hand of the party centre by providing it with increased public subsidies as well as increased control over electoral district associations and their candidates selection processes. A scandal-driven decay of its organization in Quebec left the party isolated in English-speaking Canada. No longer able to accommodate the interests of the country's two linguistic communities, the Liberal party found itself deprived of the *raison d'être* that, for a century, had been its principal claim to be Canada's natural governing party.

The Governing Party(ies)

Conventional wisdom now characterizes the history of Canadian electoral politics as having been organized by a series of distinctive party systems.⁴ These systems, described variously as successive periods of quasi-democratic parochialism, brokerage politics and pan-Canadianism, were marked by differences in the organization, appeal, communication strategies, financial bases, leadership politics, and place of local activists in partisan politics. Each was separated by its successor by electoral realignments and restructured by major institutional changes in the state that imposed new latent functions on the parties themselves.

The constant thread running through that story is the continuing dominance of the Liberal party, tying succeeding periods together and providing a recognizable face to new organizational patterns and practices. The party did so only by itself responding to the shifting demography and institutional change that was altering the political context of the time. With each successive version of the party smaller and less national in scope, the Liberals' hold on the country was loosened. Its inability to construct a genuinely national parliamentary coalition in the Pearson-Trudeau period, and then its failure to rebuild its electoral base after the 1993 electoral earthquake, undermined its claim to be a genuinely brokerage party and so broke its capacity to persist as the country's natural governing party.

⁴ Conventional wisdom defined here as widely agreed textbook accounts that do not cite any particular source for the argument.