Party System Change in Québec: Evidence from Recent Elections

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Abstract Since the 1990s, provincial elections in Québec have signaled an incremental change in Québec’s party system. These changes are manifested in increasing voter dealignment and volatility in party support. In this article we find that these trends largely continued in both the election of 2012, which produced a minority government and in the 2014 election that resulted in a majority government. Taking a longer-term perspective, we examine changes in public opinion, party identification, electoral volatility, and voting behavior in Québec Provincial elections since 1998. The implications for future government formation and the potential impact on policy are examined.

Prior to 2012, the past five National Assembly elections in Québec had signaled a progressive incremental change in Québec’s party system (Vengroff and Fisher 1995; Allan, O’Reilly and Vengroff 2001; Allan and Vengroff 2004, 2008, 2009). These changes, manifested in increasing voter dealignment and volatility in party support (Belanger and Nadeau 2009), appeared to reach a pinnacle in the provincial elections of 2008 which resulted in a return to majority government in Québec after the first minority government in a century. This article expands the analysis of the dealignment processes to the 2012 and 2014 provincial elections, which produced minority and majority governments respectively.

Belanger and Stephenson (2007, 8-9) argue that partisanship in Canadian federal parties is associated with three key variables: “stability, intensity and loyalty.” We believe these factors are at play in the provincial parties in Québec as well. We argue that recent elections provide evidence that voter attachments to two of the three major parties—the Parti Liberal du Québec (PLQ) and the Parti Québécois (PQ)—significantly weakened over this period (Allan and Vengroff 2009). Furthermore, although voter support for the Action Démocratique du Québec (ADQ) increased dramatically over this period, voters’ sense
of attachment to the party remained relatively weak. As we saw, this weak attachment contributed to a major loss of votes and seats in 2008, which propelled the ADQ from the “Loyal Opposition” to the status of an unofficial parliamentary party that would be absorbed by François Legault’s Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) in the months leading up to the 2012 election. While the CAQ enjoyed notable success in its first general election, it failed to maintain its momentum with voters in 2014.¹

In American parlance, over the years we expect a growing number of individual voters to have moved from strong to weak party identifiers, to third parties and even to truly dealigned independents. This condition of declining partisanship has, and we expect will continue to contribute to change in the party system in Québec. Reflecting the major cleavages and combination of cleavages in Québec society, the linguistic divide, the modest ideological divide (social democratic vs. “liberal”) and the sovereignist-federalist division, the traditional main parties face a growing challenge to their hegemony. As the two major parties lose voter loyalty and electoral support, we expect to see parties like the ADQ and subsequently the CAQ filling the void, tentatively capturing the more fiscally conservative part of the Francophone vote. We also expect an increase in the willingness of voters to support or at least vote strategically for new but less competitive parties such as the Greens and Québec Solidaire (QS). This may also result in a decline in turnout.

If we are indeed looking at a situation of weakening partisanship and transitions in that partisanship, what should we expect to see in the aggregate data from 2012 and 2014? We hypothesize that support for the two major parties would continue to decline in both real and percentage terms. We would also expect that a recently formed party like the CAQ (like its predecessor the ADQ) and even the tiny Green and QS parties would be beneficiaries of voter dealignment.

The rest of this article proceeds as follows. We begin with a brief discussion of the 2012 and 2014 elections, focusing on major developments in the party system since the previous elections, key aspects of the campaigns, and the election results themselves using both global and riding-level analyses. Then, to place these recent elections in a broader context and to test our hypotheses about voter dealignment in Québec, the paper then turns to a longer-term perspective, examining aggregate trends in electoral participation, support for major (and minor) parties, and electoral volatility since the 1990s.² We conclude by discussing the implications of these trends for the future of the party system in Québec.

The Québec Party System since 2008

Following the indecisive election of 2007, which produced the first minority government in Québec in living memory, the 2008 election saw, in some respects at least, a return to “normalcy” in Québec politics. Using the onset of the global financial crisis as a justification for the need for a majority government, Jean Charest sought, and received, a majority mandate during the December election. The PQ also recovered from its disastrous 2007 performance: while unable to secure a victory, the new PQ leader, Pauline Marois, led her party back to the status of the Official Opposition in the National Assembly. For the ADQ, meanwhile, the election provided a blow from which the party was never to recover. Having been thrust into Official Opposition status following the election of 41 MNAs in 2007—many of whom were considered ill-

¹ Even though the CAQ vote total declined, it still managed to win a few more seats.

² Data limitations mean that individual-level analysis of voting behavior is beyond the scope of this article.
equipped to deal with the new demands placed on the legislative caucus—the ADQ suffered as its more neoliberal message was treated with greater skepticism as the financial crisis took hold. The election would leave it with only seven representatives.

In other ways, however, the election was notable. Turnout fell to just over 57%, a low in the post-Quiet Revolution era. And, as we noted previously (Allan and Vengroff 2009), the collapse in the ADQ vote, according to Bélanger and Nadeau (2009, 104-106) translated into minor vote gains for the two larger parties. It also appeared that many former Adequistes simply stayed at home. The dealigning trends from previous elections appeared to be ongoing.

The decline of the ADQ left some vacant space on the ideological spectrum for a new political party, Coalition Avenir Québec, led by former PQ cabinet minister François Legault. Similar to its immediate predecessor in its broad ideological outlook—though less socially conservative than the ADQ—the party also favored a moratorium on any sovereignty referendums for a decade. The CAQ formally merged with (some would say absorbed) the rump ADQ at the beginning of 2012, with the remaining Adequiste MNAs becoming CAQ members instead.

Opinion Poll Trends, 2008-2014

Public opinion polling during this period appeared to continue to confirm the general trend of declining support for the major parties that had been apparent in previous elections. As Figure One shows, support for the PQ and PLQ peaked in late 2009 to early 2010 according to Leger Marketing opinion polls, reached a low point in late 2011, and was never to return to those earlier highs for the 2012 and 2014 elections.

The main beneficiaries of the declines were some smaller parties—Québec Solidaire on the sovereignist left in particular, and, in what was ultimately its final flourish, the ADQ on the right. While the ADQ support climbed to over 15% once more in the middle of 2011, by the end of the year the party had all but ceased to exist. In its place, Coalition Avenir Québec made an immediate impact, initially eclipsing the two major parties in Leger’s polls just as the ADQ had done previously. While its support fell somewhat during the latter part of 2012, it maintained a solid level of support that set it apart from the other less-established parties. Interestingly, as the QS established a foothold in the polls, another small left-of-center party, the Greens (PVQ, a party which profited from strategic voting in some solidly Liberal Anglophone ridings) faded as the election approached.

In the years between the 2008 and 2012 elections, then, while the Québec electorate behaved in a manner that suggested a possible return to dominance by the two largest parties, it should not be interpreted as the Québec party system returning to a period of equilibrium. In the spring of 2012, further signs of discontent were apparent as thousands of university students took to the streets to protest the Liberal government’s plans to sharply increase tuition rates in the province. It was against this backdrop that Charest requested dissolution of the National Assembly in early August and called for an election to be held on September 4.
The 2012 Campaign

The decision to seek an early election was viewed as a risky move on Charest’s part, especially since the PLQ rarely led in the polls during 2012. The student protests, and the government’s rather heavy-handed response to them, further eroded support for the government. During the courses of the five-week campaign, the “usual suspects” were prominent issues: taxes, economic development, and social services were brought to the fore, and the PQ promised to reverse the PLQ’s tuition increases if elected. As in every Québec election, sovereignty was the 800-pound gorilla in the room. However, the campaign was notable, perhaps, in that Legault tried to take the issue off the table by calling for a decade-long moratorium on a sovereignty referendum. Naturally, the PQ demurred, and promised a referendum once it believed a victory was possible. The Liberals tried, unsuccessfully, to draw the PQ out on the issue.

Another major concern that came to the fore during the campaign related to identity politics. While debates over “reasonable accommodation” had become more vocal in recent years, under Marois the PQ sought to make national identity a core element of its campaign. Thus, the PQ proposed a charter that would restrict the public display of religious symbols, give greater prominence to the French language when it came to admitting new immigrants, and extend Bill 101 to cover CEGEPs and small-businesses. The party also proposed creating a category of Québec citizenship that would be available to residents, and prospective residents who could speak French (Montreal Gazette, 9/3/12).

As Figure Two shows, during the election campaign itself, the Pequistes led in the polls for most of the time. More notably, Legault’s CAQ regularly received the support of more than one in four of the electorate during the campaign, and in several polls ran second only to the PQ.3 While most observers expected a PQ victory then, the only question was whether the party could secure a majority government.

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3 To emphasize the extent to which CAQ was dominated by its leader, during the campaign the official party name registered with the DGEQ included the phrase “L’équipe François Legault.”
2012 and 2014 Election Results

In the end, the Parti Québécois achieved its victory, but Marois’ party failed to win enough seats to secure an overall majority in the National Assembly. The election results are shown in Table One. Although the PQ was able to secure an additional three seats compared to its 2008 total, its share of the vote actually declined by over three percentage points, and its total of 54 seats left it well short of a majority. While these results may have been disappointing to Pequistes, Liberals had even more reason to be dissatisfied with the results. The PLQ saw its share of the vote decline by over ten percentage points, resulting in the loss of sixteen seats, including the Sherbrooke riding of Premier Jean Charest. Despite this decline, however, it is worth noting from Table One that the electoral difference between the two parties in the entire province remained quite small—only around 33,000 votes separated them, and the difference in vote share was less than one percent.

For the Coalition Avenir Québec, on the other hand, the results were far more encouraging. The new party won over 27% of the vote, placing them only about four percentage points behind the two major parties in terms of overall vote share. Moreover, this represented a gain of almost eleven percentage points when compared to the performance of the ADQ in 2008, resulting in an extra 12 seats within the legislature. Finally, the election also produced gains for Québec Solidaire, which saw it double its representation (albeit from one to two seats) with over six percent of the vote in the province.

Once again, therefore, the election produced a result that was far from decisive, where it was not entirely clear which party could claim the most satisfaction from its performance: the PQ won without securing a majority, the PLQ perhaps did better than expected despite its losses, and Legault’s CAQ performed credibly while falling short of the levels of support that greeted its arrival on the political scene in Québec. Within two years, however the province went to the polls again. This time around, the campaign came to be dominated by two issues: the *Charte de...*
laïcité, and Québec’s sovereignty.

“Cultural affinity” arguments, often labeled “reasonable accommodation,” in Québec, Canada, and in many Western European countries, pushed governments to take action to address growing citizen malaise. It rose to immediate salience among the Canadian public in 2007 when the somewhat isolated and un-diverse Québec municipality of Hérouxville targeted what its leaders erroneously believed to be Muslim practices. The public outcry, both positive and negative, resulted in the setting up of a Québec provincial commission (the Taylor-Bouchard Commission) to study the issues and make recommendations regarding multiculturalism.

The Liberal Government in Québec City responded by promulgating Bill 94 in 2010. The bill required women to show their faces in order to receive government services. Although the issue was quite controversial, and regarded by many as anti-Muslim, it hit a responsive chord and received broad support across both Québec and Canada. Furthermore, the Liberal Party had, while in power, developed and required the dissemination of a statement of “Québec values,” which all actual and potential immigrants were required to sign.

The PQ leadership did not think the Liberals went far enough. In the 2012 campaign, party leader Pauline Marois proposed a Charter of Secularism. The Charter, among other things would have made it illegal for government officials to wear religious symbols while on the job. The debate got even more heated when the discussion turned to making sure that new immigrants were prepared to adopt and/or adapt to Francophone Québec language and culture. Marois further proposed creating a distinct Québec citizenship that would apply to all current residents but limit access to future immigrants to those who speak French and know about the history, culture and values of Québec. As a minority government the PQ, elected in 2012 was unable to subsequently gain enough support to pass the charter in the National Assembly.

Table One: 2012 Québec General Election Result

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Votes</th>
<th>Votes (%)</th>
<th>Change since 2008</th>
<th>Seats</th>
<th>Seat change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parti Québécois</td>
<td>1,393,703</td>
<td>31.95</td>
<td>-3.22</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>Parti liberal du Québec</td>
<td>1,360,968</td>
<td>31.20</td>
<td>-10.88</td>
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<td>-16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coalition Avenir Québec*</td>
<td>1,180,235</td>
<td>27.05</td>
<td>10.68</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Québec solidaire</td>
<td>263,111</td>
<td>6.03</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Option nationale</td>
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<td>na</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parti vert du Québec</td>
<td>43,394</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>-1.18</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>125</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* CAQ performance compared to ADQ in 2008

Furthermore, the Liberal Party had, while in power, developed and required the dissemination of a statement of “Québec values,” which all actual and potential immigrants were required to sign.

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In 2013 with the buildup to the release by the PQ of the details of the proposed charter in the National Assembly, public support for it rose to 66% (CBC News, 9/10/13). The Charter seemed like a sure winning issue for them as they prepared for the next election campaign. Marois and the PQ were convinced that they could use the Charter to make a strong case for a majority government. However, as the details were released and reports of negative incidents mounted and were widely reported, debate on the Charter heated up. By January of 2014, public support for the Charter had dropped to 48% (Kelly 2014). Regardless, the PQ seemed poised to win a majority of seats in the April election.

The Party leadership hoped to contest the election based on the Charter, the economy and past and pending corruption charges against the Liberals. An important point that Marois failed to see was that the salience of the Charter as an election issue was relatively low. Polls during the election campaign showed that nearly two thirds of voters (63%) wanted to hear less about the Charter while huge majorities expressed interest in hearing more about policies affecting the economy and job creation (85%), health (84%), public finance (77%) and education (73%) (Leger Research Intelligence Group 2014). Contrary to high PQ expectations, the best that could be said about the proposed Charter’s influence on the election was that it did not seem to significantly hurt the PQ among francophone voters.

The PQ hoped to respond to the economic concerns by bringing in a big gun, billionaire Québecor CEO, Pierre Karl Péladeau. During a major press conference Marois hoped to use this star candidate to underline the Party’s commitment to business and economic growth. However, instead of emphasizing his perceived strength on the economy, Péladeau touted his strong support for sovereignty for Québec. His public appearances derailed Marois’ efforts. Instead, the topic on everyone’s mind became independence and the prospects for a third referendum in the event of a PQ victory. Normally, the PQ tries to soft-pedal sovereignty during election campaigns in order not to scare away uncommitted voters and the so-called soft sovereignists. Instead they found themselves painted by the opposition with a broad sovereignist brush.

The Liberals seized on the Péladeau position and rapidly transformed the campaign into one that put the PQ on the defensive. Support for sovereignty remained flat at about 40%, with only one in five Québécois wanting it to be an important issue in the campaign. Even among Francophones, less than a third (31%) felt that a PQ victory would or should be a mandate to hold another referendum on sovereignty. Yet this more than anything else dominated the campaign. The PLQ called into question not only the issue but also the honesty and integrity of the PQ. Tactically Marois found herself trapped into promoting both a low-salience policy, the Charter, and defending the relatively unpopular issue of sovereignty. Their efforts to address the economy, the top issue for most Québécois, took backstage causing the Party to lose its edge.

This is where electoral volatility and voter identity come into play. “Soft sovereignists” and francophone federalists found a welcoming home in the CAQ. Historically, supporters of third parties like the CAQ are more likely to vote strategically when under the pressure of a close election. This was especially the case as the Québec election seemed to be a dead heat in the polls as election day approached. Empirically, this is what seemed to happen in March and early April of 2014. Second preferences of third party voters and their willingness to migrate between parties became quite significant. Among CAQ voters 43% listed the Liberals as their second choice and only 17% selected the PQ in that role. As can be seen in Figure Three there is a direct and strong negative correlation between the decline of support for the CAQ and increased support for the Liberals until the last days of the campaign.
when it seemed to recover somewhat.

Hence, the combination of a volatile electorate, the commitment of the PQ to a low salience issue (the Secularism Charter), the distractions of having to address the sovereignty issue, the poor economic record and inability to manage public finances and the resulting inability of Marois to maintain a focus on the economy, led the PQ from an apparent victory in January to, as Table Two shows, a crushing defeat in April. The Liberals, on the other hand, were able to put the PQ on the defensive while emphasizing their own commitment to the economy. If party ID among Québec voters was more stable, especially among third party, especially CAQ voters, an ongoing series of minority governments alternatively led by the PQ and the PLQ would be the likely outcome. Instead, existing voter dealignment, volatility and strategic voting helped produce a largely unanticipated majority Liberal government.

Explaining Party System Fluidity

One factor potentially influencing the party system in Québec is the institutional structure, the electoral system. Over the years scholars and pundits alike have noted the distortions in the election results in Québec produced by the single-member, simple plurality electoral system. Although like many other provinces Québec has been engaged in a serious analysis and potential reformulation of its electoral system any such change remains highly unlikely given the interests of the major parties in maintaining the status quo. The Least Squares Index of Disproportionality index gives us a good indicator of the relative distortion (vote – seat disparity) in an election. These data are shown in Figure Four for recent elections in Québec. The higher the figure the greater the disproportionality and the more favourable the system to the larger, more established parties. The high levels of disproportionality in elections prior to 2007 were consistent with the level of disproportionality generally found in single member district (SMD)
systems. However, the comparable figure for 2007 was only 5.5, a figure more consistent with the results in proportional representation (PR) systems, systems less favourable to the largest parties.

In fact, the 2007 election produced the most proportional results in many years. The Liberals won 33% of the vote and 38% of the seats. For the ADQ, which until then greatly suffered the distortions of the SMD system, the results were for the first time relatively equitable as they received 30.8% of the vote and 32.8% of the seats. For the PQ, which finished third and is usually the beneficiary of vote seat distortions, the results were likewise very equitable with the party receiving 28.3% of the vote and 28.8% of the seats. Québec Solidaire and the Green party with 3.65% and 3.89% of the vote respectively were shut out. The greater competitiveness and vote/seat equity in the system clearly contributed to the problem of producing a majority government.

The vote/seat distortions returned to higher levels in the 2008 election, rising to 11.9, much to the benefit of the two traditionally largest parties, the PLQ and the PQ. In the 2012 election, levels of disproportionality conformed to the earlier levels, again to the benefit of the two larger parties. The impact of the electoral system was most keenly felt by the CAQ, which won less than two-fifths of the seats won by the second-placed PLQ, despite having a vote share difference province wide of only about four percentage points. If anything, therefore, the disproportionality inherent in the electoral system acted as a brake on the impact of the influences of dealignment among the electorate. Nevertheless, the electoral system’s distorting effects was not enough to prevent another minority government. The 2014 election produced a disproportionality score of 11.6, with the difference between the Liberals’ vote share and seat share amounting to over fourteen percentage points. This time around,

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Votes</th>
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<th>Change since 2008</th>
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<tr>
<td>Coalition Avenir Québec*</td>
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<td>+4</td>
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<td>Québec solidaire</td>
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<td>Option nationale</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>125</strong></td>
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however, the PQ’s discrepancy was smaller, but once again it was the smaller parties—primarily CAQ and QS—that were hurt by the SMSP electoral system. CAQ, despite winning more than nine votes for every ten the PQ won, ended up with less than 75% of the PQ’s seat share.

More evidence of how the SMSP electoral system distorted the electorate’s preferences can be seen by looking at the relative placing of each party—especially the CAQ—in each constituency. Table Three shows the winning and runner-up parties in each of the 125 election contests in 2012. In addition to its nineteen victories, CAQ finished second in a record 53 contests, more than either of the two larger parties. In many districts, therefore, CAQ was either the winner or the main opposition party, but of course in a first-past-the-post electoral system, the second place finishes count for nothing. In 2014, the distortions—shown in Table Four—were not as severe: the PLQ’s dominance was such that it won 70 seats and finished second in a further 30 constituencies, while the PQ was its primary challenger in the majority of cases. While it was unable to match its 2012 vote share, CAQ still managed to break the PLQ/PQ duopoly in 54 seats.

The 2012 and 2014 elections, then, produced results that suggested voter loyalties are not as strong as they once were. In the first election no party was able to secure a legislative majority, one party secured over a quarter of the vote in its first electoral outing, and the former incumbent party saw a sharp decline in its support. Yet the second election saw a return to majority government, with the PLQ recovering its lost ground at the expense of the PQ and CAQ. It would appear that voters are behaving in a manner that we have seen in previous elections, demonstrating weaker attachments to political parties. But in order to test our hypotheses about longer-term voter dealignment in Québec, it is necessary
to place the last two elections in a broader historical context.

### Longer-Term Party System Change in Québec

The analysis of the aggregate data from 2012 and 2014 provides support for the hypothesis that the party system is in a state of flux. The spectacular rise, then fall, of the ADQ, and its replacement by the CAQ provides further evidence of an electorate with increasingly weak ties to the major parties in Québec. In order to examine claims of voter de-alignment and party system change in more detail, however, it is worth examining change over a long period of time. In this section of the paper we broaden our analysis to include elections dating back to the 1990s.

#### Changes in Party Support

As we have noted previously (Allan and Vengroff 2009) the 2007 election was notable in that both the PQ and the PLQ lost support. The 2012 election, though, repeated this outcome. More generally, though weakening loyalties to the two major parties in Québec is part of a longer trend. Figure Five shows the total vote share obtained by these two parties in elections since 1989. In every election between 1989 and 2007, the combined vote share of the two parties declined. In 1989, the two parties accounted for more than nine out of every ten votes; by 2007, only slightly more than 61% of voters gave their vote to either the PQ or the PLQ.
In less than a decade, then, the two heretofore-dominant parties in Québec lost nearly 32% of their support.

Of course, it goes without saying that the 2007 election was exceptional, with the ADQ making a major breakthrough into the position of being the Official Opposition within the National Assembly. In the 2008 election the ADQ vote collapsed, and the Liberals and Pequistes returned to their previous positions as the top two parties in the province. But this result was achieved, on average, with the two parties only gaining a few hundred extra votes in each constituency. As Figure Five shows, while their combined vote share recovered between 2007 and 2008, the 2008 total of 77.25% remained below 2004 levels, and represented a decline of more than 14% compared to 1989 levels. Thus, prior to 2012, even if we were to treat the 2007 election as an outlier, the longer-term trend pointed to a weakening of loyalty to the Liberals and the PQ, especially when coupled with the decline in turnout.

Taking the 2012 and 2014 elections into consideration, however, it is the 2008 election that increasingly looks like the outlier case. Support for the two major parties fell precipitously in 2012, by over fourteen percentage points, to approach the 2007 levels once more. While there was a slight recovery for the “Big Two” in 2014, their support remains well below historical levels. The overall trend line, therefore, suggest that significant numbers of voters in Québec continued to move away from the parties that have dominated (and, it must be said, continue to dominate) Québec politics since the 1970s.

In the period between the 1990s and 2008, of course, a key beneficiary of weakening ties to the major parties was Mario Dumont’s ADQ. From 1998 onward, the vote share of the ADQ rose above double digits, with the party reaching its
electoral zenith in 2007. While the ADQ then imploded in spectacular fashion at the subsequent election, its political space within the party system was replaced by the CAQ. If we consider the ADQ or the CAQ to have achieved “major party” status during this time, does this suggest a “realignment” among the Québec electorate, with voters accommodating a new addition to the party system? In other words, rather than voters becoming disenchanted with major parties in Québec, they simply transferred support to a new challenger.

Figure Six does not provide much support for this “realigning” hypothesis. While the overwhelming number of votes was shared among the three parties in every election since 1998, the combined share of the three parties’ vote declined over time. In 2007, when the ADQ had its best result, it is notable that the three-party share of the vote actually declined overall. And while the total for 2008 increased—as the ADQ support fell precipitously—it was still almost 5 percentage points lower than in 1998. In 2012 and 2014, the longer term trend of declining support for the three largest parties in Québec resumed, and even accelerated, as support fell to its lowest points since the ADQ first emerged in 1998.

A corollary of the decline in support for Québec’s major parties is growing support—albeit still small—for smaller parties in the province. Figure Seven examines the changing levels of support for smaller parties in Québec. While the total vote share of smaller parties remains low, it has risen steadily in the last decade or so, peaking at double-digit levels in 2014. What is more evident, however, is that there has been some consolidation among the minor parties—particularly on the left—with the Greens being recently replaced by Québec Solidaire as credible challengers in some districts. Indeed, the latter party gained a seat in the 2008 election and added an additional seat in both the 2012 and 2014 elections. If it is able to maintain its foothold
in the National Assembly in the years to come it is most likely to draw disaffected former Pequistes to its ranks.

Whether one defines the CAQ as being one of the major parties in Québec or not, therefore, the long term trend in Québec points not to realignment in the party system, but to increasing dealignment.

Electoral Volatility

Further evidence of dealigning trends in Québec’s party systems can be seen by examining electoral volatility.

According to Pedersen,

Volatility “tells us to what extent party strength is being reallocated from one election to the next between losing and winning parties. An examination of national patterns will thus indicate, if the relative positions of parties are fairly constant, or if they fluctuate in ways which may eventually reflect basic electoral alignments. (1990, 199.)

Figure Seven: Support for Parties other than PQ, PLQ and ADQ
Levels of volatility between recent Québec elections are shown in Figure Eight, using Pedersen’s method. The measure shows a clear upward trend over time, even allowing for the decrease in volatility in 2007. Voter volatility dipped slightly in 2012 compared to the previous election, and again in 2014, but remained well above historical levels prior to 2008. Such levels of electoral volatility do not suggest a party system in a steady state where voter loyalties to a single party remain stable over time. The upward trend in volatility has also produced an increase in the “effective number of parties” (Laakso and Taagepera 1979) represented in the National Assembly. Between 1989 and 2003, the effective number of parties was less than two, consistent with a traditional two-party system. Since then however, the value has increased, reaching almost three in 2007 before averaging around a “two-and-a-half” party system in subsequent elections.

**Voter Turnout**

The final, and perhaps most telling evidence of partisan dealignment in many party systems is declining levels of voter turnout. As voter loyalties to political parties become weaker, the opportunity costs of voting become greater and the challenges to party organizations to get out the vote increase. Declining turnout has been widespread in advanced democracies over

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4 Pedersen’s index is calculated by summing the absolute values of all percentage vote gains and losses for each party in an election, and dividing the result by two. The higher the score, the greater the degree of volatility between elections.

5 To give these values some context, in Pedersen’s examination of volatility in the postwar period in Western Europe between 1948-1977, the average level of electoral volatility was 8.1%.

6 Rather than simply denoting the actual number of parties represented in the legislature, the “effective number of parties” measure takes into account the relative strength of each party based on its seat share.

7 For a discussion of the growth of Québec’s party system from a comparative perspective (through the 2012 election), see Perella and Tanguay (2013). Our analysis also is consistent with that of Jean-François Godbout (2013: 30-3), who employs Laakso and Taagepera’s measure to show that the effective number of candidates within individual Québec constituencies also trended upward over the same period.
recent decades so is there any reason to expect that the party system in Québec should be an exception to this broader trend?

As Figure Nine clearly shows, the answer is somewhat mixed. In 1994, voter turnout in the province exceeded 80%, a comparatively impressive level of turnout for a plurality-based electoral system. But in the years since, turnout had been in a steady decline, with turnout in 2008, perhaps an outlier (Blais, Galais and Gélineau 2013), falling to an historic low in modern times. Weakening voter attachments to political parties in Québec were not just increasing the possibility that voters would switch their support between elections; recent electoral evidence showed that increasingly large numbers of Québécois and Québécoise were simply deciding to stay at home on election day. This particular indicator of dealignment was less evident in 2012, however. The turnout of 74.6% was the highest turnout for a provincial election in Québec since 1998, suggesting that although voters have steadily been becoming less loyal to political parties they have not yet become entirely disengaged. Similarly, in 2014, turnout, while below 2012 levels, remained above the 70% mark. This may be attributed to the prominence of the sovereignty issue in the campaign rather than party loyalty.

Conclusions

The last six provincial elections in Québec signaled an incremental change in Québec’s party system. These changes are manifested in increasing voter dealignment and volatility in party support. Our findings converge with those of Belanger and Nadeau (2009). They saw the two major parties, the PQ and the PLQ moving toward the center ideologically with relatively little to distinguish them in many policy areas. With sovereignty/independence becoming less prominent as an issue until 2014 this opened up some space for third parties that are more ideological in orientation.

Belanger and Nadeau (2009)
suggested that the 2007 election was not a realigning election, but a deviating one, and we then saw a return to normalcy in 2008. Given the continuing regional concentrations of strength of the PLQ and PQ it will be hard to unseat them without serious electoral system reform, an unlikely occurrence. The distortions in the electoral outcomes produced by the FPTP system may reinforce the return to bipartism, even if a third party challenger is able to hold its position in the electorate. Given the growing volatility of the electorate, however, we feel that dealigning, rather than merely deviating, elections will become more common in the future and may serve to disrupt further the existing party system and government stability.

Decreasing party loyalty and elevated levels of volatility may thus be the hallmarks of the party system in the future. However, should there be a serious reopening of the sovereignty debate, as was the case in 2014, this might reinvigorate and differentiate the two leading parties and their federalist and sovereignist bases. Opinion polls since the 2012 election, and to some extent during the 2014 election also suggest another return toward normalcy, as the CAQ appears to fade for the time being, but it would be premature to suggest that we are seeing a resurgence of bipartism. After all, the earlier demise of the ADQ clearly did not produce this outcome. Dealigning trends, with third parties emerging (and being replaced), turnout generally falling, and the PQ and PLQ no longer able to command greater than 75% of the electorate's support will make the system less stable. If the trends of the last several elections in Québec continue, for the immediate future we can expect ongoing but weaker bipartism in elections to come. As noted, without the issue of independence, we might expect a series of minority governments and/or new governing coalitions, formal or informal.

WORKS CITED


