

## **Perceptions of Party Competence in the 1997 Election**

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Leaders come and go, but parties remain. This permanence manifests itself in the relative stability of what is called “party image”.<sup>1</sup> These images refer to the recognized capacity of various parties to deal competently with certain problems and issues. In Great Britain, for instance, “Labour... usually has an historic advantage in terms of public perceptions about the best party for managing the National Health Service, while the Conservatives have usually been regarded as the strongest party on defence”.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, in the United States, “Democrats are seen as better able to handle welfare problems [whereas] perceptions of parties on social issues (e.g., crime and protecting moral values) favor the GOP”.<sup>3</sup>

A party’s reputation has two characteristics. The first is its “breadth”. A party’s reputation is measured by the fact that a certain number of its adversaries recognize its particular competence. In Quebec, for instance, many federalist voters recognize the Parti Québécois as being best able to ensure the protection of the French language.<sup>4</sup> In the United States, in the early 1990s, when the percentages of Democratic and Republican supporters were relatively similar, the Democratic Party was chosen by three times as many voters as the Republicans as the party best able to deal with poverty. The proportions were exactly reversed for questions of national defence.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Robert J. Trilling, *Party Image and Electoral Behavior* (New York: Wiley, 1976).

<sup>2</sup> Pippa Norris, John Curtice, David Sanders, Margaret Scammell, and Holli A. Semetko, *On Message: Communicating the Campaign* (London: Sage, 1999), 82.

<sup>3</sup> John R. Petrocik, “Issue Ownership in Presidential Elections, with a 1980 Case Study”, *American Journal of Political Science* 40 (1996), 831.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Nadeau and Christopher J. Fleury, “Gains linguistiques anticipés et appui à la souveraineté du Québec”, *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 28 (1995), 35-50.

<sup>5</sup> Petrocik, “Issue Ownership in Presidential Elections”, 832.

Party images also tend to be relatively stable, without necessarily being unchangeable.<sup>6</sup> A party which manages to establish itself in a lasting manner as the natural defender of large segments of the population will benefit from an enduring reputation. The case of the Liberal Party of Canada, long perceived in Quebec as the French Canadians' party,<sup>7</sup> is typical in this respect. This reputation also depends more immediately on the party's performance when it is in power. The Hoover administration's economic management in the early 1930s gave the Republicans a long lasting reputation of being "the party of hard times." The recession under Jimmy Carter in contrast to the prosperity under Ronald Reagan modified this image by the early 1990s, leading Petrocik<sup>8</sup> to conclude that "economic matters... were generally a GOP asset."

What is the situation for the Canadian federal parties? Have they managed to establish a reputation in certain specific domains, benefiting from what Budge and Farlie<sup>9</sup> call "issue ownership"? Nadeau and Blais' study<sup>10</sup> attempted to answer this question using data collected by the Gallup firm between the early 1950s and the late 1980s. Three conclusions arose from their analysis. First, it seemed clear that Canadians did perceive significant differences between the Liberal, Conservative and New Democratic parties in terms of their capacity to deal with the major political and economic issues. Second, it appeared that the Liberal Party had, in an overall sense, won the battle of reputations during this period. It did so by getting voters to see it as the best able to deal with the constitutional question

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<sup>6</sup> Norris et al., *On Message*, 82 ; Richard Nadeau and André Blais, "Do Canadians Distinguish Between Parties? Perceptions of Party Competence", *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 23 (1990), 319.

<sup>7</sup> Léon Dion, *Nationalisme et politique au Québec* (Montréal: Hurtubise HMH, 1978), 48 ; Daniel Guérin and Richard Nadeau, "Clivage linguistique et vote économique au Canada", *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 31 (1998), 557-572.

<sup>8</sup> Petrocik, "Issue Ownership in Presidential Elections", 831.

<sup>9</sup> Ian Budge and David Farlie, *Explaining and Predicting Elections* (London: Allen & Urwin, 1983).

<sup>10</sup> Nadeau and Blais, "Do Canadians Distinguish Between Parties?"

and foreign affairs, even while maintaining a relatively positive image as a manager of the economy.<sup>11</sup> Finally, the study's results showed that parties' images evolved over time, with some periods, such as John Diefenbaker's last mandates and Pierre Trudeau's final four years in power,<sup>12</sup> being more significant than others in this respect.

The current chapter uses data from the Canadian Election Study<sup>13</sup> to examine Canadians' perceptions about the parties' competence in dealing with a number of issues at the time of the 1997 federal election. This analysis is of interest for two reasons. First, it allows an assessment of how the arrival of two new parties on the federal scene, namely the Reform Party and the Bloc Québécois, modified these perceptions. Second, it provides a more systematic examination of the effect of party image on Canadian electoral behaviour than has been undertaken to date.

### **The 1997 Canadian Election**

Perceptions of party competence are generally measured using a question asking respondents which party, in their opinion, is best for dealing with a given issue. Using this approach, six issues are examined in Quebec, and five in the rest of Canada: national unity, job creation, taxes, social programs, crime, and, in the Quebec case, the defence of that province's interests. The exact formulation of the

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<sup>11</sup> Nadeau and Blais, "Do Canadians Distinguish Between Parties?", 323, Table 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 327-28.

<sup>13</sup> The Canadian Election Study was funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The survey was conducted by the Institute for Social Research at York University under the supervision of André Blais, Elisabeth Gidengil, Richard Nadeau and Neil Nevitte. A total of 3949 eligible voters were interviewed during the campaign, and 3170 of them were re-interviewed in a post-election survey. The average response rate was 59 percent. The questions used in this chapter come from the election wave of the study.

question is: “In your view, which party would be best at: maintaining national unity? creating jobs? cutting taxes? protecting social programs? fighting crime? defending the interests of Quebec? (Quebec only)”

These issues reflect the election’s context, but also, in a more general manner, the big questions around which the federal parties seek to establish their credentials. National unity and the defence of Quebec’s interests are recurrent themes in Canadian politics. The same can be said for balancing the maintenance of social programs with the tax burden. Crime is a dominant issue in the United States where the reputation of being “soft on crime” can be costly<sup>14</sup> and it is also an important dimension of the Reform Party’s discourse. These survey questions reflect the framing of these issues in 1997, particularly with respect to the matter of tax reduction (advanced by the Conservative and Reform parties) and the issue of maintaining social programs (defended largely by the Liberal and New Democratic parties).

The perceptions of Quebecers and Canadians-outside-Quebec are presented in Table 1 and illustrated by Figures 1, 2 and 3.<sup>15</sup> The generally important, and sometimes very pronounced gap between voting intentions and perceptions of party competence displayed in Table 1 shows that these perceptions represent more than simple projections. The point is clearly illustrated in Figures 1 and 2, which indicate differences between the general popularity of the parties and perceptions of their specific expertise in various domains. If there was a perfect relationship between popularity and competence,

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<sup>14</sup> Darrell M. West, *Air Wars: Television and Advertising in Election Campaigns, 1952-1996* (Washington: Congressional Quarterly, 1997).

<sup>15</sup> Non-responses (don't know, refusals, etc.) are excluded in Table 1 and Figures 1 and 2. For an analysis of some of the information in this table and these figures including the nonresponse, see Neil Nevitte, André Blais, Elisabeth Gidengil and Richard Nadeau, *Unsteady State: The 1997 Canadian Federal Election* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1999).

the party locations in these figures would cluster around the origin (that is to say the value of zero). This is clearly not the case.

Party images seem to have better defined contours for voters outside of Quebec, as Figure 3 illustrates. The percentage of respondents unable, or refusing, to choose the most competent party on an issue is clearly higher in Quebec than elsewhere in Canada (34 versus 22% for the five common issues). The only case where the percentage of those not naming a party is relatively weak in Quebec is, significantly, the issue of defending Quebec's interests.

#### *Canada-outside-Quebec*

The national unity question is at the heart of Canadian political debates. The data confirm the Liberal Party's positive image on this issue.<sup>16</sup> While 40% of respondents in our study support this party overall, 55% of those with an opinion on the question believe it is the party most adept at dealing with the issue. The constitutional question thus remains a trump card for the Liberals.

The relative esteem on this issue of Jean Charest's Conservative Party must also be noted. More than one in four voters recognized the party's competence on this matter, placing it 9 points above its electoral support (26 vs. 17%). Together, these two traditional federal parties appear as best able to deal with the constitutional question for more than 4 out of 5 voters. This polarization underlines the difficulty of Reform and the NDP in establishing their credibility on this question. For the NDP, chosen by only 8% of respondents, this problem reaches back several decades<sup>17</sup> and does not seem to have

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<sup>16</sup> Nadeau and Blais, "Do Canadians Distinguish Between Parties?", 332.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 332.

changed much over time. As for Reform's problems on this question, they may result from its image as an "extremist" party<sup>18</sup> and its difficulty in projecting the image of being a national party.

Over the past fifteen years, the central issue for many voters has been job creation. No less than 83% of Canadians considered this question as being very important at the time of the last election.<sup>19</sup> Note that no party has managed to break away from the pack in a decisive manner on this question (see Table 1). Also, neither right-wing nor centrist or left-wing parties seem to have established their credentials on this issue. When comparing overall vote versus perceived competence on the issue of job creation, the Liberals suffered a small (2 points) and the Reform a large (11 points) deficit on this question, to the profit of the Conservatives and the New Democrats. These results show that the opposition parties were unable to gain any advantage from dissatisfaction with the Liberals' job creation performance that was voiced by nearly 70% of Canadians.<sup>20</sup> These findings also underline the point that the NDP, which one might have expected to benefit from a focus on the question of jobs, did not

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<sup>18</sup> No fewer than 49% of respondents agreed with the statement that "Preston Manning is a threat to Canadian unity."

<sup>19</sup> The importance of the various issues was measured using an open question ("What is the most important issue to you personally in this election?") and a series of closed questions of the following form: "To you personally, in this election, is [preserving national unity; creating jobs; cutting taxes; protecting social programs; fighting crime; defending the interests of Quebec (Quebec only)] very important, somewhat important or not very important?" The percentage of respondents choosing the "very important" category of the closed question are as follows: creating jobs (84%); fighting crime (69%); protecting social programs (60%); preserving national unity (56%); cutting taxes (41%); defending the interests of Quebec (56%). These results clearly show that job creation was the dominant issue in the 1997 election and that tax reduction did not appear as a priority for many voters. The answers to the open question confirm the predominance of the jobs issue and reinforce the impression that the right-wing parties lost the agenda-setting battle during the election. The percentage of voters mentioning the different issues is as follows: jobs and unemployment (29%); social programs (16%); national unity (9%); cutting taxes (5%); crime (2%).

<sup>20</sup> The performance of the incumbent Liberal government on certain issues was measured using the following series of questions: "How good a job do you think the Liberal government has done in preserving national unity, creating jobs, reducing the deficit, fighting crime, protecting social programs, defending the interests of Quebec?" The percentage of voters very or fairly satisfied with the government's performance among those with an opinion on these issues shows the severity of Canadians' judgement on the jobs question as compared to the others: reducing the deficit (63%); preserving national unity (55%); fighting crime (48%); protecting social programs (47%); defending the interests of Quebec (35%); creating jobs (29%).

manage to establish a genuine issue ownership on this topic. Finally, the data indicate that the Reform Party has convinced few Canadians so far that cutting taxes will pave the way to job creation.

The issues generally associated with more marked ideological positioning seem to have offered federal parties better possibilities for establishing their own domains of credibility. The recognized competence of the NDP in the maintenance of social programs is absolutely remarkable in this regard. While only 13% of voters outside of Quebec supported this party, no fewer than 41% of them viewed this party as the most competent for preserving social gains. This gap between support and recognized competence in this instance is the most pronounced gap in the rest of Canada and the second most pronounced in all of Canada.

This result underlines both the strength and the weakness of the NDP's image. Clearly, for many Canadians including numerous voters from other parties,<sup>21</sup> the NDP continues to be Parliament's social conscience, and the clear-cut nature of this image is not without interest for the party. At the same time, however, the party appears trapped in this image.

The issue of social programs helps parties on the left and centre of the political spectrum, with 74% of Canadians seeing the New Democratic and the Liberal parties as the best defenders of these programs. What, then, are the questions over which right-wing parties tend to establish issue ownership? The case of taxation is particularly explicit in this regard. While the PCs and Reform receive the support of 47% of the electorate, 70% of voters see these parties as most apt to reduce taxes. It is interesting to note that this competence is not imputed to one party any more than the other;

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<sup>21</sup> The New Democrats' advantage on social programs is explained by the significant transfusions of support from partisans of other political parties who recognized the NDP's greater competence on the question. While the NDP's competence on social programs is recognized quasi-unanimously by its supporters (88%), nearly a third (32%) of supporters of the other parties defect and choose Alexa McDonough's party as being most predisposed to preserve social programs.

both receive widespread support on this question. The situation is different for the question of crime. In this case, Preston Manning's Reform Party pulls away (37%) from the Conservatives (19%), just a few points ahead of the Liberals (34%) who seem to have avoided being seen as "too soft on crime."

These findings show that voters see important differences among parties. These perceptions of party reputation are also remarkably coherent given the positioning of the parties and the accent of their campaigns in 1997. Nearly 70% of voters recognize the more right-wing parties' greater competence for reducing taxes and nearly 75% regard the more centrist or left-wing parties as better defenders of social programs.

The results are equally informative concerning the positioning of the parties and their growth potential. The case of the NDP is clearest in this regard. In the eyes of many, its function is limited to being a watch-dog for social programs. Beyond this issue, its growth potential seems singularly limited by its inability to establish the image of being competent in dealing with other issue areas (all below 20%). In short, if we add this study's observations to Nadeau and Blais' results<sup>22</sup> showing that the NDP is also handicapped by a negative image concerning its capacity to deal with international affairs, it would seem that its short-term prospects are limited.

The same seems to hold for Reform. The party has managed to establish its credibility on the crime question, and it shares with the Conservatives the image of being a party favorable to the taxpayer. But again, this seems to be a limited expertise which does not show the breadth expected of a governing party. For example, Reform has not been able to establish an image of competence (below 20%) on the questions of job creation, national unity, and the maintenance of social programs. This amounts to an

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<sup>22</sup> Nadeau and Blais, "Do Canadians Distinguish Between Parties?", 332.

imposing problem for a party which as the Official Opposition seeks to present itself as an alternative to the current Liberal government.

The situation, however, seems a bit more promising for the Conservative Party which has managed to situate itself sufficiently to the right to be a taxpayer-friendly party, even while conserving some credibility in terms of job creation and national unity (despite the legacy of Mulroney's second mandate). However, the Conservatives lack the touch of firmness in terms of crime, which largely remains Reform's domain.

The results also underline the complementarity of the Conservative and Reform parties on the right of the Canadian ideological.<sup>23</sup> Both parties benefited from the same positive perceptions about their capacity to lower taxes, which constitutes a potential advantage at a time when this question appears increasingly salient. Reform's greater rigour in terms of crime also gave the right-wing parties an advantage over the incumbent government (56% for Reform and the PCs combined against 34% for the Liberals). Nonetheless, the Conservative-Reform amalgam plainly did not amount to a complementary synergy on questions of national unity and on the maintenance of social programs (where the combined percentages are below the Liberal Party).

The comparison between the parties' popularity and competence shows, at least at first glance, the paradoxical character of the Liberals' situation. This political formation benefits from a significant core of supporters and seems almost impossible to dislodge as the governing party.<sup>24</sup> However, this situation does not seem to be based, at least at first sight, on a generalized recognition of its competence to deal with the big issues facing Canadian society. With the exception of national unity, the percentage

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<sup>23</sup> See Archer and Whitehorn, also Archer and Ellis in this volume.

<sup>24</sup> Nevitte et al., *Unsteady State*.

of Canadians attributing to the Liberals a greater competence for dealing with these issues is systematically lower than their electoral support (see Table 1 and Figure 1).

This paradox, however, may only be a superficial one. On the one hand, the Liberal Party clearly dominates the unavoidable theme of national unity. On the other hand, despite the dissatisfaction with the government's performance on the crucial issue of job creation, the Liberal Party does not seem to have been confronted by any serious competitors on this question, either from the left or right. Finally, what is striking is less the level of recognized Liberal expertise than its breadth. Jean Chrétien's party dominates perceptions of competence in two cases, namely national unity and jobs, and finishes a strong second in both the left-wing domain of maintaining social programs as well as the right-wing domain of managing crime. It is the Liberals' versatility, perhaps, which is a strength and the key to the solidity and breadth of their support. There was only one domain in 1997, namely that of taxation, in which the Liberals had a limited competence profile and this may explain why tax cuts will occupy a very central place during the Liberals' current mandate. This same result also highlights the dilemma facing the right-wing parties. If Paul Martin introduces significant tax reductions, their response may consist of calling for even more significant tax cuts. But at some point, the question of maintaining social programs comes into play and on that matter, we have seen, the Reform and Conservative parties are plainly at a disadvantage.

### *Quebec*

As is now evident, the parties' images in Quebec are less clear-cut than in the rest of Canada (see Figure 2). Quebecers' difficulties in grasping the different parties' areas of competence

demonstrates this. This ambiguity does not, however, extend to the constitutional question. The Liberal Party is clearly seen as the party most apt to maintain national unity, while the Bloc Québécois in turn is clearly seen as the best able to defend Quebec's interests. The importance of these interrelated but slightly different issues, and the well-established positions of these two parties, one resolutely federalist and the other firmly sovereignist, leave the Conservatives hardly any electoral room to manoeuvre on this question.

The data concerning the constitutional issues clearly signal the Bloc Québécois' difficulty in establishing its credibility and expertise beyond its role as defender of Quebec's interests. This holds even with respect to such issues as jobs and social programs where its ideological orientation might have provided it with an advantage over the other parties (see Figure 2 where the Bloc's deficit on all issues besides defending Quebec's interests is illustrated).

The fact that the Bloc is confined to the role of opposition in a certain sense permits the parties with a vocation for power to differentiate themselves more easily. This may in part explain the Liberals domination of most issues, regardless of whether they are of a right-wing (crime) or of a more left-wing nature (jobs and social programs). This also seems to hold for the Conservatives who, beyond their domination of the tax question, also gain significant ground for their competence in the domains of national unity, job creation, and, surprisingly, social programs.

These results suggest two interpretations of the Quebec electorate. The fundamental role of the constitutional question comes out clearly. While Quebecers are hesitant to designate the most competent party to deal with such fundamental issues as job creation, taxation, or social programs, they overwhelmingly pronounce themselves on the question of defending Quebec's interests. Barely 10% of voters hesitate or refuse to make a decision on this question, which is the smallest number of discreet or

perplexed responses of the eleven cases studied (5 issues outside Quebec and 6 issues in Quebec). The Bloc Québécois' strength essentially rests on the importance of the constitutional question at election time, and this strength, with the dominance of the Bloc as defender of Quebec's interests being spectacular even among federalist voters,<sup>25</sup> is also the party's greatest weakness. While leading the pack in defending Quebec, the Bloc Québécois trails the pack on all the other issues in the voters' minds.

Without a doubt, the open field left by the Bloc aids the federalist parties, and particularly the Liberals, who can compensate for their weakness on the question of defending Quebec's interests with the managerial reputation gained from exercising power. But the federalist parties' advantage is in turn diminished by the much narrower ideological polarization of Quebec voters; this ideological terrain is murkier and so it is far more difficult for parties to acquire solid issue ownerships (as is suggested by the large number of uncertain respondents on the question of competence), and to use these ownerships to link voting intentions to party reputations.

### **Issue Ownership and the Vote in the 1997 Election**

Canadians distinguish between parties when it comes to their capacity to deal with certain important issues. The fundamental question that remains to be determined is whether these perceptions exert a significant influence on the vote. Given the well-documented presence of a projection effect on

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<sup>25</sup> The Bloc Québécois' massive advantage results from the virtual unanimity of its supporters (97%) and the division of the federalists on this question, with 48% of them designating the BQ as most inclined to defend Quebec's interests versus only 30% for the Liberals and 23% for the PCs.

perceptions of party competence (i.e. many voters use their partisan preferences to determine party competence rather than the other way around), the question is best answered by using multivariate analysis.

The model seeks to measure the effect of party image on voting, while controlling for a certain number of factors besides party competence. The choice of these variables is justified by the accumulated knowledge of electoral behaviour in Quebec and Canada.<sup>26</sup> These variables take account of respondents' socio-economic characteristics (age, sex, education, income, religion, language), their region of residence (Atlantic provinces, Prairies and British Columbia for Canada-Outside-Quebec, with Ontario as the intercept term), their feelings of party identification, and their evaluation of the party leaders. The complete description of the variables used is presented as an Appendix, and the results are listed in Tables 2 and 3.<sup>27</sup>

### *Canada-Outside-Quebec*

The results in Table 2 contain few surprises in terms of the impact of the control variables. They clearly confirm the parties' regional strengths at the time of the last election. The strength of the Liberals in Ontario (the coefficients for the other regional variables being all negative and significant) and of the Reform Party in the Prairies and British Columbia is starkly revealed. That the Liberals' losses in the Maritimes ended up helping the Conservatives and New Democrats is also well highlighted. The socio-

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<sup>26</sup> Nevitte et al., *Unsteady State*.

<sup>27</sup> The addition of supplementary variables (respondents' values, perceptions of the economy, positions on certain issues, etc.) produce very slight differences among the control variables but do not modify in any substantive fashion this section's conclusion. These variables are described in Nevitte et al., *Unsteady State*. The results of these analyses can be obtained from the authors upon request.

demographic variables illustrate the existence of a gender gap characterized by greater support for the NDP among women voters, and greater support for Reform among male voters. Finally, Catholic voters' traditional support for the Liberal Party, and their reticence to support Reform, is also clear from the results.<sup>28</sup>

More immediate political determinants evidently play an even greater role in voting decisions. The impact of partisan identification on voting is clearly very important in all cases. To take the Liberal case as an example, the effect of identifying with this party rather than another had the effect, by itself, of increasing the probability of supporting this party by 34 percentage points.<sup>29</sup> And given the broad base of traditional Liberal support, this consideration is of considerable significance. The effect of voters' evaluations of the party leaders is also very significant, as the magnitude of the coefficients associated with this variable in the different equations demonstrates.

Clearly, our main interest concerns the impact of party reputation on vote choices. That impact appears important and systematic; 19 out of 20 coefficients measuring this variable have the expected sign, and 14 of them turn out to be statistically significant. But there are other intriguing findings beyond this general pattern.

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<sup>28</sup> Matthew Mendelsohn and Richard Nadeau, "The Religious Cleavage and the Media in Canada", *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 30 (1997), 129-146.

<sup>29</sup> When the dependent variable is dichotomous, as it is for the analyses in Tables 2 and 3, it is preferable to use the logistic regression method (Scott Menard, *Applied Logistic Regression Analysis* [Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1995]). We, nevertheless, present the results obtained by the method of ordinary least squares (OLS), which are virtually identical, and whose coefficients are easier to interpret. These coefficients measure the increase in the probability of voting for a party when one moves from one extreme category of the explanatory variable to the other. In the case of party identification for the Liberals, the coefficient of 0.17 signifies that the probability of voting for the Liberals increases, ceteris paribus, by 34 points when one moves from the category -1 (supporter of another party) to the category 1 (Liberal Party supporter). The interpretation of the coefficients for the variables measuring party competence is the same since these variables are coded in the same manner (see the Appendix).

One concerns the relative impact of the different issues. Notice that the employment issue is the one most strongly and systematically related to voting. What is also interesting, as Table 1 and Figure 1 underline, is that this is the issue for which the gap between perceptions of competence and party support is not very pronounced. The implication is that the opposition parties' inability to establish their credibility on the matter of job creation, despite the sizeable dissatisfaction with the Liberals on this question, provides an important key to understanding the result of the June 2<sup>nd</sup> election. Another lesson to draw from this result is that the opposition party that eventually does manage to establish credibility on this issue will gain an important or even decisive advantage in the future.

The other issue most directly linked to voting is national unity. The interpretation of the coefficients must take account of the distribution of perceptions on the parties' competence. This is the case, for example, when one seeks to measure the meaning of the coefficient, which is the same for the Liberal and Reform parties. The difference here resides in the fact that there are five and half times more Canadians outside Quebec (55% vs. 10%, see Table 1) expressing confidence in the Liberals rather than Reform in dealing with this issue, a distribution of opinion which favours Jean Chrétien's party.<sup>30</sup> Also intriguing is the high coefficient for the Charest-led Conservative party. This indicates once again that the national unity issue benefits Canada's two big "national" parties at the expense of the NDP and Reform.

The other results are also coherent and informative. The only other significant coefficient for the NDP besides jobs is the one concerning social programs, a finding that confirms the advantage the party draws from its image as Parliament's social conscience. Finally, it is interesting to note that the issues

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<sup>30</sup> The opposite distribution, 55% for the Reform and 10% for the Liberals, would have cost about two percentage points for the Liberals and produced a gain of similar magnitude for the Reform Party.

associated with right-wing parties (e.g. taxes and crime) are linked in a more systematic manner to the support received by the Conservative and Reform parties (this is particularly true concerning taxation). The relatively low importance voters assign to these issues, and particularly crime, again suggests that these parties, while benefiting from well-established reputations on these issues, gained few votes in 1997 because of their position on these issues. In effect, these parties thus lost the election's battle over agenda-setting in 1997.

### *Quebec*

The results for Quebec, presented in Table 3, show the expected contrast between the Liberal and Bloc clientele, one older and less francophone and the other presenting the inverse characteristics. This highlights the very undifferentiated socio-demographic character of the Conservative clientele in Quebec. The contrast between the relative effect of partisan identification and the evaluation of the leaders for the Conservatives is a sharp contrast to the two other major parties; this underlines the Conservatives' weak roots in Quebec, and highlights the extent to which Conservative support in 1997 was linked to its leader's popularity.

The results on party images confirm the preceding sections' hypotheses. On the one hand, the link between party images on issues and voting is much less systematic in Quebec than in the rest of Canada. Only seven of the eighteen coefficients show the expected sign while being statistically significant. On the other hand, two dimensions stand out fairly clearly. These involve the question of jobs, where the Liberal vote seems particularly linked to their perceived competence on this question,

and, not surprisingly, the question of the defence of Quebec's interests. The Bloc Québécois benefits substantially from this latter question given Quebecers quasi-consensus on its competence in this domain.

The weakness of the coefficients in the Conservative case, the impact of the dimension of Quebec's interests for the Bloc and a certain diversity of effects for the Liberal Party seem to confirm that the 1997 election in Quebec was the story of the leader for the Conservatives, of a single issue for the Bloc, and of the government's record for the Liberals.

### **Conclusion**

Canadians recognize that certain parties have particular expertise, and these perceptions count when it comes to making voting decisions. Parties' images, as well as the impact of their reputation, vary depending on the region. Anchored largely on the national question in Quebec, perceptions of the parties are more diversified and politically significant in the rest of Canada. This battle of reputations favours the Liberal Party. Dominant on the national unity question, Jean Chrétien's Liberal Party has yet to face serious competition over the job creation issue, even while it continues to be seen as the most adept at dealing with a relatively large number of problems (such as crime and social programs) by a large number of Canadians.

The depth of the Liberals' reputation stands in stark contrast with the narrowness of the other parties' issue ownership. The Bloc Québécois and the NDP are one-issue parties, dealing with Quebec in one case and social programs in the other. Meanwhile, Reform's comparative advantages on taxation and crime are counter-acted by its weak credibility on the issues of job creation, national unity, and of

maintaining the social safety net. Between these extremes, the Conservatives' position appears more ambiguous.

If one measures a party's electoral viability and its potential as a government party by its capacity to present a breadth and depth in its fields of expertise, the situation appears rather rosy for the Liberals and sombre for the opposition parties. This is especially the case since the Liberals' only apparent weakness, namely high taxation, is one that can be addressed by Paul Martin in the course of the present mandate. In this respect, the Liberals can control their own fate.

It is possible that the current context will push certain parties to change their image. The NDP may decide to break out of its role as Parliament's social conscience, and consider making some doctrinal changes in order to improve its image as an economic manager in order to develop a genuine issue ownership over the question of job creation in particular. The Bloc Québécois' room for manoeuvre in changing its image is limited. It is reasonable to think that this party, whose political agenda is largely beyond its grasp, will continue to be seen as a party whose single issue is the defence of Quebec's interests.

Reform's task, which would consist in maintaining its relative advantage over certain right-wing issues like crime and taxation even while offering a more acceptable image in terms of national unity and social programs, appears equally difficult. This leaves the Conservatives, with few striking strengths and weaknesses. The amalgam of Conservative moderation (national unity, job creation, social programs) and of Reformist determination (taxation and crime) seems to constitute the only alternative to the current Liberal government. Nevertheless, the conditions in which such an amalgam might come together remain as difficult to establish as to foresee despite all the recent efforts by some to create such an alliance.

## **APPENDIX : DESCRIPTION OF VARIABLES FROM THE VOTE REGRESSIONS**

### **Vote**

The following question has been used: “Which party did you vote for: the Liberal Party, the Conservative Party, the New Democratic Party, the Reform Party, or another party?” Five variables have been created, one for each party. Each variable takes the value of 1 if the respondent voted for the party, and 0 if the respondent voted for another party.

### **Socio-demographic Characteristics**

Variables have been coded on a scale from 0 to 1 where Age is the actual age of the respondent (continuous variable divided by 100), Male is a gender dummy variable (male=1, female=0), School is a 9-point scale running from 0 (no schooling) to 1 (completed university), Income is operationalized with two dummy variables (lowest and highest quintiles), Catholic is a religion dummy variable (Catholic=1, any other religion=0), Non-francophone is a language dummy variable (French=0, any other language=1), and Atlantic, Prairies, and B.C. are regional dummy variables.

### **Party Identification**

The following questions (from the campaign survey) have been used: “In federal politics, do you usually think of yourself as a Liberal, Conservative, NDP, Reform, Bloc or none of these?” and “How strongly (name of the party) do you feel: very strongly, fairly strongly, or not very strongly?” Five variables have been created, one for each party. Each variable takes the value of 1 if the respondent has a strong or a

fairly strong party identification for the party, -1 if the respondent has a strong or a fairly strong party identification for another party, and 0 otherwise.

### **Leader Evaluation**

Variables have been coded on a scale from -1 to +1. The variable used in the regressions is the difference between the score (on a 0 to 1 scale) given to the leader of a given party minus the highest score among the other leaders. The following question (from the post-election survey) has been used: “How do you feel about Jean Chretien, Jean Charest, Alexa McDonough, Preston Manning and Gilles Duceppe, on a scale from 0 to 100, where 0 means you really dislike him/her and 100 means you really like him/her?”

### **Party Competence**

Variables have been coded on a scale from -1 to +1. The following question (from the campaign survey) has been used: “In your view, which party would be best at: preserving national unity, creating jobs, cutting taxes, defending the interests of Quebec, protecting social programs, fighting crime?” A value of +1 means the respondent identified the party for which we are analyzing the support in a given regression, a value of -1 means he/she identified another party, and a value of 0 means he/she identified none (including don't know and refusal).

**Table 1. Perceptions of Party Competence in the 1997 Election***a. Canada-Outside-Quebec (columns %)*

	<b>Vote</b>	Unity	Jobs	Taxes	Social Programs	Crime
Liberals	<b>40</b>	55	38	21	33	34
Conservatives	<b>17</b>	26	24	35	15	19
NDP	<b>13</b>	8	19	12	41	10
Reform	<b>30</b>	10	19	33	11	37
<i>N</i> =	<i>1696</i>	<i>2249</i>	<i>2098</i>	<i>2131</i>	<i>2263</i>	<i>1982</i>

*b. Quebec (columns %)*

	<b>Vote</b>	Unity	Jobs	Taxes	Social Programs	Crime	Interests of Quebec
Liberals	<b>37</b>	59	44	33	41	58	15
Conservatives	<b>22</b>	29	31	47	30	21	12
Bloc Québécois	<b>42</b>	12	25	20	29	21	73
<i>N</i> =	<i>570</i>	<i>724</i>	<i>635</i>	<i>574</i>	<i>616</i>	<i>511</i>	<i>803</i>

Notes: Columns may not add up to 100% due to rounding. 'Other', 'None', 'Abstention', 'Don't Know' and 'Refused' categories are excluded for the vote variable; 'Other', 'None', 'Don't Know' and 'Refused' categories are excluded for the party competence variables.

Source: *Canadian Election Study, 1997*.

Figure 1. Party Competence, Canada-Outside-Quebec

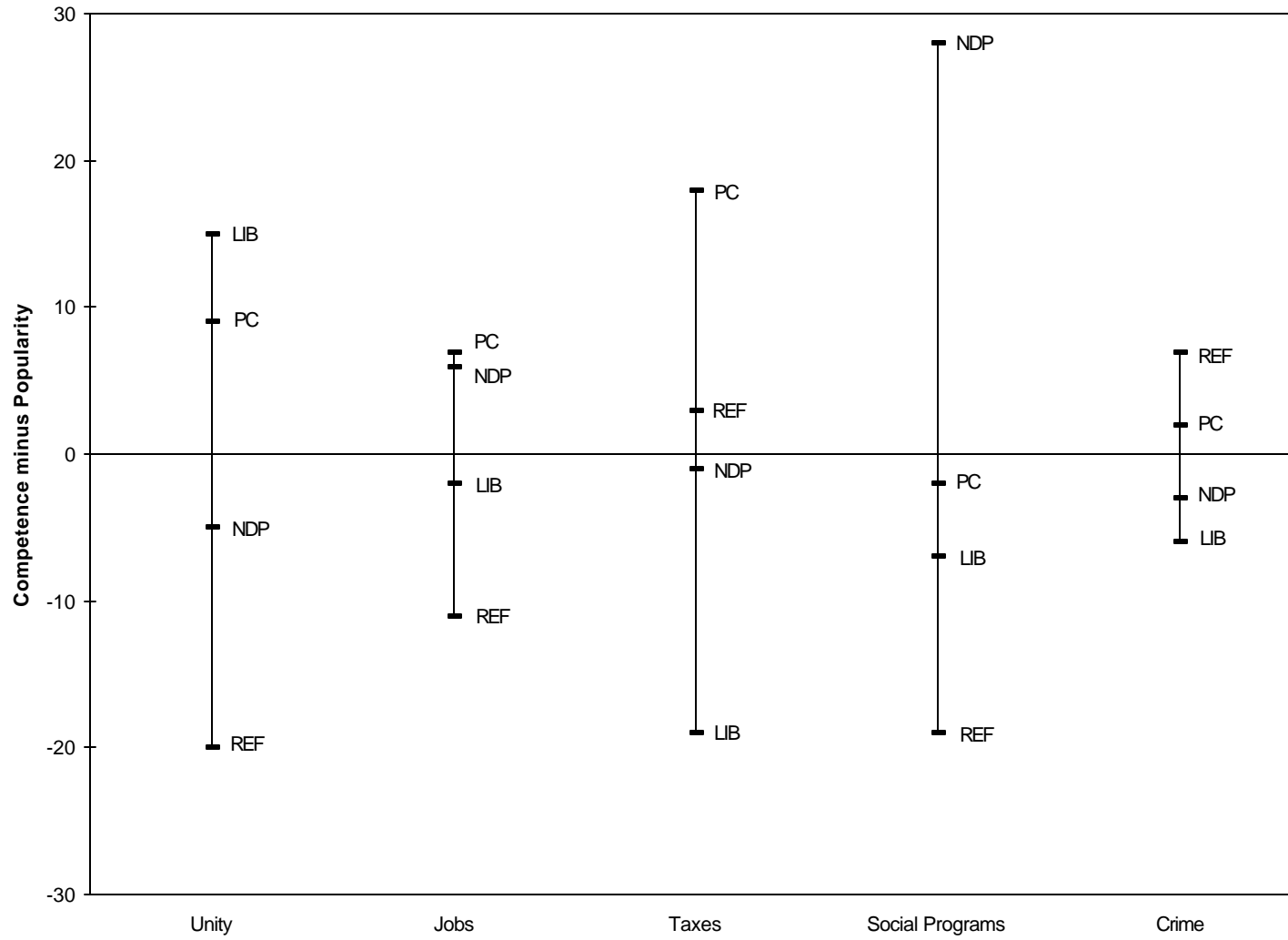
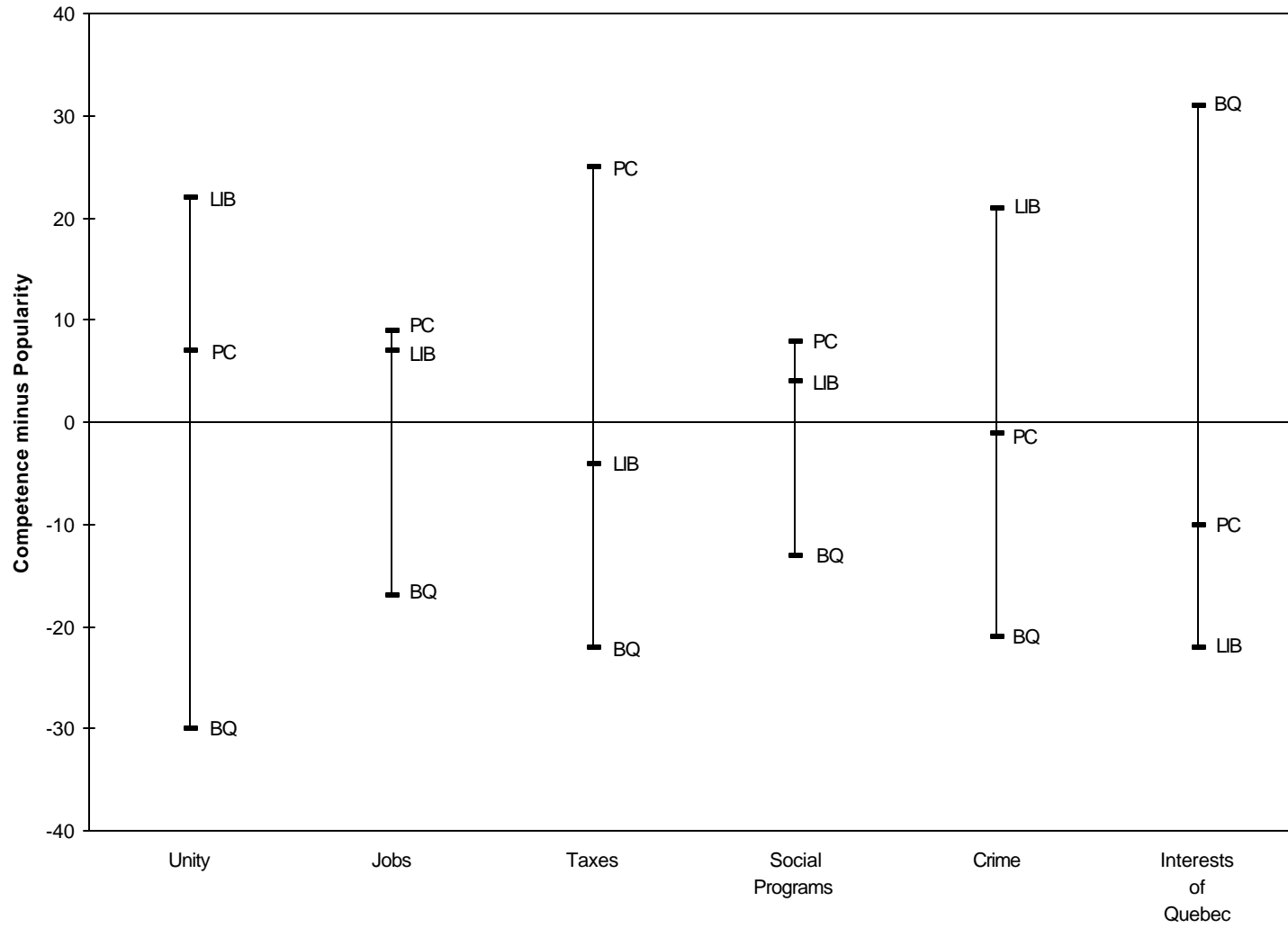
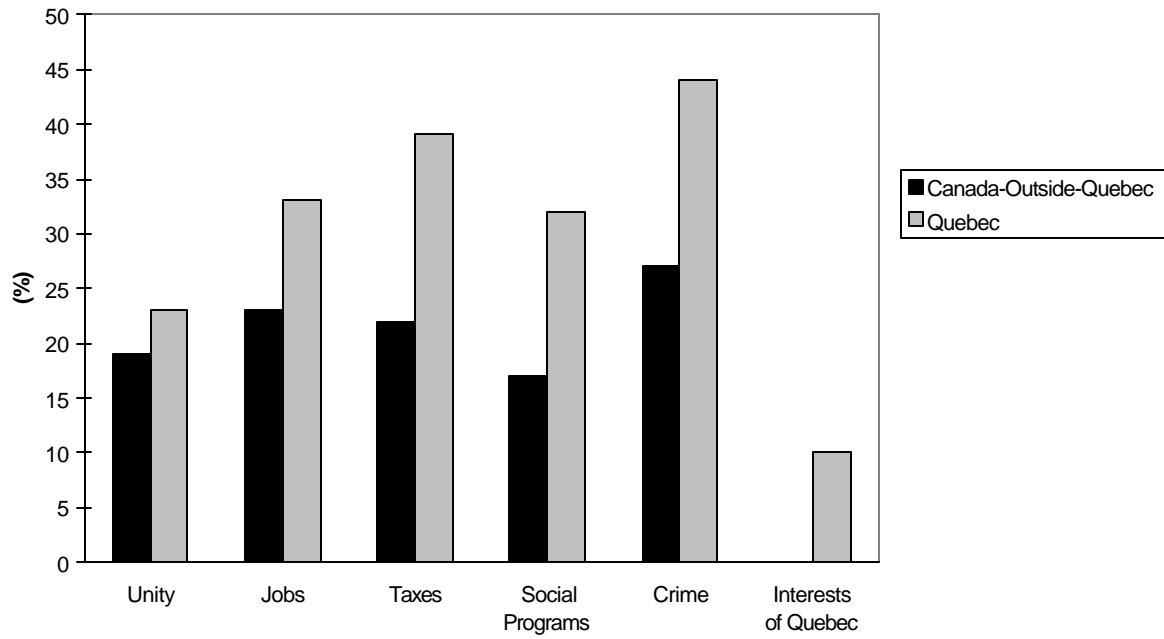


Figure 2. Party Competence, Quebec



**Figure 3. Proportion of "Other/None/Don't Know/Refusal" Responses to the Party Competence Questions**



**Table 2. Vote Regressions, Canada-Outside-Quebec**

	Liberal vote	Conservative vote	NDP vote	Reform vote
Constant	.46**	.28**	.24**	.56**
Age	.00	.05	.04	.07
Male	.03	-.01	-.03*	.04*
School	.01	.07	.10*	-.13**
Low income quintile	-.03	.01	.03	-.03
High income quintile	.02	.03	-.02	.01
Catholic	.10**	-.03	-.01	-.04*
Atlantic	-.14**	.12**	.08**	-.05*
Prairies	-.07**	-.01	.02	.08**
B.C.	-.11**	-.05*	.01	.11**
Party identification	.17**	.11**	.14**	.12**
Leader evaluation	.48**	.31**	.35**	.52**
Preserving national unity	.04**	.07**	-.01	.04**
Creating jobs	.10**	.07**	.07**	.10**
Cutting taxes	.00	.03**	.01	.05**
Protecting social programs	.02*	.03*	.03**	.02
Fighting crime	.05**	.00	.00	.04**
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.47	.34	.35	.57
<i>N</i> =	1553	1553	1553	1553

Note: Entries are unstandardized OLS regression coefficients (\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ).

Source: *Canadian Election Study*, 1997.

**Table 3. Vote Regressions, Quebec**

	Liberal vote	Conservative vote	Bloc Québécois vote
Constant	.43**	.32**	.53**
Age	.09	.08	.05
Male	-.08**	.05	.02
School	-.01	-.08	.03
Low income quintile	.03	.03	-.07*
High income quintile	-.01	.05	-.02
Non-francophone	.25**	-.02	-.05
Party identification	.18**	.12**	.26**
Leader evaluation	.46**	.61**	.54**
Preserving national unity	.01	.03	.02
Creating jobs	.07**	.05*	.00
Cutting taxes	-.01	.02	.05*
Protecting social programs	.04*	.04	.05*
Fighting crime	-.01	.01	-.03
Defending the interests of Quebec	.07**	.02	.06**
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.51	.34	.61
N =	557	557	557

Note: Entries are unstandardized OLS regression coefficients (\*  $p < .05$  ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ).

Source: *Canadian Election Study*, 1997.