

The 2012 Provincial Election in Quebec

Éric Bélanger

Department of Political Science McGill University – Email address: eric.belanger3@mcgill.ca

Eva Falk Pedersen

Department of Political Science McGill University – Email address: eva.falkpedersen@mail.mcgill.ca

Abstract: The 2012 provincial election in Quebec marked a change in government, and the election of Quebec's first woman as Premier. The campaign was held in a dramatic context characterized by nearly three years of allegations of corruption, the apparent decline of the sovereignty movement, and the events of the famous "maple spring" which pitted students against the Liberal government on the issue of tuition fee hikes. Two significant new political parties, the Coalition Avenir Québec and Option Nationale, also took part in this election. The outcome was a minority government led by Pauline Marois' Parti Québécois, with stronger than expected support for the incumbent Liberal Party of Quebec who finished second with only four seats less than the PQ.

Keywords: Quebec, election

Résumé: L'élection provinciale de 2012 au Québec a marqué un changement de gouvernement, et l'élection d'une première femme à titre de première ministre du Québec. La campagne fut tenue dans un contexte dramatique caractérisé par près de trois années d'allégations de corruption, de déclin apparent du mouvement souverainiste, et par les événements du fameux "printemps érable" qui virent l'affrontement des étudiants et du gouvernement Libéral sur la question de la gratuité des études supérieures. Deux nouveaux partis politiques significatifs, la Coalition Avenir Québec et Option Nationale, prirent aussi part à l'élection. Le dénouement fut un gouvernement minoritaire dirigé par le Parti Québécois de Pauline Marois, avec un soutien plus grand qu'attendu pour le Parti Libéral sortant qui termina second, à seulement quatre sièges du PQ.

Mots-clés: Québec, élections

Introduction

The outcome of the September 4th 2012 provincial election in Quebec was historic in that, for the first time, voters of that province elected a woman – Pauline Marois, the leader of the Parti Québécois (PQ) – to be Premier of Quebec. In that sense, the province has joined a pan-Canadian breakthrough because, at the time of writing, six of the First Ministers of the Canadian provinces and territories are women. Notwithstanding this important victory, the PQ's electoral success was far from being impressive however. The party only achieved to win four seats more than the incumbent Liberal Party of Quebec (LPQ) in the National Assembly, despite the fact that the latter had been in power for almost a decade. This new PQ minority government thus reflects the struggle that that party has been facing ever since its crushing 2003 defeat at the hands of Jean Charest's Liberals. Indeed, one should recall that in 2007 the PQ had even been marginalized as the second official opposition party behind the Action Démocratique du Québec (ADQ) (see Bélanger 2008).

Having won a majority in 2008, Premier Charest could have waited nearly a year more before dissolving the National Assembly, yet he chose the 1st of August as the start date for the campaign that would culminate in an election on the 4th of September. The last year of Liberal governance was a succession of low satisfaction rates and large-scale disagreements with civil society. Firstly, having been in power for nine years had made it hard for the party to renew itself. For instance, Jean Charest's "Plan Nord", aimed at boosting economic development via the exploitation of Northern Quebec's natural resources, should have been a gather-together and self-identifying project

involving many ministries and local communities. But the project had taken months to be concretely announced, parts of it were still uncertain at the beginning of 2012, and some Aboriginal communities and environment-advocacy groups decided not to endorse it. For Charest's Liberals, reaching a balance between the economy and civil society was a hard bet. Secondly, ever since 2009, a constant flow of allegations of corruption and collusion made in the media and in the National Assembly had diminished the public's trust in the Charest government (see, e.g., Marissal 2009). A CROP poll from April 2010 indicated that as many as 74% of Quebecers agreed that it was time for a change of government in Quebec. Later that same year, an on-line petition asking for the resignation of Jean Charest was signed by more than 200,000 citizens. In the fall of 2011, under increased pressure following the leak of a devastating report by Jacques Duchesneau, then head of the government's anti-collusion unit, Charest finally agreed to create the Charbonneau Commission, aimed at shedding light on the extent of corruption and collusion in the awarding and management of public contracts in the construction industry.

The PQ, and the sovereigntist movement more generally, also went through a period of turmoil around that same period. In the May 2011 federal election, many Quebecers decided to defect from the Bloc Québécois (BQ) and to support in mass the New Democratic Party (NDP) led – at the time – by Jack Layton (see Bélanger and Nadeau 2011). The former leader of the BQ, Gilles Duceppe, even lost his parliamentary seat. A whole debate surrounding the relevance of the Bloc's existence and the strength of the sovereignty movement quickly followed. These existential questions were also asked from within the PQ itself. Four high-profile

MNAs¹ made a splash by resigning from the PQ caucus in June of 2011, publicly disavowing Pauline Marois' leadership and her proposed strategy of "gouvernance souverainiste". Many observers of the Quebec political scene hypothesized that Gilles Duceppe might potentially take over the leadership of the PQ, given that polls suggested an eventual PQ win at the next provincial election with Duceppe at its head (Lajoie 2011). In January 2012, Duceppe finally announced that he was not interested in the PQ leadership. These PQ existential woes were quickly forgotten, however, as the attention of the whole province turned to the student crisis.

The roots of the so-called "printemps érable" (maple spring) go back to the March 2011 budget, in which Finance Minister Raymond Bachand announced the Liberal government's plan to increase annual tuition fees from \$2,168 to \$3,793 over a five-year period, representing a 75% increase in the cost of higher education. That budgetary measure was going to be effective in September of 2012. This decision triggered a protest movement that was unprecedented in Quebec for its scope, duration and intensity (Stolle et al. 2013). Several student unions voted in favour of a general strike without an end-date, to begin in February 2012. Thus, from February until June, between 170,000 and 200,000 students were on strike – meaning that the teaching schedule was paralyzed in many postsecondary institutions. Several different kinds of protest actions were organized throughout the spring, from peaceful marches to violent assaults. The Charest government proved inflexible, refusing at first to negotiate with the student unions' leaders. Their first meeting was held on April 23rd. The negotiations lasted two

days; the resulting agreement proved unacceptable to the students and triggered a series of nightly protests. With no reasonable solution in sight, the government adopted a special law (Bill 78)² that imposed important restrictions on the right to protest as well as a new standardized school calendar for striking students. At that point, the student crisis became a larger social one as many citizens across the province decided to show their disapproval of the Liberal government by participating in nightly casserole marches, making noise with pots and pans.³ Summer arrived without anyone really noticing, and after a few weeks of relative calm Jean Charest decided on 1st of August to call an election, partly as a way out of what had become for him a legitimacy crisis.

The Campaign

For the 2012 election, the LPQ, the PQ, and Québec Solidaire (QS) remained in the ranks. But they were joined by a record number of political parties, for a total of 18 party formations competing (and 892 candidates running for seats). Among these smaller parties, two new ones were particularly noteworthy.

The first was the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ). The CAQ's leader (and co-founder) was François Legault, an ex-minister from the Bouchard and Landry governments between 1998 and 2003, and a PQ MNA until his resignation in June 2009. The first rumours to the effect that Legault was interested in creating his own political

¹ Jean-Martin Aussant, Louise Beaudoin, Pierre Curzi, and Lisette Lapointe.

² It became officially titled "An Act to Enable Students to Receive Instruction from the Postsecondary Institutions They Attend" (Bill 12).

³ It should be noted that, according to polls, the Quebec population was deeply divided over the issue of the tuition fee hike but was clearly against Bill 78's measures, perceived as too drastic and restrictive.

party came in the fall of 2010. A year later, the CAQ was officially launched. Given the new party's ideological closeness to the right-of-centre ADQ, and given the fact that the ADQ's finances and membership numbers had been shrinking since its 2008 electoral defeat, merger talks between these two party formations quickly began in earnest. The disappearance of the ADQ became a reality in January 2012. The CAQ tries to define itself as a right-leaning party but without having a clear position on the main cleavage that has structured Quebec political history (sovereignty-federalism). Legault's party wants to put aside the national debate, at least for the time being, in order to focus on more pressing governance issues in the province, not the least of them being the perceived government corruption. The CAQ managed to recruit candidates in all 125 ridings, and several of them were already well-known from the general public.

The second new party of interest was Option Nationale (ON). It was created in late 2011 by Jean-Martin Aussant, one of the four MNAs who had left the PQ that spring. Based on the belief that the PQ was not pursuing Quebec sovereignty with enough commitment anymore, Aussant's party puts the achievement of Quebec's independence as its number one priority, while adopting a left-leaning stance on other social issues. ON succeeded in recruiting 120 candidates across the province.

Jean Charest began his campaign by emphasizing his usual issue priority, namely Quebec's economic development. His core message was that re-electing the Liberals would mean political and economic stability, as opposed to a PQ government that would be more interested in catering to demands from students and "la rue" (i.e., protesters in the streets) which would jeopardize the province's, and especially Montreal's, economy. But other than that, Charest did

not really offer voters any new reasons for keeping his party in power after nine years and three mandates. For her part, Pauline Marois' campaign was very much aimed at making her appear as a credible head of government who had a solid team behind her, ready to govern and replace the LPQ. She also made sure to emphasize her preference for consensus-building, opposing it to the Liberals' stubborn attitude as displayed during the student crisis. Ethical concerns were also an important part of her message, in an attempt to tap into the public's dissatisfaction with the Liberal government. However, François Legault also addressed the issue of corruption and, on the third day of the campaign, announced to the total surprise of most observers that Jacques Duchesneau – at that point the province's incarnation of public integrity – would be candidate for the CAQ. Due in large part to this early announcement by the CAQ, corruption issues became the most salient of the first week of the campaign according to media coverage data (Lawlor and Bastien 2013).

August 9th saw the publication of the first polls announcing that Jean Charest would probably not be re-elected in his riding. The PQ was receiving 32% of voting intentions while the LPQ was close behind with 29%. TV advertisements started to air during the next weekend and were mainly concerned with corruption and health care issues. Health care was an issue also put forward by the CAQ following their nomination of another star candidate, Dr. Gaétan Barrette.

The main televised debate was held on August 19th and involved four leaders: Charest, Marois, Legault, and for the first time a co-spokesperson from QS, namely Françoise David. Attacks were mainly directed at Jean Charest, but none of the leaders stood out from the others, except for David. Her performance was impressive

because she did not use personal arguments and she remained calm throughout. Charest, who constantly had to defend the integrity of his party, brought back on the table some of the conclusions from an old report (by the Moisan Commission) that put the PQ on the spot with possible illegal contributions. This debate was followed by three more on the private television network TVA, although their format was different: between August 20th and 22nd the three main leaders faced each other in duels.

During these debates, François Legault was able to destabilize Pauline Marois a little by bringing up the PQ's promise to allow popular initiative referendums ("référendums d'initiative populaire" or RIPs). He asked Marois whether allowing RIPs would mean that a group of independentist citizens would be able to impose a third referendum on Quebec sovereignty via a simple petition of 850,000 signatures. Marois tried to reassure that a PQ government would nonetheless keep control of any sovereignty referendum agenda but her responses remained vague and tentative, and were contradicted by PQ candidate Bernard Drainville who was the one who had made the RIPs be included in the party's platform (Chouinard 2012). During the main televised debate, Françoise David – whose QS is a sovereigntist party – accused Marois of not being in a hurry enough about holding a third sovereignty referendum. In a similar spirit, former PQ leader and Premier Jacques Parizeau decided not to support his old party, but to support Aussant's Option Nationale instead, because that new party put sovereignty at the very top of its priority list, contrary to the PQ.

The above observations serve to illustrate two things. First, the issue of sovereignty became more salient in the second half of the campaign, after the leaders' debates. This was partly due to the fact that the PQ was shown to have the lead

in all vote intention polls, and so was increasingly becoming under attack from all sides and not just from Jean Charest's Liberals. Second, and related, Pauline Marois almost entirely sidelined the sovereignty issue in her campaign message but was nonetheless forced to address it. Her policy priorities were defined as left-leaning and nationalist, and included the significant increase of mining royalties and income taxes for the richest strata of society, important revisions to Quebec's French language legislation (Bill 101), as well as the repatriation of legislative powers from Ottawa. But Marois' most salient promises were those involving the abolition of some of the Liberals' most controversial policy decisions: tuition fee hikes, Bill 78, and the \$200 annual health tax. Nonetheless, sensing that she may be losing some support amongst her traditional sovereigntist constituency, Marois felt that she had to cry out to them, saying "Lâchez-moi pas!" ("Don't let me down!") during an end-of-campaign sovereigntist rally.

Although the student unions had decided the week before to temporarily suspend their strike and resume the school year following Bill 78's provisions, on August 22nd a huge protest march was organized in the streets of Montreal to show that the student mobilization was still present and strong. Poll data released on August 28th still placed the PQ first with 33% of voting intentions, but now followed by the CAQ at 28% and the Liberals at 26%, thus suggesting that the CAQ could potentially form the next official opposition. During the campaign, the CAQ leader concentrated his message on policy measures that some might qualify as populist: cutting income tax, offering a family doctor to each citizen of the province, making room for the private sector in the health care system, reducing public expenses, and insinuating that some interest

groups (like unions) have too much power in public decision-making in Quebec. Also, in an attempt to lure the federalist (and especially Anglophone) vote, François Legault declared that he would vote NO if there were a new referendum on sovereignty, a statement that was consistent with his campaign message about the need for Quebecers to focus on more pressing concerns than political independence.

On August 31st, other poll results confirmed the PQ's meagre advance but also indicated that one fifth of voters were still undecided only three days away from the vote. The three main issues that the media were covering the most near the end of the campaign were the student crisis and sovereignty – two polarizing issues – as well as Quebec's economy (Lawlor and Bastien 2013).

The Outcome and Its Aftermath

On the night of Tuesday, September 4th, the Charest government was defeated by just a few seats. Indeed, Pauline Marois' PQ was elected as a minority government.⁴ Not even one percent of votes separated the popular support for the two main parties: the PQ received 32.0% of the vote and elected 54 candidates while the LPQ received 31.2% of the vote and managed to elect 50 candidates. However, Jean Charest was defeated in his own riding by the PQ candidate with a 7-point advance. As for the CAQ, it received 27.1% of the vote and elected 19 candidates, indicating that its support was dispersed across the province.

⁴ We should note a deplorable event that happened that night, right after the announcement of the official election results: an assassination attempt was made on Pauline Marois at the location where PQ supporters gathered to celebrate (Montreal's Métropolis theater). Marois was safe but one man unfortunately died. At the time of writing, the perpetrator Richard Henry Bain is facing 16 charges.

QS found reasons to celebrate as it watched Amir Khadir, its first elected MNA from 2008, keeping his seat in the riding of Mercier, and a second MNA elected under the QS banner, Françoise David in the riding of Gouin. As mentioned in the campaign section, her performance at the leaders' debate gave her visibility and increased public support. The party nonetheless received only 6% of the total vote share, although many ridings in the Montreal area were tight races between QS and the PQ. Option Nationale did not elect any of its candidates; even its leader Jean-Martin Aussant was defeated by a CAQ candidate in the riding of Nicolet-Bécancour. Aussant resigned from ON's leadership (officially for family reasons) in June 2013, leaving that party's future uncertain.

Considering the political context in which the election campaign was held, we may have expected turnout to be higher than the actual 74.6%. More Quebecers went to the voting booths in 2012 than in 2008, where the turnout rate was of 57.3% (the lowest rate in Quebec's history), but it is not an extraordinary increase if we compare to the 71.2% rate registered in 2007. In that sense, the 2012 election did not really differ from the overall negative trend in electoral participation observed in most democracies in the last decades; and even though the election addressed some issues that were particularly salient for the youth, their participation did not increase by much (Blais et al. 2013).

The election of a minority government surprised no one. The real shock was probably the relative success of the Liberal Party. All surveys from the different polling firms underestimated the Liberal vote. The phenomenon occurred in the subsequent 2013 British Columbia election – although in Quebec, pollsters at least predicted the right winner. Polls

Table 1. Quebec Provincial Election Results

	2008		2012	
	Seats (#)	Popular vote (%)	Seats (#)	Popular vote (%)
Parti Libéral du Québec	66	42.1	50	31.2
Parti Québécois	51	35.2	54	32.0
Coalition Avenir Québec (ADQ in 2008)	7	16.4	19	27.1
Québec Solidaire	1	3.8	2	6.0
Parti Vert Quebec	0	2.2	0	1.0
Option Nationale	-	-	0	1.9

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

specialist Claire Durand offers an interesting explanation of this (Durand 2013). According to her, at least two factors were particularly at play in this election. First, she suggests that when the public debate is highly polarized between “right” and “wrong” camps, as it was in 2012, then supporters of the “wrong” camp (the Liberal Party in this case) become much less inclined to declare their vote intention to pollsters or to answer surveys, which would thus create a spiral of silence. Second, she claims that the underrepresentation of certain socio-demographic groups in Quebec poll samples, most notably the non-Francophones, also explains flaws in vote predictions.

How should the fact that Quebec voters elected a party advocating the achievement of sovereignty be interpreted? The election of a PQ government is not necessarily synonymous with higher levels of popular support for Quebec sovereignty. One can first note that the PQ’s vote share has slowly been declining since the time of the last referendum, from 45% in the 1994 provincial election to 32% in 2012. In addition, in 2012, “campaign polls released by CROP have actually shown a decline in sovereignty support during the campaign period, as the possibility of a PQ victory

became more and more real. At the start of the campaign, support for sovereignty stood at 36%, only slightly lower than in the years before. Three weeks later, it had decreased to 28%.” (Bélanger and Chhim 2012). Sovereignty does not appear to be the most salient issue anymore in Quebec, and the population seems to prefer to solve other societal problems before debating the constitutional future of their province again. This interpretation seems to hold as well for explaining the Bloc defections in the last federal election (Nadeau and Bélanger 2011). The PQ vote in 2012 was more an anti-Charest vote than a pro-sovereignty one. Thus, the PQ’s victory appears to be due more to short-term factors than to strong and profound nationalist feelings (Nadeau and Bélanger 2013).

The day after the election, Jean Charest resigned from his position as leader of the Liberal Party of Quebec despite the surprisingly good results his party had just had. (For this reason, it is likely that Charest would not have stepped down right away if he had held his own seat.) Three candidates competed for the Liberal leadership: Philippe Couillard, former Health Care Minister; Raymond Bachand, former Finance and Revenue Minister; and Pierre Moreau, former Transport Minister.

Couillard was selected as new Liberal leader in March 2013, with 58.5% of the first-round vote in a delegates' convention. CROP survey data showed that at the beginning of March, the LPQ was leading the polls with 31%, but in April they were leading at 38% while the PQ was continuing its descent at 25% of vote intentions (Corbeil 2013). It is certainly too soon to conclude that the Liberal brand has regained all of its lustre, but at least the prospects for the LPQ do not look too dim for the next provincial election, which is likely to be called sooner rather than later given the PQ government's minority status.

Although the election outcome was a relative disappointment for François Legault, the CAQ leader has to be commended for bringing his brand new party very close to the ADQ's 2007 level of success. This suggests that the CAQ will be a force to reckon with in the next election. Even if the party currently is down in the polls and thus may not want another election right away, the CAQ's 2012 voter base appears to be slightly more homogeneous ideologically – at least on the left-right dimension – than the former ADQ base (Nadeau and Bélanger 2013), which suggests that the CAQ occupies a more stable niche in the party system than the ADQ did, and that it may be easier to keep the CAQ's supporters mobilized in the near future than it was for Mario Dumont.

In June 2013, Premier Marois provided a personal assessment of the first ten months of her government. Some electoral promises have been fulfilled. Among others, we note the cancellation of the tuition fee hikes and the organisation of a summit on postsecondary education, the shutting down of nuclear power plant Gentilly-2, the adoption of a moratorium on shale gas, the adoption of a bill restricting party financing by citizens and of another one about the integrity of public contracts.

But many controversial decisions have also been made and criticized. For instance, one can think of major cuts in the funding for public day care centres, far-reaching revisions to Bill 101 that had to be considerably toned down, the addition of conditions for obtaining social aid, and the non-abolition of the health tax. Many tough decisions came in an austerity budget introduced early when the Liberals were still leaderless and thus let pass. All in all, a year on, the Marois government's record appears rather mixed, although it has certainly accomplished more than less considering its minority situation. One factor that may matter in the next election campaign, whenever it is called, are the new electoral laws of popular party financing which now limit individual contributions to a maximum of 100\$ per party per year (while firms and organizations remain forbidden to donate to parties). The new measures are more constraining since they require more efforts on the part of parties to replenish their coffers. Whether these provisions will help regain Quebecers' confidence in their democratic institutions after the debates and events of the past couple of years remains to be seen.

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