

**Partisans, Defectors, and Non-Partisans:  
Explaining the Rise and Fall of Canadian Governments from 1988-2006**

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**Abstract**

This paper evaluates the partisan origins of support for Canadian parties from 1988 to 2006. In so doing, it explores to what extent a party's success in elections is the product of the loyalty of their own partisans, defection from "other"-partisans, and winning the vote of non-partisans. Most interestingly, we also consider whether there is variation in these proportions across parties. The result is a unique picture of party vote shares that sheds light on the real constituencies to which parties should be attentive.

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It is widely understood that partisanship is an important indicator of vote choice (for example, see Campbell et al. 1960 and Blais et al. 2002). Individuals who identify with a particular party are more likely to vote for that party than someone who does not identify. This finding is robust across parties and countries. However, this finding considers party support only from the angle of the voter. No research has explicitly considered party support from the perspective of parties. Conventional wisdom suggests that parties are beholden to *their* partisans, and research cautions parties against alienating their “core” by swaying too far on policy issues (Miller and Schofield 2003; Moon 2004). But partisans are only one source of party support. In every election, several voters “defect” by either abstaining or voting for a different party, and unaligned voters show up at the voting booth and cast a ballot for a preferred candidate. In these cases, a party’s support is augmented by votes from both “other” partisans and non-partisans. Thus, the view that parties need only be responsible to a core of their own partisans, who they rely on during elections, may be misleading.

This paper evaluates the partisan origins of support of the winning Canadian parties in Canadian Federal Elections from 1988 to 2006. It explores to what extent a party’s success is the product of support from their own partisans, “other”-partisans, and non-partisans. We also consider whether there is variation in these proportions across parties that have formed the government. The result is a unique picture of party support that sheds light on the real constituencies to which parties should be attentive.

### **Understandings of Party Support**

Much of what is understood about the support given to political parties, and thus the people that provide their vote support, is drawn from research into individual vote choice. One of the most striking, regular and important findings relating to party support is that partisanship matters for voters. Not only is partisanship a strong indicator of vote choice (“the single best predictor of the vote” according to Johnston et al. 1992:4), but the sheer number of partisans that relate to a party can be a significant factor in an election outcome, as Neil Nevitte and his colleagues (2000) claim occurred in the 1997 Canadian election for the Liberal party. In their analysis of the 2000 Liberal victory in Canada, Blais et al. (2002) argue, “[t]he key to Liberal dominance is partisanship, or more particularly the distribution of partisan orientations throughout the electorate: the simple and impressive reality is that among those Canadians who identify with a party a full half think of themselves as Liberals” (p.192). This finding is stable across Canadian elections (see, for example, Clarke et al. 1980, 1984, 1991, 1996; Johnston et al. 1992) and across countries (Campbell et al. 1960; Clarke et al. 2004). Thus, we know that parties benefit from the support of their partisans.

However, we also know that at no time has the entire electorate aligned with political parties. There have always been non-partisans – those individuals who do not feel particularly close, or leaning, toward a political party. In Canada, the number of non-partisans has consistently been high. In their cross-national study of partisanship, André Blais and his colleagues (2001) found that 62% of Canadians had no affiliation, compared with 41% of Americans and 51% of Britons.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, it has also been established that the number of partisans is declining around the world (Dalton 2000). Unaligned

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<sup>1</sup> Note these percentages are based on a standardized partisanship question.

individuals are the “prize” to be won by the party that catches their fancy, especially since capturing their support can mean the difference between winning and losing an election. Thus, parties do not rely only on their own supporters to cast ballots in their favour at the polls. Parties must actively pursue unaligned voters for their support. This logic is inherent in Downs (1957), in his argument that parties will converge toward the median voter on a left-right continuum in order to maximize their appeal to the most voters. Parties must struggle, then, to balance their desire to maintain/motivate their own supporters with their desire to move to the centre of the political spectrum to earn the support of unaligned, moderate voters. This tension can be particularly significant because supporters, especially activists who are most likely to be strident adherents to a party’s ideological foundations, are the ones whom parties depend upon for volunteer and financial support (Miller and Schofield 2003).

### **Loyalty and Defection**

So far, the picture of party support described here focuses on partisans and non-partisans as sources of votes. Partisanship is not an absolute indicator of vote choice, however – it is informative and indicative but far from definitive. Partisans *usually* vote for the party they identify with, either because of ideological similarity, habit, or because they respond to the partisan cue. There are times, however, when partisans defect from their chosen party. Issues, leader evaluations, socioeconomic backgrounds, and demographics have all been found to break through the “perceptual screen” of partisanship to motivate vote choices aside from partisanship (see the discussion in Clarke, Kornberg and Scotto 2009: 19). As Blais et al. (2002: 117) put it, “Their vote is not *predetermined* but they are certainly *predisposed* to vote for ‘their’ party” (italics in original). Thus, parties cannot depend upon all of their partisans all of the time – they must be motivated to turnout and support their party. Parties must expect that at least some of their partisans will defect - either in not turning out or voting for other parties. As such, parties must take this into account when calculating how best to amass enough votes to win an election.

To best understand the process and likelihood of defection, it is useful to conceptualize partisans being of two types. In so doing, we borrow the logic of DeNardo (1980) and draw upon the work of Clarke et al. (1979, 1984, 1991, 1996) in the Canadian case. Based on this work, we can think of partisans as of two types – strong partisans, those who compose the core of a party’s electoral support, and weak partisans, whose consistent support is more tenuous. In DeNardo’s formulation, strong partisans are core supporters who always support their preferred party, but the same cannot be said of weak partisans. Not only are weak partisans more likely to defect from their partisan choice, they are also less likely to even cast a ballot. In Clarke and his colleagues’ conceptualization, strong supporters are called “durable” partisans (1979). They are less likely to defect (although their loyalty is not absolute) and are also less likely to be swayed by issue and leader evaluations. Weak or “flexible” partisans, as Clarke et al. (1979) label them, however, weight issue considerations and leader evaluations more heavily and thus are more likely to defect to supporting another political party on the basis of these considerations.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> While Clarke et al.’s formulation of partisanship has been supported in several different publication and research studies, it is important to recognize that many disagree with their conceptualization of partisanship. For example, Gidengil et al. (2006) and Johnston et al. (1992) both suggest that flexible partisans were inappropriately operationalized, and therefore were over-estimated. Both Gidengil et al. (2006) and Johnston et al. (1992) focus

An interesting difference in the two theoretical formulations of partisanship is that DeNardo presents defection as a temporary phenomenon, allowing weak partisans to maintain their partisanship and make their vote choice decision anew each election. The category of “flexible” partisans is more likely to switch their partisan affiliation as well as their vote choice. This point, while interesting and of obvious consequence for understanding partisan realignments, is irrelevant for our consideration of the composition of party support in a single election.

What is important, however, are the relative sizes of the strong and weak partisan groups that support a party. If we assume that weak partisans ‘defect’ to support other parties at higher rates than strong supporters, then parties that have larger numbers of strong partisans in their constituencies may rely more on their own supporters than “other” partisans and non-partisans. The findings of Belanger and Stephenson (2007) suggest that such differentiation does in fact exist across the Canadian parties. They find, for example, that in 1997 18% of Liberal party supporters were “very strong”, whereas 26% were “not very strong”. Of Reform party supporters, 36% were “very strong”, compared to only 11% “not very strong”. In 2006, this pattern continued, with the Liberals having 22% “very strong” partisans compared to 31% for the Conservative Party, and 24% “not very strong” partisans, compared to 13% for the Conservative party. Clearly, then, the relative sizes of each party’s group of committed partisans is not uniform, and given differential defection rates, this could have a real impact on the composition of a party’s support base.

On a more positive note, the upshot of defection, from a party’s point of view, is that a party may gain as much support from the weak partisans of other parties as it loses from its own partisans. In DeNardo’s theoretical discussion, this has the effect of penalizing the larger party in a two-party system, as it loses more support (in absolute terms) than a smaller party, assuming equivalent defection rates. Adapting this model to a multiparty system, if one adopts an ideological perspective of partisan politics, this means that weak partisans are most likely to defect to one of the parties that “neighbours” their own.<sup>3</sup> In the Canadian case specifically, the conceptualization of strong and weak partisans must take into account the partisan variation that exists across parties. Work by Belanger and Stephenson (2007) indicates that the loyalty, stability and intensity of partisanship are inconsistent across the Canadian parties. A key distinction is whether or not a party has a strong ideological component – in the event that it does not, like the brokerage Liberals or former Progressive Conservatives, the pull of partisanship for supporters at the ballot box is weaker. Thus, partisan defection rates may not be equivalent across parties.

In regards to understanding the nature of support for political parties in Canada, we have identified three separate groups that compose a party’s support base in an election. Parties receive support from

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on what, in our categorization, are strong partisans in their analyses, as these are the individuals for whom partisanship operates most like a “long-standing, psychological attachment.”

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the discussion in Bowler and Lanoue (1996) regarding defections to a new party. It should be noted, however, that some research found that voters see little differences between the political parties (Kay 1977; Scarrow 1965), but this perspective has also been disputed (Nadeau and Blais 1990). If voters perceive few differences between parties, the ideological ordering of parties may do little to influence the direction of defections.

their own partisans, non-partisans, and “other” partisans who defect from their own parties. The relative rates of support from each of the partisan groups depend upon their own defection rates, which will be related to the particular strength of partisan loyalty each party enjoys (Belanger and Stephenson 2007). It is easy to see that defection rates are of crucial importance for electoral success as a party’s success depends, in great part, on the loyalty (or defection) of peripheral partisans, from all parties. Whether such support is more important, in regards to relative numbers, than the support of core partisans, or non-partisans, is an open question.

### **Research Questions and Hypotheses**

This paper considers three central research questions, each of which has separate testable hypotheses. This first is an empirical question drawing on the discussion of defection and loyalty rates among partisans of Canada’s main political parties. In the first instance, what are the relative rates of loyalty and defection? We anticipate that these rates are not the same across parties. We expect that partisans of ideological parties such as the NDP or Reform/Canadian Alliance may well exhibit higher rates of loyalty in contrast to more brokerage parties such as the Liberals, Progressive Conservatives or the new Conservative Party of Canada (Belanger and Stephenson 2007).<sup>4</sup> These findings provide a necessary baseline to consider the sources of party support.

The second question draws upon the main issue discussed above. Where does a party’s electoral support come from? The key hypothesis here reflects a conventional view of partisanship: parties are likely to gain most of their support from their own partisans. This is a logical expectation, but it also implies that partisans are loyal. Scholars in the American case have gone so far as to theorize absolute loyalty from strong partisans (DeNardo 1980), but we think this is an important question to be explored. If a party cannot expect absolute loyalty, to what extent does its own partisans’ support figure into electoral success? In examining this expectation, we address the composition of a party’s support. In addition, we also consider whether the composition of voter support, identified in the first research question, varies by party.

Finally, we consider the utility of this approach as a means of understanding how Canadian political parties win elections. Specifically, we consider the effect that loyalty and defection rates have on parties’ abilities to bring together a winning coalition of support, along with support from “other” and non-partisans. In the next sections, we consider each of these research questions in turn.

### **Data and Operationalization**

The data used to evaluate the above research questions was drawn from the 1988, 1993, 1997, 2000, 2004 and 2006 Canadian Election Studies.<sup>5</sup> There is only one key operationalization that needs to be discussed. We classify strong and weak partisans according to their responses to two questions. First, if

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that the new Conservative Party of Canada has not consistently operated as either a brokerage or an ideological party.

<sup>5</sup> Datasets and supporting documentation are available from the Canadian Election Study website (<http://ces-ec.gc.ca/surveys.html>; 1997-2006) and the Institute for Social Research at York University (<http://www.isr.yorku.ca/home.html>; 1988-1993).

an individual expresses a partisan identification, they are classified as a partisan. If not, they are classified as a non-partisan. Among the partisans, the group is further subdivided according to the stated intensity of their identification. Those who express fairly or very strong partisan intensity are coded as strong partisans, whereas those who indicate “not very strong” are coded as weak partisans. Those who respond to the intensity question with “not at all” are coded as non-partisans.

## Results

Our analyses seek to examine the partisan bases of party support in Canadian elections and to understand the ways in which parties cobble together voting coalitions of their partisans, the partisans of other parties and non-partisans. To begin this analysis we start with our first research question and consider the distribution of partisans (strong and weak) by party from 1998 to 2006. We follow this by examining how the partisans of each party behave in each election. In theory, all partisans have three options available to them: remain *loyal* and vote for ‘their’ party, *defect* and vote for a different party (or candidate) or *abstain*. This basic analysis provides the empirical and conceptual baseline to consider the broader questions of the implications of partisanship for winning elections.

(Figure 1 about here)

Figure 1 presents the percentage distributions of weak and strong partisans by party and election. Among all parties and all years, the clear majority of respondents who indicate that they are partisans of a political party suggest that they are strong partisans of that party. Overall, the greatest share of weak partisans was observed for the Progressive Conservative party in 1993 (almost 35%). Beyond this, it is evident that there is clear variation between the parties in terms of the number of weak and strong partisans. Even though changes within the party system during this time period undoubtedly affected the nature of party competition, the Liberals consistently see approximately 25% of their partisans indicate a weak attachment. The other only other party that endured across all elections, the NDP, has much more fluctuation in the rates of weak and strong attachment among its partisans, from 9 % weak partisans low in 2004 to a high of approximately 31% in 1993.

(Figure 2 about here)

A second aspect of this preliminary examination of partisan strength is whether weak and strong partisans remain loyal to the same extent, and whether there is evidence of party-specific variation. To allow us to assess differences by party, Figure 2 presents the voting decisions of weak partisans: whether they remained loyal in their vote, whether they defected in their vote or whether they abstained from voting altogether. The results reveal a number of important considerations. The first is that weak Liberal partisans were never the most loyal among all weak partisans and in 2004 and 2006 they were the least loyal of the four parties competing. A second point is to highlight the contrast between 1988 and 1993 in terms of the loyalty rates for the Progressive Conservatives: in short, weak PC partisans defected in droves in the 1993 election. In 1997 and 2000, too, PC supporters were the most likely to defect to another party. Finally, weak partisans of the Reform (then Canadian Alliance) and Bloc Quebecois parties tended to be more loyal (through 2000) than their more established rivals. The weak partisans of the new Conservative party (in 2004 and 2006) appear to be following the pattern

of strong loyalty of the Reform/CA more closely than the loyalty rates of weak PC partisans. In sum, the evidence suggests fairly widespread variation amongst the parties in terms of loyalty and defection rates among weak partisans.

(Figure 3 about here)

Figure 3 presents the loyalty and defection rates amongst strong partisans for the same time period. In comparison with the loyalty rates of weak partisans, an obvious (and not unexpected) observation is that strong partisans are typically more loyal to their party than weak partisans. While the average rate of loyalty across all years and all parties for weak partisans was 53% (from Figure 2), the cumulative rates of loyalty for strong partisans was 74%. While greater loyalty is to be expected, it is worth noting that even strong partisans do not always vote for 'their' party – on average more than a quarter of strong partisans defect or simply abstain.

In regards to cross party variation, it is clear that certain parties are less likely to maintain the loyalty of their partisans than others. For example, strong partisans of the PC party had among the lowest rates of loyalty after 1988 (between 46% and 50% in the 1993 through 2000 elections). In 1993 and 1997, strong NDP partisans, too, showed relatively low levels of loyalty. By contrast, strong partisans of the Reform/Canadian Alliance party and the Bloc Quebecois voted with the greatest rates of loyalty over this period. After its formation for the 2004 election, it appears that strong partisans of the new Conservative party tended to behave much more like partisans of the old Reform/CA party than the Progressive Conservative party.

We should also note that the other behavioural option available to partisans, aside from being loyal or defecting, is to abstain altogether. It is interesting to note that abstention appears to be an option used almost equally by weak and strong partisans, although not equally across parties. On this, there appears to be more variation among weak partisans. For example, in 1997, more than 31% of weak NDP partisans abstained, compared to just over 11% of weak PC partisans. Such variation is not seen among the strong partisans, where the abstention rates in a given election seem more similar across parties – consider, for example, the small variation in 2006 (2 pts) or 1988 (less than 1 pt), or even the relatively mild variation in 1997 (a range of only 10 pts). What is interesting about strong identifiers, however, is that they are typically more likely to abstain than to defect to support another party. However, party variation is once again evident; PC strong partisans in 1993 and 1997 behave more like weak partisans, in that a good fraction of the group is willing to defect to support another party. However, when compared with the actual numbers for weak partisans, it is clear that the party overall was suffering from low loyalty, which is not surprising given the emergence of the Reform/Alliance and the fractioning of right-wing support.

*Where does party support come from?*

The above discussion provides the groundwork for considering how rates of defection, loyalty and abstention differ by party, across time and by type of partisan (weak or strong). In short, we observe that there are differences between parties in the relative numbers of weak and strong partisans, that this can and does vary across elections and that there is variation between parties in terms of how their

types of partisans behave (rates of loyalty, defection and abstention). This brings us to our second area of interest, how these behaviors influence the composition of party support. As outlined above, there are three sources of party support – own partisans, “other” partisans, and non-partisans. Among a party’s own partisans, there are both strong and weak individuals, who are loyal to the party at varying rates. For the “other” partisans groups, there are those that defect to provide support for other parties. Finally, there are non-partisans, presumably those who are most open to appeals from all parties. To examine this second research question, we created pie charts that demonstrate the sources of support for the party that won control of the government for each election year. We discuss the results below in three logical groupings: 1988-1993, the last election with only three parties and the election that dramatically changed the Canadian party scene; 1997-2000, two elections when the Liberals dominated, and 2004-06, elections fought since the merger of the Canadian Alliance and Progressive Conservative parties united conservative supporters.

(Figures 4 and 5 about here)

(Tables 1 and 2 about here)

Figures 4 and 5 outline the composition of party support for the Progressive Conservative and Liberal parties in the 1988 and 1993 federal elections. The figures clearly show that the bulk of the Liberal and PC parties came from their own partisans (both weak and strong) in both of these elections. However, it is notable that support from parties’ own partisans comprises no more than 59% (including weak and strong partisans) of all the votes cast for the party. In other words, these results provide direct evidence that parties must gain support from outside of their own supporters in order to win office.

It is also notable that both the PCs and Liberals enjoyed support from “other” partisans. In 1988, about 10% of PC support came from Liberal defectors, while only 3% came from NDP defectors. This variation in “other” party supports conforms to our expectation that defecting partisans of ‘ideological neighbors’ are more likely to support parties close at hand. In 1993, the pattern is similar. Liberal support was largely composed of its own partisans (56%) but importantly also from 17% from other parties’ partisans. PC defectors provided 12% of the party’s vote support, while NDP defectors provided 5%. As the Liberal party is located between both of these parties ideologically, it is not surprising that both sets of defectors should be relevant contributors of support. It is interesting that the relative size of the defector “slices” are so different, but if one refers back to Table 2 an explanation emerges – the loyalty rates of PC partisans in 1993 were about 10 points lower, especially for weak partisans, than NDP partisans. Thus, NDP partisans are simply less likely to defect, meaning that they are less likely to be a significant component of another party’s electoral support. Finally, it is worth noting that the share of non-partisan support for these parties hovers around one quarter (25 to 29%).

(Figures 6 and 7 about here)

Figures 6 and 7 demonstrate the composition of support for the Liberal party in the 1997 and 2000 Canadian federal elections. Recall that in these years, the Canadian party system was significantly fragmented (Carty 2006). In particular, conservative support was split between two parties, which many indicate was an important factor in Liberal success in those years (Nevitte et al. 2000; LeDuc 2002).



Importantly, the relative size of support from the partisan support base clearly increases over 1988 and 1993. In both the 1997 and 2000 elections, upwards of 66% of the Liberal's electoral support came from their partisans (both weak and strong). Considering this in light of the loyalty and defection rates in Figures 2 and 3, it is important to remember that Liberal partisans were not more loyal than all other partisans; approximately 75% of strong partisans behaved loyally, but only 52.6% of weak partisans did. This observation would tend to confirm the suggestion of Blais et al. (2002) that a significant reason for the Liberals victory in 1997 and 2000 was their clear advantage in terms of partisanship (they simply had more; see also Nevitte et al. 2000, pp. 67-9). It also suggests that in these two elections, the Liberals were able to win power without having to appeal widely to the electorate. We expect that this result is a unique reflection of the fragmented nature of the party system during that time, as the Liberals simply needed to gather more votes than any of the other parties. Without a significant opponent, the bar was that much lower, and thus the need to appeal to "other"-partisans and non-partisans was less pressing.

In both of these years, the share of Liberal support from partisan defectors of other parties is relatively limited. In 2000 in particular, defectors from other parties constituted only 6% of the Liberal's vote share. In 1997, what support the Liberals won from other defecting partisans came largely from the NDP (3%) and PC party (7%) and may suggest some ideological neighbour effect. However, the defecting partisan shares of the Liberal support in 2000 came from across the ideological spectrum, countering that suggestion. Finally, the share of Liberal support coming from non-partisans increased from 23% in 1997 to 28% in 2000, perhaps indicating that the party was making strides in appealing to the large number of Canadians who do not identify with a particular party (from Table 2, 29.9% in 1997 and 36% in 2000).

(Figures 8 and 9 about here)

Figures 8 and 9 present the partisan composition of support for the Liberals (2004) and the Conservative party (2006) – two years in which minority governments were chosen by Canadians. In 2004, the Liberals again relied on a large measure of their partisans supporting them (70% of their vote support). Only about 8% of defecting partisans voted for the Liberals. Similar to other years, 22% of Liberal support came from non-partisans. In 2006, a different party came to power, and the composition of its electoral support indicates some interesting deviations from the pattern of Liberal success in the previous elections. Figure 10 indicates that the Conservative's electoral support was formed by about 56% of their partisans and about 20% of partisans from other parties. The majority of "other"-partisan support came from the Liberals (16%), not surprising given that the Liberals are the Conservatives' closest neighbour ideologically. Non-partisans represented 24% of their support, similar to the proportion found in the other results. Although in both years the winning party drew a majority of their support from their own partisans, the relative differences in the share of own partisans are intriguing and will be considered shortly.

#### *Putting it All Together: The Implications of Loyalty and Defection for Party Success*

To this point, we have assessed the relative shares of weak and strong partisans by party, considered the behavior of these types of partisans (loyalty, defection and abstention) and examined the partisan

composition of electoral support for winning parties from 1988 to 2006. This section seeks to tie these various strands together by considering the implications of partisan loyalty and defection rates. Are there strategic lessons to be learned? We consider each of these elections in turn.

(Figure 10 about here)

Drawing again on Figure 4 (PC Support, 1988) we see that that the majority of the Conservatives' support came from their own partisans (approximately 59%). How does this compare with the next strongest party? As evident in Figure 10, in 1988 Liberal support came from a similar number of their partisans (60%). While this may suggest that both parties drew equally from their own partisans, we know from Figures 2 and 3 that there are key differences in the loyalty rates of each set of partisans. Whereas the PC party earned the loyalty of 79% of its strong partisans and 71% of its weak partisans, the Liberals had much lower levels of loyalty (66% for strong partisans and only 43% for weak partisans). Taken in the context of the aggregate 1988 election results, in which the PC party won 43% of the total vote share and the Liberals won almost 32%, and the knowledge that there were more PC partisans in that election (from Table 2, 31% reported such an identification, compared with 24% Liberal identifiers), had Liberal partisans been more loyal in their vote decision the Liberals might have had a stronger performance in the election, perhaps creating a minority situation for themselves or the Conservatives.

(Figure 11 about here)

As is well documented, the 1993 election was a pivotal one for the party system and party competition in Canada - new parties competed and won seats, a government was defeated and a new one elected. What were the trends of partisan loyalty and defection underlying these massive structural shifts? In the first instance, we consider PC support (Figure 11). Based on aggregate results, we know that the size of the Conservative vote share shrank massively from levels observed in 1988 (43%) to 16% (from Table 1). Looking at the composition of Conservative support (Figure 11), in 1993 they obtained about 64% of their votes from Conservative partisans. However, it is important to remember the high rates of defection away from the Conservative party amongst their partisans. In particular, the Conservatives only had the loyalty of 46% of their strong partisans and a paltry 19% of their weak partisans. In the context of the historic collapse of their PC vote, while it is undoubtedly the case that the creation of new parties and general dissatisfaction with the party contributed to their downfall, it is important to note how pivotal the defection of PC partisans were to their downfall in the 1993 election. Many Canadians (20.5%) reported identifying with the PCs during that election, not much less than the 26.6% who identified with the Liberals. Had the Conservatives experienced similar rates of loyalty in 1993 as they did in 1988 amongst their partisans, the end result would likely have been substantially different.

This defection greatly benefited the Liberals, whose support included 12% of PC defectors. Overall, with more than 41% of the vote nationally and regional splits of vote share in Quebec and the West, the Liberals won the 1993 election handily. But given the data we have presented thus far, we can see that the result was not simply a reflection of fragmentation. The Liberals did a much better job of strengthening loyalty rates amongst their partisans. While only 56% of the Liberals' support came from their partisans (suggesting that the party's appeal was much wider in 1993), there was a marked

difference in the loyalty rates among strong and weak partisans of the Liberal party compared to 1988. In particular, the Liberals won the electoral support of over 80% of their strong partisans and over 60% of their weak partisans (compared to 66% and 43%, respectively, in 1988). In terms of viewing the 1993 result comprehensively, the consideration of the loyalty rates amongst Liberal partisans was an important plank in the bridge to electoral success in this election.

Because the story is relatively similar for both the 1997 and 2000 elections, these will be considered together. Based on Figures 6 and 7, about 66% of Liberal support in both of these elections was drawn from Liberal partisans. Examining the loyalty rates for Liberal partisans in these elections suggests that the Liberals did a good job of keeping strong partisans loyal to their party with loyalty rates of 71% and 75%, respectively. While loyalty rates were lower for weak partisans (47% and 53%), the Liberals were able to win these elections, in part, by taking advantage of a comparatively larger share of partisans (Blais et al. 2002) but also through keeping loyalty rates up among these partisans. In both years, the Liberals could count almost a third of the electorate as their partisans (from Table 2, 32% and 30%, respectively), a clear advantage as the proportion is more than double the raw support for any of the other parties. We should also note that the support of “other-partisans is relatively low – 11% in 1997 and only 6% in 2000, suggesting that without a large number of partisans to draw from, and relatively high loyalty rates among strong partisans, the party would not have been able to cobble together electoral victories in these years.

(Figure 12 about here)

With the creation of the new Conservative party, the 2004 and 2006 elections present a different scenario for the potential importance of loyalty and defection rates amongst partisans for party success. The end of conservative fragmentation meant that the Liberals could no longer rely on split vote shares to give them an advantage. In the 2004 election the Liberals won a minority government with just under 37% of the national vote. Based on Figure 8, about 70% of this support came from their own partisans. Rates of loyalty for the Liberals were consistent with those observed in previous years – just above 70% for strong partisans and hovering near 50% for weak partisans. In contrast, support for the new Conservative party in 2004 was composed of about 59% of Conservative partisans (see Figure 12). Of particular note is the very high rate of loyalty amongst strong Conservative partisans (85%). The contrast between these two parties in 2004 perhaps illustrates the import of loyalty and defection in partisanship. While the Conservatives have a smaller pool of partisans (from Table 2, 20% vs. 31% for the Liberals) they can clearly count on them to vote for the Conservative party. In comparison the Liberals have a larger pool of partisan supporters but their rates of loyalty are significantly lower. The significance for how this influences election outcomes should not be overlooked. Important too is where the remainder of Conservative support came from in 2004. The Liberals counted 8% of “other”-partisans in their vote total, while the Conservatives had the support of 12%. The Conservatives also had a larger share of non-partisans in their coalition, suggesting that their electoral performance was based on appeal to a much wider base than the Liberals. Again, however, we return to the idea that the Liberals simply have more partisans, and thus do not need to appeal to these other groups. Should this dynamic change, the consequences for election results may be significant.

(Figure 13 about here)

Finally, we turn to the 2006 election, in which the Conservatives won a minority government with 36.3% of the national vote. From Figure 9 we know that roughly 56% of the Conservative vote came from their own partisans and that the Conservatives enjoyed high rates of loyalty amongst both strong (90%) and weak (73%) partisans. Given that the Conservatives only had 22% (from Table 2) of Canadians identify with them in that election, this suggests that loyalty was a strong component of the win. By comparison, in Figure 13 we see that the partisan share of Liberals support grew to 72% even as their rates of loyalty dropped from 2004 (66% for strong partisans and 30% for weak partisans). While the Liberals still had more partisans than any other party (by about 10 pts), their reliance on their own partisans was likely a strong factor in why the Liberal share of national support dropped to 30%. Clearly, the party did not appeal to many others (only 21% of non-partisans are included in their vote share, and 7% of “other”-partisans). This, coupled with the party’s own lower loyalty levels, led to the election result. Thus, it is obvious that the composition of a party’s electoral support largely explains its ultimate success or failure at the polls.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

This paper has considered the composition of party electoral support through a slightly different lens than is usually employed. Most analyses of electoral results assume that self-identified partisans support their own party and leave it at that. Drawing on the insight of DeNardo that the defection of partisans from their own party is a common, plausible, and highly consequential decision for the vote outcome, this paper examined Canadian partisans and party support in light of the defection and loyalty decisions of partisans. We believe that there are two central conclusions which arise from our analyses that hold significant implications for how we understand the creation of winning electoral coalitions in Canada.

The first conclusion relates to the importance of understanding the extent and limits of partisan loyalty. It is evident that loyalty rates are extremely relevant for the amount and type of support that a party receives. The above examination of loyalty rates indicates that, even among strong partisans, identifying with a party does not guarantee casting a ballot for that party. We believe that focusing scholarly attention on this reality is both overdue and worthy of further exploration. While we know that partisanship and vote choice are different phenomena, we suggest that not enough attention has been given to the circumstances and conditions under which partisanship does not lead to a vote for the named party. As is evident from the above consideration of loyalty rates, there are significant portions of partisans in every party who defect. Understanding why this occurs would provide important nuances to our understanding of partisanship in Canada, and may have implications for understanding party election strategies with respect to satisfying their own electoral constituencies.

Additionally important, and intriguing, is that loyalty rates differ by party. The findings tend to suggest that ideological parties (such as the NDP, Bloc or Reform/Canadian Alliance) have greater rates of loyalty than classic brokerage parties (like the Liberals and Progressive Conservatives). This suggests at least two avenues for further research. First, why do some parties have more loyal partisans than others? Is

there something about the way a party is organized, or the nature of its appeal to voters, that inspires loyalty? Second, differing loyalty rates have implications for our understanding of the electoral success of different parties. Particularly for a party like the Liberals, which has tended to have a larger pool of partisans over the past two decades, this finding suggests that the lower loyalty rates of their partisans may have undermined their numeric advantage over other parties, even as other researchers have commented that their partisan advantage contributed to their success (Nevitte et al. 2000; Blais et al. 2002). Consequently, this implies that a key strategy required of the Liberal party is to maximize the loyalty rates amongst their partisans in order to take full advantage of their larger partisan base.

Our findings also indicate that high loyalty rates appear to have benefited the 'new' Conservative party in recent elections. At the same time, however, Conservative support during elections has not been concentrated among partisans alone. While the Conservatives are better able to rely on their partisans supporting them at the polls, there are simply fewer Conservative partisans. As a result, to win an election (either a majority or minority) with the current configuration of partisanship support in the electorate the Conservatives must rely on appealing to unaligned voters and defecting partisans of other parties, a strategy that is slightly different than that required of the Liberals, and yet still informed by an understanding of loyalty and defection among partisans.

This leads to our second central conclusion: parties need to appeal outside of their own partisan support base to win elections. By considering the composition of winning party support, we have identified that non-partisan support consistently comprises approximately one-quarter of the total votes cast for that party. The ability of parties to appeal to unaligned voters is clearly essential to winning votes and eventually government office. This is consistent with a Downsian view of parties competing for scarce votes, and reflects the fact that many Canadians do not hold a partisan attachment. If one assumes that partisans are less likely than unaligned voters to be swayed by appeals of other parties, then unaligned votes are prizes to be competed for and won. Knowing that such individuals provide approximately 25% of a winning party's support adds a sense of significance to this knowledge.

In addition to appealing to non-partisans, our findings also demonstrate that parties must consider how to gather the support of *other* parties' partisans if they wish to be successful. On average, the extent of dependence on defecting partisan support for winning parties average about 12.7% from 1988-2006. It ranges from a low of 6% for the Liberals in 2000 to a high of 20% for the Conservatives in 2006. Clearly, this is not an inconsequential source of support, and depending on the party competition in each election, it may be a determining factor in which party forms government.

Understanding partisan behaviour in terms of loyalty and defection, from the perspective of the support base of winning parties, provides a unique picture of how parties and political behaviour interact. Theories of party choices, including ideology and issue stances, often comment on either the goal to appeal as widely as possible, or to sustain the support of an established base. Our analyses indicate that the party that can do both, that is, earn the loyalty of its supporters and attract defecting support of other partisans as well as unaligned partisans, will be the most successful. There is no simply formula for such party strategy, and indeed, the appropriate strategy may vary by party in relation to specific

loyalty rates and the size of its partisan base. How well each party achieves this ideal, however, is clearly a factor in its electoral fortunes.

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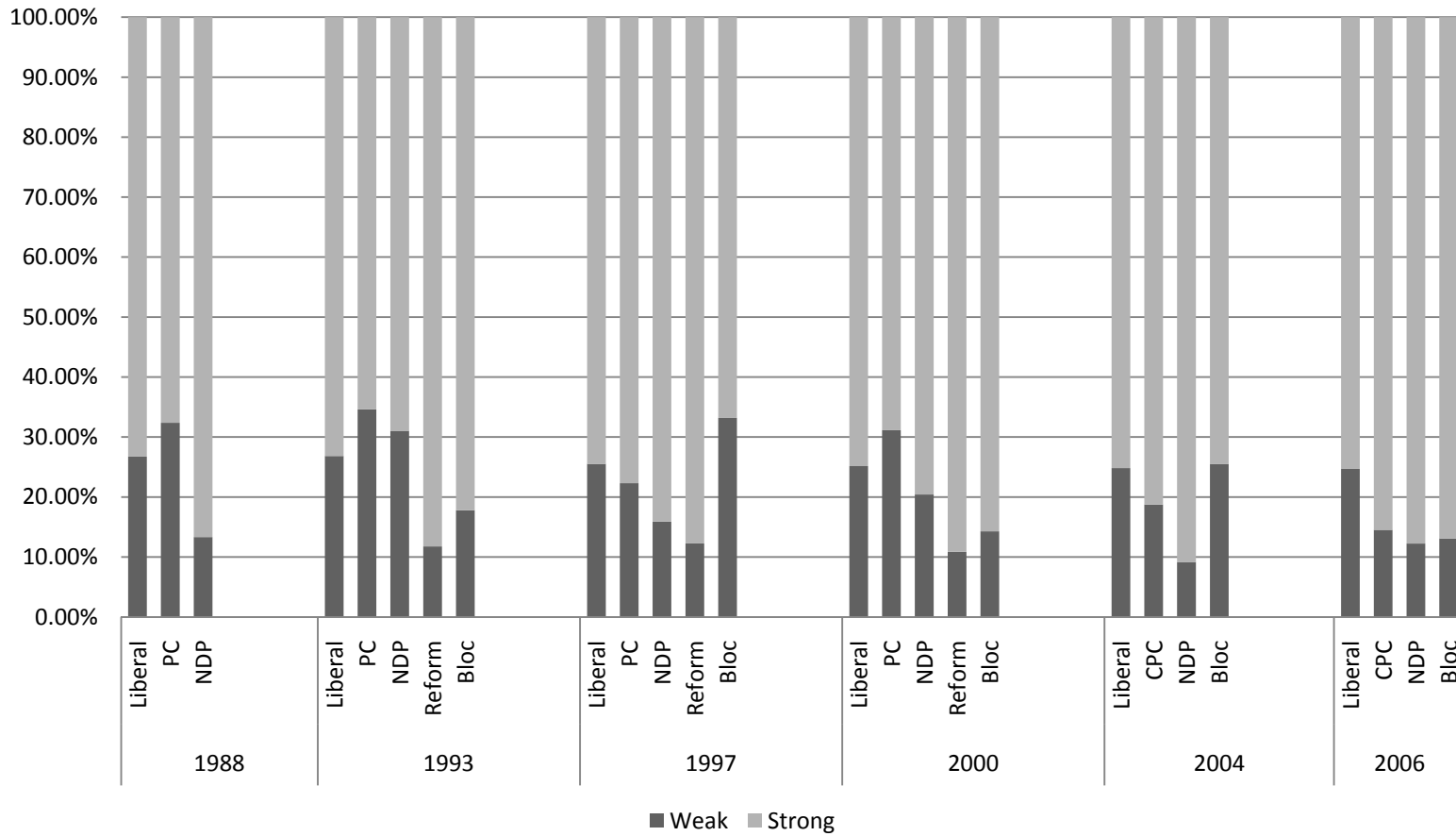
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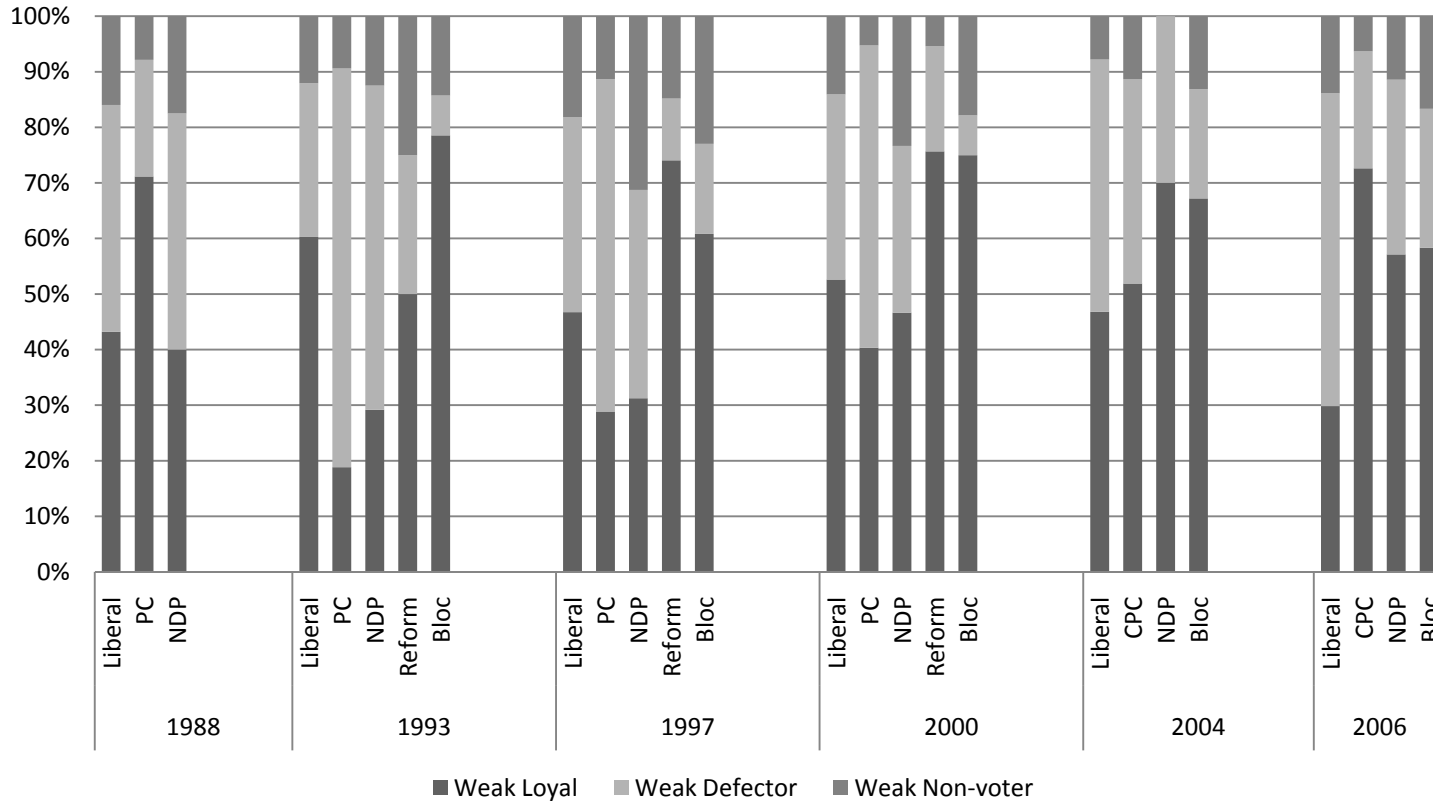
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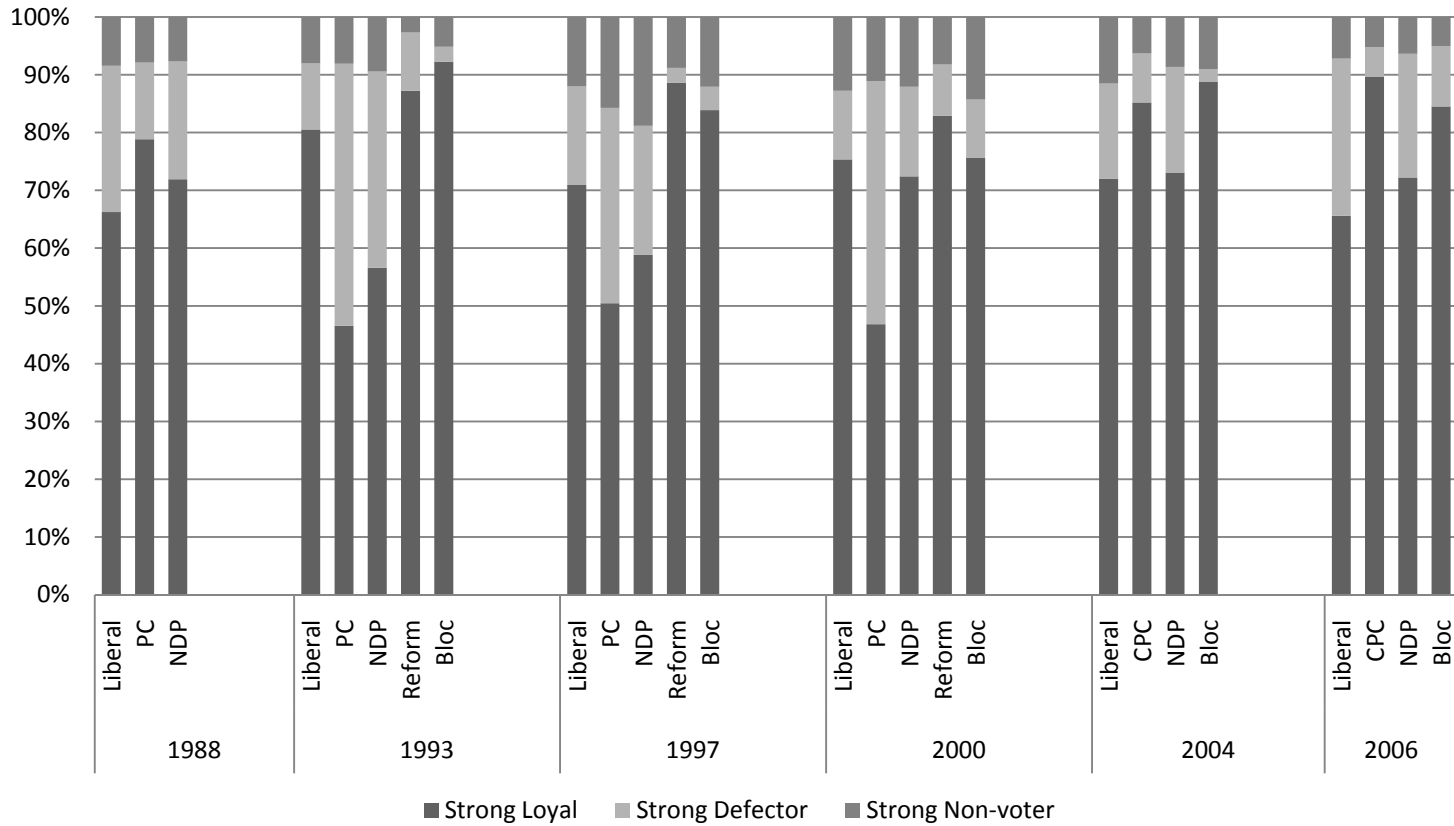
**Figure 1 Strong and Weak Partisans by Party**



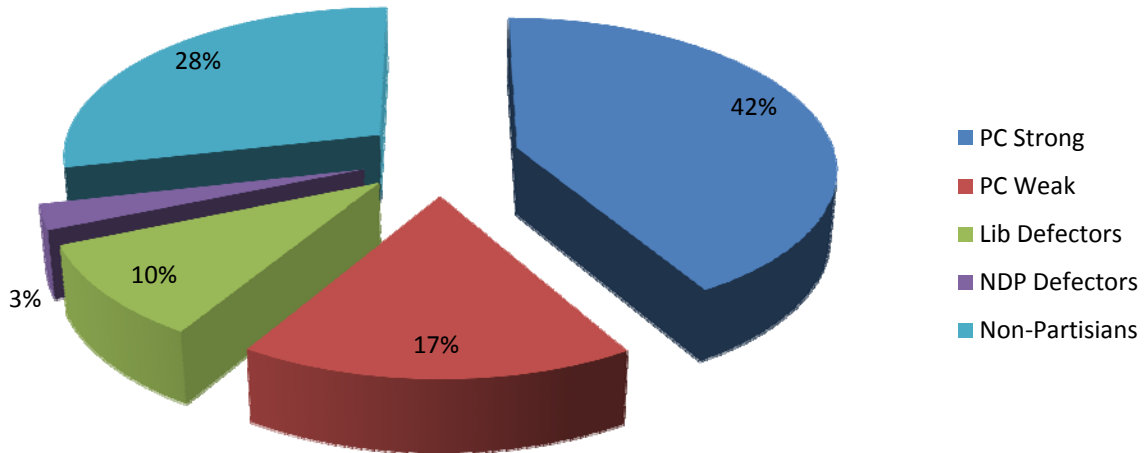
**Figure 2 Vote Decisions of Weak Partisans by Party**



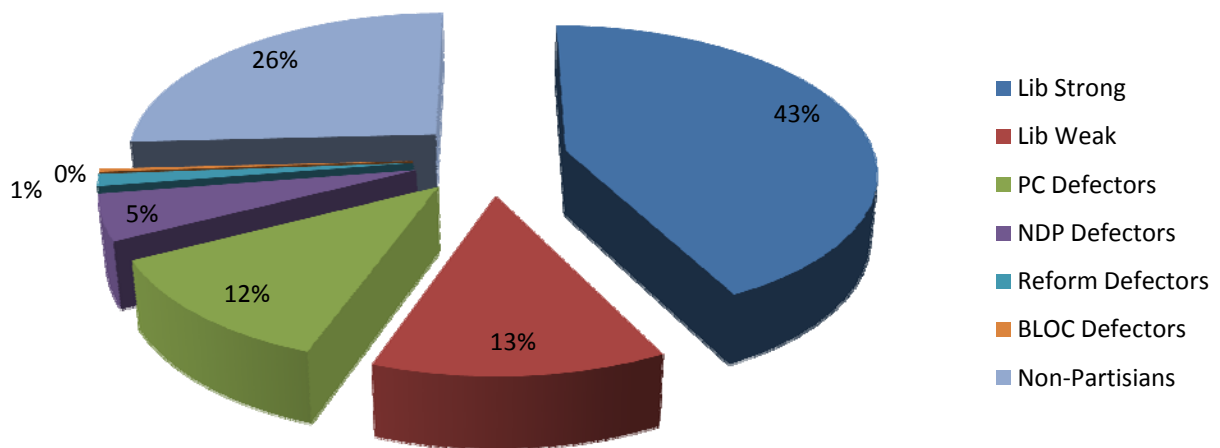
**Figure 3 Vote Decision of Strong Partisans by Party**



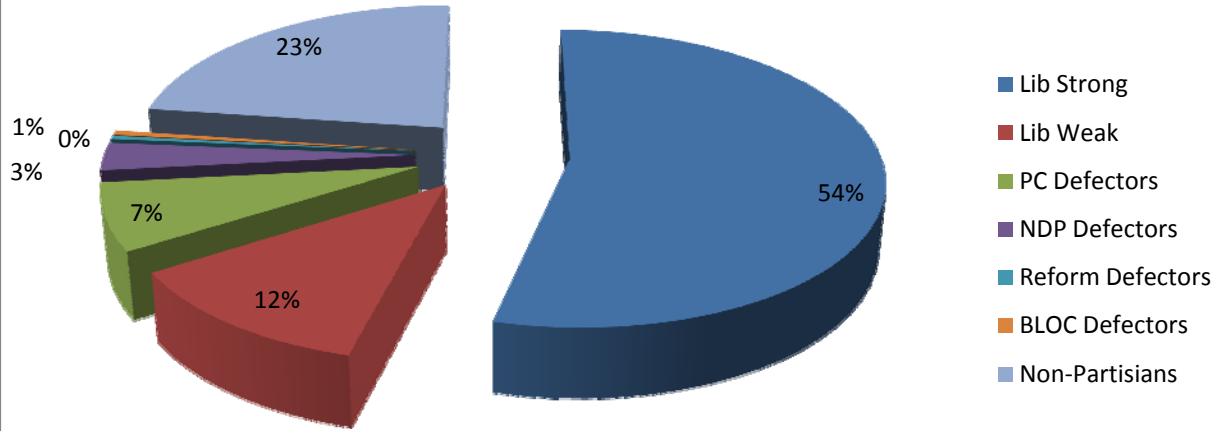
**Figure 4 PC Support, 1988**



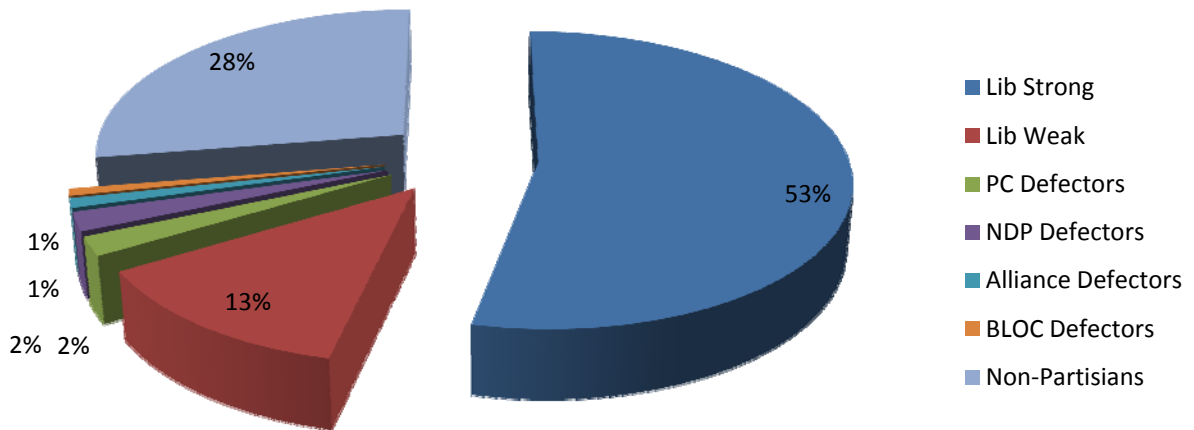
**Figure 5 Liberal Support, 1993**



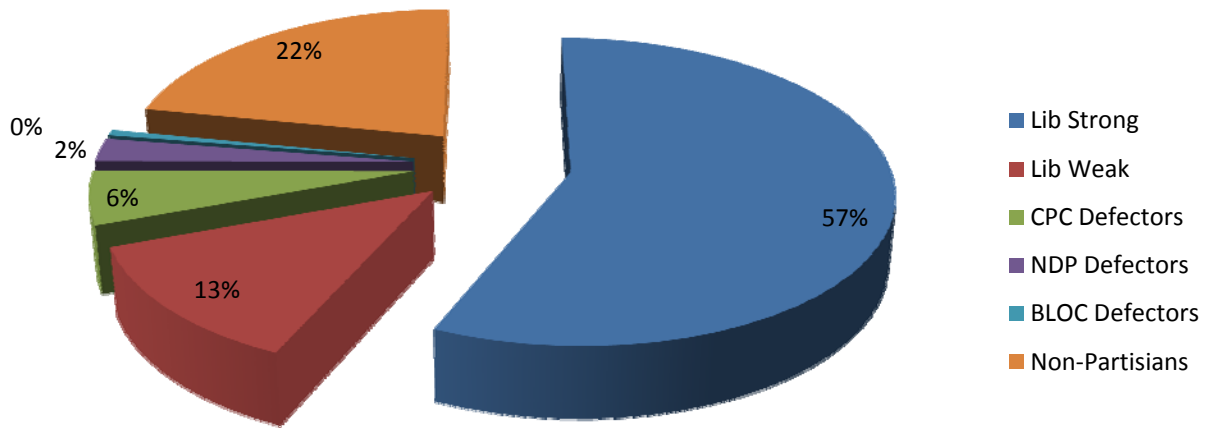
**Figure 6 Liberal Support, 1997**



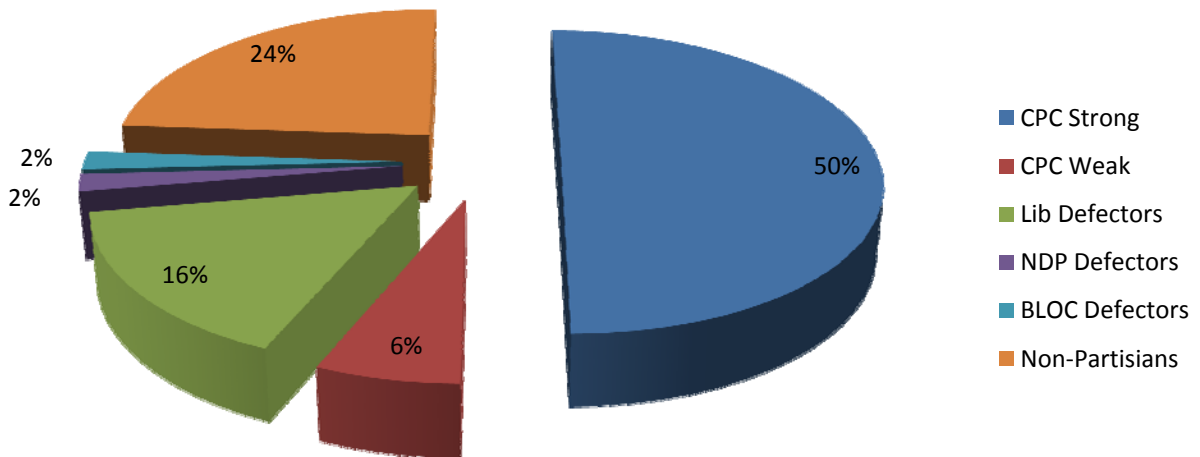
**Figure 7 Liberal Support, 2000**



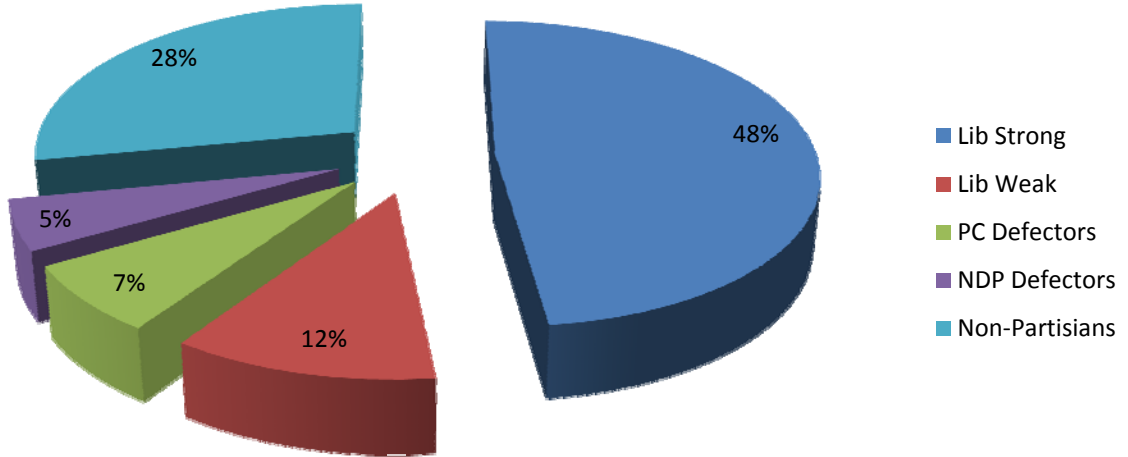
**Figure 8 Liberal Support, 2004**



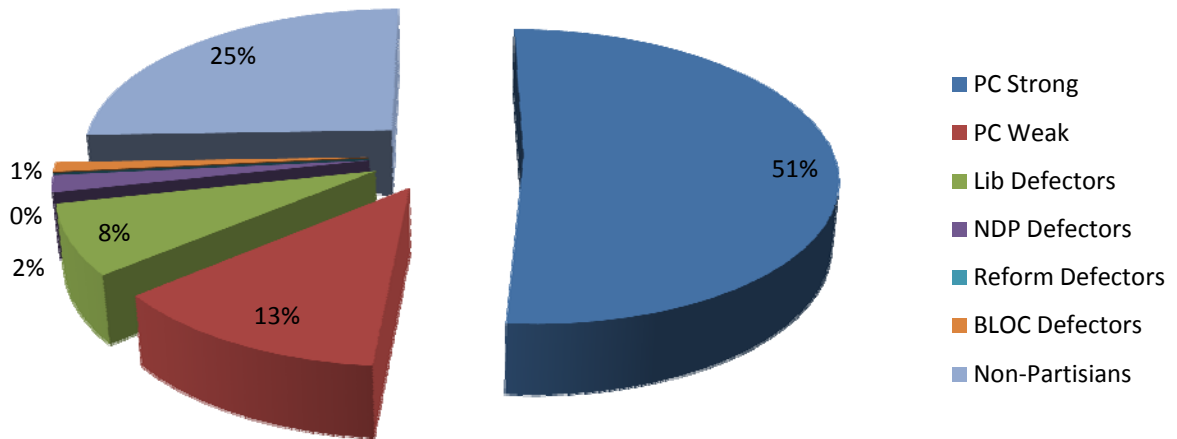
**Figure 9 Conservative Support, 2006**



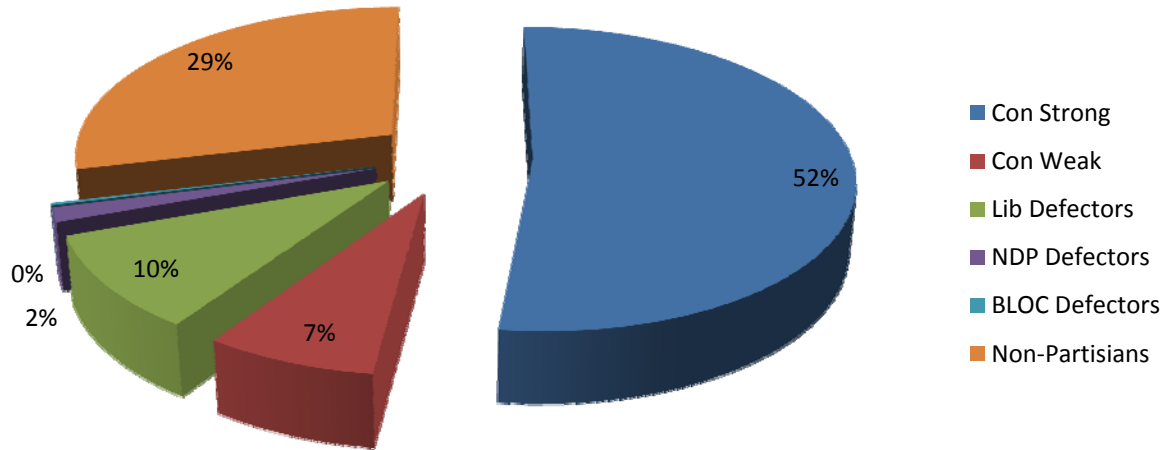
**Figure 10 Liberal Support, 1988**



**Figure 11 PC Support, 1993**



**Figure 12 CPC Support, 2004**



**Figure 13 Liberal Support, 2006**

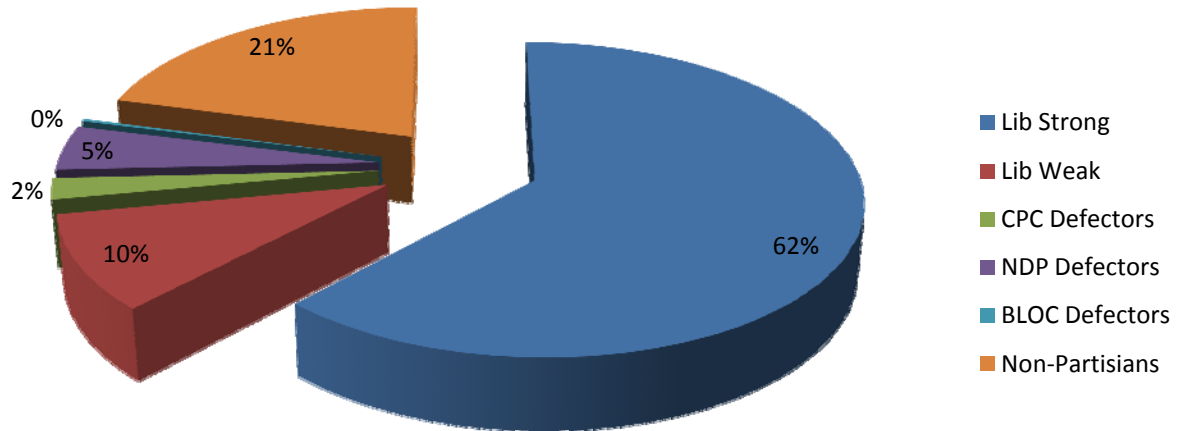




Table 1. Vote Shares by Party, 1988-2006

Election Year	Party				
	Liberal	PC/Conservative	NDP	Reform/Alliance	Bloc
1988	31.9%	43.0%	20.4%		
1993	41.3%	16.0%	6.9%	18.7%	13.5%
1997	38.5%	18.8%	11.0%	19.4%	10.7%
2000	40.8%	12.2%	8.5%	25.5%	10.7%
2004	36.7%	29.6%	15.7%		12.4%
2006	30.2%	36.3%	17.5%		10.5%

Source: "Canadian Election Results by Party, 1867-2008", <http://www.sfu.ca/~aheard/elections/1867-present.html>

Table 2. Proportions of Partisans by Party, 1988-2006

	1988	1993	1997	2000	2004	2006
None	33%	32.7%	29.9%	36%	32.14%	26.05%
<b>Liberal</b>	24%	26.6%	32%	30%	31.32%	32.68%
<b>PC/CPC</b>	31%	20.5%	15.4%	7.2%	20.19%	22.21%
<b>NDP</b>	11%	7.4%	7%	5.8%	7.78%	9.71%
<b>Reform/Alliance</b>		5.4%	7.8%	13.4%		
<b>Bloc</b>		7.5%	7.9%	7.7%	8.53%	9.34%

Source: Canadian Election Studies, various years