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## Book Review

### **Provincial Battles, National Prize? Elections in a Federal State**

by Laura B. Stephenson, Andrea Lawlor, William P. Cross, André Blais and Elisabeth Gidengil, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019, 224 pp

Notwithstanding its bizarre title, this book is about the general election of 2015 in Canada that returned the Liberal Party to power after a nine-year absence. The authors are noted (and well-funded) psephologists and their task is, in their own words, to “evaluate whether we should understand elections in Canada as national wars or individual provincial battles” (p.7). They are concerned about the regional aspects of Canadian politics, though not every region is covered in this book. Instead, it is Quebec, Ontario and British Columbia that are targeted. The fact that the Liberals won all the seats in Atlantic Canada and that the Conservative Party dominated Western Canada in 2015 is apparently of less concern.

The work employs known methods (surveys of candidates, post-election surveys of voters and media content) but the originality of the book lies in how it unites the three methods. It unfolds by pursuing each of the methods separately. After a general chapter on how regionalism has been expressed in election outcomes since the 1990s, a short study of the campaigns in Quebec, Ontario and British Columbia is offered. Chapter four examines local candidates and their campaigns in the three chosen provinces to measure whether candidates felt controlled by national party headquarters. It concludes that party representatives were generally happy with their relationships with central command. Chapter five focuses on the national campaigns themselves, including the leader tours, party press releases and social media activity (mostly what was emitted by the parties, not a study of what the response was). The authors found little variation across the regions. The chapter following turns its attention on the media itself, again in an effort to establish the degree to which specific television and newspapers demonstrated a regional outlook. Certainly, the authors report, Stephen Harper was portrayed more negatively in the press than his main challenger. Even the *National Post's* coverage of the Conservative leader was rated as negative. The impact of the CTV network news show (because it has consistently been the most-watched news bulletin since the turn of the century) is examined.

The book then looks at voter behaviour through a comprehensive post-election survey, but the treatment is brief, coarsely rained, and raises more questions than it answers. There is no demographic data presented to explain why the Liberals won, or where or why. Elsewhere, some have argued that Justin Trudeau's ability to attract young voters might have been a factor in the Liberal victory. That hypothesis is not even considered beyond stating the obvious: after Ignatieff, many voters were pleased to see a recognized name take the helm of the party. Did the promise to decriminalize cannabis earn the Liberals more favour? Not a word. Were female voters put off by the Harper government's approach? This issue does not seem to matter: this book is about regionalism, not about what voters really cared about.

In the end, the authors conclude that Canadian voters are more sophisticated than people might expect. “Their vote decisions are complex and their preferences are nuanced. Voters in Canada are not so easily by current events that they abandon long-held vote considerations. Further, considerations vary by province. This should not be surprising” (p.175). There is indeed little that is surprising in this book. The methods employed may be enticing, but this book

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adds up to less than the sum of its parts and brings very little to the understanding of seasoned observers of Canadian politics. For one part, the explanations are sorely lacking in historical context. Certainly, the Liberal improvement in getting votes (39.4%) was impressive, but only in light of the disastrous performance of the party in 2011. The Liberal result of 2015 was similar to those obtained by the Chrétien Liberals in the 1990s. The NDP suffered the reverse, falling back to the higher-end of its traditional support at 19% after its record-setting result of 2011. After nine years in power, the Conservative Party under Harper received 31.9% of the votes, essentially its core support.

The authors of *Provincial Battles, National Prize? Elections in a Federal State* believe that the turning point of the election may have been in mid-September 2015 when polls showed a sudden leap in preference for the Trudeau Liberals and a coincident drop in support for the Mulcair NDP, but they consider that the impact of the campaign was more cumulative than turning points. There was a context: the Harper government promised to appeal the Federal Court of Appeal's decision that Ottawa had no right to insist that women not wear a niqab when receiving their Canadian citizenship. This happened in rough combination with the widely broadcast image of the body of a young Syrian boy being washed ashore in early September. Both events showed the Harper team to be soulless for many, even though most Canadians shared the government's belief that women wearing niqabs probably should not receive Canadian citizenship and supported the government's policy of limited immigration to Canada from Syria. But far more importantly, it coincided with the three leader debates that took place in the space of eleven days between 17 September and 28 September. Alas, there is no mention of debates in this book.

At 175 pages of text, this is a short and impressionistic work that must be read in tandem with the volume edited by Jon Pammett and Christopher Dornan, *The Canadian Federal Election of 2015* (Dundurn, 2016) which is far more informed, textured, less self-referencing and better written.

This study is a test of the resilience of regionalism. The authors conclude that campaigns were consistent across the country in terms of their messaging; that news outlets did not significantly vary their messages or emphases according to their location; and that, for the most part, voters had roughly the same expectations of each of the national parties (as well as the Bloc Québécois). The only variable that can explain why the NDP did poorly in Quebec or that the Liberals did better in Ontario and Atlantic Canada or that the Conservative did better in Western Canada and British Columbia is because the local political cultures are different. This will surprise no one who has completed a grade 10 civics course. To answer the question in the title (something the authors do not explicitly do), the authors have concluded that provincial battles are won unpredictably and that the national prize, or the national victory by the Liberal Party, was the product of accident.

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