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The 2007 Provincial Election and Electoral System Referendum in Ontario

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Abstract

Ontario's general election in Oct. 10, 2007, was unprecedented for several reasons. The election was held on a date fixed by legislation and not one set by the premier or his caucus, something new to Ontario and relatively new to Canadian politics. Turnout declined to 53%, the lowest ever in Ontario history. The incumbent Liberals won a second consecutive majority government, something the party had not achieved since 1937. And finally, the election featured a referendum question that asked voters in Ontario to approve reforms to the electoral system, a proposal that was overwhelmingly rejected. This article explores each of the above-stated elements as they unfolded in the election.

Pre-campaign period

Not too long after the Liberals were elected on Oct. 2, 2003, they honoured an election promise on democratic renewal. Legislation was introduced in June of 2004 that imposed a fixed election date. Elections are now scheduled to take place every four years on the first Thursday of October, starting with Oct. 4, 2007, with a one-week wiggle room to avoid a conflict with any religious holiday.¹ As it turned out, the election date for 2007 had to be moved six days in order to accommodate a Jewish holiday.

Ostensibly, a fixed-date format would eliminate a tactical tool to set the election on a date favourable to the premier's chances of re-election. As a result, this reform hoped to address some of the cynicism voters feel towards elected officials. Whether indeed the premier's prerogative to call an election is a core complaint among the electorate is not obvious. However, there is some evidence to suggest popular support for fixed election dates (Desserud 2005), and thus, such a reform should receive approval from the public.² Whether this succeeded is still too soon to tell, but the record-low turnout rate of 53% is not overly suggestive of an outcome intended by this reform. Given that Ontario's chief elections officer, John Hollins, optimistically was quoted hoping for a turnout rate of 75% (Benzie 2007), it is difficult to conclude that this reform succeeded in any measurable way.

In fact, some feared this legislation would bring about a permanent campaign. An institutional change to the date of the election dilutes the meaning of the official start of the election campaign.

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Officially, the campaign began September 10, 2007. No party can “campaign” before this date, but restricted activities pertain mostly to advertising and publicity saturation that normally characterize the “heat” of an election. However, since everyone knows the date of the next election, parties can begin jostling for future electoral support years in advance, to the point that provincial politics becomes less of an effort towards developing coherent policy and more of an effort of securing fundraisers and campaign teams needed to gain and maintain power. McGuinty, himself, voiced concern: “In a real sense you never stop campaigning...The only thing that has really changed is that everybody knows when the next election date actually is and we never take our eye off that” (Campbell 2005: A5).

These fears may have been misplaced. While party leaders toured the province making campaign-style speeches well before the official start of the campaign, there is not much evidence to suggest Ontario is now in the grip of a permanent campaign. Even days before the September 10th official kick-off, voters were visibly inattentive to any election-oriented communication efforts by the party leaders. Some polls indicated people were unaware of an upcoming election (and were certainly unaware of the accompanying referendum on electoral reform). That is, while party leaders may have been “selling” themselves, no one was in a buying mood. Maybe this was due to the climate, since voters enjoying their short Ontario summer are not likely to feel drawn to electoral politics until well after Labour Day. If Ontario voters exhibit pre-campaign inattentiveness, then party leaders may feel restrained from expending time and resources on early campaigning events.

Ironically, the most significant “event” of the 2007 election year occurred in the pre-campaign period: John Tory’s announcement in June of his support for public funding of faith-based schools. This controversial announcement left the PC party in such a weakened state that it spent much of the rest of the campaign trying to recover losses. It turned a pre-campaign period in which polls indicated that the Liberals’ best hope was a minority government into one that virtually guaranteed the Liberals re-election. But apart from this one hot-button issue, the pre-campaign period could not be said to contain notable moments that contributed significantly to any dynamics during the actual official campaign period, let alone to the actual result on election day.

Campaign dynamics

When the 30-day election campaign began officially, the electoral outcome was still in considerable doubt. Premier Dalton McGuinty’s Liberal Party entered the campaign ahead of John Tory’s Progressive Conservatives, but not by much. Most polls showed Liberal support at about 40% of decided voters with the PCs no more than four points behind. Hence small shifts during the campaign could conceivably produce majority or minority governments for either party, and there was certainly potential for small shifts. Support for the two major parties had bounced up and down over the spring and summer of 2007, and at one point in early spring, the Progressive Conservatives were even reported to be in the lead (Enviroics 2007, May18). Further, although Howard Hampton’s New Democrats, at 17%, were not a threat to win the election, they and the Liberals traditionally share an overlapping support base that moves from one camp to the other. Finally, the Ontario Green Party had been polling in the 9% range in most polls, but many pollsters and pundits thought from past history that much of this support would eventually go elsewhere.

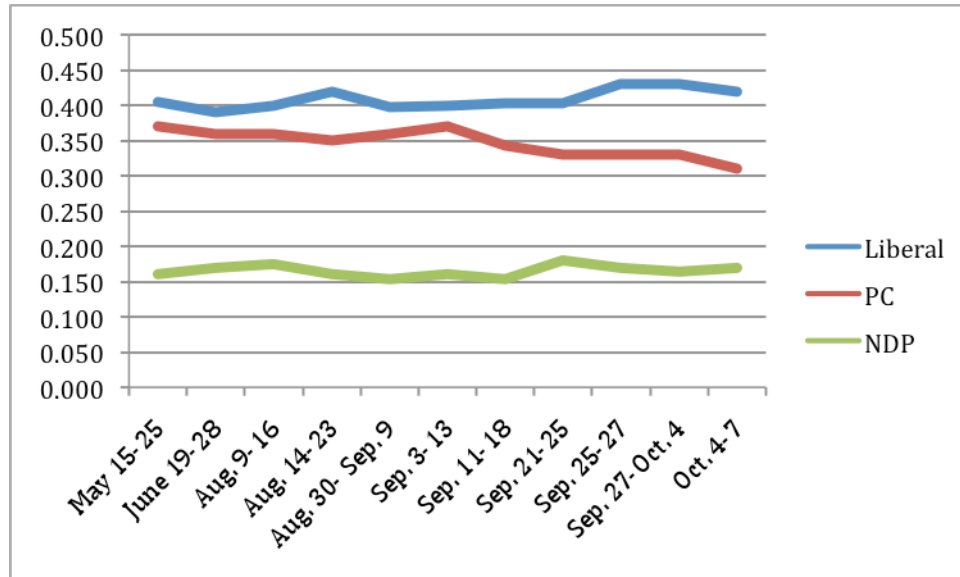
The main contenders’ strategies for the campaign reflected their respective strengths. With a lead in the polls and a reasonably healthy economy, the Liberals saw the election as theirs to lose; McGuinty would try to keep a low profile and avoid mistakes while promising action on health care, education and the environment. The Progressive Conservatives felt as many did that leadership was the Liberal’s Achilles’ heel and the PC strength; hence they would build their campaign around the slogan “leadership matters,” and attack McGuinty for his “broken promises.”

The campaign unfolded very differently. As noted earlier, in the election platform it developed in the spring, the PC party committed itself to extending full government funding to private faith-based schools in the province. It was not a major plank in the party's platform. Framed as an exercise in "fairness," it merely extended to other denominational schools in the province what the Catholic School system had long enjoyed. The proposal affected few voters and did not entail a significant draw on the province's coffers. However, as noted earlier, the public's initial reaction to the proposal was not just negative – it was strongly negative. A poll (Ipsos Reid 2007, Sept. 10) conducted at the start of the campaign found that fully 45% of the sample "strongly opposed" the idea while only one in seven was "strongly" supportive of it. Through the first weeks of the campaign, the issue came to dominate media coverage of the campaign, fuelled in part by John Tory's mishandling of questions about the teaching of "creationism" in provincially-funded schools, and in part by the Liberal's deft reframing of the issue as one that would segregate religious minorities in this multicultural province while destroying its public education system. With rumours of widespread dissatisfaction within the PC core support base, intensifying opposition to the proposal within the electorate as a whole, and open revolt from one prominent PC backbencher, John Tory finally capitulated with ten days left in the campaign; he announced he would allow a free vote on the proposal if his party was elected. However the damage to his campaign was beyond repair.

While there was actually little aggregate change in party support levels from the beginning of the campaign to its end, what change there was advantaged the Liberals at the expense of the Progressive Conservatives. Specifically, the spread between these parties widened from four percentage points to about five-to-seven points for much of the mid-campaign, and widened again to about 10-to-11 points through to election day (see Figure 1). In the weekend prior to the vote, polls consistently estimated Liberal support in the 43% range and PC support at or about 32% – both within a percentage point of their official vote tallies on Oct. 10. Support for the NDP and Green alternatives remained virtually unchanged from Labour Day through to election day.

What accounted for the apparent Conservative-to-Liberal shift? A more definitive answer must await future individual-level analyses, but certainly the "funding issue" is a prime suspect. Shortly before election day, a pollster (Ipsos Reid 2007, Oct. 10) reported that almost a third of all voters cited this issue as the primary reason for casting a vote for or against a party (and by then, about 53% "strongly opposed" it). Health care, as in most elections, was also an important election issue to voters – cited as the primary reason by 21% of respondents – but, like the "funding" issue, voters tended to perceive the Liberal Party as best reflecting their position.

The impact of the "leader factor" in this election is difficult to estimate. On the one hand, neither John Tory nor Dalton McGuinty had a particular edge among voters as the person best suited to be premier (SES 2007, Oct. 10). Viewers were somewhat more likely to see Tory as the "winner" of the televised leader's debate, but, as the next section will show, Tory's perceived strength as a debater did not translate into vote shifts; and one pollster (SES 2007, Oct. 8) found that "party leader performance" ranked fifth out of six factors when voters were asked what most influenced their decision.³ On the other hand, fully one third of a polled sample (SES 2007, Oct. 10) reported that their impression of John Tory had "worsened" over the campaign, suggesting perhaps that "leadership" might indeed have mattered, but that his handling of the "funding" issue had fallen short of expectations. This leads to a question that cannot adequately be answered here, but it is one that is central to voting studies: Were voters moved more by Tory's handling of the issue – a leadership factor? Or was it the issue itself the motivating factor? Future study will be needed to separate the two effects.

Figure 1: Party Support

Source: Angus Reid, Environics, Harris/Decima, Ipsos Reid, Nanos, Strategic Counsel

Leaders' debates

Televised election debates are generally hyped to be *the* most important event of a campaign. The anticipation of knock-out blows leaves an impression that at the end of such an event, there should be one clear winner and at least one clear loser. Many were in fact anticipating a decisive result, especially given that McGuinty's weaknesses on broken promises offered an easily exploitable vulnerability (Brennan 2007).

As it turned out, the Sept. 20 televised debate between the three party leaders contributed little change to the overall campaign. No one party leader suffered a blow. No one party leader emerged as decisively persuasive. And, as polls showed, voting intentions before and after the debate remain virtually unchanged (see Figure 1),⁴ with the Liberals at around 40% before the debate, and in that range afterwards. However, polls conducted after Sept. 25 saw a widening of support for the Liberals over the PC. The widening Liberal-PC differential was a trend that appears to have started at around Labour Day, with the debate imposing no obvious "kink" in the trend.

Why this is the case remains unresolved, but it is plausible that the debate is merely an amplification of the rest of the campaign. That is, party leaders' performance and statements made in general campaign activities are likely to be repeated in a televised debate. After all, leaders use a televised debate to reinforce the same message exclaimed throughout the campaign. Each party leader must respond to the same criticisms that follow them from campaign stop to campaign stop. The only difference in a debate is that the party leaders relinquish a great deal of control over their "message" to the dynamics of the vocal interchange and to the questions posed by the moderator.

Another possibility for a lack of debate effects may revolve around deliberate efforts to manipulate expectations. Often, strategists in American presidential elections low-ball their candidate before a debate in order to exceed these lowered expectations (Norton and Goethals 2004). There is some sign such a strategy was employed in Ontario. The Liberals publicly equated success to McGuinty's ability

to survive the event without looking too bloodied. Here is what an unnamed Liberal source stated to the press: "If the Premier is still standing at the end of the debate, we'll be happy," (Lyle 2007: A13). And indeed, the media's review of McGuinty's performance conformed to the pre-debate expectations. He survived, and thus, met or exceeded modest expectations. Whether strategists deliberately low-balled McGuinty before the debate is not clear, but what is certain is that regardless of who "won" the debate, the post-debate voting intentions remained unchanged from the pre-debate levels.

Seat change

Ontario is the only province that uses the federal constituency configuration for the determination of provincial boundaries. This election introduced the riding changes created from the 2001 census, which were not available at the time of the previous provincial election. In fact, there was a slight revision from the federal map, to allow for an additional northern seat that created 107 provincial ridings rather than the 106 seats allocated federally. However, none of the 97 seats south of the Nipissing constituency (North Bay) were altered from the federal boundaries.

As one might expect from such a process, there was substantial overlap in party support patterns between seats won between the federal and provincial elections. Of the 107 seats, only 30 produced provincial winners different from the party in the corresponding federal riding during the 2006 vote. The majority of those cases (17) occurred in marginal constituencies narrowly won by the Harper Conservatives in 2006 and the McGuinty Liberals on Oct. 10. This reflected the slightly stronger Conservative performance in the federal election where the Liberals had a 5% Ontario-wide plurality compared to the 11% plurality in the provincial vote. In general, these were swing constituencies in upscale bedroom suburbs, small cities or mixed rural areas on the periphery of urban centres which had been won by the Martin Liberals in 2004. None were in the Greater Toronto Area. The handful of other party seats reflecting party switches from 2006 to 2007 included three with unusually strong provincial Conservative MPPs in seats that voted Liberal federally.⁵

The Green Party, while almost tripling its vote performance from 2.8% to 8% compared to the 2003 election, exceeded 15% of the vote in only two constituencies, and could claim to be genuinely competitive only in Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound where the party ran a particularly popular local candidate. Apart from the growing importance of the environmental issue, the Greens seemed to represent a default position for those who supported "none of the above." One other position that distinguished the Green party, once the religious school funding issue took hold, was a rejection of financing for *any* parochial schools including the Roman Catholic system. The party likely would have done better if its leader were allowed into the televised debate. Its opposition to funding of parochial schools has reasonable public support, but many were unaware of this position.

Tables 1 and 2 provide a regional as well as overall distribution of the Ontario vote, and they suggest relatively little deviation by region (see Figure 2). The Liberal and Conservative vote proportions declined by comparable amounts in contrast to 2003 but their respective declines were associated with the 5% Green increase as well as a smaller rise of 2% in NDP support. Accordingly the effects of redistribution were modest on an aggregate level.

Table 1: Regional Vote Distribution, 2003

	Liberal		P.C.		N.D.P.		Green		Total seats
	Votes	Seats	Votes	Seats	Votes	Seats	Votes	Seats	
Toronto	51.0%	19	26.3%	-	17.7%	3	3.1%	-	22
GTA	46.1%	11	41.4%	3	9.2%	-	2.2%	-	14
Hamilton/Niagara	44.4%	7	34.3%	3	18.1%	1	1.9%	-	11
East	45.0%	12	40.1%	10	10.3%	-	3.6%	-	22
West	43.8%	16	37.1%	8	14.6%	-	2.9%	-	24
North	52.5%	7	16.6%	-	28.9%	3	1.8%	-	10
Total	46.6%	72	34.6%	24	14.7%	7	2.8%	-	103

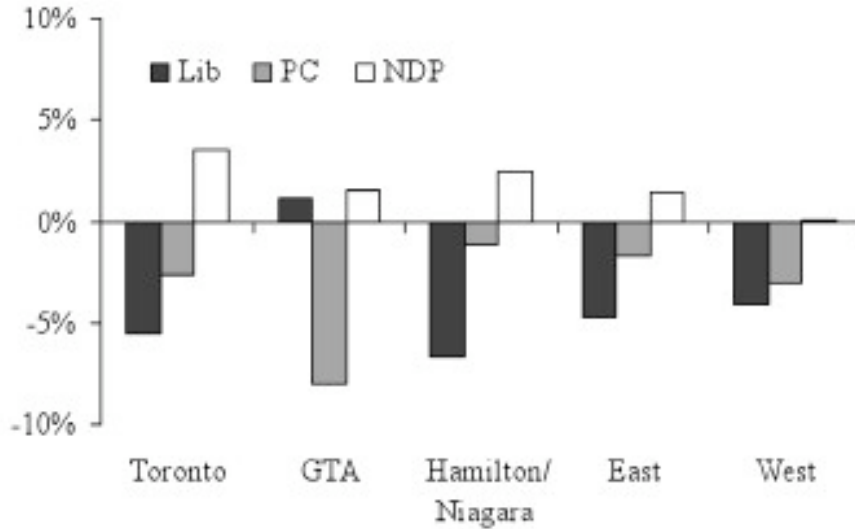
Source: Elections Ontario

Table 2: Regional Vote Distribution, 2007

	Liberal		P.C.		N.D.P.		Green		Total seats
	Votes	Seats	Votes	Seats	Votes	Seats	Votes	Seats	
Toronto	45.5%	18	23.7%	-	21.3%	4	7.5%	-	22
GTA	47.3%	14	33.4%	4	10.8%	-	7.4%	-	18
Hamilton/Niagara	37.7%	5	33.2%	3	20.5%	3	7.7%	-	11
East	40.2%	12	38.5%	10	11.8%	-	8.3%	-	22
West	39.7%	15	34.1%	9	14.6%	-	10.0%	-	24
North	43.8%	7	14.6%	-	36.8%	3	4.1%	-	10
Total	42.2%	71	31.8%	26	16.8%	10	8.0%	-	107

Source: Elections Ontario

Figure 2: Change in Regional Party Support



Source: Elections Canada

Referendum

The fixed date election was one component of a package of reforms. A referendum on whether to adopt a more proportional electoral system was another. The debate about the electoral formula followed the British Columbia Citizens Assembly model (see <http://www.citizensassembly.bc.ca/>). The Ontario deliberative process involved 103 individuals drawn at random from each of the 2003 ridings. Meetings began in September, 2006, and a resolution was adopted in April, 2007. The model proposed by the Ontario Citizens Assembly is, however, much different than the Single Transferable Vote option that emerged from the BC process. Ontario's citizens assembly endorsed a more incremental change, whereby the plurality system would be maintained, with proportionality achieved by a second tier of party-list members, similar to the system found in Germany and New Zealand. This model was called Mixed Member Proportional or MMP. Adopting it would entail an increase to the number of seats in the legislature (see <http://www.citizensassembly.gov.on.ca/>).

After the Ontario Citizens' Assembly completed its work, the issue seemed to die from neglect. Although the government followed through with its promise and put the proposed reform to a referendum,⁶ there was not much public interest or awareness. In addition, there was hardly any debate and discussion during the campaign, and nearly no discussion before the campaign. Summer polls showed that only 8% knew anything about the referendum, and information forums organized around the referendum failed to draw large crowds. Even the minister responsible for this initiative, Marie Bountrogianni, expressed worry (Benzie 2007).

One possible cause **was** the government's approach to this issue. Elections Ontario spent \$6.8 million on an information campaign, but the extent to which this helped raise awareness and understanding is very much in doubt. During the campaign, strict rules constrained the debate surrounding the referendum. There certainly were groups endorsing one side or another, but there was hardly any visible sign of an actual referendum, at least nothing comparable to the 1992 referendum over the Charlottetown Accord or the 1995 referendum in Quebec. Electoral reform was not nearly as divisive and salient in Ontario. From birth to death, the issue remained off the radar for most voters, leaving them with no good reason to vote in favour of something about which they knew little (Gillespie 2007).

In addition, the threshold to adopt the electoral reform was set high. Following the BC formula, MMP in Ontario would be adopted if the Yes side received support from a "super majority:" 60% of all voters, plus 50% of all voters in 64 of the 107 ridings. As it turns out, a super majority was achieved, but for the No side: 63.1% of voters overall voted "No", with a simple majority of voters rejecting the proposal in 102 ridings.⁷

Aside from the low level of awareness apparent during the campaign, this result may also be a reflection of contentment. There are signs voters simply prefer the current plurality system. A Compass survey commissioned by the Privy Council Office points to a lack of trust for politicians and parties, so any system that would elect more politicians and *appear* to give parties more power over the appointment of some members is sure to smack against this widespread level of cynicism (see Compass 2007). Whether this perception was true here is another matter. As noted by Hugh Thorburn (2007), the current system is already undemocratic with grassroots candidate nomination procedures often being usurped by the party elite. Finally, Ontario has not suffered from distorted or exaggerated election results, where either the party that received the most votes came in second,⁸ or where an election produces a majority government with thin oppositions,⁹ despite the more even vote distribution. These are conditions that normally lead to demands for electoral reform.

Cabinet change

One of the often overlooked aspects of elections is the impact voting has on the front bench of a government. In Canada's Westminster Parliamentary system it is a truism that policies are set by the executive. Therefore when governments are unpopular, it is reasonable to expect voters to punish those that create unpopular policies. But in the Canadian provinces this is not necessarily the case. Indeed, when governments are defeated, cabinet ministers are often the last to pay the ultimate price and lose their seats (Docherty and White 1999).

What happens when governments are re-elected? Using this same logic one would expect cabinet ministers in successful incumbent governments to keep their seats. In Ontario in 2007 this is exactly what happened. Elections should provide the opportunity for cabinet renewal. Legislators who have spent a term or more on the backbenches have a track record that they all hope would qualify them for a promotion to the cabinet table. While the size of cabinet is relatively elastic, premiers hope to have openings filled instead of just expanding their cabinet to placate ambitious private members.

McGuinty's electoral success presented him with a problem in this regard. First, of McGuinty's 25-person cabinet going into the fall vote, fully twenty-two decided to run again. That 88% of the executive opted to stay is either a ringing endorsement of McGuinty as a leader or indicative of how long the Liberals had been away from the reins of power and how reluctant they were to let go. Among those deciding not to run again was Minister of Finance and election strategy architect Greg Sorbora and Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs Marie Bountrogianni.

Second, of the 22 that did run for re-election, only one, Caroline Di Cocco of Sarnia-Lambton, was defeated. Such a high success rate meant that McGuinty had some difficult choices to make. In all,

four returning cabinet members were relegated to the backbenches while ten MPP's were promoted to cabinet for the first time. Only one of these new cabinet ministers, Margaret Best, was a newcomer to legislative politics, while one other, Aileen Carroll, had served federally before seeking provincial office. One could argue McGuinty learned the lessons of his Liberal predecessor, David Peterson, who placed rookie MPP Chaviva Hosek in the politically hot Housing portfolio without the benefit of legislative experience in 1987. Margaret Best was given a lower profile cabinet spot. In sum, McGuinty looked for experience in crafting the first cabinet of his second mandate. He was not afraid to demote long serving cabinet ministers whose experience stretched back to the 1980's. At the same time he was loathe to replace them with complete amateurs and choose instead to reward some members of his first term of office's backbench.

Endnotes

- ¹ While the law may remove an element of surprise about the precise election date, it does not restrict against the calling of an election following a non-confidence vote in the legislature. That is, the fixed-date law is not a constitutional amendment. It sets a "best before" expiry date on a government.
- ² A fixed date for Ontario is new for the province, but it seems to be the latest instalment in what has become a bit of a national trend. In Canada, the federal government passed a fixed-date election law, with the current minority Conservative government committed to an election on Oct. 19, 2009. At the provincial level, British Columbia and Newfoundland and Labrador have instituted fixed election dates. Other provinces, namely New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and Quebec, have considered this idea as part of their efforts towards electoral reform.
- ³ There is some debate as to whether party leaders matter much to a voter's decision. See Blais et al (2002).
- ⁴ Some datapoints reflect an average of different surveys conducted at around the same time.
- ⁵ There also was an assortment of seats in northern Ontario, Windsor and Hamilton that the Liberals and NDP normally compete for, that split between those parties over the two levels of government.
- ⁶ The actual question was: Which electoral system should Ontario use to elect members to the provincial legislature?" Choices: 1) The existing electoral system (First-Past-the-Post); 2) The alternative electoral system proposed by the Citizens' Assembly (Mixed Member Proportional)."
- ⁷ The five ridings where the majority voted in favour of the proposal are located in Toronto: Beaches-East York (50.1%); Davenport (56.7%); Parkdale-High Park (54.5%); Toronto-Danforth (55.1%); and Trinity-Spadina (59.2%). All ridings were won by NDP candidates, with the exception of Davenport, which went Liberal.
- ⁸ For example, in the 1998 Quebec election, the Parti Québécois won a majority of the seats (76 out of 125) with 42.9% of the vote, while the Liberals formed the official opposition (48 seats), even though it won a slightly higher plurality of votes, 43.6%.
- ⁹ A most extreme example would be the 1987 election in New Brunswick, where the Liberal Party won all seats in the provincial legislature.

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