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*What Democrats and Republicans can learn from Canada's Stephen Harper**by Reihan Salam*

North America's Other Election

Canada has weathered the global economic crisis with noteworthy grace. Last month, its economy created over 100,000 new jobs, more than in any month in decades. Wages keep growing, and Canada's banking sector is, according to the World Economic Forum, "the soundest in the world." So it shouldn't be surprising that last week, Canadians returned [Stephen Harper's](#) Conservatives to power and granted them 19 new seats in Parliament. Harper called the election because he thought he could win it. But the five-week campaign featured wild oscillations—and offered a few glimpses of Canada's fragmented future.

Early on, the Conservatives looked like they might win a majority by expanding their share of the vote in francophone Quebec. The wooing of Quebec's so-called soft nationalists has been at the heart of Conservative electoral strategy since the party's birth in 2003, when the Progressive Conservatives merged with the western-centered [Canadian Alliance](#). Before the early 1990s, Quebec voters who wanted autonomy from Ottawa tended to vote for the Progressive Conservatives. Those who embraced a strong federal government backed the Liberals. But the constitutional crisis of the early 1990s forced a polarization of Quebec's electorate: either you were for a united Canada or against it, which meant that you were either for the federalist Liberals, or for the separatist [Bloc Québécois](#). The politics of the middle way were dead, and the fortunes of the conservative parties in Quebec died with it.

The failure and exhaustion of Quebec's sovereignty movement presented an opportunity for a return of the middle way, and Harper shrewdly seized it. In 2006, the Conservatives won 10 seats in Quebec, far more than anyone had anticipated. Since then, Harper has explicitly referred to Quebec nationhood, and he has sought to raise its profile in international bodies like UNESCO, a clear gesture in the direction of soft nationalists. The Conservatives have also channeled considerable resources to the province. All the same, the Conservatives failed to increase their seat total. Quebec voters still turned to the Bloc Québécois en masse, even though enthusiasm for Quebec sovereignty remains low.

The Canadian media have pointed to the Conservative government's decision to cut arts funding as well as a number of harsh anti-crime measures as the reason for their dismal showing. But there was much more to it. First, Canada's war in Afghanistan has killed nearly 100 Canadians and is deeply unpopular in Quebec. By pledging to withdraw Canadian forces in 2011, Harper built a consensus with the Liberals and neutralized the issue in most of the country—but not in Quebec. The Bloc wants Canadian troops out of Afghanistan now. Also, the New Democratic Party, which has struggled for decades to displace the Liberals as Canada's party of the left, ran very effective anti-Harper advertisements in Quebec in the hopes of building a beachhead there. But the ads redounded to the benefit of the Bloc instead, both because there was no real prospect of major NDP victories in Quebec and because Quebec voters tend to be, frankly speaking, very tribal.

Quebec aside, there were a few other aspects of Canada's federal election that have resonance for those of us following the American political scene. In Ontario and British Columbia, the Conservatives performed extremely well, thanks in part to a below-the-radar ethnic outreach effort. Whereas the Conservatives had been all but shut out of Canada's biggest metropolitan areas in the last election, the party won a number of unexpected victories in the suburbs of Toronto and Vancouver, and came close in several more seats. Asian Canadians, and in particular Chinese, Filipino, and Korean voters, chose the Conservatives by wide margins across the country, a trend that bodes well for the party's future. (This is in marked contrast to the U.S. Republican Party's failure to break out beyond its increasingly narrow ethnic base, a failure that will likely tilt states like Colorado, Nevada, and Virginia into the Democratic column.) More significant was the shift of middle-class married women in Ontario and British Columbia into the Conservative column, doubtless a response to Harper's very effective tax-credit pandering. Like Bush's Republican Party, the Conservatives have expanded their coalition by appealing to working class voters, but they've mainly done it by using targeted tax policies, like the Clinton-era Democrats.

In the middle of the campaign, Harper and other leading Conservatives created a panic within the party with a series of hamfisted remarks. And although the financial crisis hasn't hit Canada directly, it has certainly created anxiety. Briefly, the Liberals and New Democrats seemed capable of forming a coalition on the strength of Harper's failure to feel the pain of Canada's middle-class families. But on the 14th, the day after Canadian Thanksgiving, those middle-class families turned to Harper as a safe pair of hands. It didn't help that the central feature of the Liberal domestic policy, a carbon tax, was essentially demagogued to death by Conservative candidates across the country. It is easy to imagine Republicans doing the same to a sweeping Democratic environmental plan.

Right now, Liberals see their meager showing—just 26 percent of the vote, one of the worst outcomes in the history of the party—as a serious reversal. At the same time, the Liberals won't be held responsible for the wrenching economic conditions to come. Assuming there is a severe downturn, the Conservative government will be forced into a budget deficit, a serious taboo in Canadian federal politics. The Liberals will eventually find a leader more appealing and charismatic than [Stéphane Dion](#), and when they do, the party will surely make a comeback, not least because the 7 percent won by the flavor-of-the-month Green Party will dwindle to zero.

At the moment, left-leaning Canadians are suffering from a severe case of Obama envy. The Liberals are desperate for a Trudeau-like figure who can present a dashing, cosmopolitan face to the wider world. Stéphane Dion is not that man. [Michael Ignatieff](#), the celebrated intellectual and human rights activist and Liberal MP, just might be. After a disappointing and somewhat clumsy start, Ignatieff has proved a fast learner and a keen campaigner. He will, however, having a hard time fending off his old friend and classmate [Bob Rae](#), the former NDP premier of Ontario who has inherited much of [Jean Chrétien](#)'s old political machine.

All this is to say that Stephen Harper and the Conservatives have an unenviable task of governing ahead of them, and possibly a tough election as well. This minority government bears an eerie resemblance to [Joe Clark](#)'s Progressive Conservative win in 1979, when for just ten months he led a large minority government that had minimal Quebec representation. Clark mistakenly believed that he had a strong mandate, and he united the fractious opposition parties against him. Stephen Harper may well do the same.

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