

Social Movement Success as a Political Process: The Case of the 2012 Quebec Student Protests

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University tuition fees in Quebec remain among the lowest in North America, despite recent government attempts to raise them. What explains the success of the 2012 Quebec student protests? This paper argues that the unfolding of political events in 2012 demonstrates the counter-intuitive manner in which a state can come to reflect a social movement's objectives. The Quebec student movement succeeded not by garnering public support or directly influencing policy decisions, but by allying itself with an opposition party that won an election in spite of its association with the movement. The student movement was not backed by popular opinion, and its success resulted from aligning itself with a party that was able to withstand the detrimental effects of this relationship.

Keywords: Quebec; social movements; student politics; protest; process tracing

Malgré les efforts déployés pour les augmenter, les droits de scolarité au Québec demeurent parmi les plus bas en Amérique du Nord. Cet article examine les facteurs menant au succès du mouvement étudiant et affirme que la mobilisation de 2012 démontre qu'un état puisse arriver à refléter les objectifs d'un mouvement social d'une manière contre intuitive. Le mouvement étudiant n'a pas réussi à cultiver le soutien général de la population ni à influencer directement les politiques publiques. Durant la crise de 2012, malgré que l'opinion publique au Québec restait défavorable au mouvement étudiant, il a plutôt atteint ses objectifs grâce à son alliance avec un parti qui a pu surmonter les effets nuisibles de leur rapport.

Mots-clés: Québec; mouvements sociaux; politique étudiante; protestation; traçage des processus

On February 13, 2012, postsecondary students throughout Quebec began a strike in opposition to tuition fee increases proposed by the Liberal government led by Jean Charest. After months of contentious and sometimes violent protests, an election was called and the Quebec Liberal Party was defeated. The reforms proposed by the Charest government were abandoned and the student movement was celebrated as a successful mobilization against neoliberalism in the spirit of other resistance movements such as the Arab Spring. However, while this mobilization was instrumental in producing policy change, its effect was indirect and counterintuitive.

This paper's principal argument claims that, after the initial organizational success that brought its demands to political prominence, the student mobilization undermined the electoral prospects of its political ally. Student resistance made the cancellation of the tuition increase possible, but counterintuitively rendered the election of the party that would pursue such a policy less likely. Therefore, the strike influenced the terms of political debate and the process of political competition by exerting countervailing effects. The paper concurs with prevailing sentiments that social movement demands are politically mediated, but argues that they can influence political dynamics in a contradictory fashion.

This argument calls into question characterizations of the Printemps Québécois as an awakening of civic consciousness or a popular victory against encroaching neoliberalism. The student movement succeeded by attaching itself to a political party that attained electoral victory despite, not because of, its association with the striking students. Put differently, after successfully mobilizing to politicize the tuition increase, the student movement realized its immediate policy objective not by becoming a political asset, but by remaining a sufficiently small political liability.

The paper begins by introducing theories of social movement success and influence. Following this, it introduces process tracing as the paper's method of case study analysis. Next, it

proceeds with a historical overview of the Quebec postsecondary education system before discussing the details of the 2011 student strike. After establishing the historical context, it will go on to analyze the relationship between the Parti Québécois, striking students and popular opinion, and will advance the paper's claim that the movement depended on the PQ's ability to absorb the movement's unpopularity without succumbing to electoral defeat. The paper will then examine the PQ's governance of student tuition in order to demonstrate that the student movement's success was not only counterintuitive, but also limited, as some contentious tuition reforms were subsequently passed. Finally, the paper will consider implications for social movement strategy and discuss possible reasons why the PQ would choose to associate itself with the unpopular strike. Altogether, this analysis will endeavour to demonstrate the extent to which the effectiveness of the student mobilization rested upon the availability of a political ally, rather than a more general spirit of resistance in Quebec.

Social Movement Theory

Social movements are one of the most prominent areas of study in sociology and political science. Debates regarding the motivating factors behind social movement participation have produced extensive literatures. Resource mobilization theory (McCarthy and Zald, 1977; Tilly, 1978), political opportunity theory (Tarrow, 1994), relative deprivation theory (Gurr, 1970), and rationalist examinations of the collective action problem (Olson, 1965) have each contributed to an improved understanding of why individuals participate in group activism. Although the study of social movements has produced touchstone works on the topic of mobilization, the matter of social movement success and failure has received less scholarly attention. This is in some respects surprising, as the purpose of a social movement is not mobilization in itself, but mobilization in

pursuit of a particular goal. However, the methodological difficulties of gauging success and failure quickly become apparent and imbue the topic with a degree of subjectivity.

Despite these methodological challenges, there have been some notable studies of social movement success and failure. Scholarship in this area can be traced back to the work of William Gamson, whose book *The Strategy of Social Protest* (1990 [1975]) surveyed US social movement organizations from 1800-1945. Gamson (1990: 458) concluded that organizations which adopted more assertive tactics experienced greater success. This general finding was reinforced by other scholarship such as Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward's (1977) *Poor People's Movements* (Amenta, 2014: 17). Recent studies (McAdam and Su, 2002; McVeigh, Myers and Sikkink, 2004; Walker and McCarthy 2010) have been skeptical of such conclusions, in part because movement assertiveness may engender a debilitating response from the state or broader public (Amenta, 2014: 16-18).

Contemporary research has moved away from Gamson's macroscopic empirical analysis in order to further understand the specific causal processes underlying social movement success by assessing the relative influence of social movement strategy versus political context. Success is most often defined in terms of influence over state policy (Biggs and Andrews, 2015: 421). Most investigations conclude that context and tactics are reciprocal (Amenta et al., 2010: 288-289) which invites scholars to specify the salient interactions between political circumstances and social movement strategy that produce greater levels of success or influence.ⁱ Notwithstanding the iterated and reciprocal relationship between context and behaviour, the persistent question remains whether policy changes consistent with a social movement's demands are more attributable to the movement's strategic decisions and organizational features, or the political environment in which they operate.

Tactically, social movements appear to be confronted with a dilemma grounded in the twin imperatives of acting against the source of their grievance and accumulating public support. Disruptions such as boycotts, strikes and protests can economically weaken (Luders, 2006: 2010) or undermine the reputation (King and Pearce, 2010) of the movement's target (Biggs and Andrews, 2015: 420). Though some claim supporting evidence is lacking (Biggs and Andrews, 2015: 421), "many scholars argue that protest matters when activists impose economic and reputational costs on targets." It is certainly apparent that many movements adopt tactics consistent with this logic, even if it is incorrect.

In addition to imposing costs on their targets, one would also expect the cultivation of widespread support to be an important factor in social movement success. If protest amounts to lobbying by other means, and policymakers are understood to respond to electoral calculations, then attracting popular support would seem a necessary precondition for success. This intuitive logic is reinforced by existing empirical research. For example, in his extensive study of ecology, anti-nuclear, and peace movements, Marco Giugni (2004) finds that the social movements in his study have a very limited effect on policy. However, to the extent that they *are* consequential, their influence is bolstered when combined with favourable public opinion and sympathetic state elites. Indeed, context-oriented studies have argued that success partly relies on "enlisting the support of bystanders" (Biggs and Andrews, 2015: 422). Similarly, Edwin Amenta (2006) underlines the importance of political context for social movement success in *When Movements Matter*. Amenta examines political mediation models of social movement success and studies the development of the United States' social security program, analyzing counterfactual scenarios to ascertain whether the presence of a social movement can actually be said to have caused the outcome for which it successfully mobilized to advocate. His study goes beyond asking *whether* a movement influenced

policy, by investigating *how* political context allowed for this influence to be exerted (Amenta, 2014: 21).

This paper agrees that political context is essential to consider. However, it challenges the salience of popular support in contributing to social movement success. The case of the 2012 Quebec student strikes suggests that political context may matter so much as to override the need for a social movement to accumulate widespread support and sympathy.

Process Tracing

This paper employs a process tracing approach to conduct its empirical analysis. Process tracing is a narrative-based method of social research. It is designed to identify whether causal relationships exist and the mechanisms that connect causes to their effects (George and Bennett, 2005: 206). In its deductive form, process tracing entails the presentation of a theory and the explication of its empirical implications (Trampusch and Palier, 2016: 445). Researchers identify conditions which must be present in the historical record if a hypothesis is true and conditions that would validate the hypothesis if they were observed. They then consult the historical record to see if such necessary or sufficient evidence is present (Mahoney, 2012; Van Evera, 1997: 31-32; Collier, 2011: 825). This approach is well-suited to determining whether and how certain factors were causally necessary or sufficient to produce an outcome.

Process tracing can also be employed as an inductive approach to theory-construction. Researchers are able to sketch a causal process by identifying how factors combined to generate an outcome (Trampusch and Palier, 2016: 444). This inductive approach is designed to theorize the existence of causal conditions, whereas the deductive approach is suitable to testing these theories. Despite their differences, these two approaches are complementary and represent a narrative mode of hypothesis construction and testing.

Though process tracing is sometimes formalized, it allows narrative to be foregrounded while ensuring that this narrative serves the purpose of tracing a causal claim. The paper tests the claim that the Quebec student movement caused the abandonment of the Charest government's proposed tuition fee increase. It confirms this causal relationship, but finds that the mechanisms linking cause and effect are counterintuitive. The causal chain leading to the abandonment of the fee increases included an important set of other conditions. Specifically, it required circumstances that allowed the partisan opposition to the Charest government to win an election despite the unpopularity of the student mobilization. To validate this argument, it is necessary to show that the student mobilization was in fact unpopular and that the PQ's victory was attributable to other factors. Taken together, these observations support the argument that the causal process linking mobilization to success rested on exogenous political dynamics, specifically the PQ's ability to advocate on behalf of students despite the strike's unpopularity. We base our analysis on polling data, Hansard records, newspaper articles, and existing scholarly accounts of the student protests.

Quebec's Distinct Education Model

Quebec's relatively low tuition levels can intuitively be subsumed under its generally progressive approach to social policy oriented towards equity and accessibility. In fact, there are more than superficial connections between Quebec's approach to university education and the evolution of its welfare state. The 1965 Parent Reforms were a significant component of the province's socio-cultural transformation during the Quiet Revolution era. They are described by André Drainville (2013: 788) as a "pillar" of the Quebec Model. Although the Parent Report's recommendation to abolish tuition fees was not adopted, it led to a prioritization of equitable access to education and ensured that "student associations... played... a role as privileged actors in the management of education" (Drainville, 2013: 788). These concerns have survived over the

subsequent decades as evinced by findings that “neoliberal ideology” was less influential upon education policymakers in Quebec than in other Canadian provinces (Fisher et al., 2009: 564).

It is not accurate, however, to suggest that Quebec’s social policy model and the enduring values borne out of the Quiet Revolution reliably preserve low tuition levels. There have been substantial fee increases. In 1990, the PLQ led by Robert Bourassa increased fees from \$567 to \$1668 (Simard, 2013: 267).ⁱⁱ Despite intense student opposition and protests, the PLQ implemented its plan and tuition was raised over four years. In 1996, the PQ government proposed a 30 percent increase but capitulated to large student protests (LaCoursière, 2007: 152). The Charest Liberals subsequently unfroze tuition fees and implemented a \$300 increase in 2007 (Simard, 2013: 201). Essentially, since the 1990s, Quebec governments, whether Liberal or Péquiste, have sought to increase tuition levels. They have at times failed in the face of student opposition, but also succeeded in implementing quite substantial increases. Importantly, despite fees quadrupling since 1990, tuition fee increases have never attained the impression of normalcy in Quebec. Proposed increases sometimes succeed and sometimes fail, but are consistently met with robust student opposition.

The Maple Spring

The most significant recent attempt to substantially increase tuition was undertaken by the PLQ under Premier Jean Charest. The 2011-2012 annual budget officially put forth their intention to raise postsecondary tuition fees by 75 per cent over five years. This proposal amounted to an increase of \$1625, from approximately \$2200 to \$3800 per year, and was set to enter into effect in the fall of 2012 (Bégin-Caouette and Jones, 2014: 417). This was hardly the tripling successfully implemented by the Bourassa government, but far outstripped the prior thirty percent increase. The proposal was a reaction to increased budget shortfalls and declining quality of education (Maroy

et al., 2014). It reflected pressure exerted by Quebec universities to address what they viewed as inadequate funding (Bégin-Caouette and Jones, 2014: 420). In 2009-2010, funding for Quebec universities trailed the Canadian average by \$850 million (CRÉPUQ, 2013). The proposal also reflected the government's centre-right ideology and motivation to improve the province's fiscal standing. In justifying the proposed increase, the Charest government suggested that Quebec students need to pay their fair share of education costs (Sorochan, 2012).

Student organizations overcame their traditional ideological divisions and began lobbying the government to abandon its plans (Dufour and Savoie, 2014: 480-1). The first major show of organizational force occurred on November 10, 2011, when Quebec's four largest student groups participated in a joint demonstration in Montreal and a one-day strike (Dufour and Savoie, 2014: 483).ⁱⁱⁱ Following this demonstration, the Association pour un Solidarité Syndicale Étudiante (ASSE) put together the CLASSE coalition between itself and any student association that voted to join the campaign opposing the tuition increases. Rumours of a spring strike began to circulate shortly thereafter. As part of their pre-strike campaign, ASSE attempted to reach out to the broader public by framing the tuition increase as a justice issue which implicated all Quebecers rather than a student-specific financial concern (Collombat, 2014: 147). They stressed the broader societal value of accessible higher learning and decried the commodification of public goods, including education (Bégin-Caouette and Jones, 2014: 417). Simultaneously, student organizations augmented their protest activities by engaging in picketing, marches, and other disruptive tactics (Spiegel, 2015: 777). Several "days of action" featured large protests in cities across the province and the occupation of campus buildings. Yet the Charest government continued to refuse to meet with students to discuss the increase (Sorochan, 2012). Instead, the government remained

“confident that the mobilization would eventually die away... (and) adopted an inflexible approach toward the demonstrators” (Fournier, 2014: 174).

On February 13, 2012, the first student associations under CLASSE voted for a “grève générale illimitée” (Dufour and Savoie, 2014: 483). By this time, the strikers numbered three hundred thousand, amounting to 75 per cent of the Quebec student population (Bégin-Caouette and Jones, 2014: 417). Meanwhile, picketers attempting to enforce the strike mandate forced the effective cancellation of classes at most universities (Sorochan, 2012). This tactic provoked clashes with students opposed to the strikes, some of whom filed injunctions to force the continuation of classes and prevent picketing. Court decisions balanced the right to strike with the students’ right to attend classes they paid for. Although numerous injunctions were eventually handed down forcing students to return to school, these were largely ignored (Sorochan, 2012).

The next flashpoint occurred in April when protestors surrounded the PLQ’s annual congress in Victoriaville, with protesters and police suffering injuries during violent confrontations. Police involvement increased through April and May, with many demonstrations featuring mass arrests (Bégin-Caouette and Jones, 2014: 417). On May 18, the government passed a law to curtail the protests and encourage students to call off the strike (Lemay and Neige-Lapierre, 2012: 442). The emergency act known as Bill 78 restricted the right to protest by making it easier for police to declare a demonstration illegal. It also suspended all classes until mid-August and imposed heavy fines for disrupting classes when they resumed.

The government’s efforts in this regard were ineffective and public disapproval of perceived infringements upon citizens’ rights emboldened and broadened the movement. The reaction to Bill 78 is described by Collombat (2014: 149-50) as “the moment when the Maple Spring turned from a student strike to social upheaval...Bill 78 was the straw that broke the camel’s

back.” Similarly, Fournier (2014: 175) underlines the effect of Bill 78 in emboldening resistance to the Charest government: “whilst exceptional legal measures, heavy-handed police tactics and mass arrests have been known to dissuade protest, they had the opposite effect in Quebec” (see also Wood, 2007). Spontaneous protests broke out across the province in reaction to the law, including the *manif des casseroles* demonstrations, a nightly tradition during the spring and summer of 2012 where participants voiced their displeasure by banging pots and pans. Events culminated in a May 22 demonstration where an estimated 400,000 protestors marched through downtown Montreal (Fournier, 2014: 174). This violation of Bill 78 constituted the “largest act of civil disobedience in Canadian history” (Sorochan, 2012).

The 2012 Quebec Election

The main challenger to the governing Liberals was the Parti Québécois which initially embraced the student movement. All PQ Members of the National Assembly wore the red square symbolizing support for the strikes on their lapels during the spring legislative session (Canadian Press, 2012). PQ leader Pauline Marois suggested that the Liberals had put forth an unconscionable and burdensome increase in fees. Marois argued, “Les jeunes ont parfaitement raison de se battre contre cette hausse. Aucun n'accepterait une hausse des tarifs d'électricité, de taxes ou d'impôts de 75 pour cent” (Ouellet, 2012). The PQ leader conveyed a denunciation of the tuition increases to the National Assembly on May 17, 2012:

Je vais vous dire pourquoi je le porte, le carré rouge. Le premier ministre utilisera une loi spéciale contre les jeunes sans jamais avoir accepté de s'asseoir avec eux, sans jamais avoir accepté de discuter avec eux de sa décision d'augmenter de 137% les frais de scolarité depuis 2007... Que propose-t-il aux jeunes? Que laissera t-il aux jeunes?... Ce sont eux qui devront payer plus que tous ceux qui sont passés avant eux...le carré rouge que nous

portons, c'est le symbole de l'équité...pourquoi le premier ministre s'acharne-t-il contre les jeunes du Québec? (Marois, 2012).

The major student organizations and movement leaders generally reacted with skepticism to these overtures from the PQ (Canadian Press, 2012; Radio Canada, 2012). There were exceptions among the more moderate student leaders, and former FÉCQ president Léo Bureau-Blouin even ran as a PQ candidate in the 2012 provincial election (Wilson, 2012). The major student organizations remained politically neutral and did not endorse any political party during the campaign (Mazataud, 2012). For their part, more radical students questioned the PQ's commitment to the student movement's goals and feared the protests would be coopted by the party's pursuit of electoral gains (Canadian Press, 2012). Despite this unease, the PQ's recognition marked an important endorsement of the strikes. Support was of course qualified, and the PQ condemned violent protest tactics and did not embrace the most radical of the students' demands, but they provided significant symbolic recognition and validation.

However, the political damage of this association became evident as the protests persisted. A CROP poll conducted between May 22 and 25 found that only 36 per cent of respondents supported the students and 64 per cent supported the government (Dufour and Savoie, 2014: 485). Once polling revealed that most Quebecers not only opposed the violence of some protests, but also supported the government's approach to the tuition issue, PLQ MNAs began publicly denouncing the PQ's visible support for the students (Canadian Press, 2012). At the very least, the governing party perceived the PQ's links with the student movement as a political weakness. The PQ seemed to have reached the same conclusion when they decided to remove the red squares from their lapels, though they continued to voice support for the ambitions of Quebec's

postsecondary students in general and criticize the government's approach to the strike (Canadian Press, 2012).

Hoping for a renewed mandate, the Liberals called an election on August 1, set for September 4, 2012. Student organizations immediately mobilized to encourage their members and sympathizers to vote (Bégin-Caouette and Jones, 2014: 418). Importantly, the campaign was not centered on the issue of the tuition fee increases. Other factors contributed to the downfall of the PLQ. Foremost among these were perceptions of corruption amidst the revelations of the Quebec Commission of Inquiry on the Construction Industry, also known as the Charbonneau Commission. Indeed, the commission dominated media coverage and stimulated widespread discontent amongst voters (Bégin-Caouette and Jones, 2014: 421). Accordingly, the PQ attempted to reinforce government integrity as the central issue of the campaign. As conveyed by *Le Devoir*, “Le Parti québécois se (pose) comme le parti de l’honnêteté, par opposition au Parti libéral, qui symbolise l’usure et la corruption ‘L’enjeu le plus urgent, c’est de changer le gouvernement libéral de Jean Charest, ce gouvernement usé et corrompu’, a répété la chef péquiste tout au long de la journée” (Shields, 2012).

For his part, Charest emphasized the significance of the student crisis. At the PLQ campaign launch on August 1, *Le Journal de Montreal* (Lajoie, 2012) reported, “Charest appelle les Québécois aux urnes le 4 septembre pour régler une fois pour toute la question des droits de scolarité.” The Premier argued, “Les électeurs devront choisir entre un gouvernement libéral qui fera respecter la loi et l’ordre ou un gouvernement péquiste dont les gestes et les décisions seront dictés par la rue ... Pauline Marois a fait le choix d’embrasser le mouvement de contestation, de porter ses symboles...Marois propose de plier, de céder et de leur donner tout ce qu’ils demandent” (Lajoie, 2012). Although the PLQ placed the student crisis at the centre of their campaign

(Chouinard, 2012), only 14 per cent of Quebecers identified this as the most important election issue (Leger Marketing and Agence QMI, 2012a: 16). In this short and unfocused campaign, “hardly any questions were raised of tuition fees, or higher education or civil liberties” (Drainville, 2013: 796). Ultimately, the PQ emerged victorious, obtaining a small minority in the Quebec National Assembly amidst promises to abandon the Liberal’s proposed tuition increase. The PQ obtained 31.95 percent of the vote compared to the Liberals’ 31.2 and attained 54 seats to the Liberals’ 50 (DGÉQ, 2012).

The PQ in Power

After the election, the PQ proposed its own model of tuition reform which, while less invidious to the province’s students, nonetheless demonstrated that their broader objectives would not be entirely achieved. Rather than initiating a discussion on reducing or eliminating tuition fees, as the radical student unions like ASSE have advocated, the PQ announced that tuition would rise annually, with increases indexed to increases in average household income. This result was not an instance of duplicity on the part of the PQ, as Pauline Marois expressed her support for more modest increases prior to the election (Canadian Press, 2012).

Despite speculation that this development would lead protestors back on to the streets, student reaction was muted. Some demonstrations did occur, but none approached the level of social mobilization witnessed during the Printemps Québécois. The protests coincided with a student summit established by the government with the aim of reviving the tradition of collaboration and consultation with civil society that has been a feature of the Quebec model of social policy (Nöel, 2013) and which the PQ accused the Liberals of neglecting. According to Marois, the summit was designed to “re-establish the dialogue, to rebuild bridges, to re-weave the links between us” (Canadian Press and Postmedia News, 2013). While the student reaction was

not enthusiastic, neither was it rebellious. Student associations issued statements ranging from cautious concern to outright rejection of the PQ's plans, but ultimately the policy was successfully adopted.

While this result might be said to indicate the moderating effect of a corporatist collaborative approach which explicitly includes civil society, a less optimistic interpretation is also tenable. Once the PQ was elected, the students had no viable means of resistance aside from lobbying. Quebec Solidaire was more sympathetic to the striking students' ambitions, but offered no prospects of becoming a governing party in the short or medium term. Conversely, the PQ could not entirely betray an already mobilized and agitated segment of the population. Therefore, the outcome is best understood as a necessary compromise. If the students wished to advance more radical claims, they lacked a viable political avenue to achieve their policy objectives, and if the PQ wished to adopt more stringent education reforms for the purpose of fiscal management, it was to some extent beholden to its alliance with the students.

Interpreting the Printemps Québécois

Some scholars suggest that the 2012 student mobilization was aided by the global environment of protest and resistance. Drainville's (2013) account of the student strike argues that "what is distinct about the present juncture is the matter-of-fact folding of global context into situated events" (792). He explicitly links the Quebec student movement to the Arab Spring and protests in Iceland (796). That the student mobilization is referred to as the "Maple Spring" or "Printemps Québécois" should provide evidence that it was at least to some extent subject to global dynamics. Along these lines, Giroux (2013) conceives of the protests as an instance of globally-minded resistance to neoliberalism and contends they were not limited to challenging the commodification of education. In his view (527), the student movement affirmed that "the assault

on the university could be addressed as part of a wider attack on the social state, the environment, unemployed workers, indigenous peoples and young people across the globe.” Giroux lauds the students for their victory in the face of violence and propaganda deployed by defenders of neoliberal orthodoxy (525-6). He affirms that that the students viewed their objectives in terms of a broader global struggle and the movement achieved extraordinary success in advancing this debate in Quebec and elsewhere.

This assessment is shared by others (Spiegel, 2015: 536; Bégin-Caouette and Jones, 2014: 418) who emphasize the movement’s neoliberal critique and links to other global struggles. In assessing the student movement’s success, Kennelly (2014: 136) lists a number of recent notable protests, from anti-war rallies in the early 2000s to the Occupy movement. She suggests (136) that the Quebec protests stand in contrast to these other examples since, “none actually enacted democracy in such an immediate and insistent manner, engaging directly with the governments of the day to demand that their concerns be recognised and addressed, while making use of direct democracy principles within their own organisations.”

However, it is important not to overstate the global foundations of the protests or their ultimate success. While tactics, rhetoric, and labels were certainly appropriated by the Quebec student protests, it is difficult to conclusively claim that global forces were causally significant. Fournier (2014: 168) cautions against overstating the global dynamics of the event: “The links and similarities between the movements that have emerged from 2011 onwards, from the Arab Spring to Occupy, should not lead us to downplay their essentially local character.” Any claim that global dynamics were causally significant for the emergence or strategy of the student mobilization would have to address Quebec’s history of student strikes, taking into account the global contexts in

which they previously occurred. Given the frequency of student mobilizations in Quebec, it seems more likely that the global context affected the aesthetics and interpretation of the strike more than facilitating its occurrence. Furthermore, analyses which emphasize the student movement's impact as a successful counteraction to neoliberal orthodoxy should be tempered by the PQ's aforementioned handling of the movement and tuition issue once the party gained power.

While the debates surrounding the Printemps Québécois are likely to continue, it is important to recognize that successful mobilization does not automatically result in success for the movement. Accordingly, it is inaccurate to claim that the Charest government's failure to increase tuition fees can be attributed to the effective resistance of students. Instead, a more complex picture must be presented. The Charest government never abandoned its tuition plans and appears to have lost the 2012 election for unrelated reasons. This is not to dismiss the role of the protests in weakening and challenging the Charest government, but there is reason to avoid conflating the realization of a protest movement's desired outcome with its effectiveness in causing this outcome. The influence of student protests, however necessary, was a mediated and indirect cause of the subsequent policy.

The students' victory was partial but it was a success nonetheless. This result was contingent on the PQ being elected in spite of its support for striking students. Social mobilization was necessary to challenge the Liberal proposal, but widespread popularity was not. Instead, once mobilized, striking students became a burden to their political ally. The movement's balancing of resistance necessary to politicize the tuition increase and moderation necessary to avoid becoming politically untenable was likely more of an unintentional outcome than a strategic process, but there are strategic implications nonetheless. Rather than pursuing widespread popularity – an intuitive strategy of social mobilization – the priority might be better placed on cultivating a

political ally that could assume government. This strategy is likely to produce immediate policy objectives more reliably than long-term goals, but provides an avenue for effective struggle. Importantly, this reduces the incentive to dilute principles in pursuit of broader popularity. While sufficient unpopularity may render a movement politically toxic, so long as it remains tenable to its allies, negative electoral effects may be tolerable and more favourable policy outcomes can be expected to result.

The PQ's Perspective

Although this paper is primarily concerned with explicating the contradictory effects of student social mobilization over policy and politics, its argument begs the question of why the Parti Québécois would take on a burdensome alliance with student organizations. The liabilities associated with such an alliance detracted from an otherwise advantageous starting position in the 2012 election campaign. This section presents three factors which may have contributed to the PQ's political positioning during the student crisis. First, the PQ faced an insurgent force to its political left. Québec Solidaire was founded in 2006 from a merger of smaller left-wing parties (Dufour, 2009: 56-57). The fledgling party remained a marginal electoral force in 2012 but had steadily increased its vote share and elected two popular MNAs in Françoise David and Amir Khadir. For example, a 2010 poll found Amir Khadir to be the most popular politician in Quebec (Leger Marketing, 2010: 3). Given Québec Solidaire's media savvy (Castonguay, 2010) and the increasing ability of small parties to reach wide audiences through the internet and mass media, the party posed an increasing threat to the PQ. Moreover, the sudden and dramatic rise of the NDP in Quebec during the 2011 federal election highlighted the volatility of the Quebec electorate and the room for growth on the political left (Fournier et al., 2013). If the PQ did not position itself

against the tuition hikes, it risked ceding a substantial politically mobilized segment of the electorate to Québec Solidaire.

Second, the PQ may have supported the student movement because they underestimated its unpopularity. Initially, support for the students and the government was equally divided when polling on the issue began on February 23, 2012 (Dufour and Savoie, 2014: 485). Four months later, a CROP-La Presse poll conducted May 23-25 yielded only 36 per cent support for the students (CROP and La Presse, 2012: 6).^{iv} As public opinion shifted, the PQ curtailed their support. However, the PQ's initial stance against the tuition increase limited their ability to disassociate themselves. Though the student protests remained unpopular, 71 per cent of Quebecers agreed that Jean Charest had managed the conflict poorly (Leger Marketing and Le Journal de Montreal, 2012: 7). Polling in May 2012 also revealed that a majority of Quebecers opposed Bill 78 and viewed the law as overly harsh (Leger Marketing and Agence QMI, 2012b: 7). The PQ positioned itself against the embattled Premier's unpopular law, but in doing so retained their ties to the unpopular students.

Additionally, disaggregating province-wide polling data may help to explain its influence on the PQ. The regions of Quebec where the PQ is most competitive contained greater support for the students than the provincial average. Notably for the PQ, Francophones were 15 per cent more supportive of the students than Anglophones (Dufour and Savoie, 2014: 485). At the same time, opposition to the students was highest in areas of less political importance to the PQ due to their conservative character: the Quebec City region, Anglophone ridings, and places with many voters over 55 years old (Dufour and Savoie, 2014: 485). In many such ridings, PQ support trails far behind the PLQ and the Coalition Avenir Québec.

A third explanation for the PQ's alliance with the student movement lies in the party's ideological commitment to egalitarianism and social democracy. According to Peter Graefe (2005: 51-52), however, the PQ's social democratic roots and an affinity for radicalism should not be taken too far. The PQ has followed the trend of social democratic parties throughout the world by abandoning manifestos that "presage a classless cooperative commonwealth" in favour of proposing "a series of compromises staying within the bounds of what can be realistically expected in light of existing institutionalized compromises and hegemonic discourses." Instead of maintaining an egalitarian stance consistent with the ambitions of CLASSE, the PQ has pursued its political project according to the principles of what Graefe (52) calls "competitive nationalism." Graefe (53) argues that in the early 1990s, the logic of the PQ's pursuit of sovereignty transformed from asserting independence in order to manage market forces in protection of the nation, toward asserting that "the welfare of Quebecers under globalization is only possible with sovereignty. Anything less means a loss of competitiveness." This places the nation and "competitiveness" in a symbiotic relationship and is largely consistent with the modernizing neoliberal rhetoric invoked by the Charest Liberals to justify their proposed fee increases. According to this logic, the exceptionally low tuition levels enjoyed by Quebec students were unrealistic and unsustainable, and Quebec must not resist but rather accommodate the pressures of globalization.

Nonetheless, one need not dismiss the PQ's social democratic ideological roots when explaining their alliance with the striking students. Even if the PQ has chosen, or been compelled by circumstance, to adopt a more neoliberal approach, the dynamics of opposition party politics are different than those of governance. Essentially, the PQ might be more able and willing to adopt more principled, even radical, positions when in opposition. Although this position may not be electorally beneficial, they have less to lose than a governing party, and simply by being the

opposition against an establishment Liberal party they may have been more inclined to embrace forces of social resistance. However, the developments following the PQ's 2012 victory reveals that they insisted on following through with their own proposed tuition increases and were by no means susceptible to the instrumental influence of the students they supported.

Regardless of why the PQ chose to ally with the students, the student movement benefited from, but did not aid in the party's victory.^v This scenario could be the result of ideological affinities, political miscalculations, or efforts to forestall challenges from marginal parties, but in each case the party's embrace of the student movement provided the students with an avenue to achieve their policy objectives without persuading the general populace.

Conclusion

The PQ's cancelling of the tuition increases marked a partial resolution of the issue. Some student leaders celebrated the revised plan as a clear victory for their signature priority. Among them was former FÉUQ president Martine Desjardins, who explained her reaction when Marois introduced the scaled-back fee increases: "C'est à ce moment que je me suis dit: on a gagné" (Lowrie, 2017). Yet many student leaders were angered at the decision and emphasized that eliminating or at least freezing tuition fees was the movement's stated goal. Others argued that postsecondary tuition was only one aspect of the movement's broader agenda, which should include addressing social inequalities (Lowrie, 2017).

The aforementioned divisions within the student movement may help explain the failure to challenge the Marois government more forcefully on the tuition issue, as well as the comparatively small scale of anti-austerity resistance during Phillippe Couillard's premiership. Although Couillard won a majority government in 2014, he did not re-introduce the tuition increases proposed by his Liberal predecessor. Recently, the student movement has lacked the sustained activism, shared

purpose, or organizational energy which united participants during the Maple Spring. The conditions which precipitated the widespread social resistance of 2012 appear difficult to replicate.

Nonetheless, the 2012 Quebec student strikes are an important recent example of social movement success. As this paper has argued, the student's victory was attained through a counter-intuitive process. Rather than engendering sentiments of solidarity amongst the general public, popular opinion of the student movement remained low and deteriorated over the course of the strike. The movement obtained its immediate policy goal of cancelling the tuition fee increase proposed by the PLQ, but this depended on a political ally that could withstand the detrimental electoral impact of the alliance. While subsequent developments reveal that relations between the PQ and the students deteriorated after the defeat of the Charest government, the case provides a useful explanation as to how social movements can influence policy without cultivating widespread popular support. The strike and protests were necessary to advance the movements' policy objectives, but this tactic simultaneously eroded public support, and success depended on an electoral contest fought over an array of unrelated issues. Ultimately, the outcome of this social struggle was determined not by the balance of social forces engaged in it, but rather a largely external political process.

ⁱ Amenta cites Soule et al., 1999; Amenta et al., 2002; Meyer, 2005; Amenta, 2006; Olzak and Soule, 2009.

ⁱⁱ Simard cites FÉCQ, 2013.

ⁱⁱⁱ The four student groups consist of the more moderate FÉCQ and FÉUQ (Quebec's branch of the Canadian Federation of Students and the Quebec Federation of Students), the more radical ASSÉ (Association for Student Syndical Solidarity) and the defunct umbrella organization TaCEQ (Quebec Student Roundtable).

^{iv} However, an Abacus Data poll conducted May 15-16 found that 43% of respondents supported the students (Abacus, 2012: 5).

^v Fourteen per cent of voters identified the tuition debate as the most important election issue. Of these voters only 19 per cent reported that they intended to vote PQ, compared to 29 per cent for Québec Solidaire (Leger Marketing, 2012a: 16).

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