

Campaign Dynamics in the 2000 Canadian Election: How the Leader Debates Salvaged the Conservative Party

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Canada's Progressive Conservative Party faced the prospects of electoral annihilation going into the 2000 election. In the 1993 election, the party

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suffered what must surely be the most humiliating defeat ever visited upon an incumbent party; its share of the popular vote plummeted from 43% to 16% and it was reduced to a mere two seats (1%, down from 57%). So complete was the collapse that the party—one of the two parties that had alternated in power since Confederation in 1867—lost its official status in the House of Commons.¹ Meanwhile, the new party of the Right—the Reform Party—managed to get 19% of the vote and, thanks to the concentration of its support in western Canada, this translated into 52 seats.²

With 19% of the popular vote and 20 seats, the Conservatives were able to regain official party status in the 1997 federal election, thanks in good measure to their new leader, Jean Charest.³ But the Reform party also made some progress: with just over 19% of the vote, but 60 seats, it did well enough to form the official opposition.⁴ Three years later, in hopes of increasing its support in central and eastern Canada, the Reform Party reconstituted itself as the Canadian Alliance.⁵

There was little doubt which party would win the 2000 election. On the eve of the campaign, the incumbent Liberals enjoyed a huge 20-point lead over the Canadian Alliance (45% against 25%). The real stakes of the 2000 election concerned the outcome of the “fight for the Right” between the new Alliance Party and the old Progressive Conservative Party: which of these two parties would succeed in establishing itself as *the* party of the Right?

With their support standing at below 10%, the challenge for the Conservative Party was to win at least 12 seats in order to retain official status in the House of Commons. For the Alliance, meanwhile, the challenge was to make some additional gains and, more importantly, to broaden its support by making inroads in Ontario, Canada's most populous province, where Reform had failed to win a single seat in 1997. An Al-

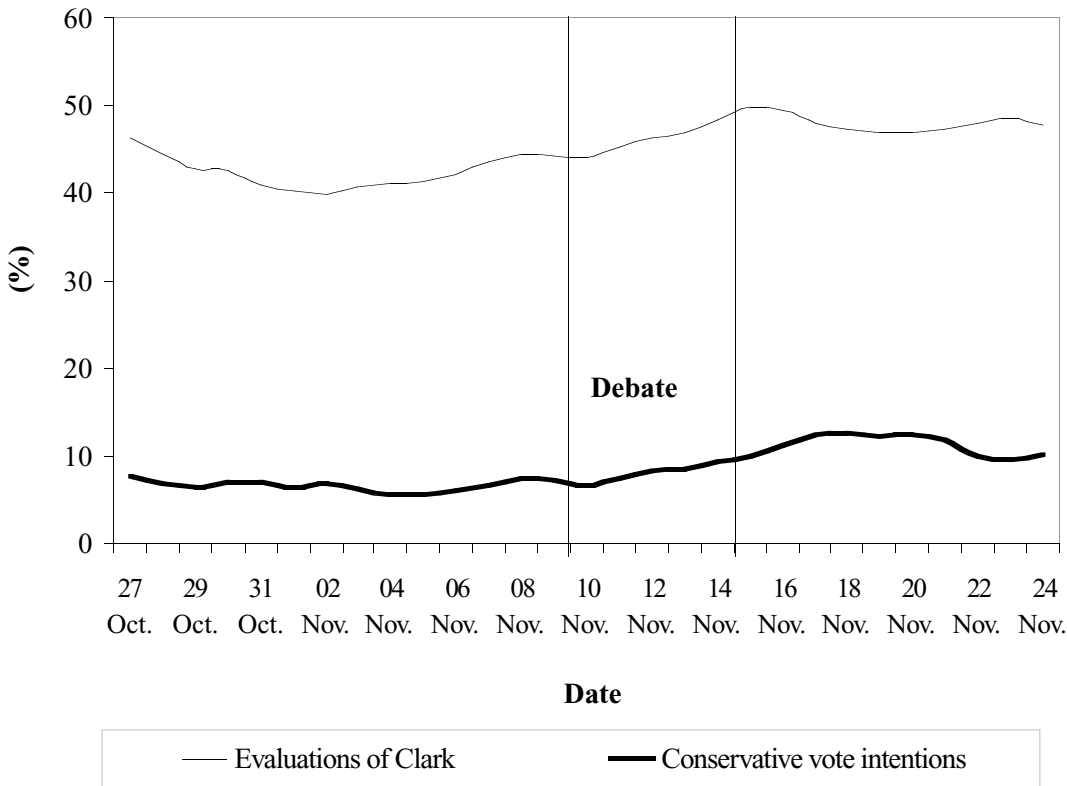
liance breakthrough in Ontario would lie to rest the charge that the new Right party was just another western-based protest movement. By winning seats in Ontario the Alliance could credibly claim to speak for the whole country, and if the Conservatives could not muster 12 seats, then the Alliance's displacement of the Progressive Conservatives as the only party of the Right would be complete. As it happens, the Alliance won only two seats in Ontario and the Conservatives managed to get their 12 seats nationally. As a consequence, the fight for supremacy on the Right continues.

The campaign was critical in salvaging the fate of the Conservative party, and we show that this Canadian election provides yet more evidence that campaigns matter (see Johnston et al. 1992; Holbrook 1996; Norris et al. 1999; Brady and Johnston forthcoming). But campaigns can matter in different ways. Our interest here is in documenting the impact of specific campaign events on voters' opinions and intentions.

The data come from the 2000 Canadian Election Study. The campaign survey employed a rolling cross-section design. The overall sample was broken down into replicates, one for each day of the campaign. Because each daily replicate is as similar to the others as random sampling variation permits, all that distinguishes the replicates (within the range of sampling error) is the date of interview. This design enables us to estimate the impact of specific events on both vote intentions and voters' feelings about the leaders. A total of 3,651 respondents were interviewed during the campaign. The first full day of interview was on October 25, three days after the election was called, and interviews continued until election day, November 27. The response rate was 60%.⁶

The analysis focuses on the three key players, namely, the Liberals, the Alliance, and the Conservatives, and their respective leaders. This is where

Figure 1
Evolution of Evaluations of Clark and Conservative Vote Intentions (five-day moving averages)



most of the movement during the campaign appears to have occurred.⁷ The Liberals won the election, with 41% of the vote (and 57% of the seats), the Alliance came second, with 25% of the vote (and 22% of the seats), and the Conservatives third, with 12% (and 4% of the seats).⁸

We first show graphs that indicate how vote intentions and leader ratings moved during the course of the campaign. The graphic evidence provides a useful initial impression of whether plausible campaign events mattered. We then perform statistical time-series analyses in order to test in a more rigorous fashion the potential impact of specific campaign events.

We start with the televised leader debates, which are watched by a substantial fraction of the electorate (see below) and which have proved to be key events of previous Canadian election campaigns (Johnston et al. 1992; Blais and Boyer 1996; Blais et al. 1999), and we subsequently consider other episodes that could plausibly have affected the outcome of the election.

Figure 1 uses five-day moving averages to track the evolution of vote intentions for the Conservatives over the course of the campaign, along with evaluations of their leader, Joe Clark.⁹

The vertical line indicates the time of the English debate, which took place on November 9.¹⁰

This debate seems to have been crucial for Joe Clark, the leader of the Conservative party.¹¹ Forty-three percent of those who had watched the debate¹² thought that Clark had performed the best.¹³ Figure 1 shows that ratings of Clark went up in the days following the debate, from about 44 (on a 0 to 100 scale) to about 50, and then came back to about 48. The impact of the debate

until election day. The results indicate that the debate produced a permanent increase of four points in both Clark's ratings and Conservative vote intentions.¹⁵

The loser of the debate appears to have been the leader of the Liberal party, Prime Minister Chrétien. Twenty-seven percent of those who had watched the debate said that Chrétien had performed the worst, 20% chose Day (the leader of the Alliance), and 17% could not name a loser. Figure 2

was not instantaneous; it took a few days for the full effect to take place. This suggests that the impact of the debate was not solely direct (on debate viewers), but was also indirect (Blais and Boyer 1996), through improved media coverage and/or interpersonal communication.¹⁴ The same pattern seems to have emerged with respect to Conservative vote intentions, which increased from about 7% to about 12%, to come back to about 10%.

Table 1 provides an empirical test of the impact of the English debate on Clark's daily ratings and on Conservative vote intentions. The control variables are the daily percentages of respondents who identify with the Conservative party and with other parties. The independent variable, DEBATE, equals zero until November 9, progressively moves from zero to one in the five following days, and remains at one

Table 1
Time-Series Analysis of Evaluations of Clark and Conservative Vote Intentions

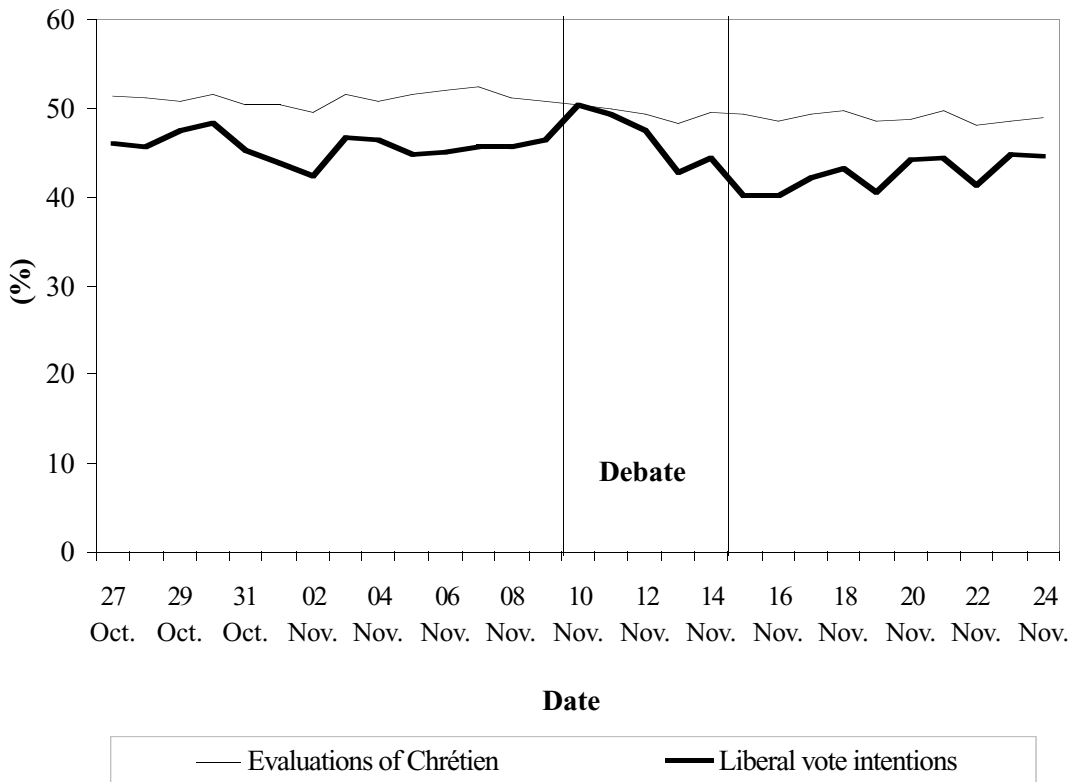
| | Evaluations of Clark | Conservative Vote Intentions |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------|------------------------------|
| | Coeff. (S.E.) | Coeff. (S.E.) |
| DEBATE | 4.43 (1.22)*** | 3.72 (.87)*** |
| Conservative Party Identification | .40 (.24) | .55 (.17)*** |
| Other Party Identification | -.02 (.09) | -.03 (.06) |
| Constant | 41.97 (4.23)*** | 5.05 (3.00) |
| D.W. | 1.37 | 1.93 |
| N | 33 | 33 |

*significant at .10 level (two-tailed test)

**significant at .05 level (two-tailed test)

***significant at .01 level (two-tailed test)

Figure 2
Evolution of Evaluations of Chrétien and Liberal Vote Intentions (five-day moving averages)



shows that ratings of Chrétien dropped slightly, from about 51 to about 49, in the days following the debate. Again, the drop was not precipitous; it took place over a period of four or five days. The same pattern holds for Liberal vote intentions, which slipped from about 46% to about 40%, to come back to about 44%.

Table 2 provides a direct test of the impact of the English debate on Chrétien ratings and Liberal vote intentions. The results suggest that the debate produced a decline of two points in both ratings of Chrétien and Liberal vote intentions.¹⁶

There was another important campaign event that could have undermined support for the Liberals. It occurred on November 16, when Prime Minister Chrétien acknowledged having talked to the chair of the Business Development Bank of Canada (a public corporation) to help an investor obtain a loan for a hotel in the Prime Minister's own constituency. Predictably, the opposition parties screamed "scandal" and tried to exploit the episode. The government ethics councillor was asked to look into the matter. But the councillor's report issued five days later cleared the Prime Minister of any wrongdoing. Figure 2 shows no change at all over that period in either ratings of the Prime Minister

or Liberal vote intentions.¹⁷ The only significant campaign event eroding Liberal support was the English debate, which seems to have been responsible for the two point drop in both ratings of the Prime Minister and Liberal vote intentions between the beginning and the end of the campaign.

Finally, there was the Alliance and its new leader, Stockwell Day. Figure 3 shows that ratings of Day were unaffected by the English debate of November 9. His daily mean ratings remained

remarkably stable from November 3 to November 15. But his ratings did drop in the first days of November, from about 49 to about 46. What caused this drop? One possibility is that this indicated a negative public reaction to attacks that the party was in favor of two-tier health care (that is, that the party would introduce some privatization of Canada's public health system). This charge made the headlines in the *Globe and Mail* (one of English Canada's two national newspapers) on October 31. As health care was voters' main pre-occupation (Blais et al. 2002), this could have been a turning point in the campaign.

We tested this interpretation by creating a TWO-TIER variable that moves progressively from zero to one from October 31 to November 5 and remains at one until election day (Table 3). The variable gets close to the conventional level of significance, and the coefficient suggests a three-point drop in ratings of Day, which is consistent with our reading of Figure 3. However, ratings of the party, as such, did not move during that period. Fewer voters chose the Alliance as the best party for dealing with many issues in that period, but the drop was not particularly striking in the case of health.¹⁸ A more plausible interpretation is that we are witnessing the decay in early November of a temporary boost in Day's ratings in the

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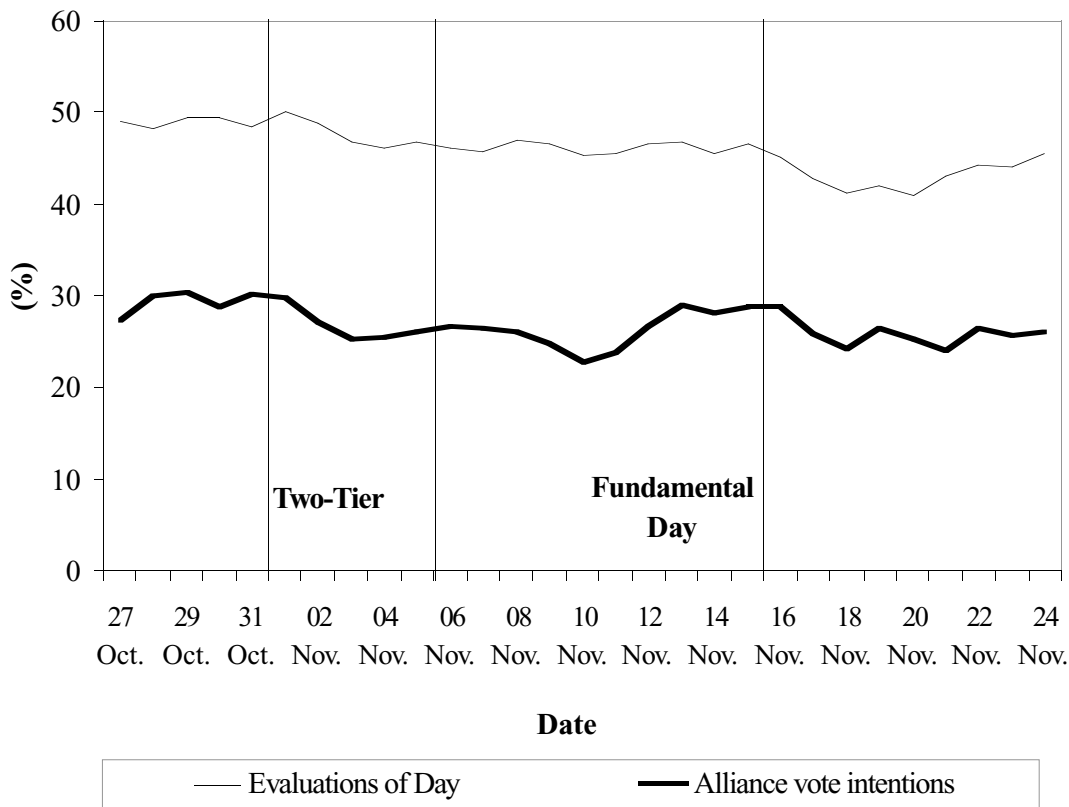
| | Evaluations of Chrétien | Liberal Vote Intentions |
|------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| | Coeff. (S.E.) | Coeff. (S.E.) |
| DEBATE | -2.28 (.92)** | -2.52 (2.06) |
| Liberal Party Identification | .12 (.08) | .64 (.18)*** |
| Other Party Identification | -.24 (.09)** | -.94 (.20)*** |
| Constant | 54.76 (3.18)*** | 55.96 (7.10)*** |
| D.W. | 2.98 | 2.27 |
| N | 33 | 33 |

*significant at .10 level (two-tailed test)

**significant at .05 level (two-tailed test)

***significant at .01 level (two-tailed test)

Figure 3
Evolution of Evaluations of Day and Alliance Vote Intentions (five-day moving averages)



very first days of the campaign (before the Canadian Election Study fieldwork started) or perhaps just before.¹⁹ After all, Day was a new party leader and the Alliance party launched its campaign by focusing on the youthfulness, enthusiasm, and the new ideas that supporters claimed he would bring.

A second drop in Stockwell Day's ratings took place at around November 15. Mean evaluations of Day went from about 46 to about 42, but returned to their initial level by November 24. And indeed November 14 and 15 were tough days for the Alliance and Day. On the 14th, the Immigration Minister charged some of Day's supporters with being racist, anti-immigrant, and anti-Semitic. These denunciations hit TV news headlines on the 15th. That very same evening, the CBC (the publicly owned television corporation) presented a long report entitled "Fundamental Day", which highlighted the (fundamentalist) religious beliefs of the Alliance leader. Clearly, the religious convictions of Mr. Day were not mainstream and one possible interpretation of the election is that Canadians were reluctant to support a leader who could be suspected of having a hidden religious agenda.

Figure 3 suggests that this series of events produced a progressive drop in Day's ratings, followed by a gradual recovery. To capture this dynamic we created two variables, FUNDAMENTAL and FUNDAMENTAL². FUNDAMENTAL moves from one on November 16 to eleven on November 26, and FUNDAMENTAL² moves from one to 121. If there is a curvilinear relationship,

with 26%, almost exactly where it started.

Even though there was less movement than in previous Canadian elections, the campaign did matter.²¹ It is reasonable to assume that if vote intentions had not moved during the campaign, the Conservatives would not have won enough seats to keep their official status in the House of Commons. It is,

FUNDAMENTAL should have a positive coefficient and FUNDAMENTAL² a negative one. This is precisely what we observe in Table 3. These results suggest that the events that occurred on November 14 and 15 did have an effect on Day's ratings but the effect dissipated by election day. And the findings indicate no net effect, temporary or not, on vote intentions.

The 2000 election campaign was a difficult one for the Alliance and for its new leader. Our findings suggest, though, that the campaign was not as disastrous as it may have seemed. Day's ratings did decline during the campaign but no specific event appears to have produced that decline.²⁰ The most likely interpretation is that the temporary boost that the new leader had enjoyed before the election was called simply disappeared early in the campaign. As for vote intentions, the Alliance ended

Table 3
Time-Series Analysis of Evaluations of Day and Alliance Vote Intentions

| | Evaluations of Day | Alliance Vote Intentions |
|-------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|
| | Coeff. (S.E.) | Coeff. (S.E.) |
| TWO-TIER | -2.87 (1.79) | .79 (2.28) |
| FUNDAMENTAL DAY | -1.62 (.74)** | -.71 (.94) |
| FUNDAMENTAL DAY ² | .16 (.08)* | .07 (.10) |
| Alliance Party Identification | .35 (.15)** | .82 (.19)*** |
| Other Party Identification | .13 (.13) | -.20 (.16) |
| Constant | 40.57 (5.13)*** | 25.77 (6.53)*** |
| D.W. | 2.14 | 2.26 |
| N | 33 | 33 |

*significant at .10 level (two-tailed test)

**significant at .05 level (two-tailed test)

***significant at .01 level (two-tailed test)

of course, impossible to tell with certainty since we are dealing with 301 constituency elections, but the nationwide surge associated with Joe Clark's performance in the debates was probably critical in three constituencies where the Conservatives' margin of victory was under six percentage points (0.7 in Richmond, 4.6 in South Shore, and 5.5 in Brandon-Souris).

Our analysis confirms the central role that televised leaders' debates play in Canadian election campaigns. The English debate appears to have been critical in the Conservative surge. That surge may have been small but it was important enough to ensure the party's survival. None of the other campaign

events seems to have had a lasting effect on any of the parties.

These findings beg a strategic question: What would have happened if no debates were held? The question is particularly perplexing given the evidence that the debates typically hurt the party that is ahead at the time they take place.²² For the medium term, the Liberals look to be the leading party, and it is easy to imagine that the leader of the Liberal party might reason that he/she would be better off without debates. The risk, of course, is that the refusal to participate could hurt the party even more. The optics of refusing to participate in this most democratic exercise are not good. Perhaps the optimal sce-

nario from the Liberal perspective would be to modify the format in such a way that the potential effect is reduced. This will be an interesting strategic game to watch in the next election.

Our findings suggest that British Prime Minister Tony Blair and French President Jacques Chirac may have been wise in declining to participate in a televised debate in the 2001 British and 2002 French elections. But our findings also raise further questions about which types of debates, in what kinds of context, are most and least likely to affect voters. In order to address these questions we need more studies that use the campaign rolling cross-section design.

Notes

1. A political party must have at least 12 seats to be recognized officially as a political party. This status confers significant benefits, such as being able to obtain funding and to ask questions at the highly visible question period.

2. For an analysis of that spectacular change, see Johnston et al. 1996.

3. See Nevitte et al. 2000.

4. The Bloc Québécois, a party that runs candidates only in the province of Quebec, had formed the official opposition between 1993 and 1997.

5. Preston Manning, the leader of the Reform Party, convinced its members to put an end to the Reform Party and to create a new Canadian Alliance Party, which he hoped would attract members of the Conservative Party. Some Conservative members did join the Alliance but most stayed with the old party. The Canadian Alliance selected its new leader, Stockwell Day, in July, three months before the election was called.

6. The fieldwork was conducted by the Institute for Social Research at York University and Jolicoeur & Associés. The study was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Elections Canada, and the Institute for Research on Public Policy. Copies of the survey questionnaires and of the data set can be obtained at: <www.fas.umontreal.ca/pol/ces-ec>. For a comprehensive analysis of the election, see Blais et al. (2002). Note that the numbers cited in the book are slightly different from those indicated in this article, which are based on the most recent data set.

7. There appears to have been a small increase in vote intention for the New Democratic Party (NDP) over the course of the campaign but that increase does not seem to be related to any specific campaign event.

8. The New Democratic Party (NDP) had 9% of the vote and 4% of the seats, and the Bloc

Québécois, which ran candidates only in the province of Quebec, 10% of the vote and 12% of the seats.

9. All the daily data presented here have been weighted to ensure that the daily distribution of the sample among the regions (Atlantic Canada, Quebec, Ontario, and the West) remains constant. Because of the five-day moving averages, the figures start on October 27, five days after the election day was called, and end on November 24, three days before election day.

10. There was also a French debate, which took place on November 8.

11. There seems to have been a small decline in ratings of Clark at the beginning of the campaign, followed by a recovery. We do not have a ready explanation for this evolution. Note that Conservative vote intentions remain flat until the debates.

12. Thirty-nine percent said they had watched the debate, 21% in Quebec and 45% outside Quebec.

13. Eighteen percent chose Stockwell Day, the leader of the Alliance, 14% Chrétien, and 10% could not name a winner.

14. Indeed we find that ratings of Clark improved after the debates among those who had not seen the English debate as well as among those who had seen it.

15. The results are not sensitive to specifications of the debate variable. We tested scenarios under which the debate effect is assumed to take place over a period of four or six days. In all cases (for Clark ratings as well as for Conservative vote intentions), DEBATE is statistically significant, and the coefficients are always between three and five.

16. The debate variable does not quite reach statistical significance in the case of Liberal vote intention. The debate variable is constructed as previously, moving progressively

from zero to one in the five days following the debate and remaining at one until election day. DEBATE is statistically significant for ratings of Chrétien when the effect is assumed to take place over four days or six days; it does not achieve statistical significance for Liberal vote intentions under either scenario.

17. We performed many time analyses with various operationalizations of a "scandal" variable and in no case did the variable turn out to be significant. There was no movement either in the perceived level of government corruption.

18. The percentage choosing the Alliance as the best party for improving health care dropped from 20% in the last five days of October to 17% in the first five days of November. The percentage naming the Alliance as the best party for cutting taxes slipped from 45% to 37%.

19. Consistent with this interpretation is the fact that vote intentions for the Alliance in the public polls stood at around 25% in mid-October, just before the start of the campaign, and that they stood at about 30% in the last days of the month.

20. We also tested the impact of the debate that erupted, on November 6, about the Alliance's position on a possible referendum on abortion. We found no impact.

21. On the 1988 election, see Johnston et al. (1992); on the 1993 election, see Johnston et al. (1996); on the 1997 election, see Blais et al. (1999).

22. In 1988, the debates benefited the Liberals at the expense of the leading Conservatives. In 1997 and 2000, they benefited the Conservatives at the expense of the leading Liberals. There was no clear debate effect in the 1993 election. In each case, the leading party was also the incumbent party, so whether a party is ahead or the governing party (see Lanoue 1991) is a moot point.

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