

**THE IMPACT OF ISSUES AND THE ECONOMY
IN THE 1997 CANADIAN FEDERAL ELECTION***

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the impact of issues and the economy in the 1997 Canadian election among voters outside Quebec. We show that both factors affected individual vote choice. We provide estimates of how much difference the issues and the economy made in the election. It appears that the issues were decisive for nine per cent of the voters and the economy for four per cent. Issues mattered more than the economy for individual vote choice. The net impact of both the issues and the economy on vote support for the different parties was practically nil. The findings indicate that the Liberal victory cannot be imputed to the economy or the issues.

On 2 June 1997, the Liberal party was returned to power. It was a small victory, as the party managed to garner only 38 per cent of the vote, 5 percentage points less than in 1993, and won only 155 seats, just enough to form a majority government. But a victory it was.

There are at least two interpretations for the Liberal victory. The first is the economy. According to that interpretation, the Liberals were re-elected because Canadians were mostly satisfied with the performance of the Canadian economy and consequently rewarded the party in power. There are good reasons to assume that relatively favourable economic conditions may have helped the Liberals in 1997. There is a vast literature showing that economic conditions affect electoral outcomes in Canada¹ as elsewhere² and that economic perceptions influence individual vote choice.³

Such an interpretation raises vexing questions about the meaning and import of elections in Canada. If the Liberals were re-elected mostly because the economy was in good shape, and if the performance of the Canadian economy (at a given time) depends mostly on international factors, and little on the decisions made by the party in power, the implication would be that voters do not have much say about the orientation of public policy. Alvarez and Nagler make that point in stark terms about the 1996 American presidential election, in which economic considerations appeared to dominate: If “ voters reward or punish incumbents for economic performance” and “ if incumbents have little control over short-term economic performance, voters are choosing candidates essentially at random...and might be losing their ability to insure that they eventually achieve the non-economic policy outcomes they desire.”⁴

An alternative interpretation is that voters re-elected the Liberals at least in part because they liked their positions on the major issues of the day or, at least, because they preferred these positions over those of their competitors. The literature is mixed with regards to the impact of issues on the

vote. The conventional wisdom used to be that issues do not play a great role in elections,⁵ and the same argument has been made for Canadian elections.⁶ But recent studies indicate that issues can play a powerful role.⁷

Did the Liberals win the 1997 election because many Canadians preferred their positions on the major issues of the day? Horowitz, in particular, has asserted that the Liberal party had been so successful in the past because of its centrist orientation. Would that verdict still apply in 1997?⁸ Many voters seem to have perceived the Liberals' main competitor, the Reform party, as too extreme.⁹ Does that imply that the Liberals won because Canadians liked their “ moderate ” positions?

Our methodology is inspired by Alvarez and Nagler. They have examined the relative impact of issues and the economy in the United States, Britain, the Netherlands and in the 1988 and 1993 Canadian elections.¹⁰ Alvarez and Nagler conclude that the two Clinton victories in the United States presidential elections of 1992 and 1996 must be imputed to the economy, but they also show that the relative emphasis placed by voters on the economy and on issues varies across countries and time. We refine and apply their methodology to the 1997 Canadian election in order to determine the relative importance of issues and the economy in the small Liberal victory.

We focus on the two central issues of the 1997 election: Quebec and the role of the state. What should be done about Quebec has been a dominant issue in Canadian politics. Political parties managed to avoid the national question in the federal election of 1988 which centred on free trade, but it was a key factor in the 1993 election: the Reform party succeeded in tapping anti-Quebec sentiment in the West, while the Bloc Québécois was able to get the support of sovereignists in Quebec.¹¹ Did the issue help or hurt the Liberals in 1997?

The role of the state is also a traditional issue in Canadian politics and, for that matter, in

politics tout court. It is the classic left-right issue, as "the basic criterion distinguishing the left from the right concerns the role of *government* versus that of the *market*."¹² This is the most common cleavage in western democracies.¹³

Between 1993 and 1997, the Liberal government managed to eliminate the deficit, and in so doing took it off the political agenda. The next question was whether to cut taxes, as Reform and the Conservatives argued, or to put more money back into the social programmes that had been curtailed in the deficit elimination exercise. Were the Liberals perceived to be the party of the centre on this issue? Was the centrist position popular with the voters? Did the party gain votes because of it?

We use the 1997 Canadian Election Study (CES).¹⁴ The CES queried voters about their own views and about their perceptions of the parties' positions on these two central issues. On Quebec, respondents were asked whether they thought more, less, or about the same as now should be done for Quebec. If they said "more" or "less," there was a follow-up question about whether it should be "a lot," "somewhat," or "a little" more or less (see the Appendix). This makes it possible to place people on a -3 to +3 scale, where -3 means that a lot less should be done for Quebec and +3 means a lot more.

On the role of the state, previous research indicates that many people are inclined to support increased spending in areas they consider important, but that they also feel that the taxes they pay should be reduced. To force respondents to recognize the trade-off between spending and cutting taxes, the question was drafted in the following way: "We face tough choices. Cutting taxes means cutting social programmes and improving social programmes means increasing taxes. If you had to choose, would you cut taxes, increase taxes, or keep taxes as they are?." As with the Quebec issue, those who said "cut" or "increase" were asked whether taxes should be cut or increased a lot, somewhat or a little. As above, this allows us to distribute responses on a -3 to +3 scale, where -3

means cutting a lot and +3 increasing a lot.

We probed both respondents' *own* positions on the issues, and their perceptions of *parties'* positions. On the Quebec issue, for instance, they were asked: "How much does the Liberal party want to do for Quebec: more, less, or about the same as now?," with the follow-up question about whether it wants to do a lot, somewhat or a little more (or less). This allows us to locate respondents' perceptions of the parties' positions on each issue on the same -3 to +3 scale.

The CES survey measured a wide variety of economic evaluations. Like Alvarez and his colleagues, we focus on retrospective judgments, and distinguish egocentric (whether the respondent's financial situation had improved or worsened over the previous year) and sociotropic evaluations (whether the respondent thought that Canada's economy as a whole had got better, worse or stayed the same).

The analysis is restricted to an examination of the vote outside Quebec. The party system is different in Quebec, with the presence of the Bloc Québécois, the virtual absence of Reform, and the extreme weakness of the New Democratic Party (less than 2 per cent of the vote). Outside Quebec, the Liberal share of the vote in the 1997 election was 39 per cent; Reform came second with 27 per cent, the Conservatives third with 18 per cent and the NDP fourth with 15 per cent.¹⁵ Our main purpose is to determine to what extent the Liberal lead in vote support can be imputed to the economy and to party positions on the issues.

How Did Voters Feel About the Issues and the Economy?

Table 1 shows the distribution of responses on the two issues.¹⁶ On taxes versus social programmes, the dominant position, adopted by three voters out of five, was the status quo. About one voter out of four would have liked a reduction in taxes, and one out of six would have preferred increased

spending on social programmes. The first choice was the status quo and the second lower taxes. The overall mean (on the -3 to +3 scale) was -0.3.

--Table 1 about here--

Differences were more substantial on Quebec. Only one out of ten Canadians thought that more should be done for Quebec. The dominant position was the status quo, but a substantial minority would have liked less to be done for Quebec, and among this group the most frequent position was a lot less. The mean position was a little less (-0.7).

Table 2 indicates the mean scores ascribed to the parties on the two issues. Following Alvarez and Nagler,¹⁷ we use these mean scores as proxies for parties' actual positions.

-- Table 2 about here--

On the taxes versus social programmes issue, the Liberals were perceived to be close to the neutral point, the NDP to stand for a slight increase in social programmes, the Conservatives for small tax cuts and Reform for somewhat more substantial tax reductions. On this issue, the average distance between voters' and parties' positions is lowest for the Liberals (Table 3). On the Quebec issue, the NDP was perceived to occupy the middle ground, with the Liberals and the Conservatives standing for doing a little more, and Reform for doing somewhat less. The NDP was closest to the position of the average voter, and had the lowest average distance from voters' positions (Table 3), and the Liberals were farthest, overall, from voters.

-- Table 3 about here--

Table 4 indicates how Canadians felt about the economy. As indicated, we consider voters' retrospective evaluations of their own personal finances and of the Canadian economy in general. The modal response for both dimensions was neutral. About half of the sample said that the personal and national economic situation had not changed. That said, egocentric evaluations were slightly

negative. Slightly more people thought that their own personal situation had worsened rather than improved. We find a clearer and opposite pattern for the national economy, where many more people thought that it had improved rather than deteriorated over the previous year.

-- Table 4 about here--

Did the Issues and the Economy Affect Vote Choice?

We estimate a model of vote choice along the lines suggested by Alvarez and Nagler. Like them, we measure the impact of issues through variables that correspond to the absolute difference between the respondent's and the party's position. The hypothesis is that the more distant a respondent is from a party, the less likely she or he is to support that party.¹⁸ We measure the impact of the economy through voters' evaluations of whether their own personal financial situation and Canada's economy had improved or worsened over the preceding year. Positive/better, negative/worse and neutral/the same evaluations have been coded +1, -1 and 0 respectively. The hypothesis is that the more positive the evaluation, the greater the propensity to vote Liberal. Because the Liberal party is the reference point in the estimation model, the expectation is that economic perceptions will be negatively correlated with voting for the Conservatives, the NDP and Reform (rather than Liberal). The model also includes party identification, and the four most important socio-demographic correlates of vote choice: region, religion, ethnicity and gender.¹⁹ We use a multinomial probit estimation procedure, which is more adequate for multi-party elections than multinomial or conditional logit.²⁰

Table 5 reports the findings. They confirm that, even controlling for party identification, socio-demographic characteristics and economic evaluations, respondents' distance from party positions on the taxes versus social programmes and the Quebec issues had an independent impact

on the propensity to vote for a given party. More specifically, the more distant an individual was from a given party on an issue, the less prone she or he was to vote for that party. Both issues had a distinct impact of similar magnitude. We thus conclude that party positions on these two issues mattered and that voters were systematically more inclined to support the party that was closest to their own views on them.

-- Table 5 about here--

The economy also mattered. The more positive voters felt about the economy, the more likely they were to vote Liberal and the less likely to vote for either of the three other parties. Five of the six economic evaluation coefficients have the expected negative sign, though only one is statistically significant. Egocentric judgments seem to have mattered most, especially for the choice between the NDP and the Liberals, and sociotropic evaluations for the choice between Reform and the Liberals. These results indicate that both the issues and the economy affected the vote.

How Much Difference Did the Issues and the Economy Make?

This is a more difficult question. It can be reformulated the following way: What difference would it have made if the issues or the economy had not mattered, that is, if vote choice had not been affected by either of them? Our strategy is to simulate what the outcome of the election would have been if issues or the economy had had no impact on the vote. We can compare which party each individual is predicted to support given her or his distance from the parties on the two issues, party identification, economic evaluations and socio-demographic characteristics on the one hand, and which party that same respondent would be predicted to support if we were to take into account all these variables except distance from party positions on the two issues. If the two predictions coincide, the implication is that party positions were not decisive in vote choice, since the

respondent is predicted to vote the same way irrespective of perceived closeness or distance from the different parties. If the two predictions diverge, the implication is that the issues were decisive, that the individual would have voted differently if she or he had not factored in party positions on the issues.²¹ The same logic can be applied to economic evaluations. We can compare which party each individual is predicted to support whether or not economic evaluations are included in the model. Only if the two predictions diverge can we conclude that economic evaluations were decisive in the individual's vote choice.²²

With these simulations, it is possible to estimate the *gross* and the *net* impact of issues and the economy on the vote. The gross impact corresponds to the percentage of voters for whom the issues or the economy were decisive in their vote choice, that is, who would have voted differently had they not factored in the one or the other. The net impact corresponds to the overall gain or loss that parties incurred because of the issues and the economy. It is possible, for instance, that issues influenced many voters, but that the net effect on parties was very small. That would be the case if a party gained as many votes among those who agreed with its position as it lost among those who disagreed. The results of the simulations are presented in Table 6. Nine per cent of the sample respondents are predicted to vote differently when their relative distance from party positions are taken into account. For those people, party positions appear to have been decisive in their vote choice. Not surprisingly, different parties made gains and losses among different groups of voters. The net impact was practically nil.²³

-- Table 6 about here--

Economic evaluations appear to have been decisive for 4 per cent of voters. Not surprisingly, the Liberals made some gains among those who were sanguine about the economy but lost among

those with negative evaluations. These gains and losses tended to cancel out. The overall net effect was minimal.

These results lead to the conclusion that issues mattered more than the economy at the individual level. At the aggregate level, however, party gains and losses cancelled out on both dimensions. Neither the issues nor the economy exerted a huge impact on individual vote choice or on the actual outcome of the election. The impact of the economy was quite modest. Party positions were more important at the individual level but their net aggregate impact was practically nil.

Conclusion

We have shown that both the issues and the economy affected individual vote choice in the 1997 Canadian federal election. The closer voters were to a party's positions on the taxes versus social programmes and the Quebec issues, the more likely they were to support that party. And the more sanguine they felt about the economy, the more likely they were to vote for the incumbent Liberals. But issues had a greater impact on individual vote choice than the economy. Twice as many people voted differently because of how they felt about the issues than because of how they felt about the economy.

Our findings indicate that it would be wrong to impute the Liberal victory to the economy or to the issues. The net effect of the economy was minimal. The Liberals gained a little because of their centrist position on the taxes versus social programmes issue but lost a little because they were perceived to be willing to do too much for Quebec.

Appendix : Question wordings

Issues:

1. Taxes vs social programmes:

We face tough choices. Cutting taxes means cutting social programmes and improving social programmes means increasing taxes. If you had to choose, would you cut taxes, increase taxes, or keep taxes as they are?

For those who responded “cutting taxes,” the following question was asked:

Should taxes be cut a lot, somewhat, or just a little?

For those who responded “increasing taxes,” the following question was asked:

Should taxes be increased a lot, somewhat, or just a little?

Remember, cutting taxes means cutting social programmes.

Do you think the [name of the party] wants to cut taxes, increase taxes, or keep taxes as they are?

For those who responded “cutting taxes,” the following question was asked:

Does the [name of the party] want to cut taxes a lot, somewhat, or a little?

For those who responded “increasing taxes,” the following question was asked:

Does the [name of the party] want to increase taxes a lot, somewhat, or a little?

2. Quebec:

How much do you think should be done for Quebec: more, less or about the same as now?

For those who responded “more,” the following question was asked:

Should a lot more be done for Quebec, somewhat more, or a little more?

For those who responded “less,” the following question was asked:

Should a lot less be done for Quebec, somewhat less, or a little less?

How much does the [name of the party] want to do for Quebec: more, less or about the same as now?

For those who responded “more,” the following question was asked:

Does the [name of the party] want to do a lot more for Quebec, somewhat more, or a little more?

For those who responded “less,” the following question was asked:

Does the [name of the party] want to do a lot less for Quebec, somewhat less, or a little less?

Economy:

1. Personal finances:

Financially, are you better off, worse off, or about the same as a year ago?

2. National economy:

Now, I want to ask you about the economy. Over the past year, has Canada's economy gotten better, gotten worse, or stayed about the same?

TABLE 1**Distribution of Voter Opinions (in percentages)**

	Taxes/Programmes	Quebec
-3	6.3	19.7
-2	11.8	13.2
-1	6.0	6.9
0	60.0	50.9
+1	6.1	2.1
+2	9.0	5.1
+3	1.0	2.1
Mean	-0.28	-0.71
N	1551	1590

TABLE 2

Perceived Party Positions (Means)

	Taxes/Programmes	Quebec
Liberal	+0.25	+0.93
Conservative	-0.54	+0.51
NDP	+0.44	-0.22
Reform	-1.08	-1.49

TABLE 3**Distance Between Voters and Parties (Means)**

	Taxes/Programmes	Quebec
Liberal	0.94	1.85
Conservative	1.02	1.50
NDP	1.07	1.14
Reform	1.30	1.49

TABLE 4**Economic Evaluations (in percentages)**

	National Economy	Personal Finance
Positive	37.9	20.0
Neutral	45.7	53.5
Negative	16.4	26.5
N	1727	1715

TABLE 5

Multinomial Probit Model of Vote Choice, Canada 1997 (outside Quebec)

Variables	Choice Specific	Conservative/ Liberal	NDP/ Liberal	Reform/ Liberal
Party Identification	1.67 (.08) ^b			
Issues:				
Taxes	-.16 (.05) ^b			
Quebec	-.21 (.03) ^b			
Personal Finances		.07 (.10)	-.22 (.12)	-.03 (.10)
National Economy		-.07 (.10)	-.13 (.12)	-.26 (.10) ^b
Atlantic		1.13 (.21) ^b	1.43 (.26) ^b	.42 (.24)
West		-.68 (.16)	.51 (.18) ^b	.72 (.14) ^b
Catholic		-.46 (.15) ^b	-.43 (.18) ^a	-.73 (.15) ^b
No religion		-.09 (.21)	.33 (.23)	-.13 (.18)
Male		-.12 (.13)	-.39 (.17) ^a	.11 (.13)
North European		-.16 (.20)	.14 (.23)	.36 (.17) ^a
Non European		-.69 (.25) ^b	-1.05 (.33) ^b	-1.00 (.24) ^b
Constant		-.36 (.14) ^a	-.60 (.17) ^b	.06 (.15)
$\sigma_{LIB,NPD}$	-.34 (.23)			
$\sigma_{PC,REF}$	-.04 (.22)			
$\sigma_{NPD,REF}$.57 (.10) ^b			
N	1668			

^asignificant at .05 (one-tailed test)

^bsignificant at .01 (one-tailed test)

TABLE 6**The Impact of Issues and the Economy**

	Issues	Economy
Gross Impact		
% of voters for whom decisive	9.4	3.9
Net Impact on the Parties		
Liberal	+0.8	+0.3
Reform	+0.4	-0.2
Conservatives	-1.0	+0.3
NDP	-0.1	-0.4

FOOTNOTES

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¹ Richard Nadeau and André Blais, "Explaining Election Outcomes in Canada: Economy and Politics," *this JOURNAL* 26 (1993), 775-90.

² Michael S. Lewis-Beck, Economics and Elections: The Major Western Democracies (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988). Helmut Norporth, "The Economy," in Lawrence LeDuc, Richard G. Niemi and Pippa Norris, eds., Comparing Democracies: Elections and Voting in Global Perspective (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1996), 299-318.

³ Christopher Anderson, Blaming the Government: Citizens and the Economy in Five European Democracies (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1995).

⁴ Michael R. Alvarez and Jonathan Nagler, "Economics, Entitlements, and Social Issues: Voter Choice in the 1996 Presidential Election," American Journal of Political Science 42 (1998), 1362.

⁵ Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, Donald Stokes and Warren E. Miller, The American Voter (New York: John Wiley, 1960).

⁶ Harold D. Clarke, Jane Jenson, Lawrence LeDuc and Jon Pammet, Absent Mandate: The Politics in Discontent in Canada (Toronto: Gage, 1984).

⁷ Michael R. Alvarez, Jonathan Nagler and Shaun Bowler, "Issues, Economics, and the Dynamics of Multiparty Elections," American Political Science Review 94 (2000), 131-49. Samuel L. Popkin, The Reasoning Voter: Communication and Persuasion in Presidential Campaigns (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). Mark Franklin, Thomas T. Mackie, Henry Valen et al., Electoral Change: Responses to Evolving Social and Attitudinal Structures in

Western Democracies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

⁸ Gad Horowitz, "Conservatism, Liberalism, and Socialism in Canada," Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science 32 (1966), 143-71.

⁹ Neil Nevitte, André Blais, Elisabeth Gidengil and Richard Nadeau, An Unsteady State: The 1997 Canadian Election (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹⁰ Michael R. Alvarez and Jonathan Nagler, "Economics, Issues and the Perot Candidacy: Voter Choice in the 1992 Presidential Election," American Journal of Political Science 39 (1995), 714-44; Alvarez and Nagler, "Economics, Entitlements, and Social Issues," American Journal of Political Science 42 (1998), 1349-63; Michael R. Alvarez, Jonathan Nagler and J.R. Willette, "Measuring the Relative Impact of Issues and the Economy in Democratic Elections," Electoral Studies 19 (2000), 237-53 Alvarez, Nagler and Bowler, "Issues, Economics, and the Dynamics of Multiparty Elections." American Political Science Review 94 (2000), 131-50.

¹¹ Richard Johnston, André Blais, Henry A. Brady, Elisabeth Gidengil and Neil Nevitte, "The 1993 Election: Realignment, Dealignment, or Something Else?," paper presented to the 1996 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association in San Francisco. André Blais, Neil Nevitte, Elisabeth Gidengil, Henry Brady and Richard Johnston, "L'élection fédérale de 1993: le comportement électoral des Québécois," Revue québécoise de science politique 27 (1995), 15-49; "Electoral Discontinuity in Canada: The 1993 Federal Election," International Social Science Journal 146 (1995), 583-99.

¹² André Blais, Donald Blake and Stéphane Dion, "Do Parties Make a Difference? Parties and the Size of Government in Liberal Democracies," American Journal of Political Science 37 (1993), 43.

¹³ Hans Dieter Klingemann, Richard I. Hofferbert and Ian Budge, Parties, Policies, and Democracy (Boulder: Westview, 1999).

¹⁴ The CES telephone survey was conducted by the Institute for Social Research (ISR) at York University. ISR interviewed a total of 3949 eligible voters during the campaign. The response rate was 59 per cent. A total of 3170 of these respondents were re-interviewed after the election. Copies of the questionnaires, technical documentation and data set can be obtained at: www.fas.umontreal.ca/pol/ces-ec.

¹⁵ All in all, including Quebec, the Liberals had 38 per cent of the vote, Reform and Conservatives 19 per cent each, and NDP and the Bloc Québécois 11 per cent each. The Liberals won a total of 155 seats out of 301, only three more than the minimum required to form a majority government. For an overview of the election, see Nevitte, Blais, Gidengil and Nadeau, An Unsteady State.

¹⁶ Because the objective of this study is to assess the impact of issues and the economy on the vote, all the data presented here concern those who voted for one of the four main parties.

¹⁷ Alvarez and Nagler, "Economics, Issues and the Perot Candidacy"; "Economics, Entitlements, and Social Issues"; Alvarez, Nagler and Willette, "Measuring the Relative Impact"; Alvarez, Nagler and Bowler, "Issues, Economics, and the Dynamics of Multiparty Elections."

¹⁸ Anthony Downs, An Economic Theory of Democracy (New York: Harper and Row, 1957).

¹⁹ Nevitte, Blais, Gidengil and Nadeau, An Unsteady State.

²⁰ Michael R. Alvarez and Jonathan Nagler, "When Politics and Models Collide: Estimating Models of Multiparty Elections," American Journal of Political Science 42 (1998), 55-96.

²¹ The approach is similar to that followed in R. Michael Alvarez and Jonathan Nagler, "A New Approach for Modeling Strategic Voting in Multiparty Elections," British Journal of Political Science 30 (2000), 57-75. They simulate how many would have voted differently in the 1987 British election if there had been no strategic consideration. It is different from that used by the same authors ("Economics, Issues and the Perot Candidacy," "Economics, Entitlements, and Social Issues,"; see also Alvarez, Nagler and Bowler "Issues, Economics, and the Dynamics of Multiparty

Elections”) on the impact of issues. They compare the level of support a party is predicted to have on the basis of the original multinomial probit estimation, and the level of support it would have been predicted to have had if it had adopted an optimal position (given the positions of the other parties). It seems to us that our approach (which is also used by Alvarez and Nagler in their analysis of strategic voting), in which the counterfactual corresponds to a situation where issues have no impact on vote choice, is the most logical one for assessing what actual difference party positions made on the vote.

²² Again, the counterfactual is a situation in which the economy has no effect on the vote, which is logical for estimating the impact of the economy on the vote. We are trying to estimate how many people would have voted differently if they had not been affected at all by the economy. Alvarez and Nagler estimate how much different the vote would have been if economic evaluations at a given election had been the same as in the preceding (or following) one. The problem with their approach is that so much hinges on which election is used as the reference point. Our methodology has the advantage of using the same counterfactual (no effect) for both the issues and the economy.

²³ The Liberals and the Conservatives make small gains at the expense of Reform on taxes versus social programmes, but Reform makes small gains at the expense of the Liberals and Conservatives on the Quebec issue.