Split decisions: Harper's failed bid for a majority government in the 2008 election

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VOTER FRUSTRATION AND APATHY

Parents and teachers of a certain vintage tell young people: it's a privilege to vote. To have the franchise and not exercise it is to thumb your nose at one of the greatest pieces of good fortune human beings can enjoy: life in a society where choices about collective life are made with pens and persuasion, not bombs and guns. What does it mean, then, that even Canadians who make this speech—never mind its intended audience of supposedly disengaged young people—have grown weary of the ballot over the past five years?

In the elections of the 1980s, voter turnout hovered around 75 percent. A moderate decline occurred during the 1990s. But in 2004, just 61 percent of Canadians turned out for the half-hearted re-election of the Liberals under Paul Martin. That year, voters were ticked off at the Liberals but afraid of the Conservatives. In 2006, Canadians got over their cold feet and 65 percent of us turned up to shoo the scandal-plagued Liberals out of government and cautiously hand Stephen Harper's Conservatives the keys to the executive suite. By late 2008, voters were sick of the whole narrative. Stephen Harper and company were returned to government with another minority—but this time only 59 percent of registered voters bothered to cast a ballot, the lowest proportion in Canadian history. Should yet another election be called in 2009, it might be only the candidates' families and a few political science majors who bother to shuffle over to the local elementary school to have their say.

Although many factors contribute to declining voter turnout over time, we must surely attribute at least some of the diminished electoral enthusiasm to a sense of frustration and deadlock in federal politics. What do Canadians want, and why are they having such a hard time getting it?

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WHAT DO CANADIANS WANT?

Given that votes in this country are carved up among five major political parties, there is no doubt that Canadians want different things. But the rise and (as of this writing, ongoing) fall of the famous Liberal–NDP coalition did serve to clarify at least one area of broad agreement that cut across party lines: Canadians want adult supervision in Ottawa and they feel it is in short supply.

When word of the coalition first began to circulate, many pundits opined that Stephen Harper had overreached with the government's economic update. Having won just 38 percent of the popular vote (which yielded 46 percent of the seats in the House), he was too vulnerable to be making bold gambits like cutting off opposing parties' government funding. Canadians, their dissent made manifest in the form of a Liberal-led coalition, would not stand for it.

Then the polls came. It turned out most Canadians thought the problem was not a predatory prime minister, but opposition parties prizing power over stability in the middle of an economic crisis. On the evening news, they saw Stéphane Dion (the most unpopular Liberal leader since Edward Blake), the all too effervescent Jack Layton, and the Cheshire-grinned separatist/sovereignist Gilles Duceppe. The unlikely leading the unacceptable. Six in ten Canadians said the coalition should take a hike. Had an election been held amid the December fiasco, the Conservatives, according to the polls, would have won 45 percent of the popular vote and a huge majority in the House. This was so, not necessarily because Canadians' love of the party or its leader had increased seven points since the October election, but because Canadians had taken it into their heads that it might be a good idea to have a stable federal government as the world plunges into economic chaos. They cast their disbelieving gaze on their fractious Parliament, wondering whether there was anyone in that august assembly who might agree with them.

The pundits' prediction of the success of the coalition was not the first time they had diverged from—or misapprehended—public opinion on the issue of strong leadership. In the period between the 2006 and 2008 elections, many columnists and radio and television panels meditated on the salubrious possibilities of minority government in a parliamentary system. Minority government could inspire restraint, compromise, and dialogue. It might be just the thing for a

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middle-of-the-road, risk-averse society such as ours—especially since the prospect of a Conservative majority under a Big Boss like Stephen Harper was so frightening.

But when Environics polled Canadians on these very issues in advance of the 2008 election, their conclusions were altogether different from the pundits'. Environics asked the public whether they would prefer that the October vote yield a minority or a majority government. Just 28 percent favoured another minority government, while a strong plurality of 46 percent thought a majority would be preferable. And these results were by no means contingent on an ABC (Anything But Conservative) victory: the majority of Canadians (57 percent) said they doubted that a Conservative majority would govern much differently from the way the Conservative minority had since 2006. Just 37 percent of the population thought that a Conservative majority government would mean major changes for the country (and some of that 37 percent surely thought the changes would be positive—not terrifying).

What these numbers show is not that Canadians want a Conservative majority government (for which they could have voted if they had wanted to), but that despite their squishy liberal values, Canadians like the idea of a strong leader with a grip on enough power that he or she can get things done. In some ways, Canadians recognize Stephen Harper as precisely such a leader. He is nothing if not commanding, and of the characters on offer at the last election, he was seen as by far the most prime ministerial. An Environics poll conducted prior to the last election found four in ten Canadians (39 percent) believing that Stephen Harper would make the best prime minister, putting him miles ahead of the next most popular choice, Jack Layton (15 percent). And yet in a Decima poll conducted in spring 2008, 55 percent of Canadians agreed with the statement, "There is something about Stephen Harper I just don't like."

How strong will our future leaders need to be to compensate for the weakening ties that unite this country?

STRONG LEADERSHIP

Here we come to the paradox of political leadership in contemporary Canada: Canadians want a strong leader, but they want this strong leader to articulate values and ideals that do not go hand in hand with strongman politics. One reason why Canadians are so besotted with Barack Obama is that he makes idealism, compassion, and compromise look like marks of vision and strength—not of naiveté or indecision.

Canadians are not alone in wanting a strong leader; people everywhere want to feel they are represented by someone they respect—and someone who will command respect from other leaders. Indeed, we may have an even greater appetite than usual for strong political leadership at the centre because we are such a decentralized federation, and so many of the decisions about our economy are made elsewhere. The man who famously said he did not want Canada's prime minister to be merely the head waiter for the country's premiers and that he wanted Canada to be more than a confederation of shopping centres, Pierre Trudeau, remains not only the most admired politician in Canadian history but the most admired person living or dead according to the latest (fall 2008) Environics social values survey. No one ever accused Trudeau of being weak, especially when he was standing up for Canadian sovereignty and our growing small-l liberal social values, from divorce and reproductive rights to the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.

The centripetal forces that define Canada, and our current fragmented Parliament, make Canadians willing to prefer a leader who is perceived as strong and occasionally wrong to one who is perceived to be weak. Poor Stéphane Dion became the poster boy for well-intentioned but weak leadership. Some Canadians felt for him as the victim of a schoolyard bully, but they were not about to elect him president of the student council out of mere sympathy.

At the moment of this writing, the latest poll (May 2009, conducted by Nanos) finds the Ignatieff-led Liberals enjoying a small lead over the Harper Conservatives, plus a very favourable reaction to the new Liberal leader right across the country and especially in Quebec. Only time will tell whether Mr. Ignatieff will fulfill the Trudeau promise of strong liberal leadership—both small l and capital L—in Canada.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

I offer two closing thoughts on the current political situation in Canada. First: too many of our political pundits are showing the small-l liberal, big city bias that is skewing their analysis and putting them out of step with average Canadians. Second, Quebec is in the process of separating from Canada, not with the bang of yet another referendum on sovereignty, but with the whimpers of successive elections in which fluctuating but never diminishing support for the Bloc Québécois yields successive unstable minority governments. How strong will our future leaders need to be to compensate for the weakening ties that unite this country? And if most Canadians are uneasy with the kind of strength Stephen Harper displays, what model of strength might cause us to approach the polls with optimism and conviction instead of holding our noses or staying home?