

The 2007 Provincial Election in Quebec

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Abstract:

The 2007 provincial election in Quebec may be considered a milestone in recent Quebec politics. For the first time since 1878, voters elected a minority government in the province (Jean Charest's Liberals), a third party (ADQ) replaced the Parti Québécois (PQ) as Official Opposition, and the PQ had its worst showing in 37 years. The pre-campaign was marked by the "reasonable accommodations" debate, which gave the ADQ the boost it needed to rival the two main parties. The incumbent Charest government suffered from its low popularity, due to what was largely perceived as a disappointing record. The PQ's loss of support was mostly attributable to its new leader André Boisclair's lack of appeal and to the party's insistence on holding another referendum on Quebec sovereignty. Quebec's new three-party system may last for some time, due to each party having strong and relatively well-defined regional support bases.

Introduction

The outcome of the 26 March 2007 provincial election in Quebec was historic in that, for the first time since 1878, voters of that province elected a minority government to be led by Jean Charest's incumbent Liberal Party (PLQ). The Charest government's first mandate had been very controversial, with popular levels of satisfaction towards it having consistently remained at a record low throughout Charest's first three years in power, and with strong allegations by journalists and opposition parties alike that the Liberals had not kept the electoral promises that they had made back in April 2003.¹ In that sense, the fact that they were unable to keep their majority of seats in Quebec's Assemblée Nationale in 2007 may not be entirely surprising. Yet, in the few weeks before the election was called by Charest, there were some indications that things were not necessarily looking bad for the PLQ.

The first rosy sign came with the publication of two vote intention polls on 30 January 2007, one from Léger Marketing in *Le Devoir* and the other from CROP in *La Presse*, both of which were putting the Liberals ahead of the Parti Québécois (PQ) for the first time since November 2004. Moreover, the same CROP poll also showed that satisfaction towards the Charest government, while still being relatively low, had slowly kept increasing and was now higher than it had ever been since November 2003 – Quebecers' satisfaction level was now standing at 43%, up from its record low of 20% back in the spring of 2005. Those marked improvements certainly indicated to Charest that a

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window of opportunity for holding the election was now opening, that was sufficiently close to the normal end of his first mandate.

Another important positive sign was the confirmation that new PQ leader André Boisclair was clearly unable to channel the dissatisfaction towards the Liberal government. Since Boisclair's election as party leader in November 2005 (following Bernard Landry's resignation), voting intentions for the PQ had plunged from 50%, well ahead of all the other parties, to 34%, now a few points behind the PLQ (37%).² The drop in PQ support over that period may have also been partly attributable to a slight decline in popular support for Quebec sovereignty following Stephen Harper's Conservative Party victory in the January 2006 federal election. Harper made significant inroads in Quebec in that election, winning 10 seats and pledging that his approach to Canadian federalism would be more open to Quebec's interests and aspirations (Bélanger and Nadeau 2006).

Finally, what threatened to become a damaging campaign issue for the PLQ, the debate over the so-called "reasonable accommodations," seemed to have been temporarily put to rest in the early days of February. Back a year ago, in March 2006, the Supreme Court of Canada had ruled in favour of young Sikhs wearing their kirpan at school in the Montreal area (Perreault, 2006). The ruling created a stir in Quebec, with journalists soon reporting several other examples of similar accommodations (or exceptions) of a religious type.³ In November 2006, Mario Dumont, leader of the Action Démocratique du Québec (ADQ), made some strong public comments on the matter, accusing the Charest government for its inaction in these cases (Dutrisac 2006). Dumont's criticisms were echoing many of the concerns that the Quebec French population had regarding immigrant integration and accommodation. The situation culminated at the end of January, when *La Presse* reported that the municipality council of Hérouxville (a small town near Shawinigan in the region of Mauricie) had just adopted a "code of conduct" that asked immigrants wishing to establish themselves in the town to conform to the Quebec majority's secular values (Gagnon, 2007). Dumont declared that the Hérouxville code was a "cry from the heart" in front of increasing cultural and ethnic pluralism in Quebec (*Presse canadienne* 2007). The January 30 Léger Marketing poll showed a notable upsurge in support for the ADQ, which was now receiving 24% of vote intentions, compared to only 11% barely a year before. A mere two weeks before calling the election, premier Jean Charest finally responded to the crisis by creating the Bouchard-Taylor commission to investigate cases of reasonable accommodations, hoping that this would calm down the debate (Robitaille 2007).

The Campaign

The election campaign officially started on 21 February.⁴ Five main political parties were competing. In addition to the PLQ, PQ and ADQ presenting candidates in all 125 districts, the Green Party (PVQ) presented 108 candidates.⁵ As for Québec Solidaire (QS), a left-leaning party created in February 2006 out of a merger between the Union des Forces Progressistes (UFP) and Françoise David's think tank Option Citoyenne, it was able to present 123 candidates.

The campaign's first week was mostly fought on the Charest government's record. Both the PQ and ADQ strongly attacked the incumbent government for not having kept one of its key electoral promises, that of improving Quebec's health system. The ADQ declared itself to be in favour of some form of private healthcare delivery. But the party's real priority in this election were Quebec families. Mario Dumont pledged to give \$100 per child per week to each family, a policy that was visibly inspired by the one the federal Conservative government had adopted the year before, and he proposed the abolition of school boards in the province. As for the PQ, it announced that if elected,

it would reverse one of the Liberals' most controversial decisions, that of selling part of the Mont-Orford provincial park to private interests.

The second week's focus shifted away from the Liberals' record and predictably turned towards constitutional issues. André Boisclair presented the PQ's policy platform, in which it was announced that if elected, the party would hold a referendum (now referred to as a "consultation populaire") on Quebec sovereignty "as soon as possible during its first mandate." Charest's Liberals did not lose any time in decrying the PQ's promise, arguing that Quebecers had no interest in a third referendum. Federal Liberal leader Stéphane Dion also denounced the PQ plans, telling Quebec voters that it was important that they elect a federalist government, and even suggesting that those dissatisfied with the Charest government should vote for the ADQ or the Greens. Dumont also derided the PQ's "obsession" with referendums, arguing that the Quebec government instead should fight for greater political autonomy within the Canadian federation. The ADQ's autonomist position led Charest to argue that Dumont was nothing more than a separatist in disguise, reminding voters that Dumont had publicly supported the YES side in the 1995 referendum.

The ADQ slowly started to receive more attention from its two main opponents, and from the media. Since the beginning of the campaign, several ADQ candidates had been making some controversial comments having to do with firearm regulations, women's work conditions, immigrants, and Boisclair's homosexuality. It was also revealed that one ADQ candidate had a criminal record. On an almost daily basis, Dumont had to either defend his candidates or distance himself from their declarations, and he ended up firing two of them. But despite these troubles, new polls released in mid-campaign were indicating that the ADQ was on the rise, almost neck and neck with the PQ and cutting into the Liberal lead. Charest and Boisclair both started attacking Dumont, pointing at his team's apparent lack of credibility and trying to demonstrate that his policy proposals were unrealistic because too costly. The strategy was to persuade voters that the ADQ was a "one-man show" and was not a serious government alternative.

A televised debate was held on 13 March, and involved only the three main party leaders. After the debate, most pundits agreed that Jean Charest had made a lacklustre performance, responding limply to his opponents' attacks on his record. After a difficult campaign start, André Boisclair was able to capitalize on the debate by showing an excellent knowledge of Quebec governance, by efficiently communicating his policy priorities (notably education), and by downplaying the referendum issue. For his part, Mario Dumont tried to heighten distrust towards the Charest government by displaying to the camera some administrative documents that supposedly proved that the government had been neglecting the province's highway infrastructure, and was thus responsible for a bridge collapse in the Montreal area the autumn before.⁶

With Dumont still on the rise, Boisclair now back in the race, and Election Day looming, the week that followed the debate led to speculations about the possibility of a minority government. Charest was quick to dismiss these talks, simply saying that a minority government would weaken the province; but the other two leaders were discussing the issue openly. Boisclair claimed that he would keep to his promise of holding a referendum even in a minority position, whereas Dumont ridiculed that idea and rejected any possibility of forming a government coalition with the PQ (or with the PLQ for that matter). Labour unions, like the Fédération des Travailleurs du Québec (FTQ), were starting to fear the election of an ADQ government and were now calling on their members to rally behind the PQ in order to avoid that possibility. Charest's discourse against the ADQ became tougher, and Boisclair claimed that Dumont's autonomism was an "empty shell."

The last week of the campaign was dominated by the federal budget. On 19 March, the Harper government presented its budget, claiming to resolve the so-called “fiscal imbalance” by substantially increasing federal transfers to the provinces. As a consequence, the Quebec government would be receiving a total of \$3.6 billions in new funding over the next two years. Even though the PQ and its federal cousin the Bloc Québécois were in favour of the federal budget, they both criticized Prime Minister Stephen Harper for getting involved in the provincial election campaign with his budget plan. The next day, Jean Charest announced that, if reelected, \$700 million of the new money would go towards tax cuts. This was a controversial statement, given that the Liberals had been arguing for years that the difficulties in the health sector in Quebec were mostly due to a lack of federal funding. Charest’s promise was quickly criticized by Boisclair and Dumont, as well as by some within the PLQ ranks. The final campaign polls indicated that the race was still extremely close between the three main parties, with the Liberals slightly ahead but likely without enough support to form a majority government.

The Outcome and Its Aftermath

Quebec voters went to the polls on Monday, 26 March. Turnout was 71.2%, up by about one percentage point only compared to the 2003 election, despite the current election being a much closer race. The Liberals were reelected with only a plurality of seats. The ADQ finished second, both in terms of votes and seats. This was the first time that Mario Dumont’s party (created in 1994) was able to form the Official Opposition. The PQ finished third – their worst showing since the 1970 provincial election. As for the two smaller parties, QS and the PVQ, while they attracted a good deal of attention before and during the campaign, they managed to receive less than 4% of the vote each (and no seats) on Election Day. Still, their votes came largely at the expense of the PQ, contributing to the latter’s third-place finish.

Table 1. Quebec Provincial Election Results

	2003		2007	
	Seats (#)	Popular vote (%)	Seats (#)	Popular vote (%)
Parti Libéral du Québec	76	46.0	48	33.1
Parti Québécois	45	33.2	36	28.3
Action Démocratique du Québec	4	18.2	41	30.8
Québec Solidaire	0	1.1 *	0	3.6
Parti Vert du Québec	0	0.4	0	3.9

* Union des Forces Progressistes in 2003

Source: Directeur général des élections du Québec (www.dgeq.qc.ca)

Aside from the election of a minority government, the main surprise with this outcome was, of course, the important surge in ADQ support. This rise is impressive given that the reasonable accommodations issue played no direct part in the campaign.⁷ It must probably be concluded that this issue helped the ADQ before the campaign started, by giving the party the visibility and the impulse it needed to rival the two major parties. Dumont’s campaign strategy actually had been to emphasize family issues, which better explains why the ADQ experienced a massive breakthrough in Montreal’s young francophone suburbs (the island’s north and south “couronne”). Another

explanation for the surge rests on the “vieux fond bleu” (old conservative strain) found in the rural parts of the province, where small-c conservative party movements have often had success in the past (e.g., Union Nationale, Cr ditistes), and on the vote from “young angry white men” in the Quebec City area (Drouilly, 2007). Finally, it seems that the ADQ’s success was also due to important defections among Liberal voters (those who were dissatisfied with the Charest government) and among PQ supporters (those who were unhappy with Andr  Boisclair’s leadership); those defections were facilitated by the low salience of the constitutional debate in that election (B langer 2007). In any case, Mario Dumont’s current status as Official Opposition leader enables him to present himself as a much more credible alternative to Premier Charest than before. Yet, one factor that might prevent him from capitalizing fully on this situation is his parliamentary team: most of the newly elected ADQ MNAs have been unknown people lacking any political experience. The ADQ caucus has had a hard time adjusting to the parliamentary game in the year that followed its entry in the Assembl e Nationale, and this has allowed both the PLQ and the PQ to continue picturing the ADQ as not being a serious party.

The election outcome was bad news for the PQ, seemingly confirming the party’s gradual loss of support since the 1995 referendum defeat. Barely a month after the election, leader Andr  Boisclair was shown the party’s door, and was quickly replaced by the more experienced Pauline Marois. Her first action as new PQ leader was to officially put on hold any referendum plans. But this did not prevent her in the following months from consistently priming the issues of language and citizenship in an attempt to reclaim the PQ’s place as the main defender of Quebec’s identity and national interests. Marois’ discourse and strategy seem to have been relatively successful so far, as the PQ has regained the first spot in vote intention polls and as the ADQ has experienced a slight setback. What these post-election movements in public opinion suggest is that the ADQ’s newly-found support base may still be fragile, and might crumble as soon as the national question becomes salient again. In that sense, it is still too early to proclaim the death of the Parti Qu b cois and its replacement by the ADQ as the new nationalist party in Quebec (B langer 2007).

As for Jean Charest’s Liberals, they have had to adapt to their minority government status. Their first test has been the provincial budget of May 2007, which was adopted with the PQ’s support at the cost of significant concessions. Since the election, satisfaction towards the Liberal government has been improving, so that Charest’s leadership is currently not being put into question. Charest himself has given no sign that he would not lead the PLQ again in the next election. Yet, with both the rise of the ADQ and the resilience of the PQ among the francophone population, the Liberals’ support base currently seems to be limited to non-francophones, mostly around the Montreal and Outaouais areas (Drouilly, 2007). This ought to be a source of concerns for the PLQ, and it suggests that Quebec’s new three-party system may last for some time, due to each party having strong and relatively well-defined regional support bases. As a result, no party has been able to clearly take the lead in opinion polls over the past year, so that we can still expect this minority government to last for at least a second year.

Endnotes

- 1 For a scholarly account of the Charest government's low popularity during its first mandate, see Pétry et al 2006.
- 2 According to CROP poll results.
- 3 These examples notably included the Montreal Hasidic Jew community asking that the windows of a YMCA in their neighborhood be frosted in order to avoid seeing women working out; Muslim students from Montreal's École de technologie supérieure requesting rooms to pray at their school; and men being forbidden to attend prenatal classes at the CLSC Parc-Extension in Montreal so as not to offend Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh women attending these same classes.
- 4 I thank Hugo Lavallée for his assistance in summarizing all the campaign events described here; detailed references are available upon request.
- 5 The PVQ had presented only 37 candidates in the previous 2003 provincial election.
- 6 It was shown later that week that those documents could not really be considered as solid proofs of Dumont's claims.
- 7 Only two minor campaign events were related to reasonable accommodations: a young Muslim girl was excluded from a soccer game in Laval because she was wearing her hidjab on the playing field (27 February), and the Quebec Chief Electoral Officer announced that Muslim women would be allowed to vote without lifting their veil (22 March; a decision that he reversed the following day after numerous complaints were raised).

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