The 2007 Elections in Québec and the Future of the Provincial Party System

By

James P. Allan, Assistant Professor
Department of Political Science
Wittenberg University
jallan@wittenberg.edu

and

Richard Vengroff, Dean
College of Humanities and Social Sciences
Kennesaw State University
rvengrof@kennesaw.edu
Introduction

The 2007 general election continued a pattern of electoral change in Québec. The previous three elections in Québec had signaled a progressive incremental change in Québec’s party system (Vengroff and Fisher, 1995; Allan, O’Reilly and Vengroff, 2001; Allan and Vengroff, 2004). Those changes, manifested in increasing voter de-alignment and volatility in party support, were destined to play themselves out even more in the Provincial elections of 2007, and this turned out to be the case. As argued by Belanger and Stephenson (2007) partisanship in Canadian federal parties, including the Bloc Québécois, is associated with three key variables that get at voter attachment: “stability, intensity and loyalty” (8-9). Although they argue that the systems of loyalty may differ significantly at federal and provincial levels, even within parties with the same name, the three factors still come into play. Based on those criteria, polling data and the experience of the last four elections in Québec we hypothesize:

\[ H_1 \] All three major Québec Provincial parties, the Parti Liberal du Québec (PLQ), the Parti Québécois (PQ) and Action Démocratique du Québec (ADQ) will manifest a form of weak partisanship among significant numbers of their traditional supporters.

In American parlance, over the years we expect a growing number of individual voters to have moved from strong to weak party identifiers and even truly de-aligned independents. This condition of partisanship has and we expect will continue to contribute to the dramatic change in the party system in Québec. Furthermore, consistent with \( H_1 \):

\[ H_{1.2} \] We expect to see an increase in voter support for new but less competitive parties such as the Greens and Québec Solidaire (QS).

In addition to the changing nature of partisanship, in 2007 Quebeckers were confronted with the possibility of experiencing something not seen in a hundred years, a
minority government. Could this well based sense that a minority government was likely to result from the 2007 elections have influenced Québec voters to cast strategic votes in the hope of producing a majority government? There is very little evidence to support that proposition. In fact, a recent study of attitudes toward minority government and strategic voting at the federal level suggests that it is rare for Canadians, regardless of region or native language to vote on the basis of their preferences regarding minority versus majority government. Based on their analysis of data from the 2006 Canadian election study, Blais et al. (2007, 5) conclude “that views about minority governments do not have an independent effect on vote choice, once voters’ preferences are taken into account.” We will test this proposition at the provincial level.

**H2** If Québec voters express a preference for majority governments we expect that to be manifested in strategic voting that will favor the traditional majority parties, the PLQ and the PQ.

In the 2007 election Jean Charest’s Parti Libéral du Québec (PLQ) was returned to office, but only as a minority administration. Even more dramatically, the separatist Parti Québécois (PQ), for some time composed of a group of strong party identifiers, was relegated to third place in terms of votes and National Assembly seats, behind the PLQ and Mario Dumont’s Action Démocratique du Québec (ADQ). The ADQ enjoyed by far its most successful general election to date, drawing on the growing pool of weak identifiers from the PLQ and PQ and independents for support. The emergence of a set of new parties in the drama contributed to the further erosion of what had been a very stable two or two and a half party system since the 1970s. The impact of partisan de-alignment and to a much lesser extent, the prospects for a minority government on the elections of 2007 and where we expect these changes to lead us in the coming years is the main focus
of this paper. Given the events of recent months, we have included a brief postscript on the December 2008 provincial election, and its implications for our conclusions.

**The State of the Parties Since 2003**

*Opinion Poll Trends*

The provincial elections of 2003 represented a stark contrast to the close election of 1998, where the Parti Québécois (PQ) won a majority in the National Assembly despite receiving a smaller share of the vote than the Parti Libéral du Québec (PLQ). Although opinion polls during the 2003 campaign suggested that the outcome would remain uncertain until the last few days before the polls, in the end the Jean Charest-led PLQ unseated the PQ government of Bernard Landry, winning a clear plurality of votes and a comfortable majority of seats in the National Assembly. The PQ, for its part, saw its share of the vote decline by almost 10 percentage points compared to 1998. For Mario Dumont’s Action Démocratique du Québec (ADQ), finally, the failure to maintain the momentum it had in 2002 – when it led both of Québec’s more established parties in opinion polls – meant that the party actually ended up with one fewer seat than it had before the campaign began. Thus, despite seeing its share of the vote increase by 50% since 1998, the 2003 election ultimately ended in disappointment (Allan and Vengroff, 2004).

If the election of April 2003 appeared to vindicate Jean Charest’s decision to quit Canadian federal politics to return to lead the PLQ, however, his government’s popularity quickly evaporated in the months following his triumph. Figure One shows provincial voting intentions in Québec between the election of 2003 and early February 2007 (when
Charest called the general election for March 26), according to polling data collected by Léger Marketing.\(^1\)

**FIGURE ONE ABOUT HERE**

Although the opinion polls show that the Liberals maintained a healthy lead over their opponents through the remainder of 2003, the first polls of 2004 saw support for the PLQ collapse by 13 percentage points. Although the PQ enjoyed a bounce in its poll ratings as a result, it was not the only beneficiary of the PLQ’s misfortune. The ADQ also picked up support, while support for “other” parties – not explicitly defined by Léger, but no doubt including the new QS (UFP) and the Greens – also doubled.

While the opinion polls did not indicate trouble for the PLQ until early 2004, there were already signs by the fall of 2003 that the Charest government’s short honeymoon period had ended. Four by-elections were held on September 20, 2004, with the PLQ defending three of the seats. It would only retain one of them after the votes were counted. The retirement of Christos Sirros, a former minister in the government of Robert Bourassa, left the Liberals defending the Montreal riding of Laurier-Dorion, a seat they had held since its creation in 1994 (the Liberals had also held the ridings that preceded it since the 1960s). As the most ethnically diverse riding in Québec, few expected the Liberals to lose the seat (“Results stun both PQ and Liberals”). After a close race, however, the PQ’s Elsie Lefebvre defeated the PLQ candidate by fewer than 500 votes.

Perhaps more ominously, the PLQ also lost in the traditional “bellwether” riding of Vanier. The by-election was prompted by the resignation of the sitting MNA, Marc
Bellemare, a minister in Charest’s government who had only been elected to the seat in April of 2003. In this case, however, it was the ADQ that was to emerge victorious, with a majority of 4,500. Nevertheless, while Mario Dumont hailed the win as a great victory for his party, the other by-elections gave some cause for concern for the ADQ too. In two of the four seats, the ADQ were pushed into fourth place by the leftist Union des forces progressistes (UFP), a new party formed in 2002. No sooner had the ADQ shaken off its “upstart” party status in Québec, it seemed at the time, than it apparently had to confront challenges from other “upstarts” in the province.

The PLQ’s slide in the polls continued until April 2005, when its support bottomed out at just over 20%, placing it in third place behind the PQ and a seemingly resurgent ADQ. In a Léger poll commissioned by *Le Journal de Montreal* to mark the second anniversary of the PLQ’s electoral victory, the depth of Québec’s discontent with Charest’s government was plain to see. More than 7 in 10 respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the Charest government. While Francophones were even more likely to be unhappy with the government (84%), even among non-francophones a slight majority of respondents (53%) were dissatisfied.

Jean Charest’s personal popularity also suffered greatly, with Léger’s polling suggesting that the PLQ would fare better under a new leader such as Philippe Couillard, the popular Health Minister. Almost two-thirds (62%) of respondents thought that Jean Charest should resign his post within the coming months. This was little consolation to his opposite number in the PQ: 52% of respondents felt the same way about Bernard Landry (who would indeed resign a short time later). Only Dumont remained popular among an overwhelming majority of respondents.
Despite the gloomy picture for the PLQ two years into its term in office, in the months following the publication of this seemingly damning indictment of the government’s performance the party actually enjoyed something of a brief recovery in the polls, although not nearly enough to challenge the PQ’s clear lead. By the end of 2005 the party had apparently seen off the challenge of the ADQ, which saw its support slide dangerously close to single digits by early 2006. The PQ also appeared to have peaked in late 2005. Indeed in the early months of 2006, observers were presented with a somewhat unusual scenario for the Québec party system: all three major parties appeared to be losing support. Who was benefiting from this apparent malaise?

The answer, it seemed, was new parties, which promised to make for an interesting period leading up to the provincial election in 2007. It was noted above that the UFP had gained notable levels of support in (especially) urban ridings, while the Greens also picked up a non-trivial amount of voter support. By 2006, the UFP had evolved into Québec Solidaire. Although Léger still did not disaggregate support for “other” parties in Québec until May 2006, in March 2006 an unprecedented 14% of respondents said they would vote for an “other” party (i.e., parties other than the PQ, PLQ, and ADQ) in a provincial election.4

As if to demonstrate that this poll was not a mere outlier, the April 2006 by-election in Sainte-Marie-Saint-Jacques solidified the perception that new parties were making inroads into the support of more traditional parties. While the PQ safely held the Montreal seat, the surprise of the night was the performance of the Québec Solidaire candidate, who secured more than 22% of the vote in the new party’s electoral debut. In contrast, the ADQ candidate fell to fifth place behind the Greens, with less than 300 votes.
While Léger did not conduct any polls between June 2006 and January 2007, other polls released later in the summer suggested that the gap between the two major parties had narrowed considerably. In a CROP poll published in *La Presse* at the end of August, the PQ maintained a 5 point lead over the Liberals, with a solid majority of respondents expressing dissatisfaction with Charest’s government. The CROP poll results also appeared to confirm that despite their spectacular electoral debut, support for the QS has settled in the 7-8% range in the polls. A late September CROP poll in *La Presse* reported that the two main parties were now neck-and-neck, but dissatisfaction with the Charest government remained high (“PLQ et PQ à égalité”). This dissatisfaction contributed to a tendency to take a closer look at the ADQ as an alternative.

At the beginning of 2007, then, the polls did not indicate any clear party frontrunner in a widely-anticipated election campaign in the coming months. Based on those poll trends, few were willing to wager that the PLQ would be able to secure another majority in the National Assembly in the 2007 election, unless they enjoyed a miraculous recovery in the final months of the campaign. But neither was a majority for Boisclair’s PQ a foregone conclusion, especially with the ADQ rising once more in the polls and the new QS threatening to siphon votes from the left-wing of the PQ’s support base. One possible implication of the PLQ’s weakened position, however, was that the sovereignty issue may return once more to the forefront of Québec politics. This had certainly been the hope of the péquistes, with party leaders placing great emphasis on the issue in the months preceding the start of the “official” election campaign (“Boisclair veut un référendum le plus tôt possible”). As a look at more recent polls indicates, this was not to be.
Referendum Voting Intentions

The disaffection with Charest’s government during his first three years as Premier briefly appeared to have given renewed life to the sovereignty issue in Québec. With the PQ maintaining its desire to hold a referendum on Québec sovereignty, and the ADQ favoring greater autonomy stopping short of outright independence, a plurality of political parties in Québec were espousing support (albeit in varying forms) for greater autonomy for Québec. By 2004, there were signs that public opinion on the issue had also become more fluid. Although the lower salience of the sovereignty issue has resulted in less polling on referendum voting intentions, the polls up until 2005 suggested a remarkable turnaround for the supporters of sovereignty during that period. As Figure Two shows, between January 2003 and January 2004 voting intentions shifted from having six out of ten Québécois stating that they would vote “No” in a referendum to the electorate being evenly divided on the issue. And more importantly, in 2005 a clear majority of respondents (i.e., outside the poll’s margin of error) indicated that they would vote for sovereignty if a referendum were to be held on the future of Québec. The last time polls indicated majority support for sovereignty in a referendum on two or more consecutive occasions was in 1996.

FIGURE TWO ABOUT HERE

More recently, however, there was evidence to suggest that support for sovereignty was still far from uniformly solid. According to both CROP and Léger polls published in 2006, the early months of the year saw the tide swing back in favor of maintaining the status quo in terms of Québec’s position within Canada. By April 2006, a majority of decided respondents favored the status quo. Federalists in Québec, of course,
had also been lifted by the gains made in the province by the Conservatives in the federal general election. At the federal level, this dealt a blow to the Bloc’s goal of attaining an absolute majority of votes in the province, but at the provincial level the polls appeared to suggest that the PLQ had been unable to capitalize on the recent developments in Canada’s electoral politics.

Sovereignty, however, remained an issue that will not only surface but may even take the fore in future Provincial elections in Québec. It became harder and harder for the PQ to present a moderate face on the issue in light of the emergent party leadership and challenges to its position coming from even some of its traditionally most committed supporters in the “arts” community. When formerly sovereignist Québécois of the stature of playwright Robert Lepage and writer Michel Tremblay publicly expressed doubts about sovereignty and the positions of the PQ, the party was clearly in trouble. Even though there was a significant spike in the polls for sovereignty seen in 2005, it has taken a significant downturn in 2006. The agreement by the Bloc Québécois to support the Conservative Government in Ottawa on its budget may also have backfired. If Québec can recapture revenue and control from Ottawa through simple negotiations, wherein lies the need for sovereignty? The PQ is in the difficult position of risking the loss of the support of the so-called soft sovereignists if it comes down too strongly in favor of another referendum. But it risks losing some of its own core supporters to the left if it appears to waiver. This is the trap in which the party found itself for the 2007 election. In contrast, the Charest government made some major gains in terms of the recognition of Québec as a nation, Québec’s role in the international arena, particularly with UNESCO,
and the distribution of federal revenue in favor of Québec. The ADQ took the “middle ground” by pushing its position of greater Québec autonomy within Canada.

Party Support

As noted above, the Liberal Party of Québec had managed to squander the support that brought it to power in 2003 in record time. Having completed three full years in office, Jean Charest and the party leadership needed to be thinking about the issues and opponents that would confront them in the coming election. As one analyst suggested, Charest may have been of a mind to get all of the controversial and less popular issues behind him so that he could run on a platform based on some more positive outcomes and future prospects for success. Among these are the issues of municipal consolidation, a controversy that will not go away and is especially damaging in some of the Liberal’s traditional strongholds. Environmental concerns such as privatization of some public park lands, promised tax cuts, or the lack thereof, interaction with the public employees unions, education, healthcare, daycare and the deficit all remained critical pieces of the maze through which the PLQ had to somehow successfully maneuver. They chose to emphasize stability rather than building on gains of the recent past, a potentially fatal error.

The Parti Québécois faced serious new challenges from the left in the form of the new Québec Solidaire (QS), a combination of a citizen’s movement, Option Citoyenne, and a small socialist party, l’Union des forces progressistes (UFP). Although the new party had very limited success in the 2003 elections, it did remarkably well in a by-election in a PQ stronghold and by late 2006 it was registering as a noticeable blip in the polls. However, strategic voting was, and is, more likely to come into play and reduce
the impact of QS, especially in closely contested ridings. On the other hand, in ridings that were noncompetitive, dissatisfied voters in significant numbers found it easy to choose the QS or the Greens. The recognition that the by-elections brought to the QS and the fairly moderate positions taken by the PQ may help it siphon even more votes away in the future, and potentially lead to a plurality victory for the Liberals or the ADQ in some ridings. The Green Party of Québec also poses a serious challenge, especially in light of recent failures of the Government to effectively address very salient environmental issues. However, the Greens seemed to be drawing their greatest support from the Liberals and also suffered from strategic voting in competitive districts. In the end, neither the QS nor the Green Party determined the outcome in any of the constituencies.

On the right, the PQ faced off with an old rival, Mario Dumont’s Action Démocratique. This party seemed to go dormant for long stretches but had one major by-election victory of its own against the PQ. However, in other riding by-elections its performance was less than stellar. One of the most promising aspects of the Canadian electoral situation for the ADQ was the return of the Federal Conservatives to a position of influence in Québec. As that national party uses its position as a minority government to grow even more competitive, its message dovetailed well with the right-of-center views of the ADQ. In fact, Mario Dumont has strongly supported Prime Minister Harper’s budget and his commitment to a better federal/provincial balance in terms of the collection and distribution of revenues, family child credits and cuts in sales taxes. To the extent that the ADQ increased its share of the vote in the past, it has done so primarily at the expense of the PQ. Increases in the ADQ share of the vote cost the PQ even more seats, while finally bringing many more seats to the ADQ. As Francophones who moved
to the Liberals in 2003 became even more disaffected, the ADQ stood to be the primary beneficiary.

In the 2003 election the issue of municipal mergers and de-mergers took on a life of its own. Although these authors believed that the issue was not settled, we did not feel it would have the legs it has apparently demonstrated (Vengroff and Whelan 2005). These carried it into the 2007 provincial election and maybe beyond. Individuals outraged by the loss of their historic cities and towns moved away from the PQ in 2003. Some stayed home, while others found outlets in other parties, including the Liberals who promised to provide an opportunity to restore the lost identities. In any case, the loss of confidence in the PQ had a definite deleterious effect on its election support in 2003. The Liberals came to power with the promise of democratizing the process and providing new opportunities for reconsideration of the mergers. However, they spent whatever goodwill they had in this regard by imposing difficult to meet deadlines and standards on those that would de-merge. Overcoming the registration deadlines and the super-majorities required was no mean feat, and it is surprising that so many cities and towns succeeded in meeting the conditions. Unable to clarify and/or agree on its own position the PLQ government waffled, limited the autonomy of the de-merged cities and put them in metropolitan-wide agglomeration councils, councils dominated in almost every way by the large central cities from whose grips the de-merged cities had only recently escaped. The result is a highly unsatisfactory process from the standpoint of most suburban jurisdictions. Furthermore, the Government’s latest effort at legislation regarding the role of the agglomeration councils is alienating the large city mayors.
The ADQ had smartly called for the end to the controversial agglomeration councils. These councils have further weakened the position of the demerged cities relative to the larger central city. This controversy continues in several jurisdictions, especially the Longueuil agglomeration on the south shore facing Montreal. With both the PQ and the PLQ basically discredited in the minds of the suburban citizenry, the ADQ hoped to attract their support and win several additional key ridings as a result. A key factor here is that the both the PQ and the Liberals lost credibility with some of their key supporters and local leaders, resulting in further voter dealignment and volatility.

The 2007 Campaign

Premier Jean Charest announced the date of the 2007 general election, March 26, on February 21, the day after his finance minister, Michel Audet, unveiled the new provincial budget. Among other things, the budget promised an extra $1.3bn in health spending, and $250m of tax cuts (“Tax cuts, health spending in Québec pre-election budget”). Charest attempted to set the agenda for the campaign immediately, focusing on healthcare and, inevitably, the issue of Québec’s position within Canada. Much was at stake for Charest and the PLQ, whose government remained highly unpopular. A Le Devoir/Léger poll at the end of January, for example, found that nearly six in ten Québécois did not think the government deserved to be re-elected (“Dumont et l’ADQ remontent”).

The PQ campaign, as expected, placed great emphasis on the sovereignty question, with Boisclair committing a future péquiste government to a referendum on the issue – although notably, the word “referendum” never actually appeared in the party’s election platform (PQ leader defends absence of ‘referendum’ in party platform”). Recent findings
showing that sovereignty support and optimism regarding the prospects for sovereignty in the near future are down did not augur well for the PQ. The party also attacked Charest’s record in government, though the party’s own leader remained unpopular with voters. Moreover, the PQ also faced a new challenge on the left from Québec Solidaire and the Greens.

As discussed above, the ADQ sought something of a middle ground on the sovereignty question, attacking the two larger parties for their seeming obsession with the issue. With the party performing relatively well in the polls at the start of the campaign, it at last seemed capable of making an electoral breakthrough. In addition to the ADQ’s traditional policies on taxation and allowing a greater role for private healthcare insurance, Mario Dumont also sought to make the ongoing immigration debate about “reasonable accommodation” in the province a campaign issue.

The Charest government’s record and the sovereignty issue proved to be the central issues of the campaign. Charest, attacking the PQ’s apparent rush to move toward a referendum as soon as possible, even raised the possibility that Québec’s territorial integrity might be challenged by First Nations leaders.

By the time of the leaders’ debate, a little under two weeks before the election, there had already been controversy. Embarrassingly, Mario Dumont was forced to drop two prospective ADQ candidates for making xenophobic, sexist and homophobic remarks, while Andre Boisclair chastised a PQ candidate for making controversial comments regarding the genocide in Rwanda in 1994. Although his party was still sitting in third place in the polls, during the course of the debate it was Dumont who came under the most pressure from Charest and Boisclair (neither the QS nor Greens were invited to
participate) (“Dumont under attack in Quebec leaders’ debate”). According to most observers, none of the leaders emerged as a clear winner, and this view appeared to be shared by most of the viewing audience: according to a Léger/Journal de Montréal poll, 32% of respondents thought Charest won the debate, 31% thought Boisclair performed most strongly, while 28% gave the nod to Dumont. Since the margin of error in the poll was just below ±3%, in the eyes of the respondents the debate was effectively a dead heat (“Le débat des chefs: match nul”).

Nevertheless, Dumont enjoyed high approval ratings in the province, and in a poll published later that week asking respondents which candidate would make the best Premier, Dumont was placed ahead of Charest and the trailing Boisclair. Among francophones, Dumont was the clear leader (“Une lutte plus serrée que jamais!”).

Opinion polls conducted during the campaign also indicated that it was the ADQ’s star that was rising as the election drew closer. As Figure Three shows, the party consistently drew over twenty percent of support from prospective voters, and the party drew level with the PQ following the leaders’ debate. The PQ’s support barely moved during the campaign, peaking at thirty percent just under two weeks before election day. It is likely that they lost some support to the smaller parties, the Greens and Québec Solidaire, which between them gained about ten percent of respondents’ support.

For Charest’s PLQ, during the course of the campaign its support also showed a downward trend. Nevertheless, Charest hoped to receive a late boost from the federal government in Ottawa. In the Harper government’s federal budget, announced within a week of the Québec election, Québec received $2.3bn from Ottawa in order to address
the “fiscal imbalance” between Ottawa and the provinces. Charest was able to claim a
great victory in dealing with the federal government (which was of course happy to
support the province’s federalist party), and immediately announce that $700m of the
money would be handed to the Québécois in the form of additional tax cuts (i.e., on top
of the $250m tax cuts previously announced in the February budget).

In the last days of the campaign then, the race remained close. The Liberals did enjoy a bump in support according to the last Léger poll before the election, while the
ADQ appeared to lose some momentum. Significantly, however, the poll also reported
that in the last week of the campaign, almost one in three voters had yet to make up their minds (“Anything could happen”). As it transpired, the PLQ did manage to remain in
office, but only as a minority government. The biggest story on election night, however,
was the eclipse of the PQ and the second-place finish of the ADQ. It is to an analysis of
these results that we now turn.

TABLE ONE ABOUT HERE

Election Results – Global and Riding Level Analysis

The 2007 elections, in spectacular fashion, illustrated the change in the party
system in Québec that seriously began, as noted above, with the 1998 elections,
continued through the 2003 elections and advanced even further and more clearly in the
recent outcome. The results are shown in Table One. The Liberals with just over a third
of the vote (33.1%) managed to finish first but lost their majority government status,
winning only 48 of the 125 SMD seats. The Parti Québécois, which had alternated in
government with the Liberals for over two decades, finished a very disappointing third
with just over 28 percent of the vote and only 36 seats. Confounding the polls that
showed it in third place, the ADQ seemed to make its long awaited move into a significant role in Parliament, finishing with about 31 percent of the vote and 41 seats, making it the official opposition. The “ballot box premium” (Parisella 2007, 75) which normally leaves the Liberals with more votes than the polls would indicate, instead reverted to the ADQ. In fact, the PLQ vote was actually 2% lower than predicted by the polls. This dramatic change in status of the now three major parties could be attributed to: 1) further decline in party loyalty to both the Liberals and the Pequistes; 2) increased volatility among Francophone voters; 3) a more ideological bent and division in the electorate, making the more conservative ADQ option more appealing; 4) a decline in support for formal sovereignty and sovereignty as an issue; and 5) the search by many Francophones for an option more closely allied with their lifestyle and value issues (Kheiriddin 2007).

In the 2003 election Mario Dumont’s ADQ created many three-way races by drawing voters away from the PQ and thereby helping the Liberals win a majority of seats. In 2007, Francophone voters who began their journey in either 1998 or 2003 deserted the Liberals and moved to the ADQ in sufficient numbers to allow them to win a second place finish both in seats and votes. How did the ADQ achieve this success?

TABLE TWO ABOUT HERE

An initial explanation is provided by examining the parties’ performance at the constituency level. Table Two shows the vote change by constituency for each party between elections. The ADQ increased its actual vote total in 123 of 125 ridings between 2003 and 2007, while gaining over half a million votes Province wide. In contrast, both the Liberals and the PQ continued their decline in total voters supporting
them even though turnout was up slightly and the total number of valid votes cast increased by over 150 thousand between 2003 and 2007. With a slight positive change in turnout the PQ vote decreased by over 144 thousand votes overall (a decrease of about 5%), with its vote count declining in 104 ridings compared to 2003. The Liberals were drubbed even worse, declining by over 440 thousand votes overall (about 12%), and losing votes in all but 4 constituencies.

TABLES THREE AND FOUR ABOUT HERE

Table Three provides further evidence of Québec’s party system change. The Adequistes’ 2007 success came at the expense of both of the other major parties. Without losing any of its existing seats to its rivals, the ADQ took 15 seats from the PQ and an additional 22 from the Liberals. Furthermore, the transition is even better illustrated by the relative status of the parties in the 125 constituencies, shown in Table Four. Although the ADQ finished first in a record 41 ridings, it finished second in an additional 46, thus making it not only the official but the actual main opposition party. This may also indicate its potential for further movement to an eventual majority status since it is competitive in at least 87 constituencies, while the Liberals and the PQ are competitive in 80 and 79, respectively. The PQ finished second in 43 races, 23 times to the ADQ and 19 times to the Liberals. However, this is illustrative of the major changes in party loyalty and support in largely Francophone districts where the ADQ is growing while the PQ remains stagnant or even is declining.

The Liberals with 48 seats, finished second in only 32 races, 14 times to the PQ and 18 to the ADQ. Many of the losses to the PQ were in East Montreal, an area the Adequistes have yet to penetrate successfully. Interestingly, Vincent Marissal, writing in
La Presse before the election, identified forty critical constituencies in the election that he believed would determine the future of the PLQ government (Marissal 2007a). Many of these were ridings in which the Liberals had won closely contested races in 2003. Of those forty, the Liberals managed to win only two while the ADQ took twenty five and the PQ thirteen. This represented a net gain for the ADQ of twenty seats, a net loss of one for the PQ and a net loss of 19 for the Liberals.

Regional difference remained quite important. The Liberals retained control over their traditional bastion on Montreal Island, particularly in the west Island. There they won all 14 seats while amassing over 60% of the vote. Neither the PQ nor the ADQ was able to offer a serious challenge. The Green Party had its strongest run there and managed to finish second in several races. Given the noncompetitive nature of the races on the West Island, many voters found it easy to vote for the Greens without fear of really affecting the outcome. In addition, many voters just opted to stay home and voter turnout in this area was far below provincial averages. In other traditional areas of strength the Liberals remained strong. In Laval and the Outouais the PLQ won all of the seats and in the Estrie (Eastern townships) they won 6 of 8 seats. Each of these areas saw considerable growth in support for the ADQ.

The Liberals suffered their worst losses in the Québec City region and in the Montreal suburbs (north and south). They failed to make any gains in other regions. Furthermore, the Liberals succeeded in winning less than a quarter (24%) of the francophone vote, a factor linked to their regional losses and future prospects. The PQ remained strong in its East Island Montreal bastion. However, even there it faced a challenge on the left from Québec Solidaire (QS). QS finished second to the PQ in two
of those ridings and drew almost nine percent of the vote in the ridings in the East end. Virtually all of their support was siphoned off from the PQ. In the regions it has traditionally considered its heartland such as Abitibi-Temiscamingue, Lac-Saint-Jean-Saguenay and the Gaspe, the PQ finished very well. It also remained competitive South of Montreal. The PQ suffered from strong competition in many Francophone areas from the ADQ which took 15 seats from it.

The ADQ appeared to build on its areas of competitiveness in the 2003 elections. It firmly established its areas of strength in the Québec City area, the belt around Montreal (the Lower Laurentians, and the North Shore, the area north of the Montreal Metro. Its support and credibility as a leading party grew virtually everywhere as it added to its vote in 123 of the 125 constituencies. Even with this added support the party leaders were disappointed by their failure to break into the constituencies on Montreal Island. But even though it did show some growth there it was not sufficient to insure that it would be competitive there in future elections.

The correlational data further confirms our findings regarding the transfer of loyalties by the electorate. We examine the change in party support (in percent) between 2003 and 2007 using the constituency as the unit of analysis. The correlation for the Liberals and the ADQ is very strongly negative ($r = -.63, p< .001$). The comparable figure for the PQ and the ADQ is similar ($r = -.56, p< .001$). When we look at actual votes, rather than percent change the correlations are a bit less impressive but still highly significant statistically ($r = -.45$ and $r = -.31$ for the ADQ vote and the Liberals and PQ respectively). These data indicate that the ADQ had become the major challenger to both of the other major parties. It has over the past several elections been quite successful in
drawing voters away from both parties. Its heavy strength in Francophone areas and its inability so far to penetrate areas of major Anglophone strength would indicate that it is more likely to continue to challenge the PQ rather than the Liberals.

It is also worth noting that the correlations between referendum voting by constituency (1995) and the party choice in 2007 remain strong. The percent and actual votes for the PQ and the Liberals even in 2007 show very strong positive and negative correlations respectively (r= .75 and -.79) with the referendum vote more than a decade ago in 1995. The ADQ vote, however, is only modestly associated with the referendum vote (r = .42). This is consistent with the thesis that the ADQ was drawing support of Francophones who were neither soft nationalist or moderately federalist. As noted by some analysts, this may represent a decline in the importance of federal/sovereignist issues in favor of more pragmatic policy issues. Hence what may emerge is a party system with a strong federalist and Anglo-based Liberal party, a strongly nationalist PQ and a more pragmatic ADQ which falls somewhere in between.

Electoral Reform?10

Like many other provinces Québec has been engaged in a serious analysis and potential reformulation of its electoral system. After a series of studies, reports and consultations a draft bill was presented by the then Minister in 2004. The National Assembly was to consider a recommended approach to electoral reform. Due to considerable opposition from members of the National Assembly, including many from the Government side of the aisle, it was not presented to the National Assembly. A new Minister, generally considered to be an opponent of electoral reform was appointed in
The proposal was given to a legislative committee composed of MNAs and eight citizens “randomly” selected from among the over 4,000 citizens who applied. The committee held hearings in all of the regions of the Province in 2005 and 2006. The approach selected by the Commission’s citizen members, with some dissent, is to offer a “mixed” system which is similar to that used for the Scottish Parliament. The MNAs supported MMP but without specifying the details. The citizens’ proposal included two votes (rather than the single vote originally recommended) and province-wide compensation in the 14 regions of the Province. The proposal was divided into two sections. The first section provided greater opportunities for citizens to vote absentee or to vote at their local registrar of voters during the campaign (up to eleven days before the election). It should help the Liberals mobilize their elderly supporters by making it possible for people in both public and private rest homes (formerly only those in public rest homes were eligible) or hospitals to vote directly in their place of “residence” or by absentee ballot. It further helps voters who will be away from their voting district on the day of the election. This is especially targeted at college students, and seasonal workers. Students at Cégeps and universities will be able to vote on campus for candidates in their home constituencies. This part of the bill was tabled and passed by the National Assembly in June 2006.

The second part of the electoral reform provided for a mixed system (added member system) but must be voted on in a referendum before being implemented. It now appears highly unlikely that it will pass and if it does it probably will not be in play until several years hence. The system designed would provide for a double vote at the constituency and Province levels respectively. There would be 77 single member
constituencies and 25-27 regional districts, each consisting of three SMDs. Two additional seats will be allocated in each regional district by closed party list using a highest average formula. The relatively high threshold for party seats will mean that the system will remain or evolve further into a 2 or $2^{1/2}$ party system with an occasional fourth party maybe getting a single seat. It was agreed that dual candidacies would not be allowed so each leader would have to choose whether to compete on the list or in a constituency. This reform, when and if implemented would mean that no region would be wholly represented by a single party. About 20 percent of the vote in the regional district will guarantee a party a seat even if it does not win a single SMD seat. Thus the Liberals would be assured seats in the PQ hinterland but the PQ might win some seats in the west Island region which is overwhelmingly Liberal. The ADQ would also increase its share of seats. The most likely outcome would be either another minority government or a coalition with the ADQ as a partner. It is worth noting that on the recent budget vote it took a coalition of the Liberals and the PQ to assure passage. It is not inconceivable that these two parties faced with an ADQ government might coalesce on some key issues. In any case, the electoral reform will not influence the process for the next election and still must be approved in a province wide referendum.

What changes might have resulted if the 2007 election had used the proposed reformed electoral system? The answer is probably not much. In fact, the 2007 election produced the most proportional results in many years. The Liberals won 33% of the vote and 38% of the seats. For the ADQ, which has until now greatly suffered the distortions of the SMD system, the results were for the first time relatively equitable as they received 30.8% of the vote and 32.8% of the seats. For the PQ which finished third and is usually
the beneficiary of vote seat distortions the results were very equitable with the party receiving 28.3% of the vote and 28.8% of the seats. Québec Solidaire and the Green party with 3.65 and 3.89% of the vote respectively were shut out. Even under the proposed new system, and the concentration of their vote, their vote totals probably would not have been sufficient in any regions to gain either of them a seat.

The Disproportionality index gives us a good indicator of the relative disproportionality (vote – seat disparity) in an election. The higher the figure the greater the disproportionality. Disproportionality indices for Québec for 1994, 1998, and 2003 are 12.5, 15.2 and 15.4 respectively. These are consistent with the high degree of disproportionality generally found in SMD systems. However, the comparable figure for 2007 is only 5.5, a figure more consistent with the results in PR systems. These results would be closer to the reality of a reformed electoral system as proposed. However, if the citizens of Québec are satisfied with a minority government (indications are they are) these results may in fact have the effect of decreasing support for reform and increase support for relying on the on-going change in the party system to produce majority governments. A more proportional MMP system might have the effect of “freezing” the party system and ending in a series of minority governments under the current SMP system.

The third part of the electoral reform proposal was an effort to promote the representation of minorities and women. It provided financial incentives for parties which nominate women and minority candidates and is graduated by the level of success of those candidates in winning votes. It is still under consideration.
Conclusions

We hypothesized that Québec voters would demonstrate an even greater level of independence and decline in party identification. The data from the 2007 election are wholly consistent with this. There were massive shifts in support and the new small parties were able to garner small but significant portions of the vote. The ADQ emerged as a serious competitor as a result of its ability to draw voters from both the Liberals and the PQ. Our second hypothesis does not appear, at least in the short run, to be sustained. Québec voters do not appear to have cast their votes strategically in order to produce a majority government. The massive move to the ADQ could not in any way be interpreted as resulting from a broad based desire for a majority government. If anything, the opposite may be true.

Looking forward to the next provincial election in Québec, a number of likely issues can be identified. Sovereignty, as ever, is not likely to be absent from a future campaign, although recent evidence suggests the issue may be presented in different ways compared to the past. In the period since the last election, each of the major parties has (re-)aligned itself on the national question. The Charest government, while maintaining its strong federalist stance, has nevertheless pushed the Canadian government to readdress Québec’s constitutional position within a framework of “open federalism” (“Quebec wants to define ‘nation’ status”). Under the new leadership of Pauline Marois, the PQ has also indicated a shift in its stance on the sovereignty issue, moving away from calls for a sovereignty referendum at the earliest opportunity (“Marois to put sovereignty on hold”). Indeed, the sovereignty issue is but one area in which the PQ is reconsidering its position in what appears to be a wide-ranging internal policy
review. For its part, the ADQ has also sought to reaffirm its nationalist credentials in an attempt to draw support away from the PQ (“L’ADQ, une option pour les nationalistes, affirme Dumont”).

Aside from sovereignty and the somewhat related issue of identity (raised during the last election as part of the debate over the “reasonable accommodation” of immigrants), it is not entirely clear which of the remaining issues will be salient in the next election, but the usual suspects plus the environment can of course be rounded up. We should probably add to this list the question of provincial infrastructure, brought to the fore by a recent bridge collapse in Laval, just north of Montreal.

Critical for our purposes is the fact that these issues have eaten away at the general confidence and support for the traditional mainstream parties. The Québec voters remain much more volatile in terms of party loyalty than ever before. The new PQ leadership has re-energized the party, and Marois certainly appears more popular than her predecessor, but polls carried out in the months following the 2007 election continued to suggest no party would be able to secure an overall majority in the near future.

Postscript: The December 2008 Election

Jean Charest called a general election against the backdrop of the emerging global financial crisis, arguing that a Liberal majority government was necessary to see Québec through the deteriorating economic conditions. The PQ had been resurgent in the polls under the leadership of Pauline Marois, while the Official Opposition ADQ had lost ground in opinion polls, and lost two MNAs when they crossed the floor of the National Assembly to join the Liberals. While the issues mentioned above featured in the
campaign, the economy and healthcare also featured prominently. In contrast to the months before the campaign commenced, over the course of the campaign polls gradually indicated that a PLQ majority was a distinct possibility.

The election results (shown in Table Five) provided Charest with a majority, although smaller than he wanted. The PQ was restored to Official Opposition status, while the ADQ suffered a disastrous collapse in support, retaining only seven seats. The party’s fiscal conservatism did not attract much support at a time when many governments were debating massive economic stimulus programs. Mario Dumont, the party’s main standard-bearer since 1994, resigned the party leadership in the wake of the defeat.

While a more complete analysis of the 2008 election is beyond the scope of this paper, some initial comments can be made in light of our discussion above. First, the dramatic swing away from the ADQ is indicative of continued electoral volatility in Québec. But more importantly, it is suggestive of the de-aligning trend that we have observed in previous elections. Table Five shows that most voters who abandoned the ADQ in 2008, both in former ADQ-held districts and overall, did not appear to transfer their loyalties to one of the other major parties – they simply stayed at home. Turnout fell from 71.2% in 2007 to only 57.4% in 2008. While the PQ gained a majority of seats formerly held by the ADQ, their average gain in support in those 41 seats was less than 600 votes. While the 2008 election produced a change in the balance of political power within Québec, therefore, the longer term trends in voting behavior identified in the 2007 election appear to be continuing.
Notes:
1 The April 2003 data point represents the actual share of the vote received by each party in the provincial election, while all other data points are based on opinion poll data.
2 Respondents were asked, “Diriez-vous que vous êtes très satisfait, satisfait, insatisfait ou très insatisfait du gouvernement provincial du Parti Libéral du Québec?”
3 Respondents were asked, “Selon vous, les personnalités politiques suivantes [Jean Charest, Bernard Landry, and Mario Dumont], devraient-elles rester en poste ou quitter leur fonction au cours des prochains mois?”
4 In a CROP poll published in La Presse on May 2 2006, which did ask about the new parties, support for QS stood at 8%, with 10% of respondents supporting the Greens.
6 As CROP’s polling analyst made clear in the article, while the results were encouraging for the PLQ, its recovery was not thought to be enough to guarantee electoral success in the near future. Moreover, the poll was conducted during a time when Jean Charest was highly visible in the media, not least because of the shootings at Dawson College in Montreal. This may have contributed to the governing party’s improved showing in the poll.
7 In January of 2007, the French Socialist presidential candidate, Ségolène Royal, found herself in something of a diplomatic controversy when, in an appearance with Boisclair, she expressed support for the “liberty” of Québec. Canadian leaders in Ottawa were not impressed.
8 Undecided voters, of course, remain critical to this issue; in CROP Polls in early 2006, between 8 and 9 percent of voters were still undecided on the sovereignty issue. Given the closeness of previous referenda, the importance of this group of respondents should not be underestimated.
9 Ibid., see also Marissal (2007b).
10 This section has greatly profited from input provided by Professor Louis Massicotte, now of Laval University, who served as an advisor to the committee which developed the initial proposal.
Works Cited


“Boisclair veut un référendum le plus tôt possible.” La Presse, March 24, 2006.

“Dumont et l’ADQ remontent.” Le Devoir, 1/30/07.


“PQ leader defends absence of ‘referendum’ in party platform,” *CBC News*, 2/24/07


“Quebec wants to define ‘nation’ status.” *The Globe and Mail*, 8/7/07.

“Results stun both PQ and Liberals.” CBC News, 9/21/2004

(http://www.cbc.ca/montreal/story/qc_vote20040920.html).“Tax cuts, health spending in Québec pre-election budget.” CBC News, 2/20/07


“Une lutte plus serrée que jamais!” Léger/TVA, 3/15/07.


# TABLE ONE

## 2007 Québec General Election Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Seats</th>
<th>+/- 2003</th>
<th>Votes (%)</th>
<th>+/- 2003</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parti liberal du Québec (PLQ)</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>-28</td>
<td>33.08</td>
<td>-12.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action démocratique du Québec (ADQ)</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>+37</td>
<td>30.84</td>
<td>+12.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parti Québécois (PQ)</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>-9</td>
<td>28.35</td>
<td>-4.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parti vert du Québec</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>+3.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Québec solidaire (QS)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>-0.74</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PARTY</td>
<td># constituencies in which vote decreased</td>
<td># constituencies in which vote increased</td>
<td>Average % change in vote (all constituencies)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PQ</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>-4.95</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLQ</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-11.82</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADQ</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>+11.53</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### TABLE THREE
**Comparison of the Winning Party and Second Place Party by Constituency**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PQ</td>
<td>PQ</td>
<td>PLQ</td>
<td>ADQ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PQ SEATS</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PQ %</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLQ SEATS</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLQ %</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>63.2</td>
<td>28.9</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADQ SEATS</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADQ %</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL SEATS</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>28.8</td>
<td>38.4</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WINNING PARTY</td>
<td>SECOND PLACE PARTY</td>
<td>PQ</td>
<td>PLQ</td>
<td>ADQ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PQ</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLQ</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADQ</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% OF TOTAL</td>
<td>33.6</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>36.8</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE FOUR
WINNING PARTY IN 2003 AND 2007 BY RIDING
### Table Five: Québec General Election Results, December 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Overall Results</th>
<th>Results in Seats Held by ADQ in 2007 (Major Parties)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seats Won</td>
<td>Votes (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLQ</td>
<td>66 (+18)</td>
<td>42.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PQ</td>
<td>51 (+15)</td>
<td>35.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADQ</td>
<td>7 (-34)</td>
<td>16.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QS</td>
<td>1 (+1)</td>
<td>3.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greens</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure One: Provincial Voting Intentions in Québec, April 2003-February 2007 (Leger)
Figure Two: Referendum Voting Intentions

Date

Percent

For

Against