

Campaign Dynamics in the 1997 Canadian Election

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Cet article utilise les données de l'Étude sur l'élection canadienne de 1997 pour déterminer si les intentions de vote avaient bougé de façon substantielle au cours de la campagne électorale de 1997 et pour évaluer l'impact de deux événements clés de la campagne: les débats télévisés des chefs et la publicité du Parti réformiste sur les chefs québécois. Les données indiquent que les deux événements ont eu un impact significatif sur les intentions de vote mais que leur impact ne fut que temporaire; l'effet final sur le vote fut négligeable. Les données indiquent également que, indépendamment de ces deux événements, le Parti réformiste a fait des gains durant la campagne, surtout aux dépens du Parti libéral.

The paper uses the 1997 Canadian Election Study (CES) to determine whether there were significant dynamics in the 1997 Canadian election and to provide an assessment of the two key events of the campaign: the televised leader debates and the "Quebec" Reform Party ad. The data indicate that both events had a substantial impact on vote intentions but that the impact was only temporary. Their final effect on the outcome of the election was negligible. The data also indicate that, irrespective of these two events, Reform made some gains during the campaign, mostly at the expense of the Liberals.

Sometimes election campaigns matter: voters do change their minds about whom they intend to vote for during the course of a campaign. The most dramatic evidence comes from the 1993 federal election. The Liberals and the Conservatives were more or less tied in vote intentions at the beginning of the election, but the Liberals ended up with twice as

many votes as the Conservatives (Johnston *et al.* 1994). But campaigns do not always matter. According to one analysis, no notable shifts in vote intentions occurred in six of the Canadian election campaigns since 1945 (Johnston *et al.* 1992, p. 21). The presence or absence of campaign dynamics has to be established case by case.

The following analysis investigates what are generally considered to be the two key events of the 1997 campaign: the televised leaders' debates, which took place on 12 and 13 May¹ and the "Quebec" Reform ad, aired on 22 May, which raised the issue of whether the unity question should be left to Quebec politicians. We will ascertain whether these two events had an effect on the vote.

The most straightforward way to assess the impact of campaign events is by time-series analysis. We follow the methodology developed by Blais and Boyer (1996) to measure the effect of leaders' debates in the 1988 Canadian election. The analysis is based on the 1997 Canadian Election Study (CES).

The campaign wave of the CES is specifically designed to capture campaign dynamics. Every day of the campaign, a miniature sample of around 110 Canadians was interviewed. Within the range of sampling error, all that distinguishes the daily samples is the passage of time. This means that we can compare the responses of our respondents at different moments of the campaign and find out how similar or different these responses are.²

It is important to indicate at the outset the limits of the time-series analysis. The daily estimates of voting intentions are based on very small sample sizes, which imply large sampling errors.³ It would be unwise to rely solely on time-series estimates, which may not be as robust as we would wish. For that reason, we look at other pieces of evidence to validate the findings.

There are at least two major ways in which a campaign may affect a vote choice. First, there are persuasion effects. A campaign may induce voters to reconsider their views of the leaders and/or of the issues. In the 1988 Canadian election, for instance, many Canadians changed their opinions on the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement (Johnston *et al.* 1992, ch. 5). Second, there are priming effects. A campaign may induce voters to attach more (or less)

weight to some considerations than to others. It would seem, for instance, that those who are more exposed to the media in an election campaign come to attach greater importance to their trust (or distrust) in leaders (Mendelsohn 1994).⁴

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Figure 1 presents the five-day moving averages of vote intentions⁵ for the Liberals, the Conservatives and Reform.⁶ The figure confirms the presence of campaign dynamics: both the debates and the Quebec ad could have possibly changed the distribution of vote intentions. In the days following the debates, the Conservatives gained about five points mostly, it seems, at the expense of the Liberals. It is not clear, however, if that gain was only temporary or permanent. As for Reform, it seemed to pick up three or four points after its ad was aired, but again it is not at all clear whether that effect was transient or if it lasted through to the end of the campaign.

Campaign effects are not necessarily immediate; it may take a number of days for a campaign event to reach its full impact. Those who did not follow the campaign very closely, in particular, may have been affected by debates or campaign ads only after a few days. Furthermore, the impact may be only temporary. To test these possibilities, we created four variables: DEBATE, DEBATE², AD, and AD². The DEBATE variable equals 0 until 12 May, the day of the English debate, and the debate variable takes on the values of 1 to 20 in the 20 days following the debate. The AD variable equals 0 until 22 May, the day the ad was first aired, and 1 to 10 in the ten days afterwards. If it takes some days for the debate to reach its peak impact and if the impact then progressively decays, we should observe a positive coefficient on DEBATE and a negative one on DEBATE² (or the reverse, for the party that lost the debate). As in Blais and Boyer (1996), we also control for the distribution of party identifications on a given day.

FIGURE 1
Evolution of Vote Intentions (Canada) (five-day moving averages)

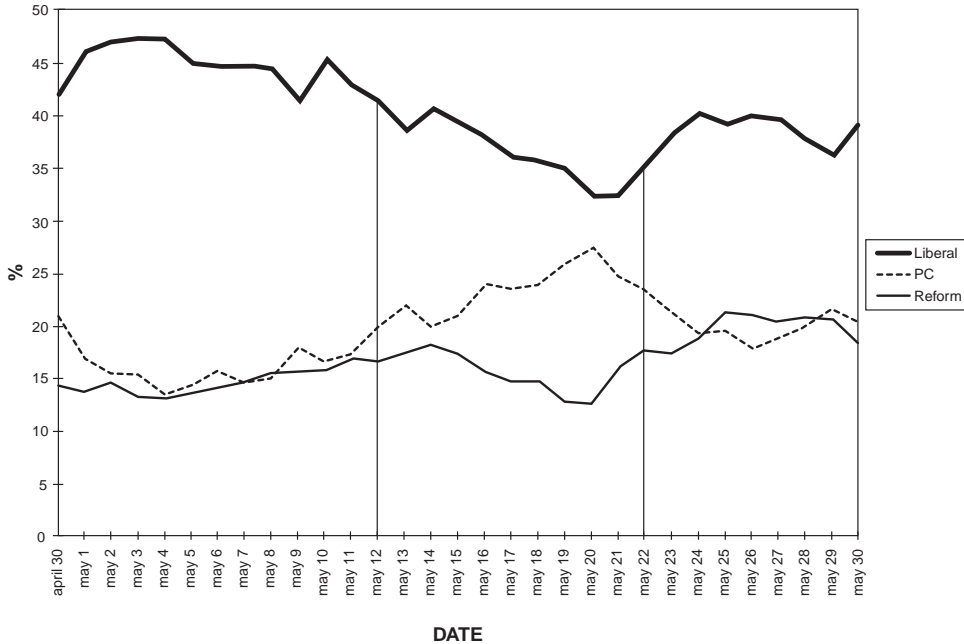


Table 1 presents the findings. Not surprisingly, the results are rather messy when all five variables are entered (panel A), and this is largely because there is strong collinearity among the variables.⁷ Panels B and C present the results when the two ad or two debate variables are omitted, and these results suggest that the debates did have a significant effect on the Liberal and Conservative vote while the ad had a significant impact on Reform support.

With respect to the debates, the results indicate that in the ten days that followed the debates the Conservatives gained about five points to the detriment of the Liberals but that by election day the debates' impact had almost completely decayed.⁸ With respect to the Quebec ad, the data suggest that Reform gained about seven points in the five days immediately following the ad. But they also show that the gain had entirely vanished by election day.⁹

It would thus seem that both events had a substantial impact on vote intentions, but that the impact was only temporary. The final effect on the outcome of the election was negligible.

Other pieces of evidence corroborate the view that the Conservatives did gain from the debates: Charest was thought to be the leader who had done the best in the debates by 63 percent of voters (Chrétien came second, with 21 percent).¹⁰ Perhaps more tellingly, the time-series analysis of feelings toward Charest indicates that the debates increased Charest's ratings permanently by about four points;¹¹ and those gains were not transient, they lasted the entire course of the campaign.

Jean Charest was thus able to improve his own personal image with the two debates. This personal popularity initially transformed into a surge of

TABLE 1
Time-Series Analysis of Vote Intentions

	<i>Liberal Vote Intention</i>	<i>Conservative Vote Intention</i>	<i>Reform Vote Intention</i>
	<i>B (std dev)</i>	<i>B (std dev)</i>	<i>B (std dev)</i>
A.			
DEBATE	-1.4956 (0.95)	1.2690 (0.95)	0.1755 (0.79)
DEBATE ²	0.0685 (0.11)	- 0.0382 (0.11)	-0.0213 (0.09)
AD	2.5437 (2.31)	-3.5700 (2.33)	3.2376 (1.98)
AD ²	-0.2724 (0.13)*	0.3334 (0.13)**	-0.2841 (0.12)**
PARTY IDENTIFICATION	50.8800 (7.64)***	44.1977 (9.27)***	8.6947 (10.36)
Constant	45.6172 (1.10)***	30.4324 (2.93)***	18.5168 (4.29)***
D.W.	2.64	1.99	2.06
N	35	35	35
B.			
DEBATE	-1.1399 (0.40)***	0.9802 (0.41)**	0.3072 (0.35)
DEBATE ²	0.0582 (0.02)**	- 0.0447 (0.02)*	-0.0051 (0.02)
PARTY IDENTIFICATION	50.6265 (7.89)***	43.5418 (9.70)***	17.0442 (10.65)
Constant	45.3202 (1.12)***	30.5625 (3.00)***	21.6501 (4.42)***
D.W.	2.32	1.59	1.84
N	35	35	35
C.			
AD	0.3272 (1.11)	-0.6076 (1.10)	2.8213 (0.81)***
AD ²	-0.0385 (0.13)	0.1001 (0.13)	-0.2919 (0.10)***
PARTY IDENTIFICATION	55.2500 (8.80)***	44.0150 (10.65)***	8.9607 (9.98)
Constant	43.4020 (1.06)***	32.7703 (3.21)***	18.6699 (4.06)***
D.W.	1.91	1.33	2.06
N	35	35	35

Notes: * :significant at $\alpha = .10$
 ** :significant at $\alpha = .05$
 *** :significant at $\alpha = .01$

Conservative vote intentions. This surge, however, proved to be only temporary. This is corroborated by another piece of evidence. As in Blais and Boyer (1996, p. 154), we regressed voting behaviour, as reported in the post-election interview, on perceptions of who had won the debate (also as indicated in the post-election survey), controlling for a whole set of predispositions (vote intention, party identification, leader evaluations,

and socio-demographic variables) tapped in the campaign survey. Contrary to what was observed in 1988, perceptions of the debate had no independent impact on the vote.¹² The debates' impact on Charest's popularity lasted through election day, but a number of voters, it would seem, came to believe by the end of the campaign that this was not enough to stick with the Conservatives.

What about the “Quebec” ad? The ad drew attention to the apparent inability of Quebec leaders to solve the issue, and it posed a rhetorical question: If Quebec-based leaders (Chrétien and Charest) could not solve the Quebec issue, then who could? The ad could have moved public opinion in two ways: first by persuasion effect, reducing voters’ willingness to accommodate Quebec and increasing their opposition to recognizing Quebec as a distinct society and second, by inducing Canadians outside Quebec to revise downwards their appreciation of the two Quebec leaders, Chrétien and Charest. Alternatively, it could have primed opinions on the “Quebec” issue and/or feelings toward Quebec leaders, leading voters to attach greater weight to these considerations in deciding how to vote.¹³

Opinions on the Quebec issue and feelings toward Quebec leaders just did not move.¹⁴ Table 2 compares opinions on how much should be done to accommodate Quebec and on the distinct society clause, as well as feelings toward the three party leaders, in the ten days preceding and in the ten days following the ad. The story is straightforward. There is no indication that opinions about the Quebec issue or feelings toward Quebec leaders shifted at all after the ad.¹⁵

There is no evidence of priming either. Our data indicate that support for Reform is related to views on the Quebec issue and that vote intentions are strongly affected by feelings toward the leaders, even controlling for socio-demographic variables and party identification (results not shown). But the significant point is that the impact of these views and feelings did not get stronger in the ten days following the ad.¹⁶

Why, then, was the Quebec ad able to move vote intentions, at least temporarily? The answer seems to be that it enabled Reform to enhance its image on the national unity front. Before the ad was aired, only 8 percent of Canadians outside Quebec thought that the Reform Party was the most competent to preserve national unity.¹⁷ In the ten days following the ad, the percentage increased to 11 percent. The impact was short-lived, however. When we regress Reform’s average daily score on perceived national unity competence on AD, AD², and PARTY IDENTIFICATION, both AD and AD² turn out to be significant. The results of the regression suggest that the ad improved Reform’s image on national unity for about five days, but that the effect had completely dissipated by election day.¹⁸

TABLE 2
Feelings Toward Quebec and Quebec Leaders before and after the Reform Ad

<i>Outside Quebec Only</i>	<i>10 Days Before the Ad</i>	<i>10 Days After the Ad</i>
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Mean</i>
Opinion on Quebec ¹	-0.72	-0.63
Distinct Society ²	0.44	0.43
Chrétien Rating ³	54.9	54.2
Charest Rating ³	53.0	53.1
Manning Rating ³	41.4	43.0

Notes: ¹On a -3 to +3 scale.
²On a 0 to 1 scale.
³On a 0 to 100 scale.

As expected, there were campaign dynamics around the debates and the Quebec ad. These two events, however, had only a temporary effect and no clear impact on the final outcome. Is this the whole story of the campaign? It does not seem so. A comparison of vote intentions in the first and last ten days of the campaign shows that the Liberals lost four points (from 43 to 39 percent) while Reform and the Conservatives gained six (from 14 to 20 percent) and three (from 17 to 20 percent) respectively. In the case of the Conservatives, the small gain might be imputed to the debates: the time-series analysis suggests a net positive impact of two points in their case (see note 8). Still, these data also suggest that, independent of the two specific events we have examined, some voters did change their minds during the campaign and that the changes were mostly to the benefit of Reform and at the expense of the Liberals.¹⁹

What caused these changes? As far as we can tell they are not related to any specific campaign event. It appears that as the campaign progressed Reform became slightly more attractive and the Liberals slightly less so. What changed?²⁰ If we compare voters' judgements on the performance of the Liberal government on six dimensions (national unity, deficit reduction, job creation, maintaining social programs, fighting crime, and keeping electoral promises) in the first and last ten days of the campaign, the data show that the greatest drop in perceived Liberal performance occurred on two issues — national unity and keeping promises.²¹

On both of these dimensions, the image of Reform improved outside Quebec. Reform was chosen by only 5 percent as the best party on national unity in the first ten days of the campaign; the percentage was 11 percent in the last ten days. Even more importantly, we believe, the percentage saying that Reform was the best for keeping promises shifted from 17 percent in the first ten days to 23 percent in the last ten days.²²

It is interesting, in this respect, to look at reactions to the goods and services tax (GST) affair.

Throughout the campaign, 65 percent of Canadians outside Quebec told us that, in their view, the Liberals had promised to do away with the GST in the 1993 election campaign and that they did not really try to keep their promise.²³ In the first ten days of the campaign, 39 percent of those who thought the Liberals had not kept their promise were still willing to vote Liberal, and 25 percent intended to vote Reform. In the last ten days of the campaign, the Liberals lost and Reform gained about five points in that group.²⁴

CONCLUSION

This investigation of the campaign dynamics thus leads to the following conclusions:

- Yes, there were campaign dynamics during the 1997 election.
- The leaders' debates and the Quebec ad both had an initial impact on vote intentions. The Conservatives and Reform gained about five points in the days following the English debate and the airing of the Quebec ad respectively. In both cases, however, the impact had mostly dissipated by election day.
- Irrespective of these two specific events, Reform made some gains during the campaign, mostly at the expense of the Liberals. Reform was particularly successful in attracting the support of those who did not trust the Liberals to keep their promises.

These findings raise important questions about the timing of events such as the leaders' debates. The impact of the debates is not always only temporary. In 1988, for instance, the debates allowed the Liberals to gain about five points at the expense of the New Democratic Party, and the effect persisted through election day (Blais and Boyer 1996). Still, a leader who wins a debate is likely to be the object of a counter-attack, and there is the real

possibility that some of the initial gain dissipates as election day approaches.

The point is, however, that voters revisit their opinions on the basis of new information provided by parties' ads and leaders' debates. There is ample evidence that the latter, in particular, contribute to the quality of information that voters possess, about both the leaders and the issues (Barr 1991; Bernier and Monière 1991).

The question then becomes: What kind of debate is likely to maximize the quality of the decision people will make on election day? While our study cannot address the issue of format, it can throw some light on the issue of timing. The Canadian approach, which consists of locating the debate at mid-campaign, does seem to make sense. It is useful for voters to be able to compare directly the views of the leaders in a debate. There is the risk, however, that people overreact to one specific event. When the debates take place two or three weeks before the election, voters are allowed to gain new information, but also to reconsider their proper weight. Apparently in 1997, the debates convinced many Canadians that Jean Charest was a good leader, but a number of voters, on second thoughts, came to the conclusion that this was not a sufficient reason to vote Conservative.

NOTES

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¹The English debate took place on 12 May and the French debate on 13 May. The latter was interrupted when the moderator fainted and was continued on 18 May.

²The survey was conducted by the Institute for Social Research at York University. A total of 3,949 eligible

voters were interviewed during the campaign; 3,170 of them were reinterviewed in the post-election survey. The response rate for the campaign survey was 59 percent. For further information on the survey, see Northrup (1998).

³The average daily sample is about 110 respondents, 80 of whom indicate a voting intention. The average sampling error is about 11 percentage points.

⁴A campaign may also lead voters to reconsider their expectations about the various parties' and candidates' chances of winning the election (Bartels 1988).

⁵Each point represents the average of voting intentions for that day and for the two days before and after. Only 19 interviews were completed on 27 April, the day the election was called. Our first "real" day of interview is thus 28 April. The first and last two days are omitted since five-day averages cannot be computed on those days. The margin of error for five-day moving averages is four percentage points.

⁶We focus on these three parties because this is where most of the dynamics occur.

⁷For instance, when we regress AD^2 on $DEBATE$, $DEBATE^2$, and AD , we get an adjusted r^2 of 0.9.

⁸On election day, 20 days after the English debate, the value of $DEBATE$ is 20 and the value of $DEBATE^2$ is 400. Hence, the effect on the Conservatives is: $20(.9802) - 400(.0447) = 1.724$, and the effect on the Liberals is: $20(-1.1399) + 400(.0582) = 0.482$.

⁹On election day, ten days after the ad was first aired, the value of AD is 10 and the value of AD^2 is 100. Hence the effect on Reform is: $10(2.8213) - 100(.2919) = -0.977$.

¹⁰This excludes the 44 percent who could not tell which leader had performed the best. We relied on perceptions of the French debate for francophones and on assessments of the English debate for others. The percentage selecting Charest as the debate winner was lower in the west (56 percent), but the Conservative leader came clearly ahead in that region as well. The percentages who selected Charest as the winner of the debates were 70 percent in the East, 74 percent in Quebec and 58 percent in Ontario.

¹¹When we regress Charest's ratings on $DEBATE$, $DEBATE^2$ and $PARTY IDENTIFICATION$, $DEBATE^2$ does not come out as significant. When we regress the

ratings on LOGDEBATE and PARTY IDENTIFICATION, the coefficient of LOGDEBATE is highly significant. Ratings of Chrétien and of Manning were unaffected by the debates. Charest's ratings were significantly higher in the ten days after the debates than in the ten days before in Ontario (at 0.001 level) and in Quebec (at 0.18 level).

¹²The coefficient is statistically significant but very small: the probability of voting Progressive Conservative increases by less than 1 percent when one perceives Charest to have won the debate.

¹³Priming would entail a polarization of the vote, that is pushing people with negative feelings toward Quebec to vote Reform and people with positive feelings toward Quebec away from Reform. Reform could win in the process to the extent that there were more voters in the first group than in the second.

¹⁴The analysis that follows excludes the Quebec sample, as the phenomenon to be explained is the temporary Reform surge in the aftermath of the Quebec ad. Obviously, this surge took place outside Quebec.

¹⁵In the east, the data suggest that Reform could have lost some points, but our sample is too small to obtain significant results. We also tested the possibility of a temporary impact through time-series analysis by regressing willingness to accommodate Quebec and opinion on distinct society on AD and AD². In neither case did AD and AD² emerge as significant.

¹⁶In the west, the data on Reform support suggest that views about what should be done for Quebec became less important in the last ten days of the campaign. None of the interaction terms proved significant when the dependent variable was the Liberal or the Conservative vote.

¹⁷The Liberals were chosen by 43 percent, the Conservatives by 25 percent, and the NDP by 7 percent.

¹⁸The dependent variable takes the value of +1 if a respondent believes Reform is the best party to preserve national unity, -1 if another party is chosen, and 0 otherwise. The mean value of the variable over the course of the campaign is -0.62. The coefficients for AD and AD² are +0.035811 (at .1 level) and -0.003761 (at 0.12 level).

¹⁹This does not imply that most of the switches were from the Liberals to Reform. Things are more complex. When we compare the vote intentions of those who were

interviewed during the first ten days of the campaign with their reported vote in the post-election survey, we see that those who left the Liberals went about equally to the Conservatives and to Reform. Reform was particularly successful in retaining those who intended to vote for it and the Liberals were particularly unsuccessful in attracting voters from other parties.

²⁰Again, the analyses that follow exclude the Quebec sample because the focus is on Reform.

²¹In both cases mean evaluations drop by 0.03 (on a 0 to 1 scale), a change that is significant at the 0.05 level. However, note that the Liberals gained 0.03 on the deficit reduction (significant at 0.05 level). There were no significant changes in the east; in the west, the Liberals lost 0.04 on national unity and keeping promises. In Ontario, the Liberals lost only on national unity (0.03) and gained on reducing the deficit.

²²There was also a substantial improvement in Reform's perceived ability to fight crime but, contrary to what we observe on national unity and promises, the Liberals' image did not deteriorate.

²³It was 61 percent in the east, 70 percent in the west and 63 percent in Ontario.

²⁴And there was no significant movement among those who did not think that the Liberals had failed to keep their promise on the GST. In Ontario, the Liberals drop from 52 to 42 percent while Reform gains four points (16 to 20 percent); in the west the Liberals drop from 28 to 23 percent while Reform gains ten points (38 to 48 percent). The Atlantic sample is too small to obtain significant results.

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