

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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Until something changes, the road to majority is blocked

Parties and voters have been boxed in by the unchanging nature of Canadian politics



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Four blocks shape Canadian politics. The blocks are hard to move. Until one of them does, the shape of Canadian politics won't change.

The unchanging nature of Canadian politics, courtesy of those blocks, doesn't stop political commentators from nattering endlessly about who's up and who's down, which party wins and which party loses from this or that event or announcement or tactic.

The nattering fills the airwaves and pages but is almost entirely beside the point, easy filler for empty spaces falsely labelled “analysis.”

The four blocks are: the Conservatives with 30 to 35 per cent of the electorate, mostly in Western Canada and rural and small-town Ontario; the Liberals with about 30 per cent, largely based in urban Ontario and anglophone Quebec; the NDP with its usual 15 per cent of the vote, give or take a couple of points; and the Bloc Québécois as the dominant party for Quebec's secessionists of hemi-demi-semi-Canadian francophones.

For some years now, each party has tried all manner of strategies to enlarge its block – except, perhaps, the Bloc, which is more or less satisfied with being Quebec francophones' preferred party.

The NDP, better financed than ever in recent years and led by the experienced Jack Layton, has held its own, winning a few more seats and making inroads in the slow-growth parts of the country. But the party, soon to gather in convention, is still essentially where it was three or four years ago, stuck in the 13- to 18-per-cent range in the polls.

Yesterday, Statistics Canada [reported](#) the largest number of employment insurance claimants since it began collecting such statistics in 1997. With all the gloomy economic news, and the hurt that the recession has inflicted on so many people, you might think the federal NDP – the self-described part of “ordinary,” “hard-working” Canadians – would be reaping political benefits from the dislocations. Not so, despite the party's best efforts.

The Liberals aren't going anywhere either, except in Quebec, where some federalist francophones have fled the Conservatives and gone back to their natural Liberal home.

It would be comforting, but untrue, for the Liberals to believe this was of their own doing. It is more a function of Conservative weakness. The Conservatives essentially shot their bolt in their first spell in government, showering Quebec with money and attention, to no avail. Now, they are out of ideas, money and chances there.

So the Liberal block, largely an Ontario and Atlantic Canadian one, is slightly larger with the addition of some Quebec voters. But the block is nowhere near large enough to supplant the Conservatives.

The Conservatives are roughly where they were at the time of their first electoral triumph: rock-solid in the rural West and Ontario, and the dominant party in most of the small towns and medium-sized cities in those regions. They have tried everything to enter majority territory, cutting taxes, spending gobs of money, controlling communications as no government ever has (no wonder another prime ministerial communications director resigned yesterday), tailoring almost every policy for political gain. Their block hasn't moved.

The Conservatives have a leader who polarizes the country. Stephen Harper impresses his party's loyalists, who might not be wild about him personally but respect his judgment, policies and competence.

His troubles are the negative perceptions outside the Conservative core. In a recent [Nanos poll](#), 15 percentage points separated those with a negative view of Mr. Harper from those with a positive view. His negatives outweighed his positives in every region but the Prairies. Result: Conservative growth potential is limited, since perception of leaders drives loosely committed voters who don't pay much attention to politics and know little about the issues.

The Conservative block just can't be easily expanded enough for the party to win a majority, or shrunk enough to deprive it of a minority. The good news for Conservatives is that the recession has not damaged them. Even better news for them is that the Liberals have almost nothing interesting to say about anything these days.

Canadians now tell pollsters that they prefer majority government. Until Canadians knock off a chunk of one of these four political blocks, however, there will be no majority.

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