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Reflecting on Lessons from the Canadian Voter

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In the introduction to this volume, we suggested the analogy of a puzzle as a way to understand the study of voting behaviour in Canada. There are two important aspects of a puzzle: the individual pieces and the overall picture that the pieces make. Identifying the salient pieces of the voting behaviour puzzle has come a long way since the scholarly treatment of voting behaviour first began in the middle of the twentieth century. Political scientists have produced a large body of literature that both identifies the important pieces and provides an overall picture of how the pieces fit together. The Canadian voter is not an enigma. There exists a rich collection of sources that scholars and the informed public can turn to in order to understand election outcomes.

In this vein, it is important to recognize that the current literature paints a much more complex picture of voting than did the early studies of voting behaviour, which almost universally used the logic of the Columbia model to examine socioeconomic categories as the sources of voting preferences. Researchers today pursue a variety of approaches to understand either the whole picture or (more commonly) one of the puzzle pieces in detail, such as looking at individual characteristics of voters, examining trends in the general population, assessing variation in political and economic context, considering differential reactions of subsets of the electorate, and focusing on the effects of campaigns, media, and political information. The chapters in this volume have considered many of the major factors in the study of voting behaviour and have made original contributions to our knowledge of them.

What has become clear, and what is readily evident if one considers other recent publications on voting behaviour, is that trying to understand the dynamics of a single election can overlook many of the fascinating

nuances of the vote decision process. That is, to know that a particular issue did or did not matter in a single election – say the economy in 1997 (Blais et al. 2002b) or the same-sex marriage issue in 2004 (Dostie-Goulet 2006) – gives us an interesting piece of information about aggregate voting in a single context, but it does not give us particulars about the effects of those issue considerations across time or on individual voters. If nothing else, the chapters in this volume reinforce the fact that the many potential voting factors matter at different times for different people. Not all voters or situations are alike, and until we look more closely at the potential influences individually, our understanding of voting behaviour, apart from the outcomes of specific elections, will be limited.

To conclude this volume, we would like to comment on three themes arising from the collective insights of the research contained in the previous chapters. Each chapter could stand on its own as a scholarly contribution to the literature, but as a whole, we believe, they present a unique snapshot of the voting behaviour literature and insights into the direction of future research.

First, and most clearly, the study of voting behaviour in Canada is focused on assessing how and when known correlates of electoral choice influence the decisions of voters. Although we know the main parameters of influences on vote choice, many of the chapters in this volume explore the importance of identifying variation (at the individual level as well as between parties or elections) in *how* these factors influence vote choice.

Second, some of the chapters present null or partially null findings. Despite sound logical foundations, Canadian voters do not always act according to theoretical expectations. These sorts of findings, though unexpected, remain informative. Indeed, questions arising from such findings might include the following. What are the implications when the data do not confirm what logic has predicted? How do these non-findings contribute to the study of voting behaviour? As reflected in the discussions in many of the chapters, the presence of null or unexpected findings denotes an important lesson in the conduct of voting behaviour research and demonstrates the challenge of finding theories that are borne out in reality.

Third, it is appropriate to take stock of what the chapters in this volume contribute to our understanding of *Canadian* elections and voting as well as to the broader *comparative* literature on voting behaviour. Although

the chapters here do not exhaust the breadth of voting behaviour work in Canada, they do provide a representative sample of current research agendas in the field. As such, they also provide a good example of the state of the literature – not only what is known from previous work but also what is still to be investigated.

Heterogeneity in Canadian Voting

A central contribution of the key models of voting behaviour (such as Columbia or Michigan) to the study of voting in Canada has been to highlight the importance of regularities and consistencies in human behaviour. For example, Meisel (1975) and others might not have discussed religious background, Meisel (1975) and others might not have discussed the tendency of Catholic Canadians to vote for the Liberal Party. Similarly, the importance of region was found only by considering how where one lives impacts his or her voting preferences (Gidengil et al. 1999). These findings suggest general expectations that should apply to all Canadian voters, as these regularities were found among many voters who share the same characteristic.

However, despite the summary evidence, looking for the same effect among all voters might not provide the most accurate picture of voting behaviour. Important differences between voters might be obscured. For instance, though we know that Catholics are more likely to vote for the Liberal Party, it may be that not all Catholics support the Liberal Party. Perhaps it is only those who hold certain attitudes, beliefs, or experiences. By having the same expectations for all voters, and treating them equally in our analyses, we run the risk of distorting the true effects of particular variables by averaging them out over the population. Some voters might be swayed in one direction and other voters in the opposite direction. These sources of heterogeneity in voting behaviour might be masked unless researchers probe deeply.

This type of differentiation among voters is similar to what Clarke et al. (1979) proposed when they developed the flexible and durable categories of partisans. In their 1996 book, they demonstrate that issues, leader evaluations, and long-term allegiances contributed to vote choice in 1993 in different proportions depending on one's type of partisanship. Although the nature of partisanship remains contested (see, for example, Gidengil et al. 2006), the idea that different people will respond to voting factors in different ways has been gaining currency and support for many years.

Exemplifying the theme of individual-level heterogeneity in voting behaviour are the effects of partisanship considered in a few of the preceding chapters. Specifically, the evidence presented suggests that all partisans are not the same. One's personal characteristics, or the party that one supports, might make a difference to the effect that partisanship has on vote behaviour. Bilodeau and Kanji observe differentiation on the basis of immigrant experience. They find that Liberal partisans are not all alike – if a partisan is an immigrant, then he or she is likely to be more stable and loyal to the Liberal Party than Canadian-born partisans. Furthermore, Bilodeau and Kanji suggest that this finding has implications for the future of the party. As a party that relies on its relatively larger number of partisans for electoral success (Blais et al. 2002a), the Liberals might consider strategically targeting or maintaining their appeal to immigrants in order to boost their committed constituency.

These findings mesh well with those of Bélanger and Stephenson, who point out differences in the nature of partisanship across parties. In their study, they propose that the ideological clarity of a party might influence the strength, loyalty, and commitment of partisans. Except with respect to stability, these expectations hold – the NDP, BQ, former Reform and Alliance Parties, and Conservative Party have the most committed partisans, whereas the Liberals have the least. However, the Liberal supporters are (unexpectedly) stable – perhaps due to the number of immigrants in the group. These differences are the kind that can be overlooked in vote models if partisanship is included as a variable and expected to have a uniform influence on all vote decisions. By looking at the issue more closely, these authors have provided us with a more nuanced way of understanding why and when partisanship matters for vote choice.

Another well-documented case of heterogeneity within the electorate comes from research on the effects of political information. Since the work of Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock (1991) and Zaller (1992), it has become popular (and in many senses necessary) to consider how information accentuates, distorts, or clarifies effects in traditional vote models. Earlier studies, such as Fiorina's (1981) retrospective voting work, noted that those high in political information (or sophistication, as it is sometimes called) were able to vote retrospectively, whereas those low in political information behaved differently. Studies that examine the use of heuristics (such as party labels, candidate traits, and so on) also confirm the importance of political information (see, for example, Lau and Redlawsk 2001), and recent work in Canadian political behaviour has

addressed the effects of information on various aspects of voter behaviour (Roy 2009). It is thus important to consider how one's personal characteristics might or might not interact to diminish or magnify influences on voting.

In this volume, consideration of the differentiating effects of information and sophistication is present in the chapters by Stephenson, Bittner, and Matthews. Not all voters are equally influenced by the long-term, short-term, and proximate factors that make up the voting "funnel of causality" (see Figure 1.1). For instance, Stephenson's chapter on the tendency of Catholics to vote for the Liberal Party finds that the impact of the sponsorship scandal on the decision to vote Liberal was most pronounced for high sophisticates and that sophisticated Catholics' long-standing attachment to the Liberal Party is most vulnerable to being overcome by their issue preferences. If the electorate is examined as a whole, without investigating differences in sophistication, then these results are not evident. Similarly, Bittner speculates that information might influence the use of candidate evaluations in vote decisions such that low-information voters might be more likely to draw on leader evaluations. She finds that leader evaluations do influence Canadian voters, but she recognizes that factoring such evaluations into one's vote decision might be a cognitive shortcut – and thus most likely to be used by those in need of a shortcut to avoid having to gather additional information to cast an informed ballot. Finally, Matthews' chapter considers whether campaigns work as equalizers to increase the information of low sophisticates and, in so doing, level the impact of economic considerations on the vote decision. Although his findings mostly run opposite to his expectations (which we discuss below), he does find that campaigns have a differential effect on those with university degrees compared to those without degrees. Degree holders demonstrate an increase in the effect of economic evaluations on their vote decisions by the end of the campaign.

Although empirical generalizations provide useful traction for understanding voting behaviour in the aggregate, one of the central insights of this volume is the intellectual value of identifying and understanding nuance and differentiation. As demonstrated by many of the chapters here, focusing our analytical lens on distinctions within the electorate is a promising direction of study and can add much to our collective understanding of voting behaviour in Canada. By examining heterogeneity within core findings about Canadian voters, we can sharpen

our election models and improve their explanatory and predictive capabilities.

The Usefulness of Null Findings

The second issue that we see emerging from the chapters in this volume is that voters do not always behave as theories, and possibly even extant research, indicate they should. The voting models, as initially developed, do not discriminate between national contexts, and thus the regularities found through voting models are assumed to apply to all voters everywhere. However, research into Canadian elections has long found that voting models developed in the United States are not always directly applicable in Canada. Consider, for example, the null findings for the influence of class found by Alford (1963) and others. When a theory is refuted, what are the implications for the research?

Null findings do not inherently indicate that a model should be discarded in a specific context. Rather, negative findings can point to a need to understand how the context in which a voting model is applied affects the elements of the model. Are there underlying assumptions of the model that have not been acknowledged? Does the model's success depend on a particular type of voter, or party, or issue? For instance, it is important to account for specific long-term, short-term, and proximate factors that are particular to a country. One example is the effect of race in the United States. Race is an important predictor of vote choice in the United States in that African Americans are much more likely to vote for the Democratic Party. Although this observation is central to American voting, there might be no or very little effect of race on voting patterns in other countries. Indeed, including race in a model of Canadian voting behaviour is likely to be inconsequential. At the same time, within Canada, language is a central predictor of vote choice, particularly within Quebec, so the inclusion of whether or not the respondent speaks French is much more important in Canada (although not in the American context). Thus, understanding when and why theories "fail" provides researchers with important information about the potential limits of theoretic generalizability. Furthermore, such "failures" help to push research agendas forward with amendments or adaptations that more fully specify the causal processes at play.

The chapters in this volume go beyond pointing out country-specific exceptions to demonstrate that there are instances when voters do not fulfill the expectations of political scientists for how they cast their ballots.

The chapter on campaign effects by Matthews is an excellent example. As developed in his chapter, there is ample theoretical reason to expect that one's sophistication will amplify the importance of campaign events for a voter, and evidence of this effect exists in other national contexts. However, Matthews finds almost no evidence for the theorized effects of an election campaign. What do such findings mean? Is there something wrong with the theories that have been applied? Are the data inappropriate to answer the question? How should a researcher proceed?

First and foremost, it is important to recognize that null findings, even though they tend to be underreported in academic journals, can tell us a great deal about political phenomena. Finding that a theory is not supported by data can open up new avenues of investigation. In the case of campaign effects, null findings inevitably raise further questions, such as whether there was anything about specific elections that might have eliminated or undermined the observation of campaign effects. For example, were the campaign messages of each major party salient and well publicized? Were there specific events in the campaign that might have served to obscure the observation of campaign effects? Did any aspects of the election campaigns violate fundamental assumptions of the theoretical propositions?

Other chapters also demonstrate the incidence of null findings and constructive responses to them. For instance, Anderson's chapter produces some surprising, if not completely null, findings. Anderson addresses the influence of economic conditions on vote choice by demonstrating that sociotropic prospective economic evaluations have the greatest effect on federal incumbent support in the elections under consideration. This finding contradicts much existing work in the field that points to retrospective evaluations as generally being more important. Attempting to respond to this surprising finding, Anderson speculates that, consistent with other work on economic voting, the specific political context of each election under consideration might contribute to these findings. Thus, this response opens up the possibility of incorporating contextual variables into the study of economic voting in Canada. This represents a step forward in our theoretical understanding of how economic conditions impact Canadian voters.

The chapter by Goodyear-Grant also includes null findings. She tests whether a sex-based affinity exists for voting for female candidates and finds that men are more likely to vote for female candidates than women – a finding that is opposite to expectations. Goodyear-Grant uses the null

finding as an opportunity to examine the attitudinal characteristics of who *does* vote for women candidates, exploring a multitude of potential arguments that have been put forth by other researchers. She finds two factors apart from partisanship that influence the decision to vote for a female candidate. Once again, null findings provide the spark for further research that provides a more nuanced picture of voting behaviour, and null findings in Canada with respect to theories that have been supported in the American case open up an additional avenue of research into contextual differences that might matter.

As some of the chapters in this book demonstrate, null findings can be theoretically useful. The fact that a well-developed theory (particularly if it has empirical support elsewhere) fails to be confirmed with Canadian data opens up many possibilities for future research and for improving existing theory. Understanding the Canadian case in this way, "importing" theories from other countries or political contexts can be an extremely rewarding endeavour for both Canadian researchers and the larger community of voting behaviour researchers around the world.

Contributions of This Volume

The final theme that we wish to highlight is what we believe to be the collective contribution that this volume makes to our understanding of voting behaviour in Canada as well as the broader comparative literature on elections and voting. The chapters here serve as an update, reassessment, and reinvigoration of the major theories of voting behaviour. Drawing on the initial insights of the Columbia model of voting, the chapters assessing the role of gender, religion, and ethnicity elaborate on these influences in Canadian voting. Together they demonstrate the continued salience of core sociodemographic characteristics in voting. Other chapters comment on the application of the Michigan model in Canadian voting. Whether through a consideration of partisanship or through the role of issues (such as economic conditions) and leaders on vote choice, many of the chapters reassess some of the core applications of the sociopsychological model of voting and push our understanding of how these influences manifest themselves within the Canadian case.

Beyond focusing on vote choice and updating theoretical applications in Canada, the chapters here make a novel contribution by isolating the sustained impacts of specific variables on vote choice. Each chapter gives prime theoretical attention to the effects on vote choice of one type of independent variable (be it religion, partisanship, campaign effects, or

campaign poll effects). This feature allows the authors to explore in depth how their particular independent variable shapes vote choice in Canada. In this sense, the chapters have been written and the analyses developed with a great degree of parsimony and theoretical clarity.

Although many chapters are deeply rooted in an existing literature and theoretical tradition in understanding Canadian voting and elections, some of them embark on new directions of study. For instance, the chapter by Goodyear-Grant on sex-based affinities for female candidates is the first of its kind in the Canadian case. By exploring who votes for women candidates and why, the chapter uncovers a new angle of research into the relationships between electoral choice and gender in Canada. Similarly, the chapter by Pickup on the effects of poll bias in election campaigns contributes to a recently developed research agenda in the study of election campaigns. The field of voting behaviour in Canada still contains significant unmapped terrain, and research such as that contained in these chapters helps us to understand better the full range of factors that influence voting.

Many of the chapters also provide speculation on directions for future research in the study of voting behaviour in Canada. Each chapter closes its discussion of findings and implications with fresh ideas for research into voting behaviour in Canada. As a result, not only do these chapters collectively update and renew our understanding of electoral choice in Canada, but they also contribute myriad directions for where voting research can and should go in the future. It is our hope that current and future scholars will pursue many of these research directions and that the field of Canadian voting behaviour will grow both in depth (through further analysis of existing research areas) and breadth (through the study of new research topics).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we believe that this volume contributes to the broader comparative literature on voting and elections. Many of the central theoretical statements about voting and elections were originally developed to understand and explain electoral phenomena in the United States. The application of these theoretical contributions in other democratic countries has been fruitful since it allows for a consideration of how well these theories "travel": that is, whether they can be considered accurate for democratic political behaviour in general. Consider, for example, the study of party identification. The original development of the term in the United States sparked great interest elsewhere and led scholars not only in Canada but also in Great Britain

and France (among other places) to apply the concept. The findings demonstrated that the concept could not be understood the same way in each country.¹ When findings from other countries contradict or challenge the accepted wisdom, comparative theory is compelled to account for these varying observations. Indeed, in the case of partisanship, the literature has developed significantly because of these findings. In this sense, the study of elections and voting as undertaken in this volume can be viewed as contributing to the comparative conversation among scholars about influences on vote decisions and when they are most likely to operate. Through testing, retesting, and proposing new theories and amending existing hypotheses developed to explain voting behaviour, each chapter adds to our understanding of how citizens arrive at vote decisions.

The findings in this volume also make clear that Canada has particular cultural and institutional features that facilitate as well as mitigate the applicability of comparative theory in Canada. The collective exercise of researching and writing the chapters that comprise this book depended on an awareness of which findings and theories exist elsewhere and how (and how well) they apply to the Canadian case. Discovering and comprehending the implications of this uniqueness better enables researchers to understand not only the Canadian voter but also the mechanisms by which many voting factors operate. This is a contribution to the study of political behaviour writ large, and thus we see the insights of each chapter as important and original contributions to the comparative literature on elections and voting in democratic states.

Just as each chapter closes by looking to the future, so too does our discussion here. The study of voting behaviour is important because it is through the act of voting that democracy operates. Knowing how and why voters act provides keen insight into the nature and health of the democratic process in Canada. It also provides us with an understanding of where the country is headed. As population demographics change and as issues rise and fall in importance, voting patterns and influences on vote choice might change as well. As a result, keeping abreast of changes within the Canadian electorate as well as considering the implications of changes for the vote decision itself provide an important indication of what shape Canadian democracy will take in the twenty-first century.

Note

- 1 More detail on this topic is provided in the first chapter of this volume.

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