

**Two Spheres:  
Federalism and Duality in Canada and the United States**

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Canadian politicians are frequently heard to advocate reform of their country's political system, particularly by lifting elements of the U.S. political system and installing them into the Canadian system. The two political systems have much in common. Both countries largely derive their political and electoral systems from the British parliamentary system, and both retain the British single member plurality (SMP) electoral system, whereby the country is divided into districts each electing, by plurality vote, a single member to the lower house of the national legislative party.<sup>1</sup> Together with their mother country, they are the last in the world still using SMP. SMP is also used for legislative elections on the sub-national level (state or provincial) in both countries.

But the two countries' political systems also have many features not in common with the other. This is largely because of the revolutionary origins of the United States, due to which the Founding Fathers made a conscious effort to distinguish the new nation's political system from the British system. No similar effort was made in Canada. Thus, the United States established what has come to be known as the presidential system, in which the executive and legislative are separate. The Canadian parliamentary system, continues the Westminster (British) parliamentary tradition, in which the executive and legislative are combined. The most important distinction between

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<sup>1</sup> A number of southern U.S. states use a modification of this system, wherein a candidate who finishes in first place in the general election but does not receive a majority of the vote must face the second-place finisher in a runoff election.

the two systems is that elections in a presidential system are held on fixed dates, while in a parliamentary system, elections are held on call. A set of comparisons between the two systems is found in Table 1.

Four major reforms are proposed for Canada: First, fixed election dates, proposed by several of the opposition parties in Ottawa, and currently being implemented on an ad hoc basis by the Liberal government in British Columbia. Second, Senate reform, proposed in completely different schemes by several parties. The New Democratic Party (NDP) calls for abolition of the Senate, while the former Canadian Alliance called for an equal, effective, and elected Senate. Third, abolishing SMP in favour of proportional representation, proposed by the NDP. Fourth, greater independence for Members of Parliament, proposed by nearly every party, including the governing Liberal Party. These calls for independence take a wide variety of forms, ranging from merely more free votes for parliamentarians, to abolishing confidence as a requirement for a party staying in power (proposed by those who also want the country to have fixed election dates). Giving more power to parliamentary committees is also proposed under the rubric of giving more independence to Members of Parliament. This paper will focus on the first proposal, fixed election dates, and examine the different outcomes that result in the United States by having fixed election dates.

Canadian politics is made especially interesting because of *duality*. Duality means a person has a different protocol for politics on one level (national, provincial or state, local) than another. The United States has a two-party system, and this two-party system is replicated in almost all of the 50 states. People who are Democrats on the national level are also Democrats on the state level. People outside the South who are Republicans on the national level are also Republicans on the state level. This is not always true for Southern Republicans, since some of the southern states are one-party Democratic states. So, many people in those states are Republicans in national politics and Democrats in state politics. They practice duality. Not many people in the rest of the U.S. do. It is unheard of for a political activist in a Democratic national election campaign to vote Republican in state elections.

Duality is much more common in Canada, since the national four-party system is not replicated in the provinces. Each province has an individual provincial party system, which does not necessarily resemble the national party system, even within that province. Atlantic Canada has less duality than other parts of Canada. The Atlantic provinces have traditional two-party systems, with the Liberals and Progressive Conservatives taking turns in government. Other parties are not very important in Atlantic provincial politics. Quebec also has a two-party system, although the two parties are the Parti Québécois and the Quebec Liberal Party. (A third party, Action Democratique, was

stymied in the 2003 election, and remains a minor party. Quebec will not soon be regarded as a three-party province.) The Quebec Liberal Party is largely unconnected to the Liberal Party of Canada, although most who vote Liberal in Quebec elections also vote Liberal in national elections. Almost all of the rest vote Conservative in national elections. The leader of the Quebec Liberal Party, Jean Charest, was formerly national leader of the Progressive Conservative Party. An equivalent situation in American politics, such as former Democratic Vice President Al Gore being elected governor of Tennessee as a Republican, would be practically inconceivable. (American politicians, like Canadian ones, sometimes change parties, but that means severing ties with the former party, not being involved in the upper echelons of one on the national level and another on the state or provincial level.) Ontario, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan have three-party systems, the three parties being the Progressive Conservative Party (called the Saskatchewan Party in that province), the Liberal Party, and the New Democratic Party. The Conservatives and the New Democrats are the main parties in Manitoba and Saskatchewan; the Liberals are not very prominent. Alberta has the same parties as those three but it is a one-party province. The Progressive Conservative Party has governed without interruption since 1971, and elections are frequently an anticlimax. Before the merger of the Progressive Conservative Party and the Canadian Alliance, duality was most pronounced in Alberta, since the province elected only one Tory to Parliament.

So from 1993 to 2004, most Alberta voters practiced duality: They were Tories in provincial politics and Reform/Alliance supporters in national politics. Since the Tory merger, British Columbia has the highest levels of duality in Canada. Its two parties are the Liberal Party and the New Democratic Party, but it sends few members of those parties to Ottawa. Reasonably few people who vote for the B.C. Liberal Party also vote for the national Liberal Party. From 1993 to 2001, B.C. elected mostly members of the right-wing Alliance (formerly Reform Party) to the House of Commons yet had a socialist government running the province. Now the province federally is dominated by the Conservative Party of Canada, yet there are no Conservatives in the B.C. legislature. Table 2 illustrates the degree of duality in Canada at mid-2004. For each province and territory, it shows the percentage of seats in the provincial legislature held by the governing party, and the percentage of seats from that province in the House of Commons held by the corresponding federal party at dissolution of Parliament in May 2004. Five of eleven units have a dualistic pattern at present,<sup>2</sup> evidenced by a deviation of 30 percentage points or more between the two.

Table 3 indicates the absence of duality in most of the United States. For each state, the percentage of Democrats in its Congressional delegation and its legislature is given. In only eight states is the difference between these percentages 30 percent or more. Four of the states -- Alaska, New Hampshire,

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<sup>2</sup> Northwest Territories and Nunavut have non-partisan territorial governments.

North Dakota, and South Dakota -- have small Congressional delegations (three or four) making the difference not particularly meaningful. This leaves four states out of 50, all in the south, having dualistic patterns in state and national representation: Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Oklahoma.

Why is this so? What makes duality such an important part of Canadian politics when it is largely absent in the U.S.? The reason is that the entire U.S. electoral system is designed to foster harmony between the state and national levels while the features that do this are absent in Canada. In all but five U.S. states,<sup>3</sup> state elections are held the same day as national elections and ballots are long. This means that when people vote to elect a President of the United States, they will also be voting for U.S. Representative, and they may also be voting for U.S. Senator, governor of their state, secretary of state, state attorney general, state senator, state representative, state judges for several levels of courts, and frequently much more. Local offices might also be on the same ballot. There might also be ballot questions, including referenda and state constitutional amendments. Meanwhile, Canadians only vote for one office in each election -- their local Member of Parliament or member of the provincial legislature. The separate elections for national and provincial office make a difference in how the parties are organized. In the Democratic and Republican parties in the U.S., national and state functions are combined (although campaign

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<sup>3</sup> Louisiana, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Vermont, and Virginia.

funds are usually separate), and at the state conventions of the parties, the same delegates sitting in the same room on the same day will pick the party's candidates for both the U.S. Senator from their state and the governor of their state. In Canada, national and provincial parties are separate, and by joining a provincial party, a person does not automatically become a member of the federal party that has the same name, nor would one be thought unusual for joining a competing federal party instead.

The main reason the state and national parties are harmonized in the U.S. is the orderliness mandated by the regular schedule for elections; there is an election for the entire U.S. House of Representatives and one-third of the U.S. Senate on the Tuesday following the first Monday in November of every even numbered year, whether anyone wants one or not. The election of president and vice president is on the ballot every other time. The lack of harmonization in Canada is mandated by the lack of a schedule for elections; elections are held on call. Since national and provincial elections are not held in concert with one another, the need for a single body to organize for them is less. Even the nuts and bolts of the elections are harmonized in the U.S.; elections for national office like President and U.S. Senator are run by the same state officials who put on state elections. There is no standardization in the details of the election from state to state or even from one town to the next; one polling place may use paper ballots while the next uses mechanical voting machines with levers and the next uses computer

punch cards. (The imbroglio in Florida after the 2000 presidential election is called to mind.) In Canada, a national bureaucracy based in Ottawa conducts every election for every seat in Parliament, and every detail is the same from coast to coast to coast, complete with the cardboard ballot boxes and secrecy screens and even the information signs being mailed out from the national capital to every polling place.

Another cause of upheaval in Canadian politics is the idea that people determine their votes in either provincial or national politics on their feelings toward the corresponding party in the other level of government. This is so in spite of the fact that the national and provincial parties are largely unconnected. This manifests itself in voters in provinces with Tory governments voting Liberal in large numbers in national elections when they're dissatisfied with the provincial government, and vice versa. There is some speculation that the NDP didn't do well in British Columbia in the 2000 national election because voters were mad at the province's NDP government (which was subsequently voted out of office by an overwhelming margin six months later). It also appears to have an effect in provincial politics. At the peak of Pierre Trudeau's leadership, most Canadian provinces had Liberal governments. Not long after Trudeau left office, there were no Liberals in power anywhere in the country. Although this was seen as a triumph for Brian Mulroney and his Conservatives, by the time Mulroney left office, Tories formed the government only in one-party Alberta and in

Manitoba. When Jean Chrétien took over as Prime Minister, Liberals held five provincial governments, but now they only have two, and one of those Liberal parties in government – in British Columbia – assuredly has the weakest ties to the national Liberal Party of all the provincial Liberal parties.

The harmonization of elections tends to make more voters attach to one party or the others. With Canada's ad hoc elections, more voters seem to resist attachment to a party and to decide anew with each federal or provincial election. The low level of attachment to the Canadian parties keeps things interesting. A party's base can be determined by the lowest level of support it enjoys in a particular period. For the Liberals since 1968, their low ebb was the 28 percent of the vote they took in the 1984 election. (Their base is therefore the 28 percent who voted for them even then.) For the Tories from 1968 to 1988, their low-water mark was the 31 percent of the vote they received in 1968. This means that from 1968 to 1988, only 59 percent of the electorate were attached to one of the only parties that have ever governed Canada. The other 41 percent fluctuated between the two parties, the NDP (whose base was 15 percent in this period, the share it received in 1974), and other parties. With four in ten voters essentially free to follow the swings of the moment, it's no wonder the period produced a landslide for each party and also a minority government for each party in that period. Since 1993, the Liberal base (from 1997) is 38 percent and the Tory base (from 2000) is a mere 12 percent.

This means only half the electorate is anchored to one of the traditional parties. The Liberal base being twice as large as that of the number two party (the 19 percent Reform took in both 1993 and 1997) explains in part why the Liberals had such an easy time winning from the 1993 to 2000 elections. No other party was in a relative position to compete with them, in contrast with 1968 to 1988, when the Tory base was within three percentage points of theirs (and the Tories actually had a bigger base). With the combination of the Progressive Conservative and Alliance parties, the combined base<sup>4</sup> jumps to 35 percent (from 1997), very close to the Liberal Party.

This measure varies wildly among the provinces. In Prince Edward Island, 87 percent of the electorate was part of the base of either the Liberals or Conservatives in national elections from 1968 to 1988, while in British Columbia, only 36 percent was. This illustrates the two-party nature of the polity in the Atlantic provinces and the fickleness of British Columbia. These figures are contained in Table 4.

In the U.S., a median 88 percent of voters are attached to one of the two major parties. Table 5 shows the corresponding bases for the U.S. parties, based on votes for the House of Representatives from 1994 to 2002, inclusive. Partisan attachment in all but three states is at or above the level of that of the two Canadian provinces with the highest attachment. Those three states have explanations: Vermont (one of five states

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<sup>4</sup> This makes the not uncontroversial assumption that the new Conservative Party will retain 100 percent of

which does not elect its legislature at the same time as Congressional elections) was represented by a socialist in its one and only House seat over this period, and the Democrats he caucuses with frequently didn't run a candidate against him.<sup>5</sup> Louisiana, one of the states that requires a majority, has an unique system whereby candidates are elected in the primary election if they win a majority then. General election results from there are not comparable with other states since most races are settled before the general election. The third outlier, South Dakota, has a single House seat, which was filled in the 1994 election by a popular Democratic incumbent, who went to the Senate in 1996 and was replaced in the House by a Republican who was comparably popular. Omitting the 1994 election from the field gives South Dakota a combined party base of 78.3 percent.

The political prospects for a move to fixed election dates seem to be poor since the ability to choose the election date is the single greatest power exercised by Canadian prime ministers and provincial premiers. British Columbia Premier Gordon Campbell might pay a price for announcing the date of the 2005 election during the 2001 election campaign. His move had a low electoral value, because his party not only won the 2001 election, their victory and its magnitude were so great and known so far in advance of the election that the incumbent premier,

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the voters from both of the former parties, something some MPs from both parties have already disproven.  
<sup>5</sup> Vermont also has the only independent in the U.S. Senate, James Jeffords, whose defection from the Republican Party in 2001 resulted in the Democrats taking control of the body.

Ujjal Dosanjh, conceded the election a week early.<sup>6</sup> If the Liberals do poorly in the 2005 election,<sup>7</sup> undoubtedly Campbell's giving up his power of election timing will be cited as a serious factor.

Thus, a move to fixed election dates would not only deprive Canadian executives of their single greatest power in the long term, it is apt to disrupt the partisan patterns that have defined Canadian federal and provincial politics for nearly a century.

#### REFERENCES:

Tony L. Hill, *Canadian Politics, Riding by Riding: An In-Depth Analysis of Canada's 301 Federal Electoral Districts*, Minneapolis: Prospect Park Press, 2002. ISBN 0-9723436-0-1.

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<sup>6</sup> A highly unusual move, even by B.C. standards.

<sup>7</sup> Since the party currently holds 74 of 79 seats, a definition of poor performance might be elusive.

Table 1. **COMPARISONS OF PARLIAMENTARY AND PRESIDENTIAL SYSTEMS**

<b>PARLIAMENTARY</b>	<b>PRESIDENTIAL</b>
<i>Duration of parliament is for flexible term within set limit</i>	Duration of legislature is fixed; sessions and starting dates are also fixed
<i>Elections are held on call</i>	Elections are held at fixed intervals
Voters cast vote only for local member or party	Voters vote for local legislative member and for president/presidential electors
Executive and legislative are combined	Executive and legislative are separate branches with different powers and competing claims to legitimacy
No such thing as divided government	Different parties may control executive & legislative branches
Parties sometimes create coalitions in order to form a government	Coalitions among parties to form governments are extremely rare (e.g., unity ticket at end of U.S. Civil War)
Members of cabinet continue to hold their parliamentary seats	Members of cabinet do not hold other offices
Head of state and head of government are separated, at least ceremonially; prime minister must consult formally with head of state in some instances	Head of state and head of government are combined in one person; president answers to no one except electorate
Prime Minister needs ongoing support of parliament to continue in office	President does not need support of the legislature to continue in office
<i>Party cohesion is rigidly enforced and necessary to the promulgation of coherent policies</i>	Party cohesion is usually lax and the formation of ad hoc interparty coalitions on specific issues is common
Legislative negotiation primarily takes place among party leaders	Legislative negotiation extends to individual members
<i>Committees are relatively unimportant in the legislative process</i>	Committees are paramount in the legislative process
<i>Parliament is not independent; MPs described as "sheep"; subject to punishment if they don't vote as told</i>	Legislative branch is fiercely independent; members vote as they please, and even punishment within chamber is rare
<i>Upper house in bicameral parliament usually marginalized</i>	Upper house in bicameral legislature usually more powerful
Party leadership and structure are ongoing; parties are strong	No institutional party leadership; party starts from scratch whenever it runs a new presidential candidate; parties are weak
Prime minister accountable first to caucus (partisans within parliament)	President accountable to people first
<i>Rule of prime minister predictable and strong; PM usually doesn't have to fight for legislation; sometimes described as "elective dictatorship"</i>	Rule of president less predictable and weaker; president must build legislative support on every issue
Nearly all leaders brought up through ranks in parliament	Leaders sometimes emerge from outside politics
Alleged to provide more stable regimes	Alleged to provide less stable regimes
Parties which lose elections may still have a role in government	Presidential elections are winner-take-all
Electoral losers generally stay in parliament	Electoral losers go away

Items in *italic* are current objects of reform in Canada

Table 2.

**Duality in Canada, 2004**

<b>Province or Territory</b>	<b>% of Provincial seats held by governing party</b>	<b>% of Federal seats held by corresponding federal party</b>	<b>Diff</b>	<b>Result</b>
<b>Prince Edward Island</b>	85%	0%	85%	<b>DUALISTIC</b>
<b>British Columbia</b>	94%	18%	76%	<b>DUALISTIC</b>
<b>Yukon</b>	61%	0%	61%	Not dualistic - small N
<b>Saskatchewan</b>	52%	14%	37%	<b>DUALISTIC</b>
<b>Manitoba</b>	61%	29%	33%	<b>DUALISTIC</b>
<b>New Brunswick</b>	52%	20%	32%	<b>DUALISTIC</b>
<b>Newfoundland &amp; Labrador</b>	71%	43%	28%	
<b>Ontario</b>	69%	92%	23%	
<b>Nova Scotia</b>	48%	27%	21%	
<b>Quebec</b>	58%	49%	9%	
<b>Alberta</b>	89%	88%	1%	
<b>Northwest Territories</b>	NA	NA	NA	
<b>Nunavut</b>	NA	NA	NA	

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Table 3.

**Duality and its absence in the United States, 2004**

State	Congressional delegation pct Dem	Legislature pct Dem	Difference (pts)					
North Dakota	100%	31%	69%	Not dualistic - small N				
Alabama	22%	63%	41%	DUALISTIC				
Oklahoma	14%	54%	40%	DUALISTIC				
South Dakota	67%	29%	38%	Not dualistic - small N				
Alaska	0%	35%	35%	Not dualistic - small N				
Kentucky	25%	59%	34%	DUALISTIC				
Mississippi	33%	63%	30%	DUALISTIC				
New Hampshire	0%	29%	29%	Not dualistic - small N				
Oregon	71%	44%	27%					
Wyoming	0%	27%	27%					
Delaware	67%	40%	26%					
Hawaii	100%	74%	26%					
Colorado	22%	45%	23%					
Idaho	0%	22%	22%					
Washington	73%	52%	21%		Nevada	40%	49%	9%
New Mexico	40%	60%	20%		New Jersey	60%	51%	9%
Arizona	20%	38%	18%		Tennessee	45%	55%	9%
Wisconsin	60%	42%	18%		Rhode Island	75%	84%	9%
Kansas	17%	33%	17%		Missouri	36%	44%	8%
Iowa	29%	45%	16%		Illinois	48%	55%	8%
Georgia	40%	56%	16%		New York	68%	60%	7%
Vermont	33%	49%	16%		Minnesota	50%	43%	7%
Massachusetts	100%	85%	15%		Ohio	30%	36%	6%
Virginia	23%	36%	13%		Texas	47%	41%	6%
Pennsylvania	33%	45%	12%		Utah	20%	25%	5%
Montana	33%	45%	12%		South Carolina	38%	42%	5%
Arkansas	83%	72%	11%		North Carolina	47%	51%	5%
West Virginia	80%	69%	11%		Michigan	47%	43%	4%
Nebraska	20%	31%	11%		Connecticut	57%	61%	4%
Maryland	80%	70%	10%		California	64%	61%	3%
Louisiana	56%	65%	10%		Maine	50%	53%	3%
Indiana	36%	46%	10%		Florida	33%	33%	0%

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Table 4.

**Combined bases of the Liberal and Progressive Conservative parties by province and territory, 1968 to 1988 inclusive:**

PROV OR TERR	COMBINED	LIB	PC
Prince Edward Island	86.8	40.5	46.3
Nova Scotia	72.3	33.6	38.7
Newfoundland	66.1	36.4	29.7
New Brunswick	63.4	30.9	32.5
Alberta	63.1	12.7	50.4
Yukon	62.3	21.7	40.6
Ontario	61.8	29.8	32.0
Saskatchewan	54.6	18.2	36.4
Manitoba	53.2	21.8	31.4
Northwest Territories	48.1	24.7	23.4
Quebec	40.8	35.4	5.4
British Columbia	35.8	16.4	19.4

Source: Tony L. Hill, *Canadian Politics: Riding by Riding: An In-Depth Analysis of Canada's 301 Federal Electoral Districts*, Minneapolis: Prospect Park Press, 2002, p. 10.

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Table 5.

**Partisan bases in U.S. House elections, by state, 1994-2002 inclusive**

STATE	COMBINED	DEM	REP	STATE	COMBINED	DEM	REP
North Carolina	96.1%	42.9%	53.3%	Oklahoma	85.6%	31.0%	54.6%
Indiana	95.0%	42.1%	52.9%	Hawaii	85.5%	55.5%	30.0%
Arizona	94.4%	37.3%	57.1%	Florida	85.4%	39.4%	46.0%
Maryland	93.7%	49.2%	44.4%	Mississippi	85.3%	44.0%	41.3%
North Dakota	93.4%	52.3%	41.1%	Rhode Island	84.6%	61.3%	23.3%
Tennessee	93.2%	43.4%	49.8%	Colorado	84.4%	30.5%	53.9%
Delaware	92.9%	26.6%	66.4%	Missouri	84.1%	44.7%	39.4%
Minnesota	91.7%	49.9%	41.8%	New York	84.0%	46.3%	37.7%
Iowa	91.5%	37.6%	54.0%	Alabama	83.8%	33.7%	50.1%
Illinois	91.4%	48.0%	43.4%	Idaho	82.9%	28.9%	54.0%
Michigan	91.1%	47.2%	43.9%	Wyoming	81.8%	28.6%	53.2%
Texas	91.1%	42.1%	49.0%	New Mexico	80.7%	40.6%	40.1%
Oregon	91.0%	54.2%	36.8%	Massachusetts	80.4%	65.8%	14.6%
Washington	90.9%	49.0%	41.9%	Maine	77.1%	46.9%	30.1%
New Jersey	90.2%	43.9%	46.3%	Utah	76.9%	26.9%	50.0%
California	90.1%	47.5%	42.6%	Virginia	75.8%	29.0%	46.7%
Wisconsin	89.7%	37.5%	52.1%	Montana	74.9%	32.7%	42.2%
Connecticut	89.6%	47.4%	42.3%	Nevada	74.7%	19.4%	55.3%
Georgia	89.5%	36.3%	53.3%	West Virginia	74.3%	66.0%	8.3%
Kentucky	89.5%	32.1%	57.5%	Nebraska	73.9%	9.9%	64.0%
Ohio	89.0%	40.3%	48.7%	Alaska	73.5%	16.5%	56.9%
New Hampshire	88.0%	37.7%	50.3%	Arkansas	73.3%	32.1%	41.2%
Pennsylvania	87.9%	40.7%	47.2%	South Dakota	61.5%	24.9%	36.6%
South Carolina	87.9%	32.6%	55.2%	Louisiana	61.2%	29.9%	31.3%
Kansas	87.7%	31.3%	56.4%	Vermont	18.3%	0.0%	18.3%

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