THE SOURCES OF CAMPAIGN INTEMPERANCE

Election 2000

Paul Howe

That last November's federal election degenerated into mud-slinging is not just the fault of the party leaders. First-past-the-post pushes them into go-for-broke strategies, while growing political ignorance and indifference among the electorate encourage simple-minded sloganeering. We need to: get young people more involved; hold annual leaders' debates; lengthen our election campaigns, consider fixing their dates, and more.

Si l'élection fédérale de novembre dernier a tourné à la médisance et à la calomnie, la faute n'en revient pas seulement aux chefs de partis. D'une part, en effet, le système majoritaire uninominal à un tour incite les politiciens à faire flèche de tout bois; d'autre part, l'ignorance et l'indifférence croissantes de l'électorat encouragent ces mêmes politiciens à user de slogans simplistes. Que faire ? On pourrait, par exemple, pousser les jeunes à s'engager plus activement dans le processus politique, tenir chaque année un débat des chefs, étendre la durée de nos campagnes électorales, peut-être en fixer d'avance les dates, etc.

It seems to be generally agreed that the recent federal election campaign marked a low point in the annals of Canadian electoral democracy. The opposition parties appeared determined to turn the election into a plebiscite on the Prime Minister's leadership and integrity, criticizing at length his arrogance at calling an early election and his unethical dealings with the President of the Business Development Bank of Canada. The Liberals fought back with barbs of their own and scaremongering about their opponents' policies. The result was a campaign dominated by sniping leaders and devoid of thoughtful policy debate, leading to a record low voter turnout of just over 60 per cent, as many Canadians were hard pressed to find an acceptable, let alone worthy, candidate from among the choices on offer.

But was it really such a sorry spectacle as all this? For the opposition parties to pick up on Mr. Chrétien's brash governing style was not just understandable, it was entirely justified. The concentration of power in the hands of the prime minister is a central fact of Canadian politics these days. As much as, if not more than, the stated policies of the winning party, it matters vitally who fills the country's top political post. An arrogant leader—or, for that matter, one with a deep belief in creationism—is potentially relevant to many voters and deserves to be an important campaign issue.

There are limits that should be respected, of course. Criticism of leaders should target qualities and beliefs relevant to the job and not degenerate into gratuitous attacks. The circumstances of this election, however, were especially apt to produce vitriol. Three parties began the campaign looking to make up considerable ground. Two—the NDP and the Conservatives—had fallen on hard times and were looking to get back in the game as serious players. One, the Alliance, was hoping for the major breakthrough (widely defined as popular support above 30 per cent, with seats in all regions of the country) that would establish its credentials as the government-in-waiting. Neither ambition was outrageous given the volatility of Canadian voters nowadays and the unpredictable nature of election campaigns.

In the absence of heat and controversy, however, the realization of these goals was unlikely. Reasoned debate on the finer points of policy was not going to produce the double-digit gains the NDP, Conservatives and Alliance were

trying to achieve in the course of a 36-day campaign. The opposition parties were going for broke and recognized, quite rightly, that vigorous attack was their best bet; a quiet, unassuming campaign would only have worked to the incumbent's advantage. In the end, the gambit was unsuccessful, but the strategy was not necessarily flawed. It was, however, distasteful.

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An important question that should be asked in the wake of the election is why the opposition parties were striving for such improbably large gains. The answer, in part, lies in an electoral system that showers rewards on parties that reach critical thresholds and severely punishes those that come up short. Parties like the NDP and the Tories, with popular support spread thinly across the country, cannot win significant numbers of seats until, at a bare minimum, they break the 20 per cent barrier nationwide. The Alliance fares better under first-past-the-post because of the heavy concentration of its vote in western Canada, but it too faces a formidable threshold: the level of popular support needed in Ontario to take a goodly number of seats from the dominant Liberals. The inflammatory tactics we saw in the campaign were partly a function of these parties' efforts to ignite the electorate in the hope of surmounting some of the obstacles presented by Canada's electoral system.

A different system—one that distributed seats in accordance with each party's share of the popular vote in each region of the country, say—would alter the structure of electoral incentives and might well produce more circumspect and cautious campaigning. Under a proportional representation (PR) system, parties would know that small increases in vote share would yield small gains in seat share, making gradual growth (or recovery in the case of the Tories and NDP) a viable electoral strategy. The road to success could involve circumspect, policy-driven campaigning aimed at producing modest but solid gains across several successive elections. First-past-the-post, on the other hand, encourages smaller parties to campaign with abandon, since small vote gains, unless concentrated just so in particular regions and ridings, are unlikely to produce commensurate seat gains. They strive for the elusive breakthrough that will put them on the electoral map, whether in particular regions or in the country as a whole. In short, for smaller parties our electoral system places a premium on quick and dirty methods of voter persuasion.

Another factor contributing to an election heavy on personal diatribe and light on policy debate was the Canadian electorate itself. A sizeable and growing section of the population is woefully ill-informed about political matters and can only be reached with simplistic sloganeering and grandstanding. In a 1990 survey carried out for the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, five per cent of Canadians could not name the prime minister. In a similar survey commissioned by the IRPP in March 2000, that number had risen to 11 per cent. In that same survey, only 46 per cent of respondents could name the federal minister of finance, even though the present incumbent is probably one of the highest-profile finance ministers the country has ever had, and just over one-third (35 per cent) could identify the official opposition in the House of Commons.

Nor are things likely to improve down the road. Young Canadians are the least politically knowledgeable group in the country, and by a wider margin today than ten years ago. In 1990, 56 per cent of 18-to-29-year-olds were able to answer at most one of the following three political knowledge questions correctly: Who is the PM? Who is the Liberal leader? Who is the NDP leader? For the survey sample as a whole, the figure was 16 points lower at 40 per cent. By 2000, the younger group was lagging still further behind: When asked to identify the prime minister, finance minister and official opposition, fully 67 per cent of 18-to-29-year-olds scored no more than one out of three, compared to 46 per cent for the sample as a whole—a gap of 21 points.

What's more, this relative decline in levels of political knowledge also holds true of young Canadians who have received post-secondary education. In 1990, 41 per cent of 18-to-29-year-olds with a university degree answered all three questions correctly, putting them 11 points above the survey norm of 30 per cent. Ten years later, only 27 per cent of young graduates scored three for three, essentially no better than the overall average of 26 per cent.

This growing ignorance of political affairs is closely linked to declining political participation. In the IRPP survey of March 2000, 69 per cent of those with no more than one question right reported voting in the federal election of 1997, compared to 90 per cent of those with three right—a difference of 21 percentage points. The distance between the least and most knowledgeable had grown substantially since 1990, when the gap in reported voting at the last federal elec-

tion between the two groups was only 14 points (80 per cent vs. 94 per cent). It will be interesting to see if surveys conducted during and after the recent federal campaign reveal this to be a continuing trend that partly accounts for the record low turnout on November 27th. (The reader should note that surveys tend to produce levels of reported voting in excess of actual turnout.)

The underlying causes of declining political knowledge are likely complex. The claim that today's citizens are less conscientious about fulfilling their civic duties and more inclined to pursue personal interests at the expense of the common weal probably has some merit. But it is also, surely, in part a vicious circle. Voters are ill-informed, so politicians resort to sloganeering and personal attacks in the hopes of attracting attention and votes, with the result that many voters are turned off politics and tune out entirely—thus prompting further abasement of political tactics and discourse. Reform of the political process *and* invigoration of the electorate are required to break this unhealthy cycle.

First the electorate: Since the problem of political detachment is most pronounced among younger Canadians, special efforts need to be made to involve this section of the population in the political process. Judging by events of the past several years, from the battle in Seattle to environmental protests, their disengagement from politics is not unconditional but rather represents an estrangement from the traditional activities of political parties and electoral politics. Alternative routes of political involvement, always attractive to younger activists, have become the norm rather than the exception among the current generation. To re-channel some of this energy back into conventional avenues will require imaginative solutions. At a recent conference in Montreal on the subject of citizenship, a teacher described a series of activities organized in her high school during a recent provincial election campaign that were designed to involve students in real-world political events. Lowering the voting age to 17 or even 16 would allow schools to undertake such initiatives at a time when students were able to participate formally in elections through the act of voting. Early participation in the political process is one of the simplest and most effective ways to encourage later involvement.

Measures to engage young people politically could also be stepped up at the post-secondary level. Enrollment in political science courses has been declining in many universities across the country in recent years. While most institutions have breadth requirements that force students to take courses in fields outside their immediate area of specialization, they are typically free to choose from a vast array of options. A good argument can be made that an introductory political science course involving a healthy dose of Canadian politics should be a mandatory part of any university degree. Other social sciences will make the case that their subjects deserve equal emphasis and consideration, but only political science is directly concerned with the indispensable task of building civic capacity by creating politically-informed citizens. If Canadian high schools continue to produce graduates who lack the most rudimentary understanding of Canadian politics, perhaps the universities will have to fill the void for that part of the polity that does pursue higher education.

But building participatory instincts and enhancing political knowledge will only breed discontent if changes aren't also made to the political process. There are two key areas of potential reform we should be hearing a fair bit about in the near future. One is the issue of prime ministerial power: What can be done to empower other players in the political system? Many Liberal backbenchers have been itching for an opportunity to press for greater autonomy and influence for individual MPs. With the prime minister anxious to quell unrest in the

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Political knowledge by age, 1990 and 2000

		Age				
		18-29 (%)	30-45 (%)	46-60 (%)	61+ (%)	Total (%)
1990	0-1 answers correct	56	35	30	35	40
	2 answers correct	24	33	28	35	30
	3 answers correct	20	32	42	30	30
2000	0-1 answers correct	67	44	34	28	46
	2 answers correct	20	31	29	34	28
	3 answers correct	13	26	37	38	26

Note: Knowledge questions asked in each year are noted in the text.

ranks it is not inconceivable that there may be some movement on this front in the current term.

A second ripe issue is electoral reform. As always, the skewed relationship of votes to seats has prompted considerable post-election commentary. But the pressure for change may actually gain some momentum this time round, since we are now in a situation where the same parties are regularly shortchanged by the first-past-the-post system. Either some of these parties will disappear completely, which still looks unlikely at this stage, or they will rally to put pressure on the government to consider some manner of proportional representation.

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Neither reform will be achieved easily, but change on either front, whether minor or thoroughgoing, would have the effect of distributing power more evenly throughout the political system, thus reducing the stakes of our winner-take-all elections and setting political competition on a more even keel.

Political knowledge and voting, 1990 and 2000

		Voted in previous federal election (%)
1990	0-1 answers correct	80%
	2 answers correct	91%
	3 answers correct	94%
2000	0-1 answers correct	69%
	2 answers correct	85%
	3 answers correct	90%

Data Sources:

1990: Survey of Attitudes About Electoral Reform, conducted by the Institute for Social Research, principal investigators André Blais and Elisabeth Gidengil.

2000: Strengthening Canadian Democracy Survey, conducted by the Institute for Social Research, principal investigators Paul Howe and David Northrup.

The other investigators bear no responsibility for the analysis and interpretations presented in this article.

The campaign process itself could also be altered to positive effect. The establishment of a permanent voters list in 1997 made it possible to reduce the length of the 2000 campaign to 36 days. Looking back, the five weeks slipped by rather quickly and the campaign never seemed to acquire much texture or definition. Lengthening the campaign period is one obvious change to consider.

But more than this, thought has to be given to reducing the excessive focus on election campaigns and making serious policy debate a more regular feature of Canadian political life. At the moment, the only direct exchanges between party leaders outside election time occur during the daily bun-fight that is Question Period. One constructive addition to the political calendar would be an annual leaders' debate. Once a year would be infrequent enough to generate considerable anticipation and interest among the electorate, but often enough to encourage more sustained public reflection on the policy alternatives represented by the different parties. (And there is surely widespread agreement that the format of the debates should be modified to reduce the free-for-all among the five leaders in favour of more structured exchanges between two at a time.)

In keeping with the theme of a more steady political diet, fixed election dates are another idea worth considering. Knowing precisely when the next election will occur would allow parties to develop and disseminate platforms earlier and choose candidates sooner. It would mean a longer political season during which parties could hope to sway blocs of voters gradually, through reasoned discussion, rather than scrambling for a knock-out blow in the last round. Fixing the date of our elections would obviously take us closer to an American-style system, but that isn't necessarily a drawback. Disputes over dimpled chads aside, many observers felt that the recent US presidential contest was markedly more civil and richer in policy debate than the Canadian campaign.

Whatever other solutions might be proposed to improve the tone and depth of Canadian election campaigns, it should be recognized that the problem derives as much from an indifferent electorate and rigid political structures as from our politicians. Unless basic societal and institutional constraints are altered, new party leaders are likely to fall into the same patterns of indecorous behavior.

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