

Why is the Right Winning in North America? Comparisons and Mutual Influences in Canada, Mexico and the United States

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In 2007, parties that can be broadly identified with right-wing ideologies are governing all over North America. They have been in power since December 2000 in Mexico, January 2001 in the United States, and in Canada since January 2006.

Why are conservative parties increasingly winning elections and forming governments throughout the continent? Why in contrast is left seems to be making only small progress, if not regressing, in Mexico; even though it has enjoyed increasing success in other parts of Latin America? Why the Conservative Party, considered not long ago as too far off the right to appeal to average Canadians, was eventually able to form a government? Why is it that, despite all the criticism and controversy resulting from the 2000 elections and the war in Iraq, the Republican Party was able to make its presidential candidate reelected in 2004?

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I will argue that prevalence of the right cannot be explained neither by its intrinsic programmatic superiority, nor in reference to an abstract ideological environment after the Cold War. Building on work previously published,¹ I will further argue that this prevalence results from the combination of five interrelated factors: 1) the efficient use of marketing techniques to convey a message appealing to voters' individualism and fear, 2) resort to populism as a rhetorical tool, 3) support from a coalition of non-partisan political actors that provide funds and legitimacy, 4) trans-border solidarity among specific actors in North American conservative coalitions, 5) the growing employment of professional political consultancy and public relations firms based in the United States.

In this presentation, after concepts are defined and some indications about the way the right engages in political campaigning are provided, evidence is offered on how domestic and transnational conservative support networks are structured. Some of their most salient recent activities are also discussed.

Background definitions

Although in many respects they are very different from each other, the current partisan standard bearers of conservatism in North America – the National Action Party (PAN) in Mexico, the Republican Party in the United States, and the Conservative Party in Canada– share some basic features. They have in common an ideology strongly congenial with neo-liberal capitalism. Therefore, they stress strong individualism over social solidarity; value security, law and order over freedom; and defend the primacy of the market over the state; all of which translates

¹ Julián Castro-Rea, "Assessing North American Politics after September 11. An Overview of Impacts on Continental Security, Democracy, and Sovereignty".

in distrust of the state intervention in the economy and rejection of the Welfare State. They are also socially conservative, to varying degrees, holding values such as the practice of religion in public life, putting morality at the top of the public agendas, defence of the traditional nuclear family as the basic cell of society, opposition to abortion and same-sex relationships, etc.

This pro-market ideology promotes public policies that are arguably not in the best interest of the majorities. Moreover, quite often these neo-liberal policies are carried out under a veil of secrecy in which political strategies are masked by misleading public statements, media controls, bait-and-switch tactics, etc. Equally, values defended and promoted by conservative parties are not representative of the way majorities think in either North American state. This is reflected in the last country-wide election results. In Mexico, according to official figures only 35.89% of voters opted for PAN in the July 2006 presidential elections, 35.31% chose leftist PRD candidate.² Only 36.26% of valid votes went for the Conservative Party of Canada in January 2006.³ The United States seems to be an exception, as Republican presidential candidate obtained a slim majority of 50.73% of the popular vote. However, with a turnout of barely 56.2% of voting age population in that country, it is reasonable to question whether in fact most US citizens prefer the Republicans.⁴

² Mexico's Instituto Federal Electoral website, http://www.ife.org.mx/documentos/Estadisticas2006/presidente/gra_nac.html, accessed Sep. 28, 2007.

³ Official results from Elections Canada website <http://www.elections.ca/scripts/OVR2006/default.html>, accessed Sep. 28, 2007. Thomas Flanagan, strategist for the 2006 Conservative campaign, concedes that "Canada is not yet conservative or Conservative country; neither the philosophy of conservatism nor the party brand comes close to commanding majority support". See his *Harper's Team. Behind the Scenes in the Conservative Rise to Power*, 2007.

⁴ Data obtained from <http://www.uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/national.php?year=2004&f=0&off=0> website, accessed Sep. 28, 2007.

Therefore, the reason for conservative success is not the immediate translation of citizen choices, interests and values into political institutions and policies. An explanation must be found elsewhere.

Admittedly, conservative prevalence is partly explained by institutional deficiencies. In Mexico, illegal intervention of the federal government, not effectively stopped by electoral authorities, and weak legislation and enforcement of third-party campaign contributions are among the series of deficiencies that plagued the 2006 elections and favoured the conservative victory. In Canada, the first-past-the-post electoral system and Westminster parliamentary rules allowed the conservatives to form the government without an absolute majority in the House of Commons and even without support from a majority of voters. In the United States, an electoral system that distorts the expression of popular preferences, concentration of vote for the left in large urban centres⁵ and intervention of the Supreme Court in support of the *status quo* also favoured the conservative alternative. Declining voter turnout in the three countries is also a factor, as marginalized populations did not express their choices at the ballot.

However, institutional deficiencies, although important, are not enough to explain conservative success. These parties still received a solid share of the vote, arguably freely expressed by cross-cutting demographic and regional categories of voters. Our analysis focuses on this voluntary support, and how to make sense of it.

In popular discourse, the left is often accused of being “a bunch of losers”; systematically missing opportunities at being elected. While this judgment is certainly harsh and subjective, it has an element of truth, as the left is often amateurish when campaigning, practises out-

⁵Jonathan Rodden, “Political Geography and Electoral Rules: Why Single-Member Districts are Bad for the Left”, 2007. Rodden shows that concentration of the left vote, thus leading to waste of support, occurs in most industrial countries with no PR system.

dated strategies to reach potential voters and mostly relies on voluntary work. On the discursive front, the left aims at building its strength from appeals to people's sense of solidarity and righteousness.

The right, in contrast, tends to be increasingly professional about political competition. Its political activities are usually goal-oriented, organized as a business, incorporating the tools of business management. Transferring the logic of market competition to politics, conservatives use public opinion polls to identify "hot button" current issues that may make them gain public support. Moreover, they tend to be ruthless when campaigning, never hesitating to engage in negative advertising if that increases the chances to defeat the adversaries. Discursively, the right appeals to voters offering individualized, selective incentives. Through emotionally loaded messages, it attempts to build on people's individualism, utilitarianism (even selfishness and greed), parochialism, and religious prejudices to invite voters to defend their assets and relative privileges. The combination of all these elements is what Gonzales and Delgado have labelled "the politics of fear".⁶

The Republican Party created and improved over time a set of strategies to counter and roll back as much as possible the impacts of the civil liberties movement of the 1960s. These strategies brought Ronald Reagan to the presidency, and were also behind the triumphs of George Bush Sr. and Jr. The politics of fear was first practised by political strategist Lee Atwater, who was behind George Bush Sr. electoral victory in 1988. Atwater was mentor to Mary Matalin and Karl Rove, key political advisors to George Bush Jr. The politics of fear sees political competition as a war of ideas, where opponents are to be destroyed to guarantee a successful outcome. It builds on the following elements:

⁶ Manuel Gonzales and Richard Delgado, *The Politics of Fear. How Republicans Use Money, Race and the Media to Win*, 2006.

- a) Use of celebrities to endorse the conservative message, when not marketing celebrities themselves as politicians.
- b) Negative campaigning, building on deceit and manipulation.
- c) Populism, portraying conservatives as “just plain folks”, similar to all voters, accusing their opponents to be elitist ideologues, disconnected from the views and needs of real people (this element will be further discussed in the coming pages of this text).
- d) Political apathy among the most alienated sectors of society, especially the youth, working poor and racial minorities.
- e) Recruitment of political support among corporate employees, making clear to them that their jobs and relative privileges may be at stake,
- f) Stirring moral values, fear and other emotions in people’s minds. Religion and fear that haunts US society –to unemployment, to the unknown, to outsiders and, more recently, to terrorism– become tools to manipulate voters and get their support.
- g) Racism and rejection of immigrants, as a way to appeal the vote of poor or middle-class white citizens.⁷

Conservative parties in Canada and Mexico have taken cues from this aggressive campaigning style. They did so following a general trend existing in Canada and Mexico to emulate their neighbour’s fashions and practices, to validate domestic achievements with reference to the common neighbour’s standards. The trend is especially strong among market conservatives, who admire economic achievements of the United States and wish to reproduce practices and institutions in that country convinced they will lead to a similar economic success.

The most conspicuous influence can be seen in the use of negative campaigning to discredit their adversaries. For this strategy, it is irrelevant

⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 73-98.

whether or not the content of the messages used to attack adversaries are accurate, grounded or even true. Even if accusations turn out to be false, the strategy counts on the impact falsehood creates, planting doubts in the minds of the voters about the adequacy of non-conservative candidates to hold office. This practice is clearly illustrated in the smear campaigns aimed at president Clinton while in office, in which prosecutor Kenneth Starr played a central role;⁸ and the focus of constant conservative attacks with regards to corruption. These doubts can be decisive at the moment of marking a ballot.

Tom Flanagan, American Conservative strategist in Canada's 2006 elections, directly advises his party's candidates to be tough with their opponents: "We cannot win by being Boy Scouts. We have to [...] run hard-hitting, fact based negative ads; and do whatever is legally possible to jam our opponents' communications [...] Political campaigning is a civilized form of civil war. The point is to win the war [...]".⁹

In Mexico, negative campaigning consisted in portraying the conservative candidate's main challenger as a threat to democracy. He was accused of being a messianic, authoritarian leader, disrespectful of the state's institutions and prone to demagoguery and resort to violent means to achieve his political goals. In particular, he was falsely linked to Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez, with whom the leftist candidate was allegedly plotting to make Mexico join an international coalition along with Fidel Castro, Bolivia's Evo Morales and Colombia guerrillas FARC.¹⁰

Political commentary in Canada and Mexico has recently complained about the lack of civility political campaigns have reached. If we look

⁸As shown in the documentary *The Hunting of the President*, directed by Harry Thomason and Nickolas Perry, 2004.

⁹Thomas Flanagan, *op. cit.*, pp. 285-286.

¹⁰Arreola, Federico, *Las razones del descontento*, 2007, pp. 186-203.

at the origin of this style, we will realize conservative campaigning in these countries is only adopting US standards, adjusting its practices to what is “normal”, “politics as usual” in that country for the last thirty years. This is thus the real kind of democracy the United States is exporting to its North American neighbours and to the rest of the world.¹¹

Consistent with aggressive campaigning, the right also accuses the left of being “populist”; meaning that it is non-pragmatic, economically inefficient, preferring to yield to popular pressure rather than operating under the discipline of neo-liberal economics and the realities of globalization. This is particularly true in Mexico, where the left makes use of discursive and policy elements reminiscent of past Latin American regimes usually identified with that label.¹² However, employing this adjective only with reference to the left hinges upon a narrow definition of populism; when in fact a more comprehensive definition will show that the right is also populist.

In a broader sense, populism is a political syndrome that “...positions the ‘common sense’ of ‘common people’ against the corruption and abuse of the elite. Populists want to regulate societal life according to the ‘will of the people’ and reject intermediary institutions that direct the direct influence of that will”.¹³ From that perspective, right-wing parties can also be populist, whenever they make use of the specific discursive and policy strategies just mentioned. Paradoxically, despite the bad press they have given to the term, all three major conservative

¹¹ As illustrated in the documentary *Our Brand Is Crisis*, directed by Rachel Boynton, 2005.

¹² See for instance Larry Birns and Nicholas Birns, “Hemispheric Echoes: The Reverberations of Latin American Populism”, spring 2007. See also Arreola, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

¹³ Anton Derks, “Populism and the Ambivalence of Egalitarianism. How Do the Underprivileged Reconcile a Right Wing Party Preference with their Socio-Economic Attitudes?”, 2006, pp. 175-200.

parties in North America have in fact made and still make intensive use of populism as a political strategy.

The special brand of anti-elitism contemporary conservatives resort to is “market populism”. Thomas Frank convincingly shows how this syndrome, blending anti-elitism with neo-liberalism to claim that unbridled markets are the best guarantee for full and true democracy, became the central element of a new consensus developed in the United States during the 1990s.¹⁴ The right’s version of populism in the United States has developed an almost subliminal mass-appeal, it can be properly called hegemonic in the Gramscian sense of the concept.

This consensus has also influenced public discourse in Canada and Mexico and is now part of these countries’ political landscape, readily employed by conservative candidates. In Mexico, a case in point is how Fox and Calderón, when campaigning as PAN candidates in 2000 and 2006, insisted on micro-enterprises as a strategy of self-employment and fight against poverty. While loyal to the market credo, this strategy ignores the real constraints micro-business faces in an environment of fierce competition, controlled by a limited number of powerful players, which is the reality of Mexican domestic markets. Worse still, micro-enterprises tend to hinge upon the informal economy if they are to have any success, thus creating sub-employment and making Mexico’s economic situation even more complex. All in all then, this strategy is only populist electoral posturing, which in reality has delivered meagre results.

In Canada, market populism has been manifest in tax cuts and refunds recently implemented by the Conservative government. Cuts and refunds are useful to portray the Conservative government as being on the side of common citizens and workers, by giving them back

¹⁴ Frank, Thomas, *One Market under God. Extreme Capitalism, Market Populism, and the End of Economic Democracy*, 2000.

their hard-earned dollars.¹⁵ In fact, however, because of their small size tax cuts and refunds represent only marginal contributions to household economies. The real, substantial tax cuts and breaks are increasingly granted to corporations, not to working individuals.

Domestic conservative coalitions

Parties are not alone in the right side of the North American political spectrum. Political actors such as major business groups, major media outlets and some of the people who provide their contents, non-governmental organisations (including Churches, foundations, charities, advocacy groups) and members of academia, associated either with universities, research institutes and think tanks; can also be identified with this political option. Largely supporting the parties congenial with their political affiliation, these actors have created a complex network that materially supports conservative parties and candidates, spreads the values associated with conservatism and enhances their overall societal legitimacy.

These support networks make the political playing field strongly biased in favour of the right and against the left. In other words, conservative parties have better chances to prevail because they are on the privileged side of a very unfair distribution of material, influence and prestige resources.

In the Canadian context, a good case in point is the Fraser Institute, a true hub of conservative influence and relations. Created in 1974, this *think-tank* boasts about being the most cited source of expertise in main-

¹⁵This tactic has been explicitly recommended to Canadian Conservatives by US political strategists, see below under the "Conservatism across Borders" subtitle, section 6.

stream media, on practically every conceivable public policy topic, spanning from fiscal policy to education, from energy and climate change to healthcare. Because of that, the Institute's claim of having "...changed the way people think about government and the role of markets" is probably not an exaggeration. The Institute presents itself as independent, scientific, concerned about finding innovative solutions and "...raising the level of understanding about economic and social policy". Yet, it receives its funds—for total gross revenue of close to \$ 11 million Canadian dollars in 1996— from private donors, 88% of whom are either corporations or private foundations.¹⁶ Among the latter is the Donner Foundation, known as "paymaster of the right" for its generous contributions to conservative organizations. Given the origin of its funding, the Institute has been frequently accused of manipulating its data and research to support policies typically associated with a conservative agenda.

The Institute's staff overlaps with conservative organizations such as the National Citizens Coalition and the Milton and Rose Friedman Foundation in the US; which underscore the Institute's close links to US conservative organizations. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the Institute adopts and actually defends conservative points of view. In fact, they declare their work is inspired on Milton Friedman's vision of government and the market. Its founding executive director for 31 years, Michael Walker, saw the Institute's task as a crusade to downsize government through privatization and deregulation, away from "... the dark ages of the 1970s".¹⁷

The Institute also claims to be non-partisan. However, it has close relations with conservative parties and organizations. Its executive

¹⁶ Quotes and data obtained from The Fraser Institute website http://www.fraserinstitute.ca/pdf/annualreports/2006_Annual_Report.pdf, accessed Sep. 10, 2007.

¹⁷ Maria Anastasia O'Grady, , "The Man Who Created a Scorecard on Ottawa", 2005, p. A11.

director, Mark Mullins, acted as advisor on economic and fiscal matters for the Conservative Party and its predecessors, the Progressive Conservative and the Alliance parties. The Institute's senior fellows include retired conservative politicians such as Michael Harris, Ralph Klein and Preston Manning. Its board of trustees is packed with CEOs from corporations across the US and Canada, from the financial, forestry, retail, energy, transportation, media, pharmaceutical, tobacco sectors. These corporations conceivably provide a good chunk of the Institute's budget, a presumption that we have to make because the otherwise very detailed Institute's website does not disclose the name of its funding organizations. Well-known conservative academics are also either senior fellows or board members, among them Barry Cooper, Tom Flanagan, Rainer Knopff, Thomas Courchene, and Jack Granatstein.¹⁸ The first three are members of the informal "Calgary School", a group of professors who have supported the Conservative Party and its leader Stephen Harper with platform ideas and specific policy advice.¹⁹ Before entering into partisan politics, Mr. Harper was in fact president of the National Citizens Coalition, a sister organization of the Institute.

Indeed, the Institute is "...quite possibly, Canada's pre-eminent architect of right-wing, free market social and economic policy"²⁰ Ironically, such influential institution is registered as a "charitable organization", thus not paying taxes and even issuing receipts that allow its generous corporate donors to exempt their contributions from any taxation. In this, the Fraser Institute is not alone, as other right-wing groups are also registered as charitable organizations, which encourages private donations.

¹⁸ Friedrich Hayek himself was one of the Institute's founding board members.

¹⁹ See Frédéric Boily (ed.), *Stephen Harper. De l'École de Calgary au Parti Conservateur*, 2007.

²⁰ Kim Goldberg, "Who's Who at Fraser Institute", 1997, p. 27.

The transnational right

Although the political environment in which the right prospers in each country is unique, conservative parties and their support coalitions do not operate in isolation, protected from international influence. On the contrary, there are increasing links and mutual support actions among right wing coalitions across North America.

I introduced elsewhere²¹ the concept of “transnational right”, understood as a loose alliance, neither formal nor always visible, of conservative parties, conservative wings within more moderate political organizations, non-governmental organizations, think tanks, writers and intellectuals, interest groups, business organizations, government agencies and bureaucracies active in law enforcement, surveillance and defence; both public and private. In other words, a transnational network including social groups and diverse political actors whose common feature is being “advocates of neo-liberalism”,²² who directly benefit from the consolidation of the economic and political status quo and who have therefore a vested interest in preserving it and limiting possibilities for change.

To be sure, this transnational right is not always consistent and self-conscious. Borrowing from the classical Hegelian differentiation, this alliance is mostly a coalition *by* itself rather than *for* itself. However, awareness of commonality of purpose among its members and the advantages of supporting each other increase dramatically at critical junctures, when preservation of the conservative and neo-liberal status quo is at stake.

²¹ See Julián Castro-Rea, *op. cit.*

²² Jeffrey Ayres and Sidney Tarrow, “The Shifting Grounds for Transnational Civic Activity” from website *Social Science Research Council* / After Sept. 11, <http://www.ssrc.org/sept11/essays/>; p. 1

The transnational right did not appear overnight, nor is the result of an explicit, conscious and concerted effort. It rather draws its strength from existing domestic interest groups with their own agendas, which over time converged over their goals, and eventually realized the advantages of working together across borders. Their activity either supported or was supported by partisan politics. In association with successful right wing, conservative parties they made their way to the centres of political decision in North America.

As in everything else occurring in the continent, in regards to conservative politics the United States exerts a powerful influence over its two continental neighbours. Influence is also expressly sought by individual actors involved in conservative Canadian and Mexican coalitions; either through the media, personal contacts and exchanges, sharing of political experiences and strategies, funding, etc. Of course, conservatism in Mexico and Canada does not result from US influence, it rather has its own pedigree, domestic determinants and features. Nonetheless, conservative coalitions are strongly encouraged and receive a significant boost by the activism of concrete US conservative political actors.

In part, this political influence results from economic convergence. NAFTA largely integrated North American networks of production, investment, and distribution. As a result, the political interests of North America's entrepreneurial class, especially the largest corporations with intensive exports to the region, are now broadly the same. They have thus incentives to cooperate in common endeavours and to support political alternatives compatible with their interests.

Increased business co-operation has also carried consequences over numerous domains of public life beyond the economy. The logic of economic integration, defined in neo-liberal terms and priorities, has framed and influenced the direction of these changes.

Conservatism across borders: selected cases

Some conservative actors in North America have engaged in explicit, direct cross-border solidarity; providing the backbone of mutual support among conservative movements, parties and governments throughout the continent. These activities have largely gone unrecorded by most political analysts and randomly reported by mainstream media.

These activities mostly affect Mexico and Canada, more vulnerable to US influence than the opposite. Because documenting the whole breadth of conservative cross-border solidarity in North America would be impossible within the limits of this paper, below I outline eight selected cases only, as merely an indication of the kind of cross-border, co-operative activities the right benefits from:

1) The election of PAN's candidate Felipe Calderón as president of Mexico in 2006 was marred in controversy. As a result, several chiefs of state and government around the world declined to be present at Calderón's swear-in ceremony in December that year. Among the few dignitaries who did attend were Canada's conservative prime minister Stephen Harper's and George Bush Sr. Bush played a crucial role in making the ceremony possible, as he knowingly distracted the attention of disgruntled congress members and the media to allow Calderón enter the legislative building and quickly proceed to a hasty installation.

2) The main strategist for the last three months of Calderón's campaign was Dick Morris, William Clinton's main strategist for his re-election campaign in 1996. Morris is also a well-known conservative author and political consultant in the United States, featuring a regular column in *The New York Post*.²³ He is credited with having orches-

²³ See his personal website <http://www.dickmorris.com/blog/> On July 11, 2006 he wrote the column "Mexico Stops the Chávez Left", where he extols Calderón's victory as the example to follow by the rest of Latin America.

trated the negative campaigning against Calderón's main opponent, moderate-left candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador. Mexico's electoral law forbids negative campaigning, yet in 2006 the elections agency surprisingly permitted it to occur.

The narrow victory claimed by Calderón was and still is actively contested by several million people, it has polarized Mexico's electorate and struck a severe blow to the legitimacy of its young democratic institutions. We are therefore before a paradox: although ideologically committed to helping consolidate democracy abroad, US influence ended up sabotaging the nascent Mexican democracy, when "the politics of fear" conservatives commonly practice in the US was implemented in Mexico.

3) One of the key supporters of Calderón's campaign was Roberto Hernández, chairman of Mexican major bank Banamex. Hernández was also this bank's majority shareholder before it was acquired by Citibank in 2001, a \$12.5 billion USD operation that became the largest US-Mexico corporate merger ever.

Hernández had several billion specific reasons to support Calderón. In the past, he had benefited from exceptional government largesse. In 1995, Banamex received a \$3 billion USD Mexican government bailout to cover overdue debts. Thanks to this unpaid emergency bailout, Hernández was able to sell a debt-free, financially sound Banamex, and pocket \$6 billion USD in the process.²⁴ Incredibly, the PAN-led government exempted this multi-billion transaction from any kind of taxation; by allowing it to be handled through Mexico City's Stock Exchange even if Citigroup did not trade there. The transaction would otherwise have had to pay \$3 billion USD in taxes. López Obrador, Calderón's main opponent in his bid for the presidency, had

²⁴ Julia Reynolds, "When Prohibition Meets Free Trade", 2001.

promised to review both the bailout and the merger operations, and collect due loans, taxes and interests.²⁵

From Hernández's perspective, Calderón's victory was crucial to avoid being held accountable from past dubious business operations in complicity with the federal government. Many supporters of the conservative candidate did so for the same reasons.

Hernández could count on support from his associates in the United States. Also sitting in Citibank's board of directors is Robert Rubin, former Secretary of the Treasury. In early 1995, Rubin had brokered the \$20 billion USD bailout that helped the government of Mexico meet its short-term commitments during the financial crisis that shook that country. Rubin had also headed the financial brokerage firm Goldman Sachs, which helped Hernández through the merger.

Citibank has a long story of "... custodian of the Mexican elite's sometimes dubious riches".²⁶ This has on occasion put the US bank in trouble, as when it was involved in a money-laundering investigation when Raúl Salinas, the president's brother, moved over \$100 million USD out of Mexico through Citibank. This bank has usually supported Mexico's government search for fresh funds in times of crisis.

4) Altria Group Inc., parent company of well-known brands such as Philip Morris (producer of Marlboro and Benson & Hedges cigarettes) and Kraft Foods, provides another case of transnational corporate-conservative cooperation. It is documented Philip Morris has supported George W. Bush political campaigns ever since he was governor of Texas. This tobacco company provided a significant contribution to his \$60 million USD budget for the 2000 presidential campaign. From 1991 to 1999 alone, the tobacco industry contributed

²⁵ Andrés Manuel López Obrador, *La mafia nos robó la presidencia*, 2007, pp. 197-201.

²⁶ Peter Fritsch, "Going South: How Citibank's Deal to Buy Mexican Bank Turned into a Standoff".

with over \$15.5 million USD to the Republican party. The link was made by Haley Barbour, lobbyist for the tobacco company, and Karl Rove, Bush's senior advisor, who was also employed by Philip Morris from 1991 to 1996.²⁷

Mexican magnate Carlos Slim was a Philip Morris shareholder and one of its directors since 1997. In January 2000, Slim purchased \$90 million USD in additional stock from that company.²⁸ Until July 2007, Grupo Carso, owned by Slim, owned 50% of shares at Philip Morris International. Carso still retains 20% of PMI shares and Slim sits in that company's board of directors.²⁹

5) In Canada, the election of a conservative minority government in January 2006 meant that US-style conservatism is gaining a foothold north of its country of origin. The Conservative Party of Canada brought to power is qualitatively different from the old Progressive Conservatives; reproducing the main themes held by the Republican party, adapted to the Canadian context.³⁰

The conservative victory benefited from activism of conservative Christian evangelists at the grassroots level, eager to bring Stephen Harper to power because he is one of them. Canadian conservatives also made use of populism, partly inspired on two of the parties that preceded them (Reform and the Canadian Alliance), partly importing market populism from the South. Canadian conservatives have also adopted other Republican tactics, such as relentlessly accusing the opposition of political corruption and hijacking publicly popular aspects of the opposition's agenda.

²⁷ Robert Dreyfuss, "George W. Bush: Calling for Philip Morris", 1999, pp. 11-16.

²⁸ "Mexican Buys Stake in Philip Morris".

²⁹ http://www.altria.com/media/press_release/03_02_pr_2007_07_18_01.asp, accessed August 15, 2007.

³⁰ Julián Castro-Rea, "El conservadurismo político en Canadá: orígenes y manifestaciones contemporáneas", 1999.

6) The Conservative minority government is toning down the more extreme conservative components in its program, cautiously working its way toward getting a majority in the near future, at which time those components would likely be brought forward. In order to achieve that objective, they are taking more clues from their supporters in the United States.

In early May 2006, the *Montreal Gazette* reported about a meeting of the Civitas Society, which gathered over 200 of its members in Kanata, a small town in the Ottawa region.³¹ The Civitas Society is a low-key, yet influential, Conservative group, with close ties to Stephen Harper, Canada's Prime Minister. In its last annual report, the Society listed Ian Brodie, Harper's chief of staff, as one of its directors.³² Mr. Brodie attended the group's conference. Tom Flanagan, Harper's campaign manager for the Conservative Party leadership, is a founder of the group and was also there.

Frank Luntz was one of the key note speakers at the event. Mr. Luntz's company website describes him as the pollster of record for the Republican's "Contract with America" and credits him as being one of the key engineers of the 1984 Republican landslide. One of his strengths is in counseling politicians on how to sell their message to voters.

During his speech, titled "Massaging the Conservative Message for Voters," Luntz drew a communications roadmap to bring the Conservatives to a majority government –a roadmap that Harper's government already appears to be following in several respects.

Speaking a day after meeting with Harper, Frank Luntz described the Conservatives as allies of the Republicans and urged them to discredit the Liberals so thoroughly that it will be years before they make it back into power.

³¹ Elizabeth Thompson, "Kick the Liberals as They're Down", 2006.

³² See <http://www.civitasociety.ca/public/>, accessed September 26 2007.

“I want you to do something for me because I know you might be able to make this happen”, Mr. Luntz said. “Your Liberal government was corrupt. It was disgusting. The way they wasted your hard-earned tax dollars was a disgrace. Focus on accountability and tax relief”, said Mr. Luntz. According to him, one of the reasons the Progressive Conservative government was decimated in 1993 was because they had strayed from important Conservative principles such as lower taxes. Much of that lies in personalizing the message for voters and the choice of words the party uses to describe what it wants to do, Luntz added. If the Conservatives want to overhaul the tax code, they should first convince Canadians that the current tax code is unfair, he counseled. Focus on the length of it, its complexity and how expensive it is to administer.

Mr. Luntz also described how George W. Bush’s Republicans have been successful by tapping into “exurbia,” the communities that ring the suburbs in large urban centres. Outer suburbs such as Toronto’s 905 area code are also a demographic that Mr. Harper’s Conservatives aimed for in the last federal election.

Mr. Luntz hinted at a division between economic conservatives and social conservatives in the Conservative party, urging them to set aside their differences and work together. “We are all one family”.

7) The minority government has also altered the ideological and policy-making landscape in Canada. New advocacy groups, NGOs, and think tanks have sprouted in Ottawa and elsewhere through the country; following closely on the steps of similar groups existing in the US, when they are not simply their branches.

A good example of these organizations is Focus on the Family Canada (<http://www.fotf.ca/>). Founded in 1983 as a charitable Christian organization, it opened for the first time a permanent office in Ottawa. Its headquarters is located in Langley, British Columbia, which is also a stronghold of conservative support. They are the Canadian version

of a much larger parent organization in the US. Although more limited in scope, FOTFC still managed a budget of close to \$10 million CAD in 2006,³³ receiving \$1.6 million USD from the parent organization from 2000 to 2003. Also, at least two among its board members are also vice-presidents in the US organization. Many Conservative MPs or candidates are members of FOTFC: as of January 2006, over twenty of them were.³⁴

FOTFC declared goals are to promote traditional values of family and marriage throughout society, based on the Christian beliefs of its members, opposing abortion, homosexuality and same-sex unions, premarital sex and promoting child discipline through corporal punishment. FOTFC members believe it is the duty of every Christian to change laws and public institutions so they reflect biblical values. They wish the government to adopt those values (religious included), while “maintaining cultural equilibrium and providing a framework for social order”.³⁵ To this end, they constantly lobby Parliament, government officials and journalists. They also spread their message through the Christian multimedia network owned by James Dobson, head of the US parent organization, and through paid advertisement in 130 radio stations across Canada. Dobson also contributes to another conservative organization called Promise Keepers, who believes the Bible is literally truthful and flawless in everything it says.

Dobson is the mastermind behind the FOTF movement. He is involved in US politics, on the Republican side, since the Reagan administration, and is now deeply involved with the government of George W. Bush; closely connected to Bush’s senior advisor Karl Rove.

³³ Data from Canada Revenue Agency available at its website <http://www.cra-arc.gc.ca>, accessed Sep. 17, 2007. The parent organization manages a \$140 million USD budget.

³⁴ <http://dawn.thot.net/harperstiestousa/> website, accessed Sep.18, 2007.

³⁵ Focus on the Family website, accessed Sep. 17, 2007.

He also sits at the Council for National Policy, a selected group that gathers the most powerful US conservative individuals, including business persons and leaders of organizations such as the Christian Coalition of America, the John Birch Society and the National Rifle Association. The Council funds conservative movements in the US and Canada, and meets in private, with no media coverage.³⁶ Stephen Harper, Conservative leader and current Canada's prime minister, was asked to address that group in 1997.

A graphical representations of the connections existing between Canadian Conservative politicians and right-wing organizations both sides of the border is shown in chart 1, at the end of this paper.

8) Another similar group is My Canada (<http://4mycanada.ca/>), an evangelical Christian organization who targets specifically young adults with nationalist and religious messages. The nationalist component—*i.e.*, explicitly taking distance from similar US-based movements—is essential if any Canadian political organization is to claim any success. Equally important, openly right-wing organizations are cautious not to disclose their Conservative partisan linkages, because they know this may hurt the party's appeal among mainstream constituencies. Nonetheless, their links with US counterparts and the Conservative party herein discussed are real, as can be confirmed from numerous sources.³⁷

Conclusions

Some analysts concerned about the deteriorating social realities and negative trends prevailing in North America, including James Petras

³⁶ Manuel Gonzales and Richard Delgado, *op. cit.* pp. 131-132.

³⁷ Among them http://dawn.thot.net/harperstiestousa/american_right_report.pdf, "Conservative Party Links to Right Wing American Groups", accessed September 18, 2007.

in his chapter included in this volume, have sketched the progressive policies that would be necessary to transform those realities and revert those trends.³⁸ The analysis carried out in this paper shows that implementation of those policies faces a steep hurdle: the power and influence of right-wing organizations, heavily supported by social and economic structures and practices.

The evidence presented in this paper is merely an illustration of the extensive conservative networks active and steadily growing throughout North America. The observer only needs to pull a thread or scratch the surface to start uncovering a broad and intricate array of relations linking conservative parties to business, religious groups, civil society organizations, think tanks and academia, the media, political consultants, etc. This network backs and coaches conservative people seeking office, equally enhancing the social legitimacy of their messages. They do not spare financial resources either, conservative parties and their candidates are disproportionately well endowed when compared to their counterparts on the left.

In those circumstances, it is little wonder that conservative parties win elections more often than not. Ironically, their candidates are sold as reliable defenders of the common person, as daring individuals willing to re-establish common sense in public institutions. Once in power, however, these people will favour the very special interests that backed them. The authentic concern for the common good and democracy is lost in the process.

³⁸ Yildiz Atasoy, "September 11 and the Reorganization of the World Economy", 2003, pp. 195-206.

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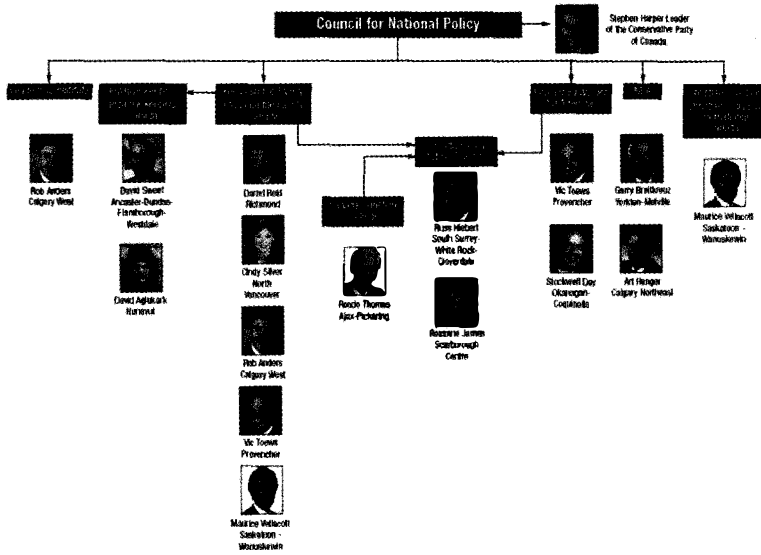


Chart 1: Stephen Harper's ties to conservative organizations

Source: <http://dawn.thot.net/harperstiestousa/>, accessed Sep. 30, 2007.