



Montreal and Quebec produced the surprise Liberal majority on election night, 35 per cent of the vote and 40 seats—the first time a majority of Quebec seats went Liberal since 1980. Shutterstock photo.

Quebec: Coming to Terms With Federalist Parties

Antonia Maioni

Justin Trudeau's vague rouge in Quebec may have defied most prognosticators but, in a province that loves both waves and winners, was not entirely shocking. McGill political science professor and respected Quebec commentator Antonia Maioni breaks down the variables that produced the outcome.

If we've learned anything about Quebec voters in federal elections, it's that partisan choice is far from predictable. Over the course of the past four decades, we've seen Quebec voters throw their support—often en masse—to the Progressive Conservatives, Bloc Québécois and the New Democratic Party, in each case searching for the party that could best represent Quebec interests and give voice to Quebecers' concerns in Ottawa. In the 2015 election, that sentiment was transposed into an irresistible push for change—a change that, apart from the small, solid base of support for the Conservative party from *les bleus* in the Quebec City area, meant

replacing the Harper government with another party.

And in this respect, Quebec voters became an important part of the general Canadian momentum against the Conservative Party and toward the Liberal party in the 2015 election. It was an historic outcome in many ways. For the first time since the Progressive Conservative era under Brian Mulroney, a majority of Quebecers voted for the party that formed the government in Ottawa. For the first time since 1980, the Liberal Party won a majority of seats in Quebec. Moreover, the result (35 per cent of the vote and 40 seats) was also a leap of gigantic proportions from the meagre results of the 2011 election, when the Liberals were reduced to seven seats and the NDP swept 59 seats across the province.

But the partisan choice of Quebecers was not *inevitable*. And this may be the most important caveat as we analyze the results of the 2015 vote in Quebec. The considerable efforts the Conservative Party expended in courting the *bleu* vote, the possibility of a comeback that Gilles Duceppe and the Bloc tried to create, and the efforts of the NDP to build from its Quebec sweep in 2011, all speak to the sense of an electorate divided and up for grabs, rather than an inevitable return to the Liberals or another bout of Trudeaumania.

The party did not have much momentum in Quebec until the summer months, opinion polls were relatively inconclusive until late in the campaign, and seat projections were showing close three- and four-way splits in many ridings.

In that sense, the results in Quebec point to two possible interpretations. The first is that Quebecers have, on the whole and including francophone voters, come to terms with “federalist” parties. The choice of the NDP in 2011 bears this out: Quebec voters discovered a “new” party—unknown and untested here—they felt comfortable with, due in no small part to the charisma of its then-leader, Jack Layton, but also its posi-

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tion on the “national question” for francophone Quebecers in particular. The choice in 2015 went beyond this to ask Quebecers to take a more fulsome place in Canada itself; in other words, to be part of the choice of a new government itself. It was the hope that Quebec would be the base from which the NDP could launch a credible attempt at forming a government that had propelled the party to choose Tom Mulcair as its leader.

In this sense, the ballot box question for Quebec voters in 2015 was twofold: they seemed prepared to support the NDP so long as it seemed to reflect Quebecers’ values and aspirations *and* so long as it seemed the viable alternative to change the government in Ottawa. As the campaign unfolded, however, both of these things became less certain. The controversy over the niqab exposed the inherent incompatibility of its message in Quebec and in the rest of Canada. The NDP’s support in Quebec had rested on a vague perception that the party was in tune with Quebec values, but the debate on reasonable accommodation was far from resolved. Even though the Liberal Party held essentially the same position, that rights could not be disallowed on the basis of religious garb, it was the discovery that the NDP was not different after all that weakened its appeal as a fresh alternative. As for aspirations, the Quebec voters the NDP courted were not as generally allergic to deficits as the NDP thought Ontarians would be. The message of balanced budgets at all costs fell on deaf ears, opening the possibility toward a Liberal message of stimulus spending that sounded better than economic austerity.

It was when the NDP began to falter as a viable alternative to Stephen Harper and the Conservative govern-

ment that the lack of depth of its roots in the province began to move voter sentiment for change toward the Liberals. Since the NDP had made its Quebec support the basis for its pitch to viability among Canadian voters, the softening in its support meant renewed doubt about its overall chances to be an effective alternative to the Conservatives. As the campaign morphed into a referendum on the Harper government, the ricochet effect of those doubts in Quebec pushed many voters, including the disaffected Liberals returning to the fold and francophones who perhaps would not have voted Liberal otherwise, to make the switch.

The second interpretation is that, despite the majority of seats and plurality of votes, Quebec is not yet the Promised Land for the Liberal Party. In other words, the return to this federalist party in the 2015 election does not mean that Quebecers have become re-born as believers in the Liberal Party’s federalist cause. Economic, regional, and political landscapes in Quebec remain divided. Quebecers still represent diverse ideological, cultural, and linguistic sensibilities, within the province and with respect to the rest of Canada. What remains to be seen is how the new Liberal government will integrate Quebec voices, how it will deal with Ottawa-Quebec relations and how it will face the enduring kinds of incompatibility between Quebecers’ and Canadians’ interests that have destabilized federalist parties for so many decades. **P**

Antonia Maioni is a professor of political science at McGill University, former head of the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada and columnist for The Globe and Mail on Quebec and constitutional affairs.
antonia.maioni@mcgill.ca