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FOREIGN POLICY AND CANADIAN ELECTIONS: A REVIEW

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INTRODUCTION

On 28 September 2015, over 3,000 Canadians gathered at Toronto's Roy Thomson Hall to watch the first, and only, Canadian election debate focused exclusively on foreign policy (*Maclean's*, 2015). Hosted by Rudyard Griffiths, director-general of the Aurea Foundation and chair of the Munk Debates, the event was broadcast on CPAC and CHCH TV, SiriusXM, and C-SPAN. It streamed online on the Munk Debates' website, as well as on those of media partners Facebook Canada and *The Globe and Mail*. A transcript was later published in *Maclean's* magazine. The nearly two-hour conversation featured Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his two most significant challengers, the Liberals' Justin Trudeau and the New Democratic Party's (NDP) Thomas Mulcair. They discussed, in English and in French, six major issues: ISIS in Syria and Northern Iraq, the global refugee crisis, Canada's legislative response to terrorism, Canada-US relations, climate change, and international trade. The trio then dealt, in rapid-fire format, with three more: foreign aid, the Arctic, and Russia. According to Open Canada's (2015) canvass of foreign policy experts, the debate was substantive and revealing. CBC's Vote Compass (2015) declared Trudeau the winner, with Harper a close second. Four years later, now Prime Minister Trudeau refused to attend a second Munk Debate on foreign policy, marking what appears to be the end of the experiment (Canadian Press, 2019).

Research on the place of foreign policy in Canadian elections is limited.¹ When International Relations (IR) scholar Justin Massie and his colleagues (2021) reflected on the 2021 election, they found the lack of discussion of international affairs to be consistent with a Canadian tradition of focusing inwards. "Foreign affairs remain far from voters' priorities," they declared. Such thinking is consistent with the analysis of fellow political scientist and IR scholar Kim Richard Nossal (2021, p.42) who has argued that "foreign policy has not generally been a *political* issue in Canada, in the sense of being an issue that plays a determining role in the electoral process and its partisan struggles between political parties." Historian Patrice Dutil (2023, p. 6) disagrees. In his introduction to a book about the role of Canadian prime

¹ For a summary of some of the international literature, see Aldrich et al. (2006) and Saunders (2016).



ministers in the conduct of foreign policy, he claims that “at least half of Canada’s national elections featured substantive discussions of Canada’s place in the world.”

This literature review investigates that discrepancy and its implications. Its scope includes data-driven election studies based on surveys and interviews most often conducted by political scientists and sociologists, empirical assessments of individual and groups of elections by historians and IR scholars, and personal reflections on elections by journalists and political practitioners. It divides its overview of the scholarship into three broad themes: voting behaviour in Canada; historical reviews of Canadians at the polls; and case studies of groups of, and individual, elections. Its findings include the following observations.

Foreign Policy Is an Election Issue

Foreign policy is an election “issue” (Gidengil, 2022), and issues are only one of many factors that shape electoral outcomes. It would therefore be shocking if foreign policy played a critical role in Canadian elections on a regular basis. Not only does it compete with other issues, like the economy and health care, that affect voters more directly, it also competes with other factors, like leadership and party loyalty, that appeal more directly to voters’ emotions.

Research Methods Matter

Research methods matter. Canadian foreign policy experts, be they historians or political scientists, that base their elections analyses on campaign documents, political speeches, and media coverage will inevitably find references to foreign policy, but the presence of world affairs in the election conversation does not necessarily mean that it affected Canadians’ voting decisions. Linking mentions to electoral impact assumes that voters are both paying attention to the campaign and making sense of what they hear through a rational process. That is not always the case.

Asking individual voters directly about who they voted for and why through surveys and focus groups eliminates the correlation / causation problem, but it also introduces human factors like emotion, feeling, and a tendency toward recency bias into the data. Voters’ explanations of their ballot choices (and even whether they voted at all) are not completely reliable. And since in Canada, international issues are rarely top of mind for voters, they are less likely to be recalled in surveys about their decision-making.



Party Platforms Treat Foreign Policy Similarly

The lack of major differences in the international postures of Canada's leading political parties limits the relevance of foreign policy to election outcomes. There is typically little for Canadian voters to distinguish between the foreign policy platforms of Conservatives and Liberals in particular. When there are differences, they are often too granular for non-experts to appreciate (Mendelsohn & Wolffe, 2001). When it is most commonly believed that foreign policy has played a role in Canadian elections, the United States has almost inevitably been implicated (Nossal, 2008). America's geographic immediacy increases its relevance among Canadian voters, as do historic strains of anti-Americanism within the public. Canada-US relations is therefore an emotional issue more than a political one, and both parties have at times attempted to instrumentalize these emotions to their electoral benefit.

VOTING BEHAVIOUR IN CANADA

Situating the place of foreign policy in Canadian elections begins with an understanding of voting behaviour. In her review of the scholarly literature for the *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, Elisabeth Gidengil (2022) highlights a series of factors that have affected public decisions at the polls, including "ideological orientations, party identification, economic evaluations, issues, leader evaluations ... local candidates [and] strategic calculations" (p. 917). She does not mention foreign policy. This lack of attention is common to much of the voting behaviour scholarship. Sociologist Dennis H. Wrong (1958) does not mention it in his article, "Parties and Voting in Canada"; and neither does Peter Regenstreif (1965) in his book-length treatment on the same theme. In his book on voter attitudes, Jean Laponce (1969) draws attention to two international issues commonly associated with the 1963 election – nuclear weapons and relations with the US – but concludes that in the constituencies he studied, neither seems to have affected voting behaviour. Although political scientist John Meisel (1972) once planned to study the differences in attitudes of Anglophones and Francophones toward foreign policy around elections, he concluded that there was "little point in trying to seek opinions on policy questions from individuals who have little or no interest in, or knowledge of, them" (p. 156). Indeed, the only book focused primarily on Canadian voter behaviour to deal explicitly with foreign policy's impact at the ballot box is political scientist Richard Johnston et al.'s *Letting the People Decide: Dynamics of Canadian Election* (1992). Even there, however, the focus is on how political parties directed voters to the question of free trade during the 1988 election. Were it not for their priming and the national media's emphasis, it is unlikely that Canadians would have included the value proposition of a bilateral trade agreement that most had never read in their voting calculus.²

² More recently, political scientists Cameron D. Anderson and Luran B. Stephenson's *Voting Behaviour in Canada* (2010) made virtually no mention of foreign policy.



Scholarship focused more specifically on “issues” as part of voters’ decision-making process is more willing to entertain the relevance of foreign policy. Yet, as Gidengil and her colleagues (Gidengil et al., 2012, p. 86) have made clear, issues are just one of many factors that determine vote choice, and foreign policy is just one of many issues. Issues matter in Canadian elections when they satisfy three conditions: “the parties have to take clear stands on opposing sides, voters have to be aware of where each party stands on those issues, and the balance of opinion has to favour one side over the other.”³ If just one of those conditions is not fulfilled, the issue will not affect the electoral outcome.⁴ Since significant foreign policy differences among political parties in Canada are unusual, and since foreign policy is rarely top of mind for most Canadians, it is perhaps not surprising that when a group of political scientists and sociologists assessed the impact of the Canadian Election Study (CES) – a survey of political behaviour, attitudes, and issue preferences throughout every election since 1965 – they did not include a subsection on foreign policy and made virtually no mention of international affairs (Kanji et al., 2012⁵). The findings of more recent voting behaviour studies imply similarly that foreign policy is unlikely to determine electoral choices and outcomes in Canada (e.g., Clarke et al., 2019).

Alternative conclusions have been offered by scholars who use different research methods. In a 1963 article, historian Ramsay Cook (1963) argues that, understood broadly, foreign policy has often played a role in Canadian elections. (He also concedes that historians have likely “exaggerated the electoral importance of external affairs if only because mouth-filling statements about foreign policy have been easier to isolate than the small, local discontents and bread-and-butter issues which today’s omniscient, omnipresent pollsters tell us are the real determinants in voting” (Cook, 1963, p. 374)). Cook focuses on the election of 1963, during which Canada’s commitment to acquire nuclear weapons was one of many foreign policy issues under consideration. Political scientist Sean Fleming (2015) argues that the Syrian refugee crisis only affected the 2015 election because the image of a dead three-year-old with family ties to Canada on a beach humanized the issue and divided political leaders on the most appropriate policy response. Nossal (2008) differentiates between anti-Americanism’s semi-regular place in Canadian elections and foreign policy writ large, which he suggests has been far less important (Nossal, 2021).

³ For a similar take, see Clarke et al. (1979). They argue that for an issue to affect an election, it must be salient to voters, controversial in a partisan sense, and skewed in terms of public support.

⁴ This theory explains how, in 2021, the Erin O’Toole–led Conservatives could produce a comprehensive foreign policy platform and yet Massie et al. (2021) could conclude that foreign policy was all but irrelevant. The other parties’ platforms were significantly less thorough, the parties were not particularly far apart on Canada’s role in the world, and the balance of public opinion was not overwhelmingly on one side of any particular issue.

⁵ See specifically the chapter by Harold D. Clarke and Allan Kornberg, “The Valence Politics Model of Electoral Choice,” in Kanji et al. (2012, pp. 180–92). For a scathing critique of the CES (in its earliest incarnations), see Wiseman (1986).



In sum, social scientists whose election studies are based on quantitative and qualitative surveys of individual Canadians' reflections on their voting decisions argue for placing significant limitations on the impact of foreign policy on voting behaviour. Issues do not always determine elections, and even when they do, foreign policy poorly is suited to be one that does. There is, however, intellectual space to disagree. For one, the CES's reliance on voters' personal recollections is problematic (Wiseman, 1986). Other measurements, like the empirical assessments of historians who analyze media coverage, party platforms, and other public elements of election campaigns implicate foreign policy more prominently, especially in terms of Canada-US relations.

HISTORIES OF CANADIAN ELECTIONS

Historian J. Murray Beck (1968) published the first chronicle of Canadian federal elections in 1968. *Pendulum of Power: Canada's Federal Elections* makes almost no mention of foreign policy. Two other studies of multiple elections published around the same time have similarly little to say. Rather than discovering what motivated Canadians to vote, after interviewing over 1,000 citizens during the elections of 1958, 1962, and 1963, Peter Regenstreif (1965) was more confident describing what was not important – political affiliation. Canadians were not wedded to supporting any party consistently.⁶ Effective leadership, and by implication campaigning, shaped voting outcomes. Laponce (1969), who studied the attitudes of members of a single Vancouver riding over the 1963 and 1965 elections, found that, while Ottawa's hesitance to acquire nuclear weapons was a major issue in the 1963 campaign, neither it, nor relations with the US "succeeded in penetrating the elector's private world of issues" (p. 83). In 1965, foreign policy was not a factor at all. In their book on the four federal elections between 2000 and 2008, Gidengil et al. (2012) identify two foreign policy issues that affected electoral results and one that affected an election's overall outcome. The Canadian Alliance's promise to increase defence spending in 2000 produced "rather modest" gains at the Liberals' expense, but the Liberals won the election regardless. In 2004, the Conservatives gained one point from the NDP thanks to a similar pledge. More important, in that same election, the Liberals gained three points from the Conservatives thanks to the Chrétien government's 2003 decision to refuse to support the American invasion of Iraq. Those three points did help Paul Martin form a minority government.

The three most prominent twenty-first-century histories of Canadian federal elections are organized around turning points.⁷ Liberal political strategist John Duffy's *Fights of Our Lives*:

⁶ Beck's (1968) most significant conclusion was framed similarly. Class was not a critical determinant of voter preference.

⁷ Political scientist Donald E. Blake (1979, p. 264) uses the term "critical elections." According to Blake, "a critical election refers to an election or short series of elections in which the normal partisan balance is substantially altered. If the new partisan distribution process persists for the next several elections, the change election(s)



Elections, Leadership and the Making of Canada (2002, pp. 9, 84, 359) is most interested in the 11 of 37 elections between 1867 and 2000 that, in Duffy's terms, "have really mattered." Duffy links foreign policy to five of them: free trade in 1891, 1911,⁸ and 1988; conscription in 1917; and foreign policy writ large in 1963. Duffy attributes voter choice in the nineteenth century less to issues than to geography and religion. "Canadian voters generally supported their party, their tribe, and their church," he writes. Party leaders and their visions dominated much of the twentieth century, with issues only returning to play a notable role around 1988. Although Duffy sees free trade as a vehicle through which incumbent Prime Minister Brian Mulroney could demonstrate his superior leadership skills, he also suggests that the re-election of the Mulroney government in 1988 reflected support "for a government committed to embracing the opportunities of globalization."

The conclusions of journalist and political consultant Ray Argyle in *Turning Points: The Campaigns that Changed Canada, 2004 and Before* (2004) overlap.⁹ The book is similarly sparse on foreign policy save for free trade with the United States and wartime economic and personnel issues. Unlike Duffy, Argyle sees Canada-US economic relations as critical to the election of 1878, but he does not identify the election of 1891 as noteworthy at all.

Political scientists Lawrence Leduc and Jon H. Pammett (2016, pp. 25, 133) have produced the most comprehensive history of Canadian elections. They organize their book around dynasties, i.e., "long periods of political hegemony under successful political leaders" and the "interludes of varying lengths" between them. Successful dynasties are produced by leaders who deal effectively with three domestic issues: economic prosperity, national unity, and social welfare. Canada-US economic relations are noted in their summary of the elections of 1878, 1911, and 1988, and the authors suggest that Liberal victories in 1935, 1940, and 1945 were influenced by "the nature of world events," but they also cite evidence from the CES indicating that among Canadians who were asked to identify the most important election issue in 1974, 1984, 1993, 2004, and 2015, no more than 1 per cent ever chose foreign policy.

In sum, although histories of Canada's federal elections are more inclined to include references to foreign policy in their narratives, even they rarely portray world affairs as a regular consideration of Canadian voters. There have been times when free trade with the US has captured the electorate's attention, and elections during wartime are inevitably affected by the international environment, but the Canadian electoral tradition is domestically focused.

will be considered realigning. A deviating election is a change election immediately followed by an election marking a return to the partisan distribution antedating the first change."

⁸ On the impact of free trade in the 1911 election, see also, Johnston and Percy (1980); Dutil and MacKenzie (2011).

⁹ Both Argyle (2004) and Duffy (2002) highlight the importance of the elections in 1896, 1911, 1917, 1926, 1845, 1957, and 1988.



CASE STUDIES

The first book-length case study of a Canadian election was John Meisel's (1962, p. 57) *The Canadian General Election of 1957*. Meisel identifies the Liberal government's failure to protect diplomat Herbert Norman from the attacks of the radical anti-communist US senator Joseph McCarthy along with Ottawa's refusal to support Britain's efforts to retake the Suez Canal as "the only two issues of any consequence related to foreign policy." In both cases, they were raised not so much to differentiate the political parties on world affairs as they were "to create a general impression on the electorate." Through Norman, the Conservatives hoped to appeal to Canadians' sense of anti-Americanism and through Suez to their pro-British loyalties. Meisel concludes that the 1957 election was ultimately a referendum on the continuation of 22 years of Liberal rule rather than a contest on any single issue or theme.

In 1970, historian Paul Stevens commissioned and collected short articles and primary source documents on the 1911 election as part Copp Clark Publishing's Issues in Canadian History series. Stevens suggests that most analysts have typically framed 1911 as an election on competing views of Canada's international posture. He wonders, though, whether other factors, like regional politics and party organization, might have been equally important. Since his book is meant for the classroom, he does not offer firm conclusions.

US scholar Howard R. Penniman's *Canada at the Polls: The General Election of 1974* (1975) is part of a collection of national election studies published by the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research. It includes nine chapters by Canadian political scientists, none of which make specific mention of foreign policy. Additional volumes in 1979, 1980, and 1984 refer to world affairs similarly rarely. The Canadian general elections of 1979 and 1980 are explored without reference to foreign policy in articles in the journal *Parliamentary Affairs* (Smith, 1980; Landes, 1981). A Canadian general election series – in which invited authors contribute chapters on different elements of the federal election – has been published since 1984. Mentions of foreign policy throughout the series are uncommon.¹⁰

In 2022, University of British Columbia (UBC) Press announced a new Turning Point Elections book series, to be edited by political scientists Gerald Baier and R. Kenneth Carty.¹¹ The series might well have been inspired by three books published the decade before. Historian Christopher Pennington's *The Destiny of Canada: Macdonald, Laurier, and the Election of 1891* (2011) tells the story of a struggle between an imperial nationalism opposed to free trade with the US, and a continentalist nationalism hopeful of achieving greater prosperity through economic integration. Published the same year, historians Patrice Dutil and David

¹⁰ See, for example, Pammett and Dornan (2004, 2006, 2009, 2016). Nor is foreign policy a factor in a case study of the 2000 election that takes a similar approach (see Blais et al. (2002)).

¹¹ For a description of the series, see their introduction to MacKenzie (2023).

Mackenzie's *Canada 1911: The Decisive Election That Shaped the Country* (2011, p. 12) is framed by the authors as "one of the few elections that revolved around international questions" (p. 12). In English Canada, the focus was on reciprocity with the US. In Quebec, Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier's *Naval Service Act* was central. In *Embattled Nation: Canada's Wartime Election of 1917*, Dutil and MacKenzie (2017, pp. 12, 272) identify the main themes of the 1917 campaign as "nationalism and imperialism, compulsion and volunteerism, ambition and resistance, war and peace." They conclude that the election was ultimately "fought on the issue of conscription, but it was decided on the basis of identity," drawing attention to a common theme in this review – that when international issues do affect Canadian elections, they tend to be conduits rather than determinants.

Perhaps because of his work with Dutil, Mackenzie was asked to contribute to the UBC Press series. In *King & Chaos: The 1935 General Election* (2023), he portrays the Great Depression as central. Two other international issues – trade with the US and the Ethiopian Crisis – are also recognized as playing a role during the campaign. Political scientist John Courtney's (2022) book on the 1957 and 1958 elections describes their relationship to foreign policy much the way Ramsay Cook does the 1963 election, calling the 1957 campaign in particular an exception to the minimal role that foreign policy typically plays in voters' minds. Courtney highlights the debate over Canada's response to the Suez Crisis as well as the St. Laurent government's invocation of closure multiple times during parliamentary discussions of the TransCanada Pipeline as two issues that affected voters' views. He cites a post-election survey that suggests that 5.1 per cent of Liberal voters in the 1953 election chose another party in 1957 because of Suez and a comment from a Liberal Party organizer that suggests it mattered even more. Nonetheless, Courtney ultimately concludes that the Liberals lost in 1957 because of a poor campaign, Progressive Conservative leader John Diefenbaker's extraordinary appeal and inspirational platform, along with the on-the-ground support that the federal Conservatives received from sympathetic provincial premiers and their party organizations. According to Courtney, foreign policy played no role in Diefenbaker's even greater electoral success in 1958. Political scientist and campaign organizer Tom Flanagan's (2022) more personal account of the 1993 election makes no mention of foreign policy at all.¹²

¹² Political operative David McLaughlin's (1994) similar approach to understanding the 1993 election is also devoid of references to foreign affairs.



The 1988 Election

No Canadian election is more often associated with foreign policy than “The Great Free Trade Election of 1988” (Leduc, 1989).¹³ In the context of this review, unpacking that election should therefore be particularly revealing. Johnston et al. (1992, p. 141) suggest that “Just as free trade dominated the media discussion of issues, so did it dominate the consciousness of voters.” Political scientist Janine Brodie (1989, p. 175) frames the 1988 campaign as “the culmination of a prolonged debate about opposing strategies for economic restructuring in Canada.” To Duffy (2002), the election was really about the role of government. Canadians rejected the Liberals’ “Big Ottawa” vision in favour of free trade with the US and the devolution of power to the provinces through Brian Mulroney’s proposed Meech Lake Accord. Political strategist Michael Kirby (Caplan et al., 1989) suggests that as much as free trade was the focal point of the 1988 campaign, the real issue was the Canadian identity. Liberals argued that signing the free trade agreement would compromise Canada’s independence. Journalist Peter Maser (1989) claims that, although much of the 1988 election campaign focused on free trade, during the final week, Brian Mulroney’s Progressive Conservatives pivoted to a focus on economic prosperity. By implication, Canadians sympathetic to the Tories who were not paying attention to politics until the week before the election might not have thought about free trade at all. Indeed, Pammett (1989) uses CES data to suggest that barely one-in-five Progressive Conservative voters identified free trade as the most important issue to them. Brodie (1989), too, questions whether Canadian attitudes toward free trade ultimately shaped the election results. In sum, there is no question that free trade dominated the coverage of the 1988 election campaign, especially during and around the leaders’ debates. It is less clear whether voters’ opinions on the agreement produced by Canadian and American negotiators drove their decision at the ballot box. Such a conclusion explains how scholars like Gidengil (2022) can all but ignore foreign policy in their studies of voting behaviour, while others like Dutil (2023) see international affairs issues as prominent throughout Canada’s electoral history. The nature of the link between the campaign and the ballot box is contested.

THE FUTURE

If foreign policy is to affect future Canadian elections, it is likely to re-emerge through one of two sub-issues. The first, foreign interference, is hardly new. It is often speculated that American negotiators refused to complete a trade agreement with Conservative Prime

¹³ In a later publication with Pammett, Leduc (2016) qualified his description. The 1988 election “was a struggle for political power that involved multiple issues... The 1988 election differed from some others only in the singularity of focus on the FTA found in the media and in much of the campaign rhetoric” (Leduc & Pammett, 2016, p. 362).



Minister R.B. Bennett before the election of 1935 because they expected to achieve a more beneficial agreement with his opponent, Liberal William Lyon Mackenzie King (Mackenzie, 2023). In 1962, the Liberal opposition led by Lester B. Pearson sought President John F. Kennedy's pollster's electoral advice (Leduc & Pammett, 2016). During the 1988 election, US President Ronald Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher issued public statements in support of the Canada-US free trade agreement (Duffy, 2002). US President Barack Obama endorsed Justin Trudeau in 2019 and 2021, contests in which China and other less friendly states have also been accused of interfering (Johnston, 2023). The second issue is religion and ethnicity (Dufresne et al., 2023; see also Nossal, 2022). Whereas early Canadian elections implicated the Catholic-Protestant divide (Meisel, 1956), today the tension is between Jewish and Muslim Canadians with specific reference to Canada's Middle East policy.

Studies of the impact of these sub-issues, or any other, will be aided by the University of Laval Department of Political Science's new project, *Electronic Manifestos Canada* (n.d.). "Poltext" offers researchers access to the campaign platforms of all of Canada's major federal parties back to 1972 and to select additional ones back to 1945. These data have yet to be investigated for their inclusion of foreign policy. As this review has shown, however, there will be limits to the significance of any findings. We can study how often foreign policy is mentioned in Canadian election campaigns, and we can ask Canadians why they voted the way they did afterwards. But, we cannot be certain of how much attention individual voters paid to specific issues nor to whether they were entirely truthful in answering surveys or participating in focus groups. Looking ahead, the lack of significant differences in the international outlooks of Canada's political parties makes a foreign policy election unlikely, but, given the increasing polarization and political instability in the US, and the tendency of Canadians to be affected by US trends, one cannot be too certain. If there is a real lesson to be learned from this review, it is scholarly humility. Academics who study Canadians' voting behaviour should ask more questions about world affairs, and foreign policy specialists who study elections should be more prudent in how they measure the impact of international issues at the ballot box.

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