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Long-Term Economic Hardship and Non-Mainstream Voting in Canada

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Introduction: Economic Decline and Voter Volatility

Discontent in Canada manifests itself through the emergence of new parties that erode the support of otherwise well-established ones. The plurality electoral system, which heavily favours large and generally centrist parties, makes such a phenomenon more significant. In Canada, the Liberal and Progressive Conservative parties have traditionally alternated as government and official opposition. In such a system, success from any other party is seen as unusual, linked to the rejection of both established parties, and therefore possibly linked to some serious level of discontent. But apart from the rare and often short-lived breakthroughs from “third” parties, Canadians do vote for many other alternatives. When support for such alternatives increases, one cannot but believe voters are deeply upset about something, compelling them to turn their backs on “politics as usual.”

Of all the sources of discontent that can direct a voter away from the two main parties, economic hardship seems the most obvious. Many other political issues come and go, but economic performance remains a constant and salient consideration for voters. No other issue touches both a voter’s need to survive and a voter’s hopes to prosper. This is why economic conditions are probably the most studied factor in electoral research, and why economic voting research offers some of the most robust models for accurately predicting election outcomes.

Despite its success, however, economic voting research focuses too narrowly on support levels for incumbents, which for the most part tend to belong to well-established and mainstream parties. The research relates such mainstream support to short-term economic conditions, and more often than not, declines in support for the incumbent tend to correspond to increased support for another mainstream opposition party. Traditionally in Canada, this support tends to volley between the Liberal and

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(Progressive) Conservative parties, and in the United States, the Republican and Democratic parties. For the most part, media attention follows these shifts: are voters supporting the current government or the main opposition?

Although a short-term approach helps explain why voters like or dislike an incumbent, it does not adequately explain the strengthening or weakening support for alternative parties, many of which advance a radical agenda. This neglect stems largely from the focus on short-term economic and political changes, an approach that makes it difficult to study the basis of electoral support for smaller parties, the support of which may depend more on structural, longer-term conditions. But a look at electoral politics in Canada (and other countries) over the past generation suggests a need to examine voting behaviour more closely. Many reasons might explain the emergence of new, and one might argue, radical, parties since 1993, namely the Reform/Alliance Party, which (prior to the merger with the PC Party) focused a great deal of attention on the need for institutional change in order to elevate the influence of Western provinces, and the separatist Bloc Québécois, which advocates a different sort of constitutional change. Support for these alternative parties may stem from a deep level of discontent, which might be tied to long-term economic decline.

Such a question poses a contrast to the concerns of conventional economic voting research. A recession here and there is not unusual and should not be expected to lead to the same level of rage as when voters persistently find themselves struggling economically, even between recessions. That kind of discouraging experience might lead one to question not only the sitting incumbent; it could also produce more severe evaluations that pin blame on the political structure, seen to be failing in its delivery of the goods, regardless of who is in power.

In a way, there is nothing new to the notion that voter discontent can stem from economic hardship. Seymour M. Lipset states, for instance, that one feature of a stable government system is its ability to sustain a healthy economy, which upholds the system's legitimacy: "From Aristotle down to the present, men have argued that only in a wealthy society in which relatively few citizens lived at the level of real poverty could there be a situation in which the mass of the population intelligently participate in politics and develop the self-restraint necessary to avoid succumbing to the appeals of irresponsible demagogues" (1959/1963: 30). Whether or not non-mainstream parties are led by "irresponsible demagogues" is a separate issue, but Lipset's main point is that voters faced with serious economic decline tend to abandon the "usual" parties in favour of something completely new. Furthermore, Lipset notes that this is especially true among those who experience a great deal of economic volatility, such as miners, farmers and so forth (243–244). He adds that

Abstract. Canadian voting behaviour from 1979 to 2000 is examined by relating long-term economic changes to support for “non-mainstream” parties, defined as parties other than the Liberals or Progressive Conservatives. This long-term perspective is unique, in that standard economic voting research focuses mostly on how short-term economic changes affect support levels for the incumbent. In order to illustrate the effects of long-term economic decline, federal voting results are related with short- and long-term economic data, namely unemployment and labour-force participation rates, all aggregated at the provincial level. The pooled data produces results that confirm the relevance of short-term changes to explain support for the incumbent party, while support for non-mainstream parties is, instead, explained by long-term economic changes.

Résumé. Cet article examine le comportement électoral des Canadiens de 1979 à 2000 en reliant les changements économiques à long terme à l’appui accordé aux partis « non dominants », à savoir les partis autres que les libéraux et les conservateurs. Cette perspective à long terme est unique en son genre car les recherches standard sur le vote économique étudient surtout le retentissement des changements économiques à court terme sur l’appui au parti sortant. Pour illustrer les effets du déclin économique à long terme, nous avons relié les résultats des élections fédérales aux données économiques à court et à long terme, notamment les taux de chômage et de participation de la population active, calculés à l’échelon provincial. Les données agrégées donnent des résultats qui confirment la pertinence des changements à court terme pour expliquer l’appui au parti sortant, tandis que le soutien aux partis « non dominants » s’explique au contraire par les changements économiques à long terme.

discontented people who share a common bond or common communication channel are more likely to mobilize politically (262). This helps explain why many new political movements tend to succeed first in particular regions (e.g., agricultural regions) or among particular segments of a population (e.g., unionized workers).

In Canada, the political implications of economic hardship have been explained most thoroughly by Maurice Pinard (1971), who focused on how economic strains helped shift Quebec voters away from the Liberals and Progressive Conservatives and towards Social Credit. He demonstrated how voters in economically hard-hit regions are more likely to turn to a third party for solutions, once voters reject the traditional parties for doing too little. Pinard used his findings to validate Neil J. Smelser’s (1963) theory of collective behaviour, whereby strains (such as economic hardship), combined with other conditions, such as the ease with which individuals can mobilize, lead to unrest. Such conditions were present in rural Quebec, where voters suffering economic strains switched from one major party to another, eventually giving up on both to support a new political movement. It should be pointed out that according to Pinard, it is not poverty *per se* that triggers discontent, since the poor are often disengaged from politics (1971: 149). But a *change* from one economic condition to a worse one can lead to support for a new political movement (1971: 119), independent of the movement’s ideology.¹

A common feature of Lipset’s and Pinard’s perspectives is the attention paid to voting as not just an expression of approval or disapproval

for the governing party, but also as an expression of support for the entire political system. This is measured by the extent to which economic decline places voters in an increasingly vulnerable position, and consequently leads them to question the appropriateness, or legitimacy, of the existing regime. Legitimacy and stability, curiously, are two central concerns in political science that contemporary work on economic voting appears to overlook. Perhaps Canada is not a likely candidate for an all-out legitimacy crisis, but the research here will show that Canada also is not immune to such a development. Long-term economic decline is related to reduced support for mainstream political parties. Since such a development escapes conventional economic voting models, there is a need to re-conceptualize the link between economic conditions and voting behaviour.

Conventional economic voting models

A great deal of economic voting research is based on the responsibility hypothesis, where voters are understood to pass judgment on how well the government has handled the economy. This has grown to one of the most prolific areas of voting research, having accumulated a wealth of literature that includes hundreds of manuscripts (Lewis-Beck and Paldam, 2000: 113). This trove of data should come as no surprise, since in a way it is rather easy to formulate testable hypotheses regarding economic conditions and voting behaviour. Models that predict election prospects for the incumbent are also very marketable, since many people outside the confines of academia, such as news commentators, lobbyists and political professionals, are interested in predicting election outcomes, with economic conditions often emerging as a very solid basis for a reliable political forecast.

General findings are consistent: bad economic times spell trouble for the party in office. It did not take a generation of research to confirm what is clearly very intuitive, but it has taken a great deal of work to identify the precise manner in which economics works. The conceptualization of economics and voting has taken research in a variety of directions, leading to a varied set of conclusions. The following review shows how far economic voting has gone to explain the link between economic conditions and voter behaviour. But as will be seen, there is clearly far more distance yet to cover, and conventional economic voting has, for the most part, conducted research with a narrow focus.

Economic voting research confirms what is commonly referred to as the sociotropic thesis: voters react to *national* economic conditions rather than personal, or pocketbook, finances. Personal financial considerations are nowhere near as important as national economic conditions,

findings that challenge the otherwise clean Downsian model that sees voters adjust their support for the incumbent according to personal economic circumstances (Downs, 1957). Egocentric effects do exist, but tend to be weaker than sociotropic effects (Lewis-Beck, 1988). Several reasons are given to explain why national conditions are more influential than personal economic factors. First, it is not always easy to attribute blame or credit for changes in personal finances, but it is possible to link general economic trends to an administration's policies. In some societies, such as the United States (the setting of most economic voting research), an individualistic political culture reduces the political relevance of structural decisions (Feldman, 1982, 1985; Sniderman and Brody, 1977). However, pocketbook effects gain more prominence when voters can clearly attribute personal circumstances to the government, a phenomenon particularly salient in societies with more interventionist governments (i.e., welfare states), where personal economic conditions are very much tied to state policies (Nannestad and Paldam, 1994, 1995, 1997).

Whereas the sociotropic vs. egocentric debate pertains to the spatial context of economic voting effects, the retrospective vs. prospective debate focuses attention on the time dimension. Morris P. Fiorina (1978) was among the first to show that voters rely heavily on past economic conditions; since these are more readily known, blame and credit are more easily established (Kinder and Kiewiet, 1979, 1981). However, the forward-looking "bankers" hypothesis offers a formidable counterargument to this view (Erikson et al., 2000; MacKuen et al., 1992), which relates trends in consumer confidence in the United States to support levels for the president. Findings substantiate a view of the voter as capable of assessing future economic expectations and linking those expectations with the current governing administration. Other studies find room for both retrospective and prospective effects. Nadeau and Lewis-Beck (2001), for instance, note that retrospective effects are present if voters are evaluating an incumbent, such as a US president seeking a second term, while prospective effects gain salience when there is no such candidate.

In either case, whether economic conditions are conceptualized as retrospective or prospective, the time horizon is very short: about 12 months. Furthermore, some see even this period as being too long when accounting for voter behaviour that appears to correlate more strongly to economic changes occurring within the past few months (Nannestad and Paldam, 1994: 217). There is a good reason why extending the time horizon too far does not make sense. Much economic voting research is based on survey data, and respondents are not expected to recall accurately economic conditions that took place more than a year or two ago. Furthermore, it is not deemed reasonable to expect respondents to project too far into the future. As a result, economic voting research is based, for the most part, on short term effects.

Although survey-level research restricts the time horizon, the time horizon of aggregate level work is not much longer. One of the first economic voting studies employs aggregate data (Kramer 1971), where declines in aggregate-level income are related to reduced support for incumbents, conceptualized as US House of Representatives candidates from the same incumbent presidential party. The findings reveal a pattern that is consistent with the retrospective hypothesis,² where declines in economic conditions erode support from the incumbent party. But economic change is still measured from the year preceding an election to the election, a short-term horizon.

Further methodological precision reveals other unique characteristics of various indicators. Take unemployment, for instance. High or low unemployment rates may be politically important in absolute terms, but what seems at least equally as important, if not more so, are *changes* in the unemployment rate (Nadeau and Blais, 1993, 1995). Furthermore, voters seem to react to job growth levels if their expectations are higher than actually reported by government statistics. Perceptions about unemployment are driven by personal experience and regional conditions, as well as by partisan cues (Nadeau et al., 2000). Others find interactive effects between economic and political factors. For instance, the clientele and “salient goal” hypotheses connect the relative salience of individual economic indicators to a party’s policy agenda. Here, unemployment and inflation mean different things to voters as they evaluate different parties. Some parties have a degree of “ownership” over a particular problem (see, for example, Carlsen, 2000; Hibbs, 1987; Rattinger, 1991; Swank, 1993). A more recent stream of research focuses attention on regional conditions (see, for example, Cutler, 2002; Godbout and Bélanger, 2002; Mondak et al., 1996), where conditions at the provincial, regional or even neighbourhood level have been measured to mediate sociotropic evaluations.

Overall, the different approaches to economic-voting research yield interesting results. But two consistent features throughout the literature are the short-term horizon and the focus on support levels for the government (i.e., the incumbent). What is needed is a look at whether voters respond to changes that are more structural, and to a more durable set of economic circumstances spanning a much longer time period. If long-term economic decline chips away at support for both the incumbent and the mainstream opposition in favour of non-mainstream parties, then a short-term horizon might not detect such a shift. Generally, support for non-mainstream parties is very small, and changes over the short term are very slight. Hence, a longer-term view is needed to measure something that otherwise might go unnoticed.

This is not to say that the long-term perspective is completely ignored. Brooks and Brady (1999), for instance, show that a longer-term view

reveals voting behaviour as reflective of policy evaluations. Here, voters evaluate party stands on issues such as welfare programs, the size of government, the legitimacy of institutions, and other evaluations that require more than just 12 months to develop. There is nothing inherently economic about this category, given that policies address numerous non-economic issues. But in many instances, policies affect voters economically, or are evaluated in light of economic conditions. As an example, Brooks and Brady mention the New Deal in the United States as an income redistribution initiative that divided the Republicans and the Democrats. It is rational, then, for poorer voters to prefer greater redistribution, while wealthier voters tend not to support such a move.

There is some evidence to suggest that a generation of painful economic restructuring and long-term economic decline can lead to voter resentment. Teixeira and Rogers (2000) point to 1973 as a dividing line in U.S. economic history, with the pre-1973 period marked by general affluence, while the post-1973 period was marked by a growing income gap between the upper and lower classes, a divide that has led to increased voter resentment. Such a perspective specifies sociotropic/retrospective evaluations as relevant before 1973, when all hard-working Americans could expect to become middle class. But the stakes began to change after 1973, with a widening wage gap making long-term personal economic interests more salient among that segment of the voting population that was most adversely affected.

In sum, if voters see that no mainstream party appears able—or willing—to reverse long-term economic decline, then it should come as no surprise if these same voters blame the system. But such a phenomenon cannot easily be captured by conventional methods that relate short-term economic changes to opinions about the governing party. A one-year improvement in economic conditions may certainly yield some benefit to the incumbent party, but a lengthy period of stagnation might shift the focus of political discourse to the margins of non-mainstream political movements.

Conceptualizing voting: mainstream vs. non-mainstream

Economic voting studies that focus only on the level of support for incumbent parties cannot adequately measure levels of discontent. Votes for the opposition Liberals during a Progressive Conservative reign are not the same as voting for the left-of-centre New Democratic party (NDP), or for the Reform party, the Bloc, the Libertarian party and so forth. There is a different, and sometimes more aggressive, message communicated when voters support smaller opposition parties. There are different types of such opposition parties, each emerging under a unique context

(see Gunther and Diamond, 2003 for a more complete and updated discussion), but it is sometimes not easy to categorize a particular political party into any one type.

A common term associated with a non-traditional opposition party is third party, a concept applied in Canada by Maurice Pinard. According to Pinard, a third party is simply a “non-traditional party which has not yet been in power” (1973: 455). Frustrated voters who do not see a satisfactory option among the traditional offerings would look for alternatives other than the Liberal and PC parties. Both traditional parties emerged from *within* Canada’s Parliament, making them essentially insiders, even when one party is in opposition. In contrast, other parties have extra-parliamentary origins whose challenge to the two traditional parties can only be noticed by contrasting positions. Normally, this involves an attack of the same institutions that have formed along with the traditional parties (Landes, 2002: 364).

Despite the simplicity of such a definition, the concept of a third party may be too specific for a study of long-term economic voting. First, few third parties run candidates in all constituencies and in all provinces. The Bloc Québécois, for example, only fields candidates in Quebec. Other parties, such as Reform, initially fielded candidates in the Western provinces only, and later expanded to other provinces (except Quebec) in 1993. Even then, not all constituencies in the rest of Canada had a Reform candidate. Second, even when a third party fields candidates in all provinces, its prominence and campaign strategy may vary from province to province. For instance, the NDP’s profile in Quebec has always been negligible. Third, some of the most successful smaller “third” parties in Canadian history have faded into oblivion, making a long-term focus difficult. The Social Credit party, the Reform party, the Bloc and the NDP all have captured the attention of those who wish to study voter discontent in Canada. But third parties (except, perhaps, the NDP) eventually fade away. Social Credit no longer appears on the Quebec electoral radar; Reform morphed into the Alliance, which later merged with the PC party; and the NDP has seen better days. The rise and fall of these parties within a relatively short-to-medium time frame does not easily permit a study of long-term voting trends. Fourth, the NDP might not qualify as a third party simply because it is not obvious whether this party is “non-traditional.” The NDP may take a leftist stance on many issues, and may have had radical roots, but the party is by no means a novelty in politics, and may simply be seen as a traditional opposition party (Gidengil et al., 2001). However, the NDP is nonetheless a party with extra-parliamentary origins, and it remains, at least federally, an outsider.

Even if it were feasible to study a third party over a reasonably long period of time, the interpretation of votes for such parties would be open to question. One could argue that the Reform party and the Bloc qualify

as anti-state parties. An anti-state party pursues fundamental, at times even constitutional, change to reform the entire political system, not simply to replace the current executive (Sartori, 1976). Communist and fascist parties fall into this category, running candidates in democratic elections just to acquire power, only to do away with democratic institutions—or implement drastic reforms—once in power. Although not necessarily as extreme as communist or fascist parties, the Reform/Alliance party and the Bloc Québécois could qualify as anti-state. One party was founded to challenge standard Canadian institutions, such as the unelected Senate, and the other party was founded to pursue a different sort of fundamental change, namely Quebec's independence. On the other hand, one could argue that neither party intends to uproot democratic institutions or to completely eliminate the Canadian state; instead, both hope to rearrange and rebalance the country's institutions to reflect regional concerns.

New parties such as the Reform/Alliance party could also qualify as an "anti-party" movement. Such movements are based on negative perceptions of established parties, which lead them to conclude that parties are no longer able to represent the electorate (Poguntke, 1996). Declining turnout, dealignment and the rise of support for the Reform/Alliance party all coincide with an increased sense of voter discontent towards Canada's two main political parties, the Liberal and Progressive Conservative Parties (see, for example, Bélanger, 2004; Clarke and Kornberg, 1993, 1996; Clarke et al., 2000; Gidengil et al., 2001).³ But again, the Reform/Alliance party does not field candidates simply to oust the insiders; instead, it has evolved to behave less and less as a Western protest party and has increasingly taken on the role of a party with an eye on government, especially following its merger with the Progressive Conservatives.

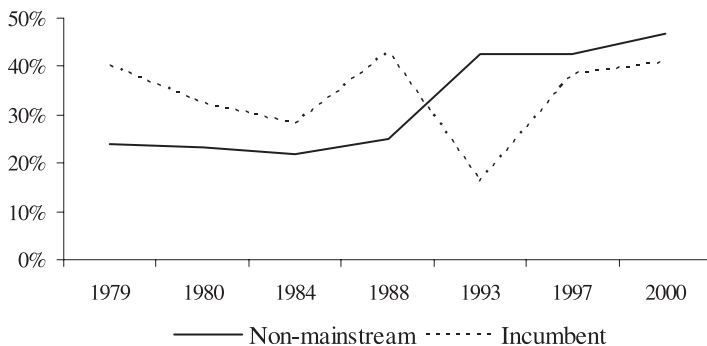
While it is not always obvious whether a larger third party reflects either anti-state or anti-party elements, with the smaller parties such distinctions are even less clear. What should one conclude regarding the Green party, the Christian Heritage party or "fringe" parties (such as the Rhinoceros party) that at times appear to parody the political system? To some extent, such smaller parties reflect both anti-state and anti-party sentiments. The more religious movements might derive support from those who regard mainstream political parties as too decadent, especially in light of hot-button issues such as abortion and homosexual rights. More policy-oriented movements might reflect an anti-system perspective, with the Greens deriving some support from ecocentric voters.

Given all these particular difficulties with the concept of a third party, a more general understanding is needed. The term "non-mainstream" party seems to conjure the same type of characteristics normally ascribed to third parties: an alternative choice. But "non-mainstream" is a more general concept, and non-mainstream voting can be defined as simply the

aggregate of votes cast for such alternatives. (See the appendix for a complete list of all non-mainstream parties that ran candidates during the period of this study.) Size does not matter, because non-mainstream parties could range in size from larger movements that have formed the official opposition, such as the Reform/Alliance party and the Bloc Québécois, to smaller parties and less prominent candidates that hardly ever get mentioned, such as independents, the Marxist-Leninists, the Green party, the Libertarians, the Natural Law party, and so forth. All non-mainstream parties are unique in what they stand for and how they attract voters, but one could argue that the common feature among all non-mainstream parties is that a vote for such parties is clearly not a vote for politics as usual. A vote for a non-mainstream party is a rejection of mainstream politics.

When viewed as a whole, it is clear that Canadians vote in sufficiently high numbers against the two mainstream parties, the Liberal and (Progressive) Conservative parties. Prior to the watershed 1993 election, the proportion of votes cast for non-mainstream parties hovered within a range of 20 to 25 per cent (see Figure 1), due mainly—but not exclusively—to support for the NDP. Since 1993, support for the non-mainstream parties surged past 40 per cent, due mostly—but again, not exclusively—to the emergence of the Reform/Alliance party and the Bloc Québécois. In other words, while support for particular non-mainstream parties is volatile over time, support overall for all non-mainstream parties tends to be more steady, and support levels tend to reflect a generalized expression for an alternative voice, sometimes based on rage, sometimes on ideology, but generally based on a rejection of mainstream politics as represented by the typical parties that tend to occupy government.

FIGURE 1
Vote Shares



Data and Methods

In order to link economic conditions to support for non-mainstream parties, the study compiled provincial economic data and provincially pooled federal voting data. Canada's ten provinces offer neat packages of both economic data and voting results, permitting the construction of ten data points for every election being studied. Election results from previous elections are conveniently and freely available from Canada's Library of Parliament Web site. Ballots cast for every candidate, whether affiliated to a party or not, are contained in these databases. The study uses aggregated provincial-level election results to construct two separate variables. One variable tracks the proportion of votes cast for non-mainstream parties, while another variable tracks the percentage of votes cast for the incumbent party. The Liberal party was the incumbent for the 1979, 1984, 1997 and 2000 elections, while the PC party was the incumbent for the 1980, 1988 and 1993 elections. For the seven elections covered, more than 87 million valid votes were cast, the vast proportion of which went to Canada's two mainstream parties, the Liberals and Progressive Conservatives.

To complement the voting data, the study gathered provincial-level economic data from 1969 to 2000 from Statistics Canada's *Labour Force Survey* databases (CANSIM table 282-0002), producing a pooled aggregate dataset of 69 data points.⁴ Two key economic indicators were extracted: unemployment rate and labour-force participation rate. The unemployment rate requires little justification, given that it is a valid and widely used measure of economic conditions. The other labour-market indicator, the participation rate, appears to have never before been used in voting research. Economic research, especially labour economics, does pay a great deal of attention to participation rates, a measure that reveals economic conditions which are not accurately captured by the unemployment rate.

First, labour-force participation is affected by longer-term conditions, such as demographics. Immigration, the baby-boom generation and the entry of women into the workforce all affect the supply side of the workforce. Data from Statistics Canada reflect some of these demographic changes. For instance, the male-to-female ratio of the labour force declined from .30 in 1976 to .23 in 2000.⁵ Second, labour-force participation may reflect overall economic health. Economic expansion, such as the period following the Second World War up to the 1960s, drew more people into the workforce, while trends from the 1960s to the 1980s show the reverse. Economic shocks (e.g., OPEC), stagflation, downsizing and the outsourcing of manufacturing and industrial work to the developing world all contribute to overall economic malaise that affects the "demand" side for labour. Industry automation can permanently elimi-

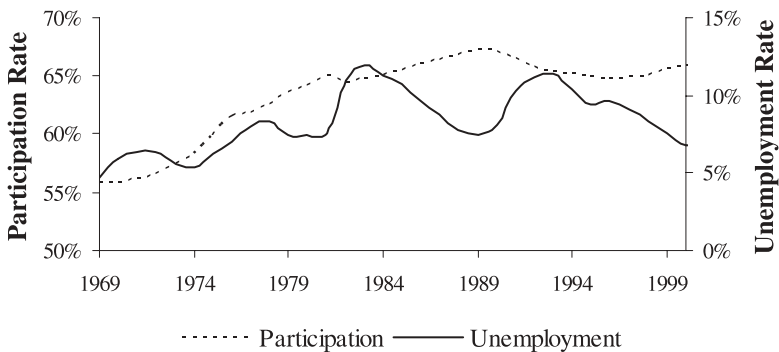
nate the need for certain workers, rendering them economically obsolete, with the consequence of seeing larger segments of the population—especially those who lack a post-secondary education—disqualified from many of the growth areas of the economy, or qualified only for work that does not pay as much as the blue-collar union wages of a previous generation. Such conditions appear to have negatively affected labour-force participation (Holzer, 1990), which may explain the post-1980s slowing trend of the participation rate, shown in Figure 2.

If it persists, an extended period of economic decline discourages workers, who simply give up looking for work, while potential workers, such as students who have recently graduated, do not even bother to look (Sapsford, 1981). This might lead to unemployment, but it might also lead to a different type of employment, such as part-time work. According to Statistics Canada, the ratio of part-time to full-time workers grew from .14 in 1976 to .22 in 2000.⁶

All of these factors contribute to overall earning potential, which is another key factor that drives participation rates (Parsons, 1980). Declining income prospects discourage potential workers from seeking employment. This degree of economic malaise is not always adequately captured by simply relying on unemployment figures. Participation rates thus offer a more comprehensive indicator.

Another good reason to use the participation rate is its ability to tap into long-term economic trends. Short-term decline, including the occasional recession, may have some impact on participation rates, but the impact seems more pronounced on unemployment, which tends to bounce back more quickly. Participation rates, on the other hand, increase or decrease independently of the business cycle. This suggests that the deci-

FIGURE 2
Labour Market Trends in Canada, 1969–2000



sion to join or withdraw from the labour force depends on long-term factors rather than short-term economic swings (Ostry and Zaidi, 1979). In other words, the labour-force participation rate functions as a general indicator of overall economic strength.

For each main indicator—unemployment and participation—two different types of variables are created, one for short-term changes and one that covers the long term. Short-term changes are simply an arithmetic subtraction of election-year rates less the rates in the preceding year. Long-term changes are calculated in a similar fashion, based on current year rates minus the rates 10 years prior.

Canada's political landscape cannot be fully understood without taking into account regional considerations (Gidengil et al., 1999), hence the decision to include regional dummies. Furthermore, since the dataset is comprised of provincially pooled data, and given that regression analysis is being used to test the hypotheses, regional dummies are necessary to account for the possibility that residuals might not be independent across the regions. Three such regional dummies are constructed: one for the Western provinces; another for Quebec; and one for the Atlantic provinces.⁷ Ontario was the excluded region and thereby functions as the reference group.

The four economic variables (short- and long-term versions of unemployment and participation) and the three regional dummy variables form the basis of Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression models to test two different hypotheses. The first hypothesis tests the responsibility thesis. Confirmation of this hypothesis would be substantiated if short-term economic conditions explain support levels for the incumbent party. Of the two economic variables, a short-term change in the unemployment rate would be expected to yield the most significant results in explaining incumbency votes.

H1: Support for the incumbent is inversely related to short-term changes in unemployment.

The participation rate is not expected to yield significant results; neither are the long-term versions of either economic variable.

The second hypothesis tests the link between long-term economic decline and support for non-mainstream parties.

H2: Support for non-mainstream parties is inversely related to long-term changes in the labour participation rate.

The short-term version of the participation rate and both versions of the unemployment variable are expected to yield insignificant findings.

Results

The economic variables and regional dummies were used to produce regression models, summarized in Table 1. Overall, the models appear stable, showing no major violation of any assumption to a linear regression model.⁸ The first model confirms the responsibility thesis, but with mixed results. Overall, support for an incumbent could be explained by short-term changes to unemployment, as hypothesized. However, short-term changes to the participation rate also yield a marginally significant result ($p < .10$), suggesting that it, too, should be included in the model.

Models 2a and 2b confirm the second hypothesis. Model 2a clearly shows that the only significant economic variable that explains support

TABLE 1
Comparing Long- and Short-Term Effects

	1	2a	2b
Dependent variable, vote share (percentage) for:	Incumbent	Non-mainstream parties*	
Regional dummies:			
West	-.0875* (.040)	.250^c (.070)	.254^c (.067)
Quebec	.0194 (.064)	.0862 (.111)	.0881 (.109)
Atlantic	.000851 (.039)	-.178^b (.068)	-.185^c (.067)
Economic conditions, long-term:			
Participation rate	.233 (.455)	-2.783^c (.788)	-2.931^c (.637)
Unemployment rate	-.367 (.576)	-.148 (.998)	
Economic conditions, short-term:			
Participation rate	4.675^a (2.651)	1.215 (4.592)	1.748 (4.534)
Unemployment rate	-3.831^b (1.576)	-1.343 (2.73)	-1.707 (2.606)
Intercept	.324^c (.038)	-.506^c (.066)	-.508^c (.065)
R-sq	.309	.626	.635
Adj. R-sq	.229	.584	.601
SEE	.105	.182	.181
N	69	69	70

*The dependent variable (proportion vote for non-mainstream parties) was converted to a base-10 logarithm to correct for heteroscedasticity.

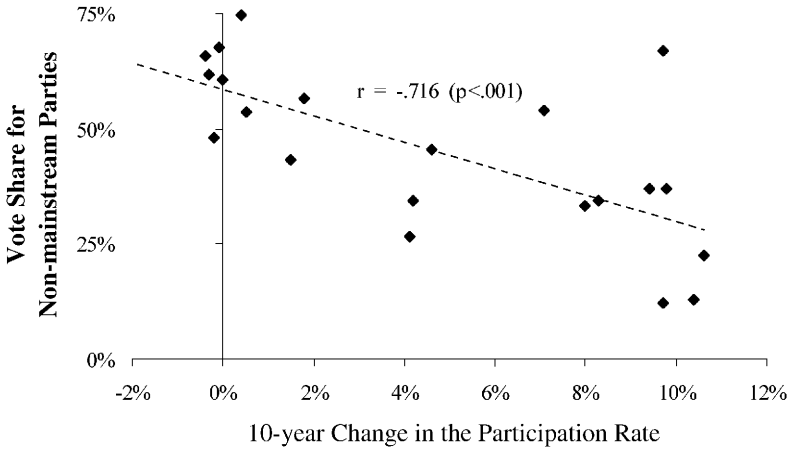
^a $p < .10$

^b $p < .05$

^c $p < .001$

Significant coefficients in bold face; standard error in parentheses.

FIGURE 3A
Participation Rate and Non-Mainstream Vote, Western Provinces



for non-mainstream voting is the long-term change in participation rates. None of the short-term variables yields significant scores, and neither does the long-term change in unemployment. (Model 2b excludes long-term unemployment for reasons explained below.) The second hypothesis is further confirmed visually through regional-level scatterplots (see Figures 3a to 3c). All three major regional groupings show a consistent

FIGURE 3B
Participation Rate and Non-Mainstream Vote, Central Canada

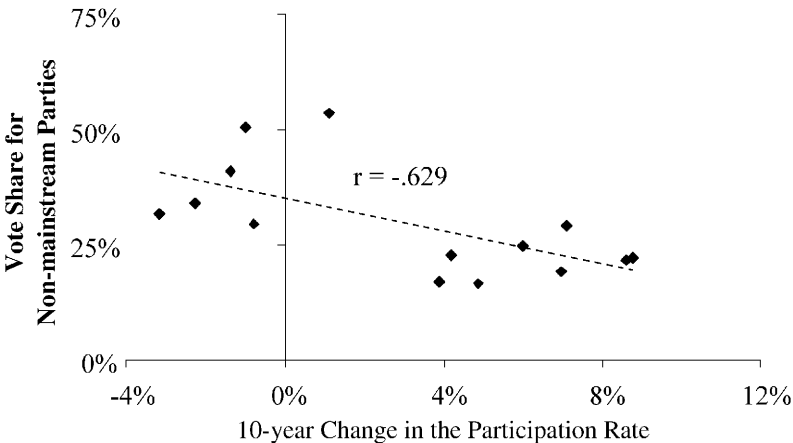
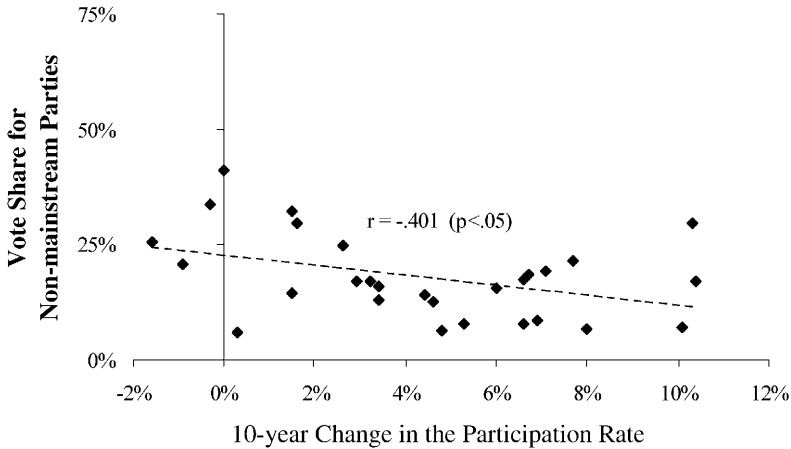


FIGURE 3C

Participation Rate and Non-Mainstream Vote, Atlantic Provinces



pattern: weaker growth in labour-force participation is related to stronger support for non-mainstream parties.

In a sense, these results simply suggest that long-term economic decline does not bode well for mainstream parties. This interpretation follows the conceptualization of labour-force participation as strictly economic. However, the participation rate could also be interpreted as a measurement of overall integration into mainstream society. Drops in labour-force participation reflect worsening long-term socioeconomic conditions. In such a context, a decline in the participation rate captures a very real sense of economic hardship, and might also reflect “social exclusion” (Brady, 2003: 723). The decision to stop looking for work is a reaction to bad economic conditions, alienation and an overall sense of exclusion, sentiments normally exploited by non-mainstream parties.

However, as already pointed out in reference to Pinard’s work, the socially excluded tend to be non-voters. Hence, there is nothing in these findings that suggests that the inverse relationship between labour-force participation and support for non-mainstream parties derives from voters who have withdrawn from the workforce. Instead, it may be those workers who are left behind to do all the work who feel resentment. In addition, they may not necessarily express their resentment by pointing to economic conditions. As Ruy A. Teixeira and Joel Rogers (2000) indicate, rising discontent among working-class American voters stems from a sense of unfairness. The large segment of voters who work, pay taxes and struggle to make ends meet perceive a political establishment more intent on addressing the needs of minorities, welfare recipients, as well

as citizens who do not work, and who probably do not vote, either. But working-class citizens do vote in greater proportions, and the political relevance of their sense of unfairness grows amid worsening economic conditions over a long period of time. It would then come as no surprise to see such voters gravitate increasingly towards political parties that advocate a social and political agenda wrapped in the language of worker rights, taxpayer rights and government waste. The political behaviour itself may be non-economic, but the drive for such a movement may very well stem from economic strains.

The other main economic indicator, unemployment, did not produce nearly as consistent a picture. Long-term increases in the unemployment rate are not accompanied by increased support for non-mainstream parties, mostly because of the cyclical pattern of unemployment. It is clearly subject to more volatility than the steadier pattern of participation rates (see Figure 2). Therefore, a 10-year change in unemployment rates might not accurately capture a trend. It is precisely for this reason that two different long-term models were constructed: one that included long-term changes to unemployment, and one without unemployment. Results for both versions do not differ by much, but it might make more theoretical sense to exclude unemployment, at least in the way it is used in these models.

Among the regional variables, the Western regional dummy is consistently significant for both models. The Western dummy is negative in Model 1, which suggests lower levels of support for the government within Western provinces, the flipside to the positive coefficient score in Models 2a and 2b. This is not overly surprising, given that non-mainstream parties have often flared up in the West. The Progressives, Social Credit, the New Democrats, Conservatives and, more recently, the Reform/Alliance have traditionally drawn a lot of support from the West. Western alienation is a sentiment that clearly has contributed to the success of non-mainstream parties in that region. But would not economic decline further inflame a region with a political context already predisposed to view conventional Canadian politics as biased in favour of the centre? In other words, economic decline in other parts of Canada might be interpreted as either bad economic decisions by state leaders or simply an ebb in the economic cycle, while in the West it might be seen as a rip-off. Lipset (1959/1963) and Pinard (1971) both mention this possibility, and the data appear to validate them. This may explain why the scatterplot for the Western provinces (Figure 3a) shows a stronger inverse relationship between labour-force participation and support for non-mainstream parties than the scatterplots for the other two regions: the West may be the region that is most sensitive to economic changes and, consequently, more prone to transfer economic discontent to support for a non-mainstream party.

As for the other two regional dummies, one or both of the remaining regions fail to attain significance. Quebec never yields a significant result, probably due to the small sample size that accounts for this regional dummy. The Atlantic regional dummy is significant only for the model that explains votes for non-mainstream parties, and curiously, living in what is clearly Canada's poorest region *removes* vote share from non-mainstream parties. One explanation for this finding is that the context in the Atlantic provinces might be totally opposite to that of the West, whereby voters in the Maritimes are more likely to sustain their support for mainstream parties. Again, this validates Pinard and Lipset, where poverty (and the Atlantic provinces are persistently the poorest in Canada) does not automatically cause people to revolt. Nonetheless, even in the poorest region we see a significant inverse relationship between labour-force participation and support for non-mainstream parties.

Conclusion

The results presented here lead us to draw several conclusions. First, the responsibility thesis is easily replicated, where support levels for the incumbent party could reasonably be tied to short-term economic changes. In particular, a drop (increase) in the unemployment rate over a period of one year bolsters (hurts) voter support for the incumbent party. But it is one thing for voters to "kick out the rascals" and place in government another mainstream party, and quite another when voters increasingly prefer parties with more radical agendas. This leads to the second main conclusion: long-term economic decline appears linked to the support for non-mainstream parties. If an increase in voter support for non-mainstream parties is understood to mean a vote against the status quo as well as a vote in favour of a set of ideas that pursues fundamental changes, then the findings reported here support Lipset's theory (1959/1963), which relates governmental legitimacy to generalized affluence.

Such results could not have been generated by relying on conventional economic voting techniques, which focus on the short term. The short-term analysis cannot easily detect any growing disconnect between voters and mainstream politics, an evolutionary process that takes a considerable amount of time. If voter shifts are presumed to move at glacial speeds, then short-term economic indicators can only tap into changes in support for the incumbent party. This is another important conclusion that can be drawn from this article's analytical approach: long-term changes to economic conditions matter at least as much as short-term ones.

But since the results presented here are based on a compilation of provincially pooled data, theoretical validation requires analysis with individual-level data. Election surveys and other micro-level data might

form a basis upon which to construct further studies of this type, assuming appropriate data exist.

Furthermore, the conclusion that long-term economic decline increases support for non-mainstream parties may be a phenomenon unique to plurality systems. The same conceptualization of voting behaviour may not yield the same results in proportional representation (PR) systems. In PR systems, as clearly stated by Maurice Duverger (1954), voters who wish to support smaller parties do not necessarily feel their votes would be “wasted.” Consequently, voters cast ballots for parties that appeal to specific political agendas, an effect that in turn encourages the proliferation of more parties. Hence, PR systems are more likely than plurality systems to encourage voter support for radical, separatist, regional, single-issue, extremist or other non-mainstream political parties, regardless of economic contexts. But in a plurality system, it takes a great deal of strife (such as long-term economic decline) to encourage voters to move away from the traditional choices and to take a chance on a non-mainstream party. Also, as Pinard (1971) notes, voters suffering strain shift their support to a third party when the main opposition party is weak in their constituency. In Canada’s case, the weakness of the Progressive Conservatives in rural Quebec led frustrated Liberal supporters to vote for the rising Social Credit. Third parties in such a context can succeed locally or regionally but not nationally. But voters in a PR system do not require the context of one-party dominance to feel inclined to support a non-mainstream party, since under this system a vote cast for a smaller party would not necessarily be wasted. Such an institutional context limits Pinard’s approach, and also limits the extent to which the results from this article could be generalized to different electoral systems.

In addition, PR systems further complicate matters through their propensity to form coalition governments. Such partnerships may make it difficult to separate mainstream from non-mainstream parties. Take Denmark and Austria as examples. Denmark’s 2001 election produced a coalition of two parties that may be considered mainstream, the Liberals and the Conservatives. But Denmark’s coalition also relies on an opposition party, the far-right Danish People’s party, to govern with a majority. Austria, too, experimented with a coalition involving a far-right party, the Freedom party. Should such non-traditional and otherwise unconventional parties be considered mainstream once they are admitted into a governing coalition, even if such parties advance an ambitious and arguably non-mainstream agenda?

Multi-partyism and institutional contexts that favour coalition governments make the mainstream/non-mainstream conceptualization of voting behaviour difficult to apply. More precision may be required to relate long-term economic decline to increased support for whatever qualifies as “non-mainstream” in such contexts. Lately, that behaviour appears tied

to the recent success of nationalist and far-right parties that challenge the status quo. It would be valuable to assess the link between growing support for such parties in other industrialized economies and the considerable economic restructuring that has taken place over the past generation. Neo-conservative challenges to the welfare state, OPEC oil shocks and the shift of manufacturing jobs to developing countries may have all led to more challenging economic conditions for voters. If the Canadian case is not unique, then long-term economic change and economic decline in other countries may shed light on the growth of other political movements that challenge mainstream politics.

Notes

- 1 Pinard (1971) notes that the success of a new political movement is not as dependent on its ideology, given that discontented voters who are ready for an alternative would tend simply to support whichever party “appears to them most likely to be successful, whether it is conservative or progressive in the eyes of the sophisticated observer” (95); in the case of Quebec, it was the Social Credit party.
- 2 Kramer (1983) points out that aggregate-level data does not confirm or negate an egocentric link. Voting behaviour related to aggregate economic data cannot explain whether voters respond to changes to their own personal incomes, or to changes in national-level incomes.
- 3 It should be noted that Poguntke (1996) distinguishes between specific and generalized anti-partyism. The first explains voter discontent with overall performance of governing or other key parties, while the latter points to voter discontent with the whole concept of a political party. Bélanger (2004) and Gidengil et al. (2001) show that sometimes a party can tap into both sentiments, as in the case of the Reform Party of Canada, which appealed to those who were upset with both the Liberals and the Conservatives, as well as those who otherwise felt disengaged from party politics altogether.
- 4 The total number of data points would have been 70, but unemployment data for Prince Edward Island was missing for some years during the early 1970s, reducing the sample size to 69 for two of the three models tested.
- 5 CANSIM table 282-0002.
- 6 CANSIM table 282-0002.
- 7 Western provinces include British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Atlantic provinces include Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick.
- 8 Collinearity diagnostics suggest no problem with respect to the relationship between the different independent variables. Residual analysis also does not suggest any other serious problems, except for models 2a and 2b, where heteroscedasticity was detected. This was treated using a base-10 logarithmic transformation of the dependent variable.

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**Appendix: Non-Mainstream Parties That Ran Candidates
in Canadian Elections from 1979 to 2000**

Abolitionist party of Canada
Bloc Québécois
Canada party
Canadian Action party
Canadian Alliance
Christian Heritage party of Canada
Communist party of Canada
Confederation of Regions Western party
Co-operative Commonwealth Federation
Green party of Canada
Independent, or candidates with no party affiliation
Libertarian party of Canada
Marijuana party
Marxist-Leninist party
National party of Canada
Natural Law party of Canada
New Democratic party
Parti Nationaliste du Québec
Parti Rhinocéros
Party for the Commonwealth of Canada
Reform party of Canada
Social Credit
Union Populaire