VOTER DEALIGNMENT OR CAMPAIGN EFFECTS?: Accounting for political preferences in Ontario

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Abstract

Elections in Canada are rarely subject to the delays in voting counts present in the United States. For Americans, the time required to count hundreds of millions of ballots has made exit polls an attractive option to political commentators hoping to fill the void between the close of polls and the confirmation of results. Often face-to-face surveys with individuals leaving the ballot box, exit polls allow not only for a quick prediction of election results, but also allow students of voting to say something meaningful about the reasons behind ballot decisions. The speed with which election results are usually announced in Canada, and the sheer cost of mounting an exit poll for such a comparatively small voting population, has meant that exit polls are not a feature of Canadian politics. For the 2003 Ontario election, however, the Laurier Institute for the Study of Public Opinion and Policy (LISPOP), at Laurier University, mounted an exit poll in one of the 103 Ontario ridings to determine what lessons, if any, could be drawn from the experience. The LISPOP exercise was the first American-style exit poll conducted in Canada and provides unprecedented data on voter motivations only minutes after individuals cast their ballots. This article provides an analysis of the results of this poll.

Elections in Canada are rarely subject to the delays in voting counts present in the United States. For Americans, the time required to count hundreds of millions of ballots has made exit polls an attractive option to political commentators hoping to fill the void between the close of polls and the confirmation of results. Often face-to-face surveys with individuals leaving the ballot box, exit polls allow not only for a quick prediction of election results, but also allow students of voting to say something meaningful about the reasons behind ballot decisions. The speed with which election results are usually announced in Canada, and the sheer cost of mounting an exit poll for such a comparatively small voting population, has meant that exit polls are not a feature of Canadian politics. For the 2003 Ontario election, however, the [----] Institute for the Study of Public Opinion and Policy ([-]ISPOP), at [----] University, mounted an exit poll in one of the 103 Ontario ridings to determine what lessons, if any, could be drawn from the experience. The [-]ISPOP exercise was the first American-style exit poll conducted in Canada and provides unprecedented data on voter motivations only minutes after individuals cast their ballots. This article provides an analysis of the results of this poll.

The [-]ISPOP exit poll had two purposes. First, the project provided an opportunity to determine the feasibility of exit polls in a Canadian context and we have published an analysis of the methodological lessons of the experiment ([---] 2006). Second, the poll provided us with much-needed information about the provincial voting habits of Canadians. At the federal level Canadian Election Studies allow us to determine why individuals vote and why they back the parties that they do. Such studies allow us to make links among an individual's attitudes, demographic background and political behaviour. Students relying on federal electoral studies to understand sub-state voter behaviour face two limitations. First, the act of voting and participation in the survey are separated by several days, a period in which media coverage often highlights the main themes of the campaign, and provides justifications for why voters backed

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the eventual winner. It is possible that in such circumstances voters could begin to blend their own reasons for voting with those highlighted by the national or local media. The timing of data collection thus presents a challenge to the reliability of the survey. The second limitation to federal election studies has nothing to do with methodology and more to do with the gaps that remain in our knowledge. Although operating since 1965 at the federal level, electoral studies at the provincial level are more rare. Obviously, federal electoral studies are not meant to probe provincial political behaviour. We still do not know whether the factors that lead individuals to vote one way at the federal level are also at play in provincial voting decisions. As a result, this paper addresses three research questions. First, are the predictors of support for political parties similar to those we find at the federal level? Obviously the nature of partisan competition is different in the three-party system of Ontario than in Canadian elections, where the partisan spectrum is more crowded. We are less interested to discover that predictors work in the same direction than that they are equally relevant. Second, in the context of the Ontario election are we able to identify predictors of behaviour that are consistent with past studies of voter behaviour? Research has suggested that gender was a significant factor in determining support for the Conservative party in previous provincial elections. We are interested to see whether voting behaviour in the 2003 election can be explained by this and other previously-identified predictors. Last, we know that the 2003 election produced a change of government, an event made possible by the existence of vote switching within the electorate. Our third research question asks which theories of vote switching appear best supported by the exit poll data. The following sections highlight the salient features of the Ontario election campaign, the methodology by which data were collected and answers to the three research questions.

Elections in Ontario

In some ways elections in Ontario appear as Canadian elections writ small. Ontario contests employ the first-past-the-post plurality system and the partisan offerings are reminiscent of the pre-1993 Canadian party system: Conservatives on the right, New Democrats on the left and the Liberals in the middle. The electoral system has rewarded the most popular party, consistently granting majority governments on the back of minority support. The system has been remarkably stable in the post-war period. Until 2003 the Conservatives had managed to win all but two provincial elections, its dominance mirroring the hegemonic status of the Liberals in 20th century federal elections. This changed in 1987 when it was replaced first by a Liberal administration and then, in 1990, by a one-term New Democratic government. By 1995, though, the Conservatives were back in power, capitalizing on widespread public dissatisfaction with the NDP's handling of an economic recession, public service cutbacks and a soaring budget deficit.

Over its two terms in office the Conservative government implemented cost-cutting measures that sought to reduce dramatically the provincial deficit and debt while introducing a wide-ranging programme of tax cuts. Such policies were justified using rhetoric familiar to students of the neo-conservatism of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. Within Canada its legislative programme was most akin to that pursued by the Conservative administration of Ralph Klein in Alberta. Almost ten years of the Conservative agenda, however, had produced disquiet among some voters. When the writ was dropped on September 2, 2003 polling data suggested Ontarians would back the Liberal party (Compas 2003a).[1]

The October 3 election produced a majority government for the Liberal party led by Dalton McGuinty. Both the Liberal and NDP leaders had guided their parties through previous elections and it was the incumbent party that possessed a new leader, albeit one with considerable legislative experience. With 46.5% of the popular vote the Liberals won 69.9% of the 103 seats in the legislature. The New Democrats improved slightly their performance from 1999, to 14.7% of the vote, but received seven seats, one fewer than in the previous election. The Conservatives witnessed the most significant change in their proportion of the popular vote, down 10 points from 1999, and were reduced from 58 seats to 24.

Aware that Ontarians had hesitated to vote for the Liberal leader in the previous election the Conservatives made this a central plank of their campaign strategy, arguing that McGuinty was 'still not up to the job'. This strategy disintegrated into

personal attacks and culminated in one Conservative staffer labelling the Liberal leader an 'evil reptilian kitten-eater from another planet' in an e-mailed party news release (Smith 2003). For their part the Liberals argued it was time for change and advocated improved funding for public services while NDP leader Howard Hampton sought to prevent his party's sympathizers from parking strategic votes with the Liberals. At the start of the campaign polling indicated that leadership was the most important issue for one third of Ontarians. Over the course of the campaign, however, this was replaced by the economy, education and health and by polling day only ten percent cited leadership as the factor most likely to influence their vote (Compas 2003b).

Literature

Attention to voting at the provincial level receives only a fraction of the attention regularly devoted to electoral behaviour in federal elections. What we know of the voting patterns of Ontarians must be pieced together from Ontarian, Canadian and comparative data. The relatively rare studies of voting in Ontario elections can be supplemented by Canada data from, for example, the Canadian Election Studies. Here we can examine the behaviour of Ontarians as they head to the polls in federal elections. The rich comparative literature seeks to draw general lessons about the behaviour of individuals, including the extent to which they respond to cues about information, economic stimuli, the policy offerings of political parties or the institutions that structure the election process. Research findings from these different clusters do not always map perfectly on to each other. We know, for example, that countries with proportional representation systems tend to exhibit higher rates of turnout, but state-level shifts from plurality to proportional systems do not always produce expected increases in voter participation. Given the research questions identified earlier, what might we expect from our data?

Research on federal elections points to several demographic factors that might affect how Ontarians cast their ballots. We should of course be cautious employing Canada-wide data to impute voting patterns in Ontario. As Godbout and Belanger illustrate, the applicability of theories can vary widely across Canada, affected both by the economic status of the province and tenor of partisan competition (Godbout and Belanger 2002). With this caveat in mind, though, socio-economic variables such as gender, religion, education and even union membership usually explain 10% of the variation in voting preferences (Nevitte et al. 1999, Blais et al. 2002). Campaign issues, by contrast, are much less able to explain voting habits and trail behind retrospective evaluations of incumbent performance and perceived leadership qualities as predictors of voter support. Partisan identification does by far the best job of explaining voter support. This has been confirmed in provincial studies. Using data gathered during and after the 1990 Ontario election Bassili noted that the speed with which respondents indicated their partisan identification helped to explain voter behaviour: those who identified a preference faster were more likely to cast a ballot for that party (Bassili, 1995). Much of this available research suggests that campaigns themselves are less important than we might think.

And yet what information we have of the 2003 Ontario election suggests that campaign issues were an important determinant of voter choice. Using rolling cross section data from the 2003 provincial campaign Cutler et al. point to the importance of campaign events and argue that media attention to 'Liberal' issues and the release of poll results created a bandwagon effect within the electorate (Cutler et al. 2004). A subsequent paper noted that this effect is not uniform: attentive and ambivalent voters, roughly one fifth of the electorate, are most susceptible to campaign information (Fournier et al. 2005), something previously argued in a Canadian context by the CES team (Nadeau, Nevitte, Gidengil and Blais 2001). What we have then, is research from Canadian elections that appears to hold in the context of Ontario elections. While not inconsistent the two literatures prioritize different explanations for voter choice, one grounded in demographic characteristics and background political issues, the other pointing to events more proximate to the decision calculus. Our data allow us to contribute to this debate.

Methodology

To test whether exit polls could be used in Canadian federal elections we designed a project using one constituency. This riding was selected for four

reasons. First, it is physically proximate to [----] university. Second, it is geographically compact, and therefore allowed us to test the feasibility of our research design while limiting logistical obstacles. Third, by demographic measures the constituency approximates provincial averages very well. The constituency contains a slightly lower proportion of residents with college or university qualifications and a slightly higher proportion of Protestants but on age, gender, high school completion and marital status it varies by two points or less from the provincial average. Fourth, and most important, the constituency is an excellent bellwether for both federal and provincial elections. In other words, the constituency is typical by demographic measures but also in terms of political preferences. Indeed within the province it provides the second-best approximation of provincial and federal voting trends.[2]

Table 1:
Most important factor in vote decision, by political party

	Issues	Parties	Leaders	Local candidates
All	49.6	19.1	19.7	11.6
Liberals	54.2	21.2	16.9	7.6
Conservatives	41.9	18.6	23.8	15.6
NDP	55.7	14.2	17.6	12.6

Source: 2003 LISPOP exit poll (n= 635).
Results are row percentages. Chi square 22.71 ($p<.1$).

A multi-stage sample provided us with our data. The first stage included a purposive sample of cluster polling stations and the second stage employed a systematic sample of voters. To be included in the sampling frame each cluster polling station varied by no more than 5% from the total constituency results in the previous provincial election.[3] This produced a sampling frame of sixteen cluster polling stations that contained between 1100 and 2520 voters in the previous provincial election. We then rank ordered our sampling frame to take into account three criteria, greatest proximity to other selected stations, ease of voter access for interviewers, and cluster size. Based on this ranking we selected ten primary stations, with the remaining six serving as alternates. This procedure allowed us to design an exit poll that minimized geographic hassles and allowed us to concentrate on predictors of response quality we felt were most important to our experiment, the questionnaire itself, response rate and data transmission. Timed to be completed within a two minute period the questionnaire contained twelve questions. The questions probed voting behaviour in the current and previous provincial election, factors affecting vote choice and basic demographic data.

At each polling station our interviewers employed a systematic sample with a sampling interval of seven, or four following a refusal. The response rate was 65%, which produced a total sample size of 635. Surveys were conducted by 50 student volunteers (five per polling station) who had received training in polling methodology, sampling and data transmission. Supervised by academic researchers the students did not receive financial compensation although some received credit for the project within courses on electoral behaviour. Survey answers were coded on hard copies, and data were transmitted to the exit poll headquarters on campus using Blackberries.[4] After the polls closed at 8 pm., the results were made available online and to the media at 8:15pm. Tables demonstrating a demographic breakdown of the vote and key campaign issues were available online at 8:30pm.

The research design has several obvious advantages and disadvantages. By employing a single constituency we are unable to test for conditions that vary within the provincial electorate. Previous research suggests, for example, that incumbency is a relevant factor for Ontario voters (Krashinsky and Milne 1983) but we are unable to test for its effects. For those seeking to understand election results, exit polls have three advantages over pre- and post-election research designs: they effectively screen non-voters out of the sample, they ensure access to traditionally hard-to-contact populations, and they tap the decision calculus of voters virtually at the time of the decision itself. We know that other surveys of voting behaviour suffer from self-report problems including an over-reporting of voter turnout, inaccurate recall of voting decisions, and post-hoc rationalization of voting behaviour. Our research design thus provides us with a unique dataset to test our research questions.

Table 2:
A model of vote choice for 2003 Ontario election

	Liberal		Tories		NDP	
Constant	-.377 (.311)	-1.487*** (.475)	-.532 (.337)	.079	-1.912*	-.1505**
Gender	.109 (.189)	-.087 (.204)	-.211 (.202)	-.083	.186	.244
Age	.001 (.071)	.002 (.076)	-.037 (.076)	-.028	.100	.080
Ethnicity	.362 (.390)	.392 (.403)	-.366	-.870*	.486	.504
Married	.058 (.220)	.078 (.234)	.262 (.236)	.279	-.183	-.162
Homeowner	-.332 (.247)	-.314 (.261)	.769*** (.276)	.721	-.825**	-.814**
Postsec'y	.194 (.187)	.119 (.202)	-.078	-.331	.171	.186
Union	.694*** (.187)	.668*** (.200)	-.876*** (.206)	-.839***	.423	.418
Leader		.469 (.385)		-.041		-.429
Party		1.060*** (.379)		-.684*		-.318
Issue		.729* (.336)**		-.673**		.101
Health		1.203*** (.261)		-.888***		-.357
Education		1.213 ***(.266)		-.954***		-.601*
Tax		-.287 (.304)		.868***		-.593
Nagelkerke R^2	.050	.180	.110	.240	.050	.070

Source: 2003 LISPOP exit poll (n= 635). Results are binary logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. *p<.1, **p<.05, ***p<.01

The Results

Our survey allows us to determine which factor most affected how voters cast their ballots on election day. As the results in table 1 demonstrate, almost half of our respondents indicated that issues were the most important factor. One fifth suggested the leader was most important and a similar proportion believed the party was most important. Only ten percent indicated that the local candidate was the most important factor in their vote. By prioritizing campaign issues over partisan identification this suggests that predictors of partisan behaviour in provincial elections differ from the predictors identified in federal elections. And yet our test for partisan identification is different from that employed in federal studies. We have asked here whether the respondent believes that the party was the most important factor in vote choice, while the federal studies typically ask to which party the individual feels closest.

We know that demographic variables can also account for voter choice. Here our data point to a number of non-findings that are in themselves interesting. Age, education and marital status were not significantly correlated with vote choice. The Conservative vote, for example, is stronger among those over 35 than it is among younger voters but in no age category was there a majority of Liberal voters.

Second, union membership, long seen as a predictor of support for the NDP, is indeed significantly correlated with vote choice. Interesting here, though, is that union members were most likely to back the Liberals. Over two thirds of those living in union households backed the winning party. In fact these individuals were more likely to back the Conservative party than they were the NDP. In what must be a depressing finding for the third party, only 15% of voters living in union households backed the NDP.

Third, home-ownership is also significantly associated with vote choice. While here too a majority of home-owners preferred the Liberals over the Conservatives, the gap is smallest among home-

owners than for any other demographic group. Forty one percent of homeowners backed the Conservatives in the 2003 election, while 46% backed the Liberals.

This bivariate examination of voting predictors cannot explain the relative weight of our variables. To test whether our model conforms with previously-identified predictors we have formulated a multivariate model of vote choice. Table 2 reports the results of a two-stage model of voting behaviour. The first stage includes predictors of behaviour typically associated with vote choice. Here we have included gender, age, education, union membership, home ownership, marital status and ethnicity. The fully-specified model identifies a range of campaign-related issues that might have had an impact on the way that individuals voted. The results point to three findings. First, on their own the socio-demographic variables do a relatively poor job of explaining vote choice. The pseudo R2 indicates that they account for the equivalent of 5 to 10% of the variation in the dependent variable. There are, however, marked improvements in model fit when we include campaign issues for all but the NDP. This leads us to a second point: the model performs better for some parties than for others. The variables employed in our analysis do a far better job explaining why individuals voted for the Conservative party and the Liberal party than they do for the NDP. Third, different variables are relevant to different parties. This is not to say that visible minority voters support one party and non-visible minority voters support another, but that ethnicity is a significant predictor of Conservative support and irrelevant for other parties. No single socio-demographic variable served as a significant predictor of support for each of the three parties. The results instead suggest a series of binary relationships. Homeowners backed the Conservatives and renters backed the NDP. Union members backed the Liberals and non-union members backed the Conservatives. This relationship holds when we turn to the fully-specified model. Those who said party was important to their vote backed the Liberals, while those who said party was less relevant backed the Conservatives. A similar pattern appears for those who say they voted according to the leaders, those who said health was important and those who said education was important. In general, then, our findings point to the primacy of campaign concerns, and are most relevant for assessments of the incumbent and incoming parties. These data also suggest that the limited role for campaign issues identified by the federal literature do not capture the decision calculus of provincial voters. An examination of voter support in light of previous provincial elections provides a more nuanced analysis.

Research on previous provincial elections suggests that partisan identification is relevant. We have also come to expect, however, that certain demographic variables are at play. An analysis of the results for the previous provincial election, for example, suggests that gender was an important factor, as women were less likely to back the Conservatives. Our findings, particularly with respect to gender, union and home-ownership, are particularly interesting when we compare them to vote choice in 1999. For the previous provincial election gender was significantly correlated with vote choice. While women were relatively equal in their assessments of the Conservative and Liberal parties, men were far more likely to back the Tories. In 1999 almost 60% of the men in our sample indicated that they voted for the Conservative party. By 2003, however, 49% of men were voting for the Liberal party. Thus the elimination of the gender gap is not because women have changed their voting behaviour but rather because men overwhelmingly switched from backing one government winner to another government winner. Comparing union membership and marital status for 1999 and 2003 produces other interesting results.

Living in a union household was significantly correlated with vote choice in 1999 although here too it was not that those living in a union household far preferred the NDP. Indeed those living in a union household were spread relatively evenly between the Liberal and Conservative parties, with 46% and 42% support respectively. Instead it was those living in non-union households who were overwhelmingly in support of the Conservative party. By 2003, however, those not living in union households were spread evenly between the two largest parties while those living in union households backed the Liberal party. Two other examples prove useful.

In 2003 over half of those who did not own their homes backed the Liberal party while far fewer backed either the Conservative party or NDP. The

Table 3:
Vote switching in the 2003 provincial election

	Liberal03	Conservative03	NDP03
Liberal99	80.600	5.900	10.600
Conservative99	25.300	67.100	3.500
NDP99	30.400	2.200	63.000

Source: 2003 LISPOP exit poll (n= 635).
Results are row percentages. Chi square=456.03 (p<.01)

gap in behaviour for home-owners was much smaller. In 1999, however, homeowners demonstrated a clear preference for the Conservatives, backing them by almost 60%. In addition, married individuals were significantly more likely to back the Conservative party in 1999. By 2003, however, the marriage gap had been eliminated.

These results demonstrate that the Conservative party has been abandoned by those it might have considered its natural constituents, men, non-union members, homeowners and married couples. The gender and marriage gaps have disappeared so that now men and women, married couples and other individuals are as likely to back the Liberals as they are the Conservative party. While the gap between union members and non-members, and home-owners and renters still exists, the gap now works in favour of the Liberal party, rather than the Conservative party. This points to a possible voter dealignment within the Ontario electorate. It is to this issue that we now turn our attention.

Any election that produces a change in government can be attributed to two possible changes in voter behaviour. First, if it has been some time since the previous election or if turnout fluctuates wildly, the electorate itself could have changed considerably. In this sense, those voting in the previous and current elections could have retained identical partisan preferences but the impact of those departing the electorate or newer arrivals could have produced a change in government. The second reason for a change in government stems from changing voter preferences. We know, of course, that even in elections where incumbents are returned individual voters can back different parties. When the overall effect of these individual-level decisions is minimal researchers describe this as individual-level volatility and aggregate stability (Clarke, Leduc, Jenson and Pammett 1991). In the 2003 election we have reason to suspect that vote switching accounted for the change in government. The following section explores both the extent of vote switching and the factors that best account for whether and why voters changed their minds.

Just under 30% of voters in our sample indicated that they switched party loyalties, backing a party in the 2003 election that they had not previously supported in 1999. As table 3 shows, the Liberal party possessed the most loyal partisans of the election. The winners managed to retain most of their voters from the previous election, losing just over 10% to the NDP and just over five percent to the Conservative party. The other two parties managed to retain two thirds or fewer of their partisans. One third of NDP voters in 1999 backed the Liberals in the most recent provincial election, while one quarter of previous Conservative voters also backed the eventual winners. But who are these switchers and when did they decide to jump?

One fifth of switchers decided before the campaign how they were going to vote. The bulk of switchers, however, decided to jump from their previous party after the campaign began. Indeed just under one half of all switchers decided how they were going to vote in the last week of the campaign or on election day itself. Non-switchers, by comparison, decided much earlier in the campaign how they were going to vote. This is more interesting than it sounds. While it is reasonable to assume that faithful voters are durable partisans, always voting the same way in elections, evidence from federal election studies suggest that this is not the case. Voters may consistently back one party over another but there is nothing automatic about this choice; at the beginning of each election voters decide anew how they will vote. That switchers decided late in the election provides some evidence of a bandwagon effect among voters. If we examine those who left the Liberals for the NDP, however, we find that here too most of the voters decided late in the campaign that they were going to switch to a losing party. This group could include previous strategic voters who

Table 4:
A model of vote switching in the 2003 provincial election

	All Switchers		NDP-Lib		Tories-Lib	
Constant	-.335	.470	-2.746***	-11.186	-.2391***	-1.942**
Female	.098	.187	.270	-.067	-.103	.007
Age	-.128	-.138	.110	.244	.040	.024
Visiblemin	-.803	-.839	.477	.658	-1.022	-1.075
Married	-.324	-.403	-.089	-.443	-.027	-.013
Howner	-.059	-.061	-1.168*	-.930	.231	.188
Postsec'y	-.003	-.041	-.230	-.298	.483	.490
Union	.333	.295	-.643	-.845	.213	.283
Leader		-.600		7.050		-.175
Party		-.1961***		5.613		-.982
Issue		.007		7.012		.392
Health		-.427		1.314		-.539
Education		-.604*		2.452**		-1.027**
Tax		-.454		1.450		-.816*
C&S, N R^2	.026, .038	.103, .148	.012, .049	.044, .174	.009, .017	.044, .081

Source: 2003 LISPOP exit poll (n= 635).
Results are binary logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. *p<.1, **p<.05, ***p<.01

backed the Liberals but consider themselves NDP partisans, or those who didn't want to provide the likely winner with a majority. In general, however, among those who switched parties there is evidence of a bandwagon effect of individuals. This is because voters switched a) to the winning party and b) later in the campaign, when the elections results could have been predicted. This suggests that the campaign itself, rather than the demographic characteristics of particular voters, can best account for switching behaviour, although determining whether demographic factors account for switching warrants further analysis.

A brief investigation of cross tabulations for vote switchers suggests that although a majority of each demographic group remained loyal to their 1999 vote choice, women were more likely to switch than men, as were union members. Education appears to have had no impact on switching, while married voters and homeowners were the least likely to switch. When examining vote switching in light of campaign dynamics we find those who were concerned about education were more likely to switch, as were those who voted according to the party rather than the leader or the issues. This suggests that voters truly were convinced that it was time to switch the party in government. Perhaps, then Liberal priming on 'time for change' was effective at gathering voters. And yet attitudes about health care or taxes were not

relevant in driving voters towards the Liberal party. It was the party, almost regardless of its policies, that attracted voters in 2003. On the one hand this is not an interesting finding; one can assume that Liberal priming on campaign issues was most effective, if only because it managed to win the election. These results indicate, however, that voters bought the Liberal argument that a change in government was needed. There is less proof that voters were more convinced by Liberal policies than by the policies of any other party. In order to compare the impact of various predictors on vote switching we employ the same two-stage model identified earlier.

Table 4 reports the binary logistic results for party switchers both in total and for the two largest groups of switchers, Conservative to Liberal and NDP to Liberal. For the model of general switching, those who voted according to party were, not surprisingly, less likely to switch, as were those who saw education as the most important issue. Demographic factors did not have a significant impact on vote switching. And yet this group includes three very diverse and discrete groups of voters: those who abandoned the NDP and the Conservatives for the Liberals; and those who abandoned their previous choice for a non-winning party, the largest of whom were Liberal defectors to the NDP. We can gain a better understanding of vote switching by examining the two largest groups of voters, previous Conservative voters who backed the Liberals and previous NDP voters who also jumped to the winners. While it would be interesting to examine those who left the Liberals for the NDP the group is not large enough to warrant a multivariate analysis.

The results confirm that demographic factors do a poor job of explaining vote switching, although homeowners were less likely to abandon the NDP for the Liberals. Clearly campaign dynamics do a better job of explaining vote choice, something evident from the obvious jump in the pseudo-R2s for the fully-specified model. Even these statistics suggest, however, that the model does a minimal job of predicting vote jumping. If the model shows anything, however, it suggests that education was a key variable. Here we are referring not to an individual's highest level of schooling but to the perceived importance of education as a policy issue. Previous NDPers who saw education as the key issue were far more likely to abandon ship and back the Liberals. Previous Tory voters who held the same view of education, however, were significantly less likely to vote for the Liberals and significantly more likely to remain loyal to their vote choice.

Conclusion

By selecting only one constituency and by limiting the number of questions in our survey, our research design did not allow us to test other variables that might have had an impact on voter choice. The inclusion of other constituencies could allow us to test for the impact of constituency, while additional questions concerning the strength and longevity of partisan identification would allow us to test for its impact on voter volatility. With the current limitations in mind, our initial foray into the field of exit polls was a success. It not only predicted the correct winner in the constituency we identified but it also provided us with data that allowed us to test assumptions about provincial voting behaviour. We now have reason to believe that campaigns play a larger role in provincial elections that was previously assumed. Indeed the results suggest that provincial campaigns hold greater sway over voters than do federal campaigns, where partisan identification plays a greater role in determining vote choice. The data also allow us to explain why Ontarians backed a different party in 2003. Between 1999 and 2003 many of the demographic groups that had been natural supporters of the Conservative party abandoned the incumbents in favour of a different party. The elimination of the gender and marriage gap heralds not only a demographic realignment of the electorate but also the diminution of demographic predictors of voting. Future research will enable us to determine whether this is a permanent shift in the electorate or an event specific to the 2003 election.

Endnotes

1. Polling by Compas showed that in the spring and summer approximately 50% of respondents supported the Liberal party, with 35% backing the Conservatives. The proportion of undecided voters, though, remained high; depending on the particular poll between one third and one half of the electorate did not express a voting preference.
2. Ontario is the only province that has identical electoral boundaries both provincially and federally. The one riding that performed better as a bellwether during this period was Stoney Creek near Hamilton.
3. Each cluster polling station is housed in one building, typically a church or school and contains between 3 to 7 different polls. Polling stations with a single poll are increasingly rare in urban settings.
4. The Blackberry wireless handheld devices were loaned to the team by its manufacturer, Research in Motion. We would like to express our gratitude to RIM for their generous support of this research.

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Variable coding

Variable	Question wording	Coding
Gender	Autocoded	Female=1
Age	And finally in what age group would you fall? (closed-ended)	0-1
Ethnicity	Autocoded	Visible minority=1
Marital status	And your marital status?	Married=1
Home	Do you own your home?	Homeowner=1
Postsec	What is your highest level of schooling?	College/uni=1
Leader	Thinking of how you voted, which factor most affected your choice? (closed-ended)	Leader=1
Party		Party=1
Issue		Issue=1
Health	Speaking of issues, which do you think was the most important issue in the campaign? (closed-ended)	Health=1
Education		Education=1
Tax		Taxes=1