

THE 2005–2006 FEDERAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN: A STORY IN POLLS

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The advantage of having a significant number of polls during an election campaign is that they either validate or invalidate certain spur-of-the-moment impressions. Three moments or events marked the 2005–2006 federal election campaign: the first debates (on December 15 in French and December 16 in English), followed closely by Steven Harper’s speech to the Quebec City board of trade on December 19; the “Goodale affair,” which occurred on December 28, between Christmas and New Year’s; and finally, the second debate (January 9 in English and January 10 in French), which coincided with the launch of a book on Option Canada by Normand Lester and Robin Philpot (*Les secrets d’Option Canada*, Ed. Des Intouchables, Montréal, 2006), that alleged hidden financing of the “No” side during the 1995 Quebec referendum campaign. In this article, we compare the trends in voting intentions in Ontario and Quebec for the three main parties, and conclude with a look at the situation in Canada as a whole.

Through time-series analyses using the poll results, we can examine whether voting intentions changed following the identified events. To create the series, the results of each poll, along with the number of respondents to each, were distributed over the number of days the poll was in the field. For tracking polls, this was done every three days to eliminate redundancy, since the two polling firms, Strategic Counsel and SES Research, used a three-day interval. With this method, we were able to create raw series of weighted averages for voting intention per day. For days when no polls were conducted, generally around December 25 and January 1, estimates were based on intrapolation.

ONTARIO

Figure 1 illustrates the estimated change in voting intentions in Ontario. The portrait painted by polls in Ontario shows that voting intentions were unstable from the very start of the campaign. On one hand, the Liberal Party of Canada (LPC) started at 40 percent, climbed to 45 percent and fell back to 40 percent just before the Goodale affair. Meanwhile, the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC) started at 32 percent and rose steadily by 0.14 percentage

points per day on average, until voting intention had reached 36 percent at the time of the Goodale affair. Only the New Democratic Party (NDP) remained stable at around 17 percent.

The Goodale affair changed the trends in voting intentions for the Liberals and ND. Between the Goodale affair and the end of the campaign, the Liberals fell to 36 percent, while the NDP gradually climbed (by 0.068 points per day) to 21 percent by the end of the campaign. The Conservatives continued to gain ground, ending up at 37 percent. Thus, the NDP benefited more from Liberal losses after the Goodale affair than the Conservatives.

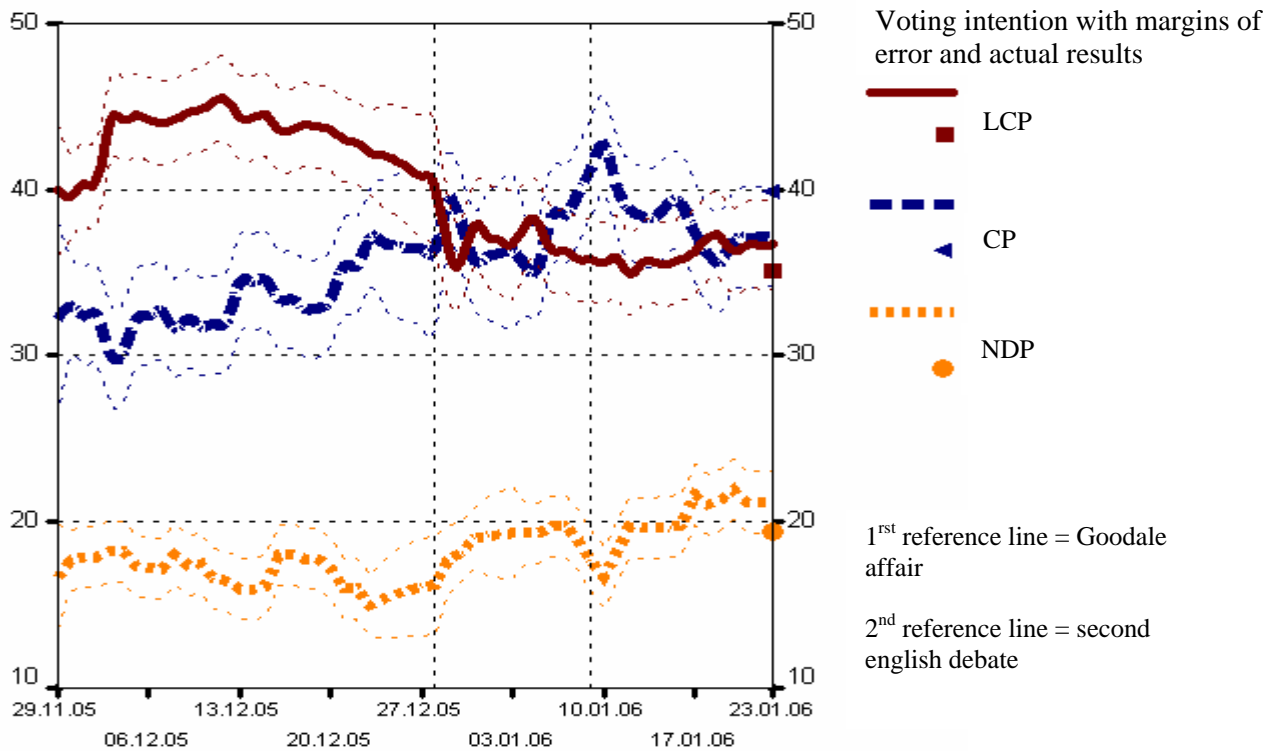


Figure 1. Change in Voting Intention during the 2005–2006 Canadian Electoral Campaign – Ontario

Finally, the second debate did not change the trends that began after the Goodale affair for any party. The time-series predictions fall within the margin of error for the Conservatives and NDP, which received 35.1 and 19.4 percent of the vote respectively. The polls slightly underestimated the Liberal vote, which ended up being 39.9 percent, 4.8 percent higher than the Conservatives, when the polls in fact predicted a very tight race between the two.

In Ontario, while voting intention for the two main parties were eight points apart at the beginning of the campaign,

they had become equal by the time of the Goodale affair. From that point forward, this similarity made it difficult for polls to differentiate the voting intentions for the main parties.. Indeed, estimates of the Conservative vote showed substantial variations that are difficult to attribute to specific events.

MEANWHILE, IN QUEBEC

Figure 2 shows the change in estimated voting intention in Québec for the Bloc Québécois (BQ), the Liberals and the Conservatives. The analyses show no impact from the first debate or of Steven Harper’s speech in Québec City. In fact, voting intentions remained more or less stable until the so-called Goodale affair. At that point, voting intention for the Liberals and Conservatives began to change. The Liberals began a sharp decline, falling from 28 percent when the Goodale story broke, to 23 percent on January 3 and to 18 percent a week later, just prior to the second debate. At the same time, the Conservatives rose from 9 percent to 14 percent and finally to 20 percent. Thus, by the second debate, the Conservatives had surpassed the Liberals in estimated voting intention. The BQ was not affected and remained relatively stable at slightly over 50 percent.

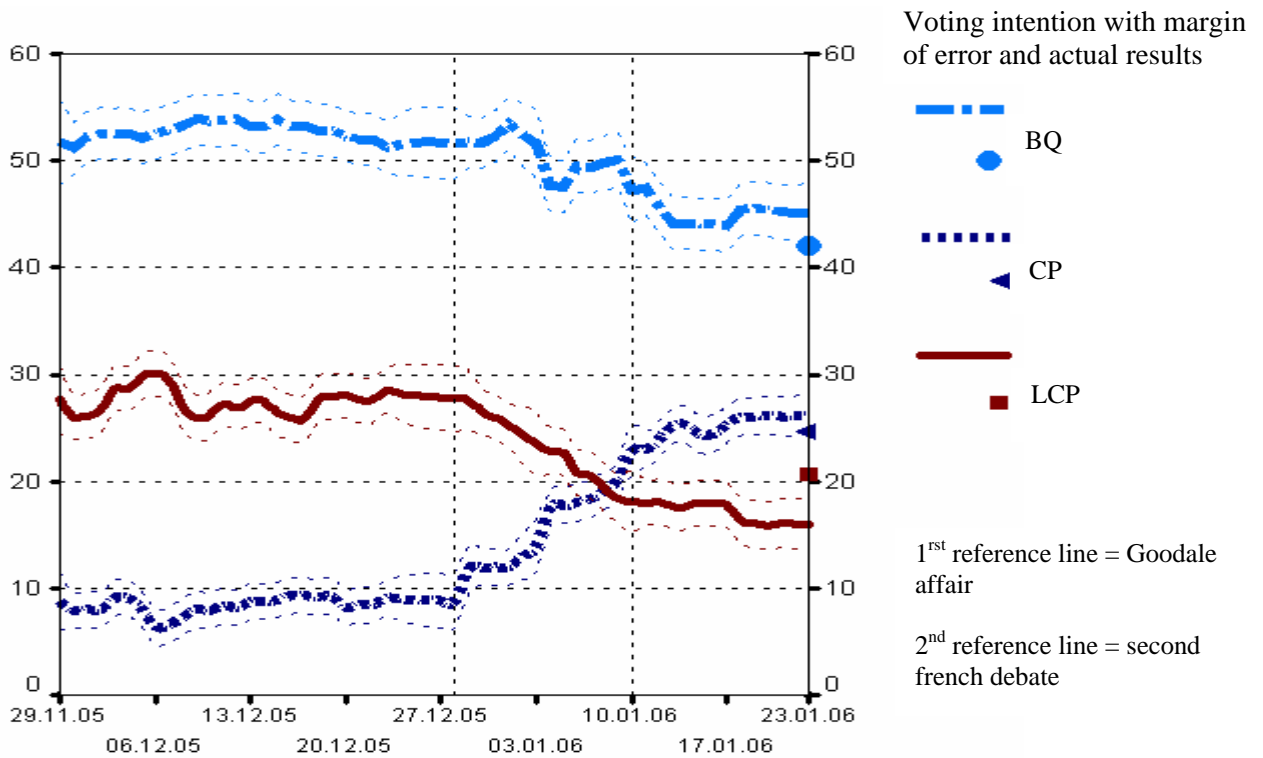


Figure 2. Change in Voting Intention during the 2005–2006 Canadian Electoral Campaign – Québec

The other important event was the second debate, which coincided with the launch of Lester's and Philpot's book on Option Canada. In the days following the debate, the Liberal decline in voting intention halted, to stabilize at 17 percent in the polls. The rise of Conservative voting intention continued, but at a slower rate, reaching 26 percent by the final polls. This situation is not necessarily attributable to the debate when one considers that, given the makeup of the electorate and Québec's voting history, the Liberal vote probably could not have fallen much lower, nor the PC vote risen much higher, at least in this election. Finally, the analyses indicate a decline of nearly three points for the BQ in the three days after the debate and a fall of six points in total by election day, to finish at 44 percent in the polls. It is surprising, since much of the commentary indicated that BQ leader Gilles Duceppe had won the debate, and there was speculation about the possible negative impacts on the Liberals caused by the Option Canada book. In the end, the polls underestimated the Liberal vote, which was 21 percent, slightly overestimated the BQ vote (42 percent) and more or less correctly estimated the Conservative vote (25 percent).

To summarize, voting intention in Québec only began to change between Christmas and New Year's, coinciding with the Goodale affair. Moreover, after the second debate and the launch of the book on Option Canada, only the Conservatives made significant gains; the Liberals merely halted the hemorrhaging and the BQ lost nearly six points. Therefore, the trends in voting elections do not appear to have been the same in Québec and Ontario.

CANADA, ONTARIO AND QUÉBEC

It is interesting to compare the trends in Canada as a whole with those of the two large provinces, especially since the publication of these polls may have affected regional voting intentions.

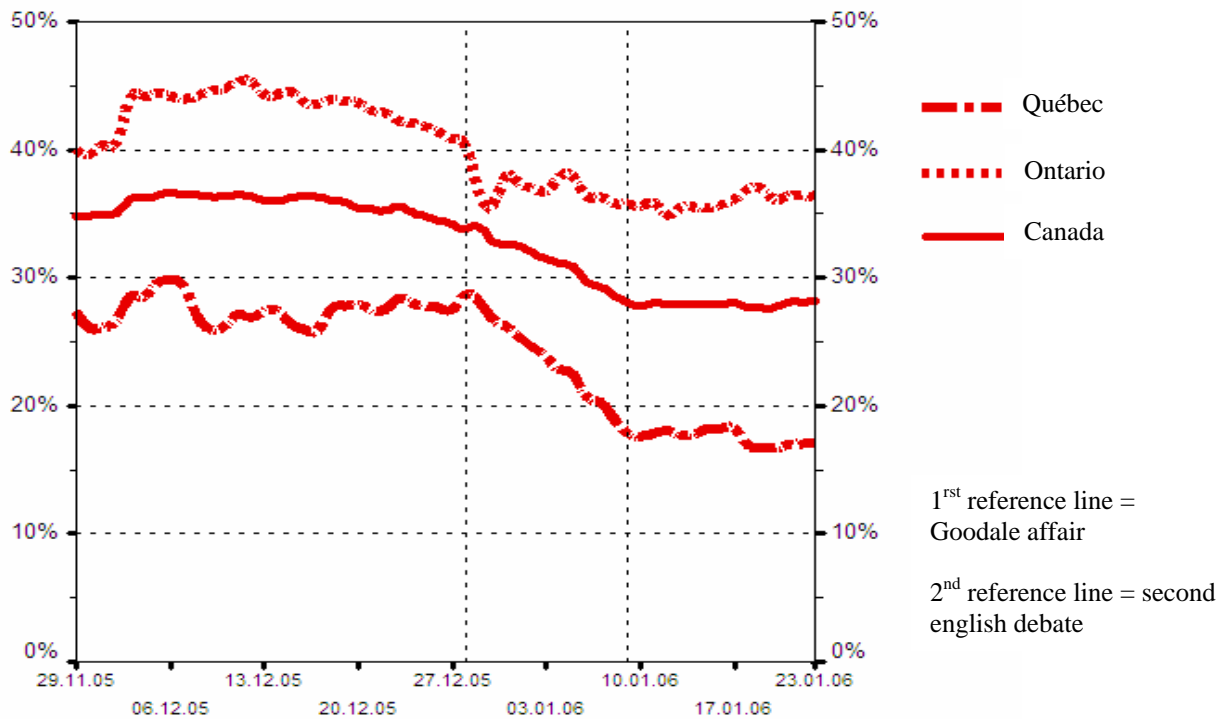


Figure 3. Comparative Change in Voting Intention during the 2005–2006 Canadian Electoral Campaign – Liberal Party of Canada.

Figure 3 compares the change in voting intention for the Liberals in Québec, Ontario and in Canada as a whole.

It clearly illustrates a two-part campaign, in which most of the movement occurred before the Goodale affair in Ontario and after the Goodale affair in Québec. However, it is debatable whether the Goodale affair really affected the reversal in voting intention in Québec; it may have been simply the fact that this was when the Conservative voting intention began to surpass that of the Liberals, to the point where the media began to speak of a possible Conservative minority government.

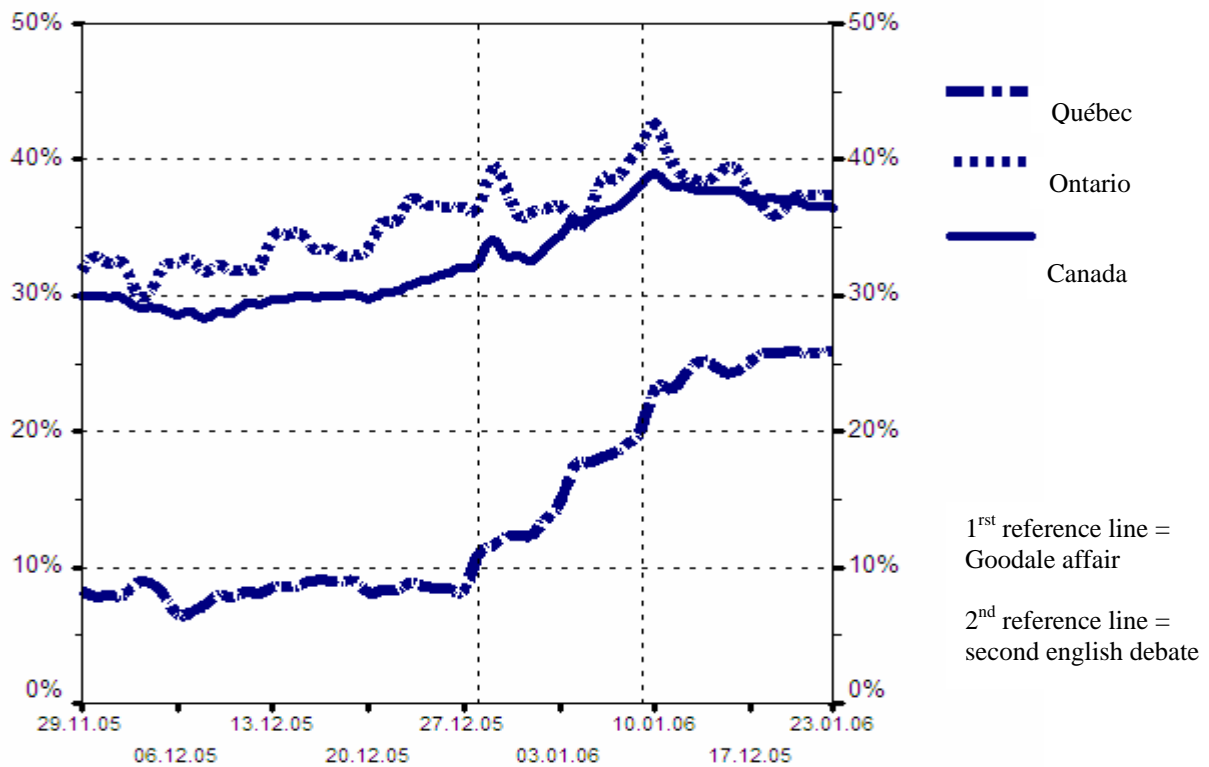


Figure 4. Comparative Change in Voting Intention during the 2005–2006 Canadian Electoral Campaign – Conservative Party of Canada.

Similarly, Figure 4 compares the trends in voting intentions for the Conservatives. It clearly illustrates the significance of the party’s late surge in Québec and its contribution to overall Conservative gains.

To conclude, changes in voting intention in Québec appear to have trailed behind changes in the rest of Canada, particularly in Ontario. It was only after the Conservatives began to be seen as a governing alternative that voting intentions began to change in Québec. And it was only after the second debate that the movement began to slow down, and that, for the first time, the Conservatives began to take votes from the BQ.