

Vote Switching in the 2008 Canadian Federal Election

A Brief Look at Canadian Election Study Panel Data

Alex Monk
Research Analyst

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When speaking of elections, we often hear of voter turnout, seats won or lost, or popular vote changes. Less common, however, is an analysis aimed at understanding the underlying determinants of what caused individuals to vote the way they did – was it a normal variation in voting behavior, or was there a specific cause for the changes? If there was a specific cause, was it policy, or was it leadership?

In the 2008 Canadian federal election, data from the Canadian Election Study panel indicates that roughly a quarter of Canadians voted for a different party in 2008 than in the election of 2006. With a fairly tight margin in all three federal elections since 2004, an understanding of what has caused voters to change their minds can be critical to the success of future campaigns. Pursuing the issue of both national and party leadership, this analysis uses data from the 2006 and 2008 Canadian Election Studies and will focus on the Liberal and Conservative parties, and their voters, between 2006 and 2008.

Before examining possible reasons for vote switching, it is important to determine where those who switched parties came from, and where they switched to. This will provide a backdrop by which the other indicators can be judged.

In the 2008 election, nearly 29% electors who had voted Liberal in 2006 selected a different party, compared to just over 21% of Conservative Party voters. Of the Conservative switchers, 38% voted Liberal, 30% voted NDP, 13% voted Green, and 5% voted Bloc. The Liberal switchers were somewhat more magnanimous. Just over 56% of those who voted Liberal in 2006 switched to the Conservative Party in 2008, along with 34% going NDP, and 8% Green. These results may suggest varying reasons for switching among previous Liberal and Conservative voters. Liberal switchers split their votes almost directly in half between the left and right of the political spectrum. This cleavage suggests a problem with the Liberal party itself, more than an ideological or value-based shift, or even a unified policy grievance.

Equally important is a brief analysis of the change in voter turnout. In what was one of the lowest voter turnouts ever in a federal election, the 2008 election saw roughly a six percentage point decline in voter turnout over 2006. Such a decline, some may suggest, would be responsible for the large number of previous Liberal supporters who switched their votes. However, election data indicates otherwise. Of those who voted in 2006 but not in 2008, approximately 40% were Conservative, 25% were Liberal, and 19% were NDP. So, despite losing fewer voters in 2008, the Liberals still suffered the highest rate of vote switching.

Despite the seemingly clear difference between these two groups, it is important to suggest a possible cause. A simple, yet effective way to evaluate such a deviation is to compare the public approval rating of the party as a whole with that of the party leader. Unlike leader opinion, which is simply how the public feels about an individual party leader, attitudes towards the party incorporates an individual's feelings on politics, policy, and government, as well as that party's leader. While not an absolute indicator of any one category, party sentiment can serve as a reasonable indicator of individual political persuasion. If public sentiment towards the leader and the party as a whole are divergent, the difference can serve as a predictor of voting behavior.

Feelings Towards the Political Parties

As part of the Canadian Election Survey, respondents were asked to rate how they felt about each party on a scale from 0 to 100, with 0 meaning they really disliked the party and 100 meaning they really liked the party. By first selecting only the cases of respondents who voted Liberal in 2006 and otherwise in 2008, and second the respondents who voted Conservative then otherwise, the following tables were compiled to display the mean party sentiment for each group.

As a baseline for comparison, Table 1.1 below displays the breakdown of mean voter sentiment, by party and by year.

Table 1.1 Mean overall party sentiments (All Respondents)

	Conservative	Liberal	NDP
2004	45.12	49.28	42.52
2006	53.07	45.28	48.73
2008	52.27	45.95	43.91

Table 1.2: Mean party sentiment of Liberal Party Switchers in 2008 (Voted Liberal in 2006, not in 2008)

	Conservative	Liberal	NDP
2004	34.95	65.32	46.72
2006	37.81	63.03	45.94
2008	54.38	55.77	42.67

Table 1.3: Mean party sentiment of Conservative Party Switchers in 2008 (Voted Conservative in 2006, not in 2008)

	Conservative	Liberal	NDP
2004	59.19	49.31	45.96
2006	65.05	42.61	46.45
2008	52.46	49.19	49.71

Compared to all respondents on the survey panel, Liberal and Conservative switchers still exhibited above average feelings towards their respective parties. Such a difference could suggest those voters still identify with the core values of the parties, but have taken issue with a current or short term issue. The two tables above display similar shifts of sentiment (though in opposite directions) from 2006 to 2008 between former Liberal and Conservative voters, but also a relative stability in sentiment towards both the Liberals and the NDP.

Feelings Towards Party Leaders

Those who switched away from voting Liberal reported higher feeling scores for both Harper and the Conservatives. Harper’s feeling score dropped significantly among previous Conservative voters in 2008. However, the most substantial difference between the two voter groups is the precipitous drop in support for Dion after he replaced Martin as Liberal leader. This change was also reflected in the sentiment towards the Liberal party as a whole. Since the sentiment towards the Liberal party among former Liberal voters did not drop as dramatically as the approval for the Liberal leader, there is cause to suggest that leadership is a critical element for voter retention.

Table 2.1: Mean leader sentiment of Liberal Party Switchers in 2008 (Voted Liberal in 2006, not in 2006)

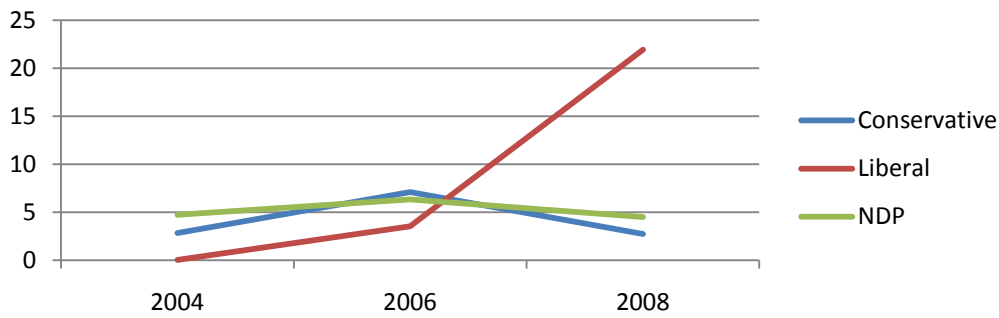
	Harper	Martin	Layton
2004	37.77	65.33	51.45
2006	44.91	66.56	52.25
	Harper	Dion	Layton
2008	51.64	33.84	47.16

Table 2.2: Mean leader sentiment of Conservative Party Switchers in 2008 (Voted Conservative in 2006, not in 2008)

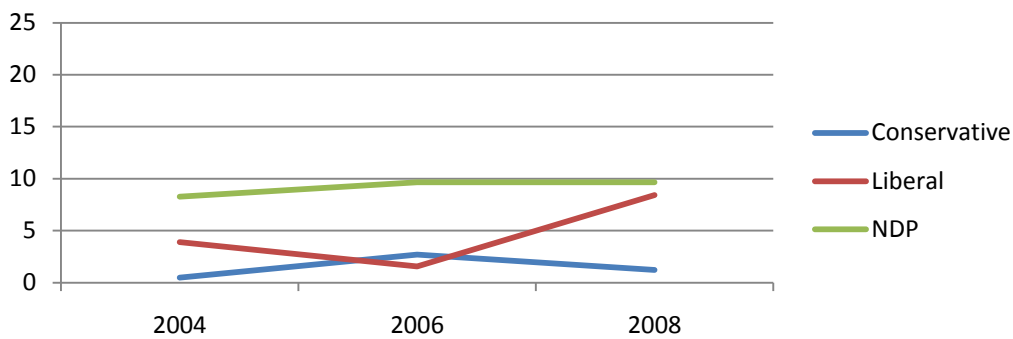
	Harper	Martin	Layton
2004	59.67	53.21	54.22
2006	67.75	44.18	56.09
	Harper	Dion	Layton
2008	51.25	40.76	53.19

Within an analysis as broad and as brief as this, it is difficult to identify the cause of a shift in sentiment. Sentiment will fluctuate for a variety of reasons, within a normal range. The graph below attempts to measure the degree of fluctuation of each variable from the normal by graphing the absolute value of the difference between mean leader sentiment and mean party sentiment. On each graph, the X-axis represents the year, and the Y-axis denotes the absolute value of the difference between the two variables. The closer to zero, of course, indicates a smaller variation between party and leader feeling scores.

Graph 3.1: Variance between sentiment variables of those who voted Liberal in 2006, otherwise in 2008



Graph 3.2: Variance between sentiment variables of those who voted Conservative in 2006, otherwise in 2008



Clearly, the greatest variance (and greatest anomaly) occurs when Stephane Dion assumed the leadership of the Liberal party. The observed variance suggests that the majority of Liberal voters who switched out did so because of negative feelings towards the leadership of Dion. While his party’s political position may have pushed some voters away, Harper and the Conservatives seem to have maintained their support from the previous election, compared to the volatility evidently resulting from the Liberal change of leadership. But if Conservatives shift votes to the left and Liberals shift votes to the right, what sort of leader to Canadians really want, and how would such a penultimate centrist run the nation?

Alex Monk is a Research Analyst at Abacus Data Inc. He received his Bachelor of Arts (Political Science) from Carleton University.