The 2014 Provincial Election in Quebec

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Abstract

After having been in power for just a little over a year and a half, the Parti Québécois government led by Pauline Marois decided to call an early election in the hope of getting the majority of seats that had evaded them the last time around. That bet was lost as the 2014 election campaign resulted in the worst showing for the PQ since 1973. The inter-election period was dominated by the debate over the PQ's proposed Charter of Quebec Values. The Charter also influenced the debate during the campaign, as did the issue of Quebec's sovereignty due in part to the arrival of Pierre Karl Péladeau as a star candidate for the PQ. The Liberal Party of Quebec is now back in government with a majority of seats and under the leadership of Philippe Couillard.

Introduction

After less than two years spent on the official opposition benches of Quebec's National Assembly, the Liberal Party of Quebec (PLQ) was back in government with a majority of seats and under the leadership of Philippe Couillard following the provincial election of April 7th 2014. That election's result represented the worst vote share of the incumbent Parti Québécois' history since 1973. The previous 2012 election had been groundbreaking since it was the first time in Quebec's history that a woman was elected as Premier. Yet, the 2014 election is also historic not only due to the PQ's demise but also because that same woman, Pauline Marois, has been defeated in her own riding (Charlevoix-Côte-de-Beaupré) after just a short reign of 19 months.

That short period in power was dominated by the debate surrounding a controversial piece of legislation that encapsulated the Marois government's willingness to tackle the issue of secularism in the province's public institutions. Bernard Drainville, the Minister responsible for Democratic Institutions and Active Citizenship, made this policy proposal public on September 10, 2013 under the name of "Charter of Quebec Values."[1] The legislation aimed at reinforcing the secular nature of Quebec society and at facilitating the adoption of the so-called

"*valeurs québécoises*" by the immigrant population – and, hence, the protection and promotion of those values. The proposed Charter had several provisions, including enshrining the values of secularism in the Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms (*Charte des droits et libertés de la personne*), indicating that the gender equality provisions of the Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms should be interpreted within a secular framework, outlining a framework for how the government would respond to requests for religious accommodation, and obliging those seeking public services to present themselves with their face uncovered (Assemblée nationale du Québec 2013).

However, much of the attention focused on the provision to ban "ostentatious religious symbols" (*signes religieux ostentatoires*) in public employment. The proposed ban on the wearing of religious symbols by all public employees was indeed the object of most of the criticisms aimed at the Charter. First, defining what is ostentatious triggered a fair amount of op-eds, editorials, and news articles. Second, the PQ had already decided that the crucifix on the wall of the National Assembly in Quebec would be there to stay because it was part of Quebec's cultural heritage. Third, many actors considered the provision to be unconstitutional as it was seen to be an attack on the individuals' freedom to express their religious beliefs. In good part for this reason, both the Liberals and Québec Solidaire (QS) were strongly against the Charter project; for its part, the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) was more conciliatory on the topic and said that if Quebecers

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[1] The actual legislation, Bill 60, "Charter affirming the values of State secularism and religious neutrality and of equality between women and men, and providing a framework for accommodation requests" was introduced in the National Assembly on November 7th 2013. It was never adopted due to the snap election call made just a few months later.

wanted a Charter then there should be one (Société Radio-Canada 2013). Finally, many societal actors accused the PQ of fuelling and exploiting fear towards immigrants as an electoral strategy. Indeed, there was considerable speculation at the time that Pauline Marois wanted to call an early election before the end of the year.

According to CROP polling results, vote intentions for the PQ significantly declined between December 2012 (36%) and June 2013 (25%), while support for the PLQ showed the opposite trend (increasing from 25 to 38 percent) thanks to that party's leadership race which led to the selection of Philippe Couillard as new Liberal leader but also to a rather chaotic first few months in power for the PQ. Since the Lac-Mégantic rail disaster of July 2013 where the Marois government had been applauded for its quick reaction, vote intentions in favour of the PQ had been slowly but surely on the rise, but the party still remained behind the PLQ. In a secluded retreat held in late October 2013, Marois and her caucus decided to postpone the election call, feeling that a bit more time was needed for the Charter debate to have an impact on public opinion that would be more clearly in favour of the government's position on this issue (Nadeau 2013). In addition, Minister of Finance Nicolas Marceau announced in late November that his government's next budget, to be presented the following spring, would unfortunately remain in deficit (of $2.5 billion). This new element further reduced the PQ's window of opportunity for going to the polls. February 2014 public surveys confirmed the rise in PQ vote intentions since the introduction of Bill 60 in November and now showed

the party to be ahead of the Liberals, thus cementing Pauline Marois' plans to call an election campaign on March 5th.

In terms of electoral organization, two things changed between the 2012 and the 2014 elections. For the first time, polling stations were allowed to be installed on university and college campuses. If they wish so, students can now have their ballot cast on campus be counted as a ballot cast in their home riding. This is part of the electoral officer's strategy to enhance youth's electoral participation; in addition, this new rule helps reduce the bias induced by student over-representation in ridings in which educational institutions are present. The second institutional change is related to party funding. The new financing rules adopted by the Marois government were aimed at reducing the influence of donors in the wake of revelations made at the Charbonneau Commission. The maximum is now set at 100 dollars per donation per year, accompanied by greater support from public funds.

The Campaign

Contrary to the previous election where the Quebec party system had seen the emergence of two new formations (the Coalition Avenir Québec, having merged with the former Action Démocratique du Québec, and Option Nationale created by dissidents from the PQ), no new important parties have emerged in 2014. The three major parties kicked off their campaign by emphasizing the economy and the issue of unemployment. The first official campaign press conference given by the PQ did not go unnoticed. Indeed, Pauline Marois did not field any questions from journalists on this occasion. This "minimum exposition"

approach was considered as suspect by the press, and Marois was even compared to Prime Minister of Canada Stephen Harper who is known for over-controlling information (Laurence 2014).

Even if parties started campaigning on the economy, the rest of the campaign was quickly re-centred around other issues, notably the ongoing debate about the province's constitutional future and the PQ's proposed Charter of Values. By the second day of the campaign, Marois had justified this early election call by saying that she wanted a majority of seats so as to be able to adopt the Charter and she invited all voters, no matter if they were in favour of Quebec's independence or not, to vote for her party (Journet and Lessard 2014). The leader of the PLQ, Philippe Couillard, accused Marois of misleading voters since her party clearly supports independence. The PLQ reiterated their commitment against that project while promoting the recognition of the distinct character of the province in the Canadian constitution. As their slogan indicated ("*Ensemble, on s'occupe des vraies affaires*") the Liberals opposed the PQ's divisive priorities of independence and the Charter with a focus on the economy, pledging the creation of 100,000 jobs during their first mandate (Chouinard 2014).

It is impossible to speak about this campaign without speaking about some of its featured candidates. A few days before the campaign started, well-known doctor Gaétan Barrette, who had unsuccessfully run for the CAQ in the 2012 election, announced that he would run this time for the PLQ and would face Fatima Houda-Pepin in the riding of La Pinière. Houda-Pepin, a Liberal MNA

for the last 20 years, had decided to run again as an independent candidate due to a disagreement over her former party's legalist position on the issue of secularism (Canadian Press 2013). Barrette would win the seat by a large margin. Martine Desjardins, who had been a students' union leader during the 2012 maple spring crisis, also decided to jump into electoral politics under the PQ banner, but she did not get elected despite the increased media visibility she had received in the years since the crisis.

But the most notable new personality in the 2014 campaign was Pierre Karl Péladeau. Owner of the largest media consortium in the province (Québecor) and very well known throughout Quebec often just by his initials (PKP), Péladeau announced on March 9th that he would run for the Parti Québécois in the riding of Saint-Jérôme after having denied rumours about it just a few months before. His nomination as candidate raised a number of ethical concerns, with many arguing that he ought to sell his shares of Québecor in the event that he would become MNA. Péladeau refused to do so and instead stressed that, if elected, he would respect all the rules mentioned in the National Assembly's code of ethics (Chouinard et al. 2014). The announcement of his candidacy was also notable due to the fact that Péladeau fist-pumped the air while claiming that he was running "to make Québec a country!" This spontaneous cry from the heart on the part of such a high-profile PQ candidate undesirably served to bring the independence issue to the fore. It fuelled concerns over Marois' willingness to prepare a third referendum on the issue if re-elected with a majority, a possibility that was alluded to by a few

of her cabinet's members just before the election call (Salvet 2014).

With the two traditional parties fighting over the referendum debate, the other parties struggled to stand out. The CAQ tried to shift the debate away from the national question by bringing up spending cuts in the health agencies' budgets, by proposing to forbid trade unions from spending money for political causes other than labour, and by suggesting to reduce the size of the state and to reform the senior civil service organization. Québec Solidaire, which is another party that wants to further prime left-right issues, experienced even a harder time putting their agenda up front. Co-leader Françoise David tried to attract voters disillusioned with the PQ (particularly the youth) by stating that, unlike the PQ, QS is a genuine social-democratic party (Teisceira-Lessard 2014). QS also tried to bring up public health issues by proposing to recruit 800 more health professionals, and reiterated its opposition to the Charter of Values. Hence, even if Quebec Solidaire has a strong position in favour of Quebec sovereignty, both the CAQ and QS tried to overcome the traditional debate about independence versus federalism. In spite of their efforts, the national question remained at the forefront of the campaign. This became clear when Pauline Marois felt the obligation to specify, right at the start of the March 20th televised leaders debate, that she would not hold a referendum on sovereignty unless Quebecers were "ready" for it – a position that proved to be as evasive as ever (Boisvert 2014).

The Liberals having clearly taken the lead in vote intention polls by then, they became the target of the campaign for the rest of its duration. Philippe

Couillard's credibility was attacked on two fronts: his personal integrity was questioned with references made to his past (his work in Saudi Arabia and his business ties with controversial figure Arthur Porter) and his apparent lack of nationalist fervor (his legalist position on secularism and his defence of bilingualism) was criticized. The PQ adopted a "Cerberus" approach: Drainville focused on the Charter of Values, Péladeau concentrated on the economy, while Marois stood in the middle to coordinate the party's message (Lessard 2014). After an unconvincing performance in the first televised debate, CAQ leader François Legault came back in force in the second one broadcasted on March 27th. A poll published four days later still placed the PLQ ahead but also showed an increase in support for the CAQ. This surge allowed the party to avoid a possible collapse but it came too late to make a real breakthrough. We can finally note that the campaign was punctuated by various small events such as a large-scale demonstration in Montreal against the Charter of Values, a semi-scandal regarding a supposed increase in the number of voting list registrations in the riding of Sainte-Marie-Saint-Jacques by Anglophone students, and many accusations of illegal financing towards different parties.

The Outcome and Its Aftermath

The Marois government was defeated on the night of Monday, April 7th, after having governed for less than two years. Philippe Couillard, leader of the PLQ, became Premier of Quebec at the head of a majority government. His party received more than 40% of the vote and succeeded in electing 70 of their candidates (see Table 1).

While the 2012 election had seen the PQ and the PLQ as tight competitors – with a difference in support of less than one percentage point – the 2014 election indicated a clear downfall for the Parti Québécois. The party only received 25% of ballots cast which translated into 30 seats. Pauline Marois resigned on election night after making a plea for youth's and women's involvement in politics. Most commentators consider that the effect of the Charter has cost the PQ a number of Montreal ridings due to a lack of identification of the voters to this identity-based issue (e.g., Boucher 2014). In addition, the PQ lost support in the suburban area of Montreal; the northern shore of Montreal opted instead for the CAQ, while the Laval region preferred the Liberals. In retrospect, it seems clear that the PQ's defeat mainly resulted as much from an anti-referendum vote triggered by Péladeau's presence (and the Liberals' discourse about it) than from an anti-Charter vote

(and a split of the pro-Charter vote between the PQ and the CAQ). Because each of these two issues strongly mobilized voters who were *against* them, they both ended up favouring the PLQ.

As for the CAQ, it received a 23% share of the vote and managed to elect 22 of its candidates at the National Assembly. Compared to the 2012 election, this result represented both a setback in terms of popular vote share (-4 percentage points) and an improvement in terms of seats won (+3). This paradoxical outcome offers a good example of the discrepancies that can be brought about by the single-member plurality (SMP) voting system. We can infer from these numbers that the CAQ's support was more concentrated in some ridings, which is a necessary condition to elect representatives under a SMP system (for a study of the geography of the CAQ's support, see Forest 2013).

Table 1. Quebec Provincial Election Results

	2012		2014	
	Seats (#)	Popular vote (%)	Seats (#)	Popular vote (%)
Parti Libéral du Québec	50	31.2	70	41.5
Parti Québécois	54	32.0	30	25.4
Coalition Avenir Québec	19	27.1	22	23.1
Québec Solidaire	2	6.0	3	7.6
Option Nationale	0	1.9	0	0.7
Parti Vert Quebec	0	1.0	0	0.6

Source: Directeur général des élections du Québec (www.dgeq.qc.ca)

Looking at the smaller parties, we can see that Québec Solidaire continued to slowly gain support. Since the 2008 provincial election, the party has always been able to get one extra candidate elected. Amir Khadir and Françoise David have respectively been elected in

2008 and 2012. The 2014 election saw Manon Massé, a well-known feminist and lesbian activist, being elected under the QS banner. Across the province, the party won 7.6% of the popular vote which represents a slight increase compared to its 2012 vote share. The

three ridings where QS succeeded in electing candidates are all located in the downtown area of the Montreal Island; and the party finished second in two other ridings of Montreal (Laurier-Dorion and Hochelaga-Maisonneuve). As for the Green Party of Quebec and Option Nationale, they both continued to decline and received negligible shares of the vote (less than one percentage point province-wide).

Overall, these results are interesting because it is the first time in Quebec that a party won the election with such a majority while having so many other parties represented in parliament. Considering that the SMP voting system usually fosters two-party systems, the province of Quebec seems to be an exception to the rule for the time being or perhaps is becoming more "Canadian" this way (for a recent assessment of the evolution of Quebec's party system, see Godbout 2013). In terms of turnout, the 2014 participation rate of 71.4% was slightly lower than in 2012 (74.6%). The 2014 turnout tends to fit with the overall decrease in electoral participation that is being experienced across many Western democracies. The 2008 election marked a strong downfall in electoral participation (only 57% of voters casted a ballot that year) but this proved to be an exception as the following two contests (2012 and 2014) saw a return to more "normal" – although still declining – turnout rates (see Blais, Galais, and Gélineau 2013). In an analysis of riding-level voting and non-voting patterns in the 2014 election, Montigny and his colleagues (2014) found that the victory of Liberal candidates was greatly helped in the ridings that experienced an increase in turnout.

When forming his ministerial cabinet, Premier Philippe Couillard has tried to achieve a balance by choosing former ministers from the Jean Charest era (2003-2012) that are experienced (Jean-Marc Fournier, Lise Thériault, Sam Hamad, Laurent Lessard, etc.) but also by appointing people new to the cabinet (Martin Coiteux, Carlos Leitão, Hélène David, Robert Poëti, Gaétan Barrette, etc.). Given that the next election is scheduled by law for 2018, Couillard has the luxury of time (Marissal 2014) and so the new Liberal government has decided to spend its first two years implementing a number of "austerity" measures in order to reach a balanced budget by 2016. The first year of the government has gone by relatively smoothly. Several manifestations against austerity have been organized by left-leaning groups, mostly in Montreal and Quebec City, but opinion polls seem to indicate that a majority of Quebecers are supportive of the Liberals' tough budgetary measures (the Liberal wins in two by-elections held in June 2015 have been interpreted as further evidence of popular support for Couillard's budget decisions). Some were even fearing a new "maple spring" in 2015 but student mobilization, lacking a key rallying issue like the tuition fee hikes had been back in 2012 (see Bélanger and Falk Pedersen 2014), proved not as strong this time around and the protest movement quickly petered out.

Understandably, the result of the 2014 election has been a brutal shock for the Parti Québécois. Members of the party have spoken publicly about the need for the PQ to engage in a deep and a long reflection about its future and its priorities. Part of this reflection exercise was accomplished during the leadership

race that led to the selection in May 2015 of Pierre Karl Péladeau as the new PQ leader, officially defeating Alexandre Cloutier and Martine Ouellet while two other candidates, Bernard Drainville and Pierre Céré, withdrew during the leadership campaign (Jean-François Lisée withdrew before the campaign even began). However, since the race did not end up being much of a close one, Péladeau was able to surf toward the finish without committing himself much in terms of future policy orientations for the party. Even on the issue of sovereignty, while being clearly committed to working toward making Quebec a sovereign country, the new PQ leader has refused so far to clarify his strategy and calendar for holding a third referendum on this question. Thus, the PQ remains stuck between a rock and a hard place – between its platform's top priority of making independence and the necessity of first getting into power in order to act on it – due to the fact that the idea of sovereignty lacks momentum among the Quebec population, at least for the time being (see also Maioni 2014). In any case, because of Péladeau's presence at the head of the PQ, the 2018 campaign is likely to end up being as polarized around the national question as before. If so, it may well become a make-or-break election for the Parti Québécois and its constitutional option.

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