

The 2008 Provincial Election in Quebec

Éric Bélanger (McGill University)¹

Abstract:

In November of 2008, Quebec Premier Jean Charest decided to call a snap election. His obvious goal was to regain a majority of seats in the National Assembly by taking advantage of the Action Démocratique du Québec's steady decline in the polls and of the breaking financial crisis. The campaign's central theme was the management of the upcoming "economic storm." Based on the overall outcome, it is clear that Charest won his gamble, but this came at the price of an extremely low turnout. Also, it is unclear whether the Liberal government will be able to win a fourth consecutive election down the road. The current controversy surrounding the Caisse de Dépôt et Placement's debacle may well hurt the PLQ in the long term. The Parti Québécois, having regained its place as the official opposition, now appears well positioned to become the alternative to the government next time.

Introduction

Only nineteen months had passed since the 2007 Quebec election when in the autumn of 2008, Premier Jean Charest decided to call another provincial election. In March of the previous year, the Liberal Party of Quebec (PLQ) had remained in power but only with a minority share of the seats in the National Assembly. The big winner in 2007 was the Action Démocratique du Québec (ADQ), which leapt to official opposition status due to high dissatisfaction with the major parties' leaderships and to the reasonable accommodation debate (see Bélanger 2008). As a minority government, the Liberals wanted to choose the timing of the next election and it was in their interest to prevent this advantage from passing to the parties of the opposition. Charest's wish not to be forced out of power clearly motivated his decision to dissolve the National Assembly and send voters to the polls only a few short weeks after a federal election and an historic presidential race in the United States. Surely, however, the government's decision to initiate a new election campaign was also driven by the political context, which appeared very favourable to the Liberal Party.

Beginning in the early weeks of 2008, the Liberals benefited from increasing popularity. In terms of vote intentions, the governing party had gained the first place position by February and would hold this advantage without interruption thereafter. Evidently, the Charest government had learned from its first term that voters would not respond well to controversial policies, and had decided to avoid making

¹ Éric Bélanger, Department of Political Science, McGill University, 855 Sherbrooke Street West, Montreal, Canada H3A 2T7 eric.belanger3@mcgill.ca

waves the second time around. This strategy was rewarded by satisfaction levels that, according to CROP polls, reached 61% in August and September of 2008. The Liberal Party had not seen such a high approval rating since it took power in 2003. These gains were not, however, exclusively the product of improvements on the part of the government. They were also facilitated by problems which had for months been crippling the two main adversaries of the PLQ. In particular, the situation of the ADQ had deteriorated substantially since the last election.

In its new role as the official opposition in the National Assembly, the ADQ was confronted with numerous difficulties. Mario Dumont and his party proved incapable of convincing the population that they could handle the responsibilities of their position. Representatives of the ADQ often appeared out of touch with the important political questions of the moment, emphasizing issues that mattered to their own party but that were not always salient to the public. The best example of this faulty judgement was the ADQ's motion to censure the government because of the low level of participation in the school board elections of November 2007 (Porter 2007). Also, Dumont received extensive criticism from both the Liberal Party and the Parti Québécois for his refusal to engage in negotiations regarding the May 2007 budget (Dutrisac and Robitaille 2007). Finally, the ADQ suffered as a result of the declining salience of reasonable accommodation, an issue which the party had used to distinguish itself over the past two years. When the Bouchard-Taylor Commission presented its report in May 2008, the debate around reasonable accommodation was largely put to rest. Thereafter, the ADQ struggled to convince the public of its continued relevance. As a result of these problems, the ADQ suffered a drop in vote intentions from 32% at the time of the last election down to 17%. What is more, two ADQ deputies crossed the floor in October 2008 and joined the ranks of the PLQ, justifying their decision by saying that Dumont was a stubborn leader who had no real plan for Quebec (Dutrisac 2008).¹

In comparison to the ADQ, the situation of the sovereigntist movement was only marginally better. At the federal level, the results of the recent October election indicated that support for the Bloc Québécois had receded slightly (see Bélanger and Nadeau 2009). At the provincial level, the Parti Québécois (PQ) appeared to be regaining stability under its new leader, Pauline Marois, but the party remained shaken by the disappointing outcome of the 2007 election. In addition, the PQ was plagued with financial difficulties and was internally divided over the question of how to handle the sovereignty issue in its discourse. In terms of vote intentions, support for the PQ was stagnant, holding at about 30% over the course of the past year.

The financial crisis constitutes the last, but hardly the least, important element of the political context that led to this new provincial election. Striking in September 2008, the crisis foreshadowed the onset of a recession and offered Jean Charest the one issue around which to organize his whole campaign. The economy had long since been an issue on which the Quebec Liberal Party was viewed by the electorate as stronger than its competitors (Lemieux 2006). Indeed, a survey published by Léger Marketing on the 27th of October 2008 in the *Journal de Montréal* confirmed this reputational advantage: in response to the question "To whom would you entrust the management of the Quebec government in a time of financial crisis?", 48% of respondents chose Jean Charest and the Liberal Party (compared to 23% who said they would prefer Pauline Marois and the PQ, and 9% who favoured Dumont and the ADQ). Incidentally, the same survey indicated a substantial Liberal lead in vote intentions. In brief, the Léger Marketing poll suggested that all signs favoured the PLQ; except, of course, the finding that 75% of respondents did not want an autumn election in Québec.

The Campaign

Jean Charest chose the 5th of November as the start date for the campaign that would culminate in an election on the 8th of December.² The same five parties that faced off in the last election would come into competition once again. This time, Québec Solidaire (QS) put forward 122 candidates while the Parti Vert du Québec (PVQ) presented 80, a significantly lower number than in the last election. In addition to these five parties, voters were presented with a new option in the Parti Indépendantiste which offered 19 candidates. That party was created in October of 2007 by some separatists who were dissatisfied with the PQ.

The Liberal Party set the tone early in the campaign, emphasizing its favoured issue in the campaign slogan "*L'économie d'abord, oui*" ("The economy first, yes"). The slogan suggested that this election was intended as a referendum wherein the population would choose the party that they felt was most qualified to manage the "economic storm" which, according to Jean Charest, was set to descend on Quebec in the coming months. Charest emphasized the economic competence of his team while presenting a plan to create jobs, invest in infrastructure and protect the purchasing power of citizens.

The Parti Québécois offered its own plan for economic renewal which, in many ways, was quite similar to that of the PLQ. But the PQ also put great emphasis on social policy and on the environment (sovereignty was hardly mentioned in the party's discourse). During the campaign, the PQ made a special effort to attract the support of ecologically-minded voters. For instance, the party recruited Scott McKay, the former leader of the PVQ, as a candidate. The ADQ, for its part, offered an economic plan which included the partial privatization of Hydro-Québec and a substantial reduction in the size of the state. ADQ leader Mario Dumont also denounced recent reforms to the education system, taking issue in particular with the new courses in ethics and religious cultures. Québec Solidaire focused above all on Quebec sovereignty and social welfare while putting forward an economic plan based on aggressive state intervention and respect for the environment. As for the Parti Vert du Québec, it struggled throughout the campaign to make itself visible, a task made more difficult by the public's relative unfamiliarity with the party's new leader, Guy Rainville.

In response to the Liberals' success in establishing the economy as the central issue of the campaign, the opposing parties sought in the second week to bring the issue of healthcare to the fore. Charest's rivals had good reasons to pursue this strategy. Not only did the government have a much poorer record on healthcare than on the economy, but polls showed that the public cared about healthcare as much, if not more, than about the financial crisis.³ The ADQ presented a plan that would allow for a mixed public-private healthcare system, while the PQ promised that if it formed the government, all Quebecers would have access to a family physician within five years. Moreover, the PQ heavily criticized Charest for his failure to fulfill a promise to reduce wait times in hospitals and accused the PLQ of not having a plan for healthcare. Despite the best efforts of their detractors, the Liberals managed to deflect these attacks by shifting responsibility for the province's healthcare problems onto Pauline Marois. Charest frequently referred to the fact that, while she was Minister of Health in the late 1990s, Marois had forced the retirement of 1500 doctors and 4000 nurses in order to meet the government's goal of achieving a zero-deficit. Marois justified her decision saying that she did not have a choice at the time, but the PQ leader had trouble escaping blame for her past decisions.

Midway through the campaign, it became increasingly evident that the Liberals were consolidating their lead, that the ADQ was on the decline, and that the PQ was merely spinning its wheels. The absence of

substantial movement in vote intentions over the course of the campaign appeared to be tied to the population's low level of interest in the campaign. The task of attracting the attention of voters was arguably more challenging for the opposition parties, who were caught off guard by Charest's decision to call an early election. Both the PQ and the ADQ experienced difficulties in the beginning of the campaign. Pauline Marois appeared slightly drained, having just barely recovered from a minor surgical procedure. Her campaign schedule rarely took her beyond the "450" area code (the suburbs north and south of Montreal). The PQ tried to draw interest for its platform by offering a series of promises on the issue of identity including a "new Bill 101" and patriation of powers in the area of culture and communications. These efforts, however, met with limited success. As for the ADQ, it largely restricted itself to internet publicity and presented little in the way of a new platform. Instead, the party recycled a policy orientations document it had adopted during its general council meeting in October of 2008. Moreover, in mid-November, Mario Dumont felt obliged to publically take responsibility for the poor performance of his party since 2007. He recognized that the ADQ had not been sufficiently effective in opposition and apologized for disappointing the electorate.

On the 20th of November, the Quebec media announced that the president of the Caisse de Dépôt et Placement du Québec, Richard Guay, would be leaving his post for a month because of exhaustion. He had just been appointed in September. The opposition parties immediately took advantage of this development, suspecting that the decision of the president to take a leave of absence was connected to the financial crisis. The PQ and the ADQ speculated that the returns of the Caisse in 2008 were probably low because of the crisis. They suggested that the Charest government – which refused to comment on Guay's leave and discouraged the Caisse from issuing an early report on its status – was trying to hide unpleasant news from the public. It appeared that the opposition might have finally found the Achilles' heel of the PLQ.

The situation of the Caisse became one of the primary issues addressed by the leaders in the televised debate on Tuesday, November 25th. Jean Charest defended himself on this matter, insisting that it would be inappropriate for the government to politically interfere in the management of the Caisse. On the issue of healthcare, the premier maintained that his government had taken steps to train new doctors, but that replacing the personnel that Marois had let go would take years. Regarding the political future of Quebec, Marois let it slip that her "hands were tied with the sovereigntist movement", a declaration that provided fodder for the canons of her adversaries. On the whole, however, all three leaders performed quite well. Although the leaders of Québec Solidaire and the PVQ were not invited to the debate, QS leader Françoise David decided to respond to all of the moderator's questions on her website; a rather original strategy for communicating with voters interested in her policy ideas.

In the days following the leaders' debate, the PQ and ADQ resumed their strategy of incessantly questioning the government on the situation of the Caisse. This continued until political crisis struck in Ottawa, giving the campaign a new dimension. On the 27th of November, the opposition parties in the House of Commons declared their intention to oust the recently re-elected minority government of Stephen Harper. The government had raised the ire of the opposition when, in a statement on economic policy, Finance Minister Jim Flaherty announced a series of controversial measures including the elimination of state funding for political parties. In response, the Liberal Party of Canada and the New Democratic Party signed an agreement to form a coalition government, to which the Bloc Québécois lent its explicit support. The effect of this political crisis on the campaign in Quebec was two-fold. On one hand, instability in Ottawa allowed Charest to forcefully make the argument that Quebec needed a majority government to weather the economic downturn. Moreover, the crisis forced Mario Dumont to distance himself from Harper, while the decision of the Bloc to support Stéphane Dion's coalition put the

PQ in a decidedly awkward position. On the other hand, once Stephen Harper tried to undermine the credibility of the coalition by highlighting its association with Québécois “separatists”, Pauline Marois was able to use the crisis to show that relations between Quebec and the rest of Canada had deteriorated. She could now claim that a move towards sovereignty was the only solution. Jean Charest, seeing that the crisis in Ottawa had now become one of national unity, chose not to comment on these events anymore.

The Outcome and Its Aftermath

On the night of Monday, December 8th, the Charest government was returned to power with a slight majority consisting of 66 seats. Popular support for the PLQ had markedly increased, but not as much as polls had predicted during the campaign (these final numbers also fell short of the internal pre-campaign numbers of the party, which predicted a win with 75 to 80 seats). This narrow PLQ win (as opposed to a more decisive result) was perhaps the big surprise of the election. It is likely that if voting day had been a week earlier, that is before Stephen Harper’s indirect intervention in the Quebec campaign, then the PLQ would have won a slightly larger share of the seats. As for the PQ, it regained its place as the official opposition with a net gain of 15 seats over the previous election. The greatest loser of the night was the ADQ, which lost 34 seats and saw its popular support fall to 16 percent. Québec Solidaire found reason to celebrate, as it watched Amir Khadir win his riding of Mercier and become the party’s first assembly member. The PVQ and the Parti Indépendantiste, on the other hand, did not gain significant support during the election and failed to win a single seat. At 57.3 percent, participation in this election was the lowest Quebec had seen at the provincial level since 1927 (when turnout was 56.4 percent). Turnout this time was 14 percent lower than in the two preceding elections. In all likelihood, this low level of participation resulted from a combination of disinterest in the fall election, and disaffection on the part of the population with respect to the parties that competed in it.

Table 1. Quebec Provincial Election Results

	2007		2008	
	Seats (#)	Popular vote (%)	Seats (#)	Popular vote (%)
Parti Libéral du Québec	48	33.1	66	42.1
Parti Québécois	36	28.3	51	35.2
Action Démocratique du Québec	41	30.8	7	16.4
Québec Solidaire	0	3.6	1	3.8
Parti Vert du Québec	0	3.9	0	2.2
Parti Indépendantiste	–	–	0	0.1

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

Based on the overall outcome, it is clear that Jean Charest won his gamble. He appears to have been successful in capitalizing on the recent steady decline of the ADQ and on the breaking financial crisis, in

order to win back a majority of seats in the National Assembly. He now has his “two hands on the wheel” for the next four years, an opportunity that he had asked the Quebec electorate to grant him. But this came at the price of an extremely low turnout. Also, it is not clear at all if the Liberal government will be able to win a fourth consecutive election down the road. For one, Charest will likely step down before the end of the current mandate and, as of yet, there seems to be no clear successor who might take charge of the government and the PLQ after him. Moreover, the Caisse de Dépôt trap, which was carefully avoided during the campaign, will most likely come back to haunt the Liberals during the next campaign. In February 2009, the Caisse finally disclosed its numbers which showed that it had lost nearly \$40 billion in 2008 (that is, a 25% loss in the value of its assets) due to the economic crisis. Premier Charest decided to appoint Michael Sabia as the Caisse’s new president, but this choice, and the expedient way in which this nomination was made, have generated a lot of criticism in Quebec. These developments suggest that the Charest government may well be heading back to the unpopular days of its first mandate (see Pétry, Bélanger and Imbeau 2006).

For these various reasons, the Parti Québécois now appears well positioned to become the alternative to the government four years from now. Pauline Marois has interpreted the resurgence of her party as a sign that sovereignty has the wind in its sails again, but support for the PQ’s constitutional option remains relatively low for the moment. Marois still appears unsure as to how she will approach the issue of sovereignty. A lot will depend on what happens at the federal level over the coming months and on whether the federalist leaders can open up again to Quebec. Indeed, it appears that the political crisis in Ottawa greatly helped the PQ mobilize its supporters during the last days of the election campaign. At the very least, Marois’ position as leader of the PQ seems secure.

On election night, Mario Dumont decided to step down as ADQ leader, after having tried for fifteen years to offer a viable new party alternative to Quebec voters. It remains to be seen if the party will survive without him at its head. The ADQ will have a hard time finding another leader who would be as charismatic as Dumont. Furthermore, the party will likely have to rethink parts of its policy platform and considerably strengthen its organization. Part of the ADQ’s problem lies in the fact that its 2007 rise appears to have been a temporary outburst mainly attributable to Liberal and PQ voters having been dissatisfied at the time with their respective parties (see Bélanger and Nadeau 2008). Such favourable circumstances may well present themselves again to the ADQ, but it seems clear now that the party’s core of supporters is much smaller than what many had initially thought. Indeed, in 2008 the ADQ basically replicated its electoral performance of 2003.

Another party with a limited number of supporters is Québec Solidaire. It was finally able to win a seat in the National Assembly, and this will certainly offer the party the visibility that it was lacking since its creation a few years ago. But in the 2008 election, it failed to increase its share of the vote. Québec Solidaire might now be able to win some more support in the wake of Amir Khadir’s success, but the party’s left-leaning (and sovereigntist) constituency still appears to be limited to urban Montreal. In seeking to break out into the rest of the province, it will face a strong competitor in the PQ. Overcoming this rival and expanding outside Montreal will be the next great challenges for Québec Solidaire.

Endnotes

- ¹ The two deputies were André Riedl (Iberville) and Pierre Michel Auger (Champlain).
- ² I thank Adela Gotz for her assistance in summarizing all the campaign events described here; detailed references are available upon request.
- ³ A survey by Léger Marketing published on November 11th in the *Journal de Montréal*, reported that 31% of respondents gave priority to the issue of healthcare, versus 28% who were most concerned with the financial crisis.

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