

Nationalism, the Parti Québécois, and the 2012 Quebec General Election

Written by Glen Duerr

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GLEN DUERR, SEP 10 2012

Quebec's Fortieth General Election

On September 4, 2012, the people of the Canadian province of Quebec went to the polls to vote to see whether the centrist and federalist *Parti Libéral du Québec* (Liberal Party of Quebec, PLQ) would be granted a fourth consecutive term in office (after victories in 2003, 2007, and 2008), or whether their main rivals, the independence seeking *Parti Québécois* (PQ), would regain the office of the premier for the first time since 2003. When the votes were counted at the end of the night, Pauline Marois, the leader of the PQ became the first female *premier ministre* (first minister) of Quebec, albeit with a minority government. The PQ won almost 32 percent of the popular vote, which translated into 54 of the available 125 seats meaning that while they will form the government, some form of coalition — whether permanent or on an ad hoc basis — will be needed in order to govern in the long term (Elections Quebec 2012).

The PQ's victory was due to a confluence of several major factors. There was a lot of energy behind the PQ campaign because of scandals within the PLQ, voter fatigue with the PLQ after almost a decade of governance, ongoing student protests over rising tuition fees ("*printemps érable*" — Maple Spring, which is a play on the Arab Spring protests in the Middle East and North Africa), and the forthcoming Scottish independence referendum in 2014. All of these factors led to increased energy for the PQ campaign and a reduced effort to maintain the PLQ status quo.

Although Jean Charest's Liberal party lost the election, the PLQ still won 31.2 percent of the popular vote and 50 seats (Elections Quebec, 2012). The loss in the election was very narrow and still indicates that the PLQ is well liked across the province. Moreover, the ongoing support for the PLQ also indicates that voters in Quebec are wary of the PQ and another possible independence referendum vote. In third place was the *Coalition Avenir Québec* (Coalition for Quebec's Future, CAQ), a new center-right party that effectively replaced the *Action Démocratique du Québec* (ADQ) after the party faltered dramatically following the resignation of longtime leader, Mario Dumont. The CAQ secured 19 seats with just over 27 percent of the popular vote (Elections Quebec 2012). At various points in the lead up to the election, the CAQ was very competitive with the PLQ and the PQ in opinion polls and the party could be poised to do very well in the next provincial election if the voters like the decisions that the party makes in the forthcoming years (Léger Marketing, August 25, 2012).

The election also saw the rise of one smaller party, as well as noteworthy support for two other parties. *Quebec solidaire* — a left wing party that also supports Quebec sovereignty—won two seats and 6 percent of the popular vote, which shows that the party is growing and has a niche amongst the Quebec electorate (Elections Quebec 2012). *Option Nationale* (ON) — another left leaning party that also supports independence — failed to win a seat, but won almost 2 percent of the vote. Many of the ON candidates were former or disenfranchised PQ members that formed an alternative against the PQ. Finally, the *Parti Vert du Québec* (the Green Party of Quebec, PVQ) also failed to win a seat, but won 1 percent of the vote (Elections Quebec 2012). The PVQ had shown promise in both the 2007 and 2008 provincial elections, but failed to capitalize on some positive polling numbers—4 percent—in August earlier in the electoral cycle (Léger Marketing, August 1, 2012).

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What Now?

Historically, Quebec has been one of the most difficult regions of North America to predict. In the last decade alone, the province has supported parties from the left and right of the traditional political spectrum, as well as both federalist and independentist parties (parties that want to keep Canada united and parties that want independence for Quebec). For example, the voters of Quebec provided significant support to Stephen Harper's federalist *Conservative Party* at the federal level in 2006, boosted the center-right ADQ at the provincial level in 2007 to give them their best ever finish, flipped back to provide major support to the independence supporting *Bloc Québécois* (BQ) at the federal level in 2008, and then overwhelmingly supported the federalist social democratic, *New Democratic Party*, in 2011, which decimated the BQ. Then, as noted in the outset of this article, the voters of Quebec provided the independentist PQ with their first mandate to govern the province (in the election of September 2012) since 2003.

Given the results in the recent election, people interested in politics in Quebec should expect three events that are likely to happen. The first likely event is that Jean Charest will step down as PLQ leader and allow for a new leadership race, as is usually the case with longstanding leaders who lose elections. Indeed, just a day after the electoral defeat, Charest announced his intention to resign as PLQ leader. Charest's last term in office (2008-2012) was marked by a number of very challenging events as noted above and it will be difficult for him to make a political comeback at the provincial level.

The second likely event is that Pauline Marois will attempt to cautiously govern the province with most support coming from the CAQ. It is also likely that the PLQ will support the PQ on some issues given that the party does not have a permanent leader and that voters typically punish political parties if they initiate a quick vote of non-confidence and do not at least try to govern. The PLQ would be very poorly positioned if another election were to be held within the next six months.

The third likely event is that Marois will cause some controversy in the near future. The main reason for this is that she has refused to give a referendum date and the issue of Quebec sovereignty (and independence) is still at the forefront of politics in Quebec. However, Marois has long promised that she intends to hold another independence referendum with a PQ election victory. On two occasions in Quebec's history already—in 1980 and 1995—the voters of Quebec have voted in independence referendums asking the question, for all intents and purposes, as to whether Quebec should remain part of Canada. (Both questions were, in reality, much longer and more convoluted, but the premise of independence was evident.)

At some point, then, Marois will most likely purport a bill in Quebec's National Assembly to hold another referendum. The timing and circumstances of this decision will be extremely important because, with a minority government, her government could fall if the CAQ does not support a referendum. François Legault, the leader of the CAQ, has been remarkably noncommittal as to his support for independence or federalism, although the official platform of the CAQ is to support greater autonomy for Quebec.

Another possibility is that with a minority government, Marois will not attempt to hold an independence referendum and wait until the next general election in order to try and secure a majority government in the National Assembly. This strategy, however, has typically backfired on the PQ. Where the party has shown tepid support for independence, hardline supporters of the party have not voted in these elections, which was most evident in the defeat of the PQ and Boisclair in 2007.

For this reason, it is likely that there will be a showdown in the National Assembly in the next year or two. Although Marois is reluctant to "show her cards" on the issue of independence, an attempt to hold a referendum will be expected of her. The issue of Quebec independence and nationalist support therefore remains — and will remain — at the forefront of politics in Quebec for the next few years.

Nationalism in Quebec

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Officially, the PQ describes its main goal as achieving sovereignty. In many respects, sovereignty is a euphemism for nationalism, and the real goal of the PQ is outright independence from Canada with some forms of cooperation on economic and border issues. With the election of the PQ, there is at least the possibility that another referendum vote will be held on the issue of independence. Given the result of the last referendum in October 1995, where 49.4 percent of voters supported independence, it is extremely difficult to predict the outcome.

The biggest reason that the PQ should still be considered a nationalist party is because the main platform is to align the national and political units. Nationalism is most succinctly described — by renowned nationalism scholar, Ernest Gellner — as a political principle in which the congruence of the national unit aligns with the political units (Gellner 1983, 1). Nationalists in Quebec, for example, argue that their national unit (Quebec) is different from their existing political unit (Canada). A nationalist sentiment therefore exists because Quebecois nationalists feel that the political principle of congruence between national and political units has been violated. A nationalist movement has resulted in Quebec as a means of trying to replace the political unit of Canada with Quebec (Gellner 1983, 1).

Nationalism also comes in a range of different “flavors.” Although some scholars reject the dichotomy between ethnic and civic forms of nationalism, with a more in-depth analysis of party platforms, the tendencies towards ethnic or civic nationalism becomes more evident. In Quebec, the PQ has evidenced some moves towards a more civic form of nationalism with greater diversity in the party and towards culture in the province, openness towards immigration, and—at least on paper—some guarantees for Anglophones in Quebec. Additionally, members of the PQ have also tried to imitate the leadership of the Scottish National Party in Scotland and project their nationalism in light of values, rather than ideology (see King 2012). The values argument has its limitations, however. While Quebecois nationalists argue that the values of the province on the issues of the environment, social welfare, Afghanistan, and energy diverge from the rest of Canada, the same could be said for several other provinces within the Canadian federation. Political ideology, for example, is significantly different in Alberta than in the rest of Canada. Likewise, views on a range of different issues in Newfoundland and Labrador also diverge from many other Canadian provinces given their different socioeconomic and territorial circumstances.

The PQ, however, also retains elements of ethnic nationalism with overt and sometimes draconian language policies, selectivity with immigration based on language, and not enough ethnic diversity within the party to reflect the changing nature of Quebec’s society. For these reasons, the PQ purports a mix of ethnic and civic forms of nationalism (for more on this point, see Duerr 2012).

The PQ is, therefore, positioned (perhaps strategically) in such a way to appeal to supporters of both ethnic and civic visions of Quebec. The strategy of the party is to appeal to as wide a range of people in order to achieve its maximalist goal of independence. What will be interesting to watch in the next few years is how and whether the PQ is able to gain the support of the CAQ to hold another referendum. Moreover, it will also be interesting to see whether the smaller Quebec Solidaire — although fundamentally different in terms of ideology — also rallies to support Quebec independence, despite the perception of widespread differences from the PQ.

Ultimately, the election of Marois should be seen as another nationalist challenge to Canada’s national unity; although, there is a disclaimer that her party only won 32 percent of the popular vote. She also has the institutional constraint of leading a minority government, which could reject her desire to hold another referendum. In many ways, the decision rests with François Legault and the CAQ as to whether they support an independent Quebec or a united Canada, or something in between. Quebecois nationalism is rising again, but the end of Canada is not yet forthcoming given that institutional constraints and questions over support remain. Canadian studies scholars—as well as scholars of British, Spanish, and Belgian studies—should however, watch closely to the shifting allegiances in Quebec politics.

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