

Social Identity and Partisanship in Multi-Party Systems: The Case of the NDP in Canada

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Summary:

Social identity is defined as that part of an individual's self concept which derives from their knowledge of membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63). Social identity theory stipulates that people generally have a desire to maintain a distinct and positive social identity and do so by accentuating differences with outgroups. Research into partisanship as a social identity has exploded in recent years (e.g. Greene, Huddy, Mason), yet it is largely concentrated in the bipartisan American context where in-partisan identity can easily be defined against the opposing party.

In multiparty systems, however, maintaining a distinct and positive social identity may be more difficult for those who identify with minor parties. In this paper, we explore the case of the New Democratic Party (NDP) in Canada, a left-leaning third party that has never governed, but in 2011 held the official opposition for the first and only time in its history.

Social identity theory argues that when individuals identify to minority groups, they often seek different strategies to enhance their group's image. One such strategy is to accentuate similarities with the majority group rather than differences. Doing so may help the minority to access the same benefits of the majority. Applied to Canada's electoral context, this means that partisans of the NDP would see themselves more similar to the Liberals and Conservatives than they would to the NDP.

We draw on the Canadian Election Studies (2004 to 2019) to document the extent to which NDP partisans differentiate themselves from their closest rivals. Our findings suggests that third party partisans are less likely to see themselves as ideologically distinct from their closest rivals, compared to major parties.

Method:

To evaluate how NDP partisans differentiate their party from the other dominant parties (Liberals, Conservatives) we turn to the Canadian Election Studies, (2004 to 2019 - the 2015 CES was omitted as it does not have some of the items under study). We use the *political identity* and *left/right party placement* measures (see Table 1).

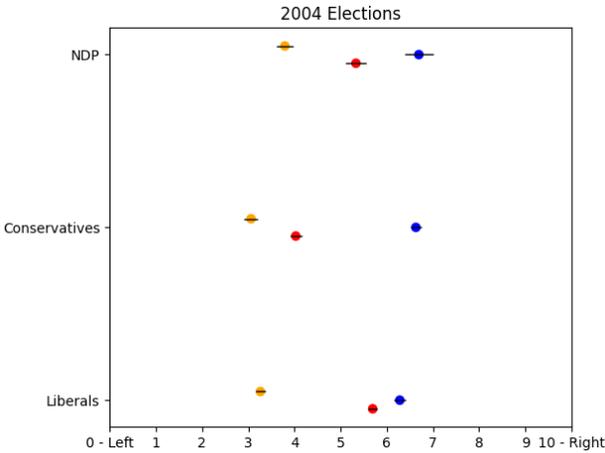
Concept	Questions	Scale
Political identity	In federal politics, do you usually think of yourself as:	Liberal, Conservative, NDP
Left/Right party placement	Using the same left/right scale, place the: Federal Liberal Party.	0=Left 10=Right
Left/Right party placement	Using the same left/right scale, place the: Federal Conservative Party.	0=Left 10=Right
Left/Right party placement	Using the same left/right scale, place the: Federal NDP.	0=Left 10=Right

Table 1. Concepts, questions, and scales used.

Results:

Consistently through all electoral studies, we find that:

- Partisans of the N.D.P.:
 - place their party closer to the center compared to the Liberals and conservatives, who place the N.D.P. further to the left.
 - place themselves close ideologically to the Liberals.



- Partisans of the Liberal party:
 - place themselves closer ideologically to the Conservatives rather than the N.D.P.
- Partisans of the conservative party:
 - distinguish themselves by placing the Liberals and the N.D.P. close ideologically and further to the left.

	LR-Liberals	LR-Cons.	LR-N.D.P.
Liberals	5.62	6.24	3.29
Conservatives	3.85	6.67	3.16
NDP	5.22	6.38	3.88

Table 2. Party placement means for each party by partisanship - 2004 CES

- See the Annex for the graphs and tables for the other elections (2008, 2011, 2019).

Discussion:

Social identity Theory views the desire for a positive social identity as the motor behind the intergroup context (Taylor & Moghaddam, 1987). When group members judge that their social identity is of lower standing, different strategies for achieving change may be adopted.

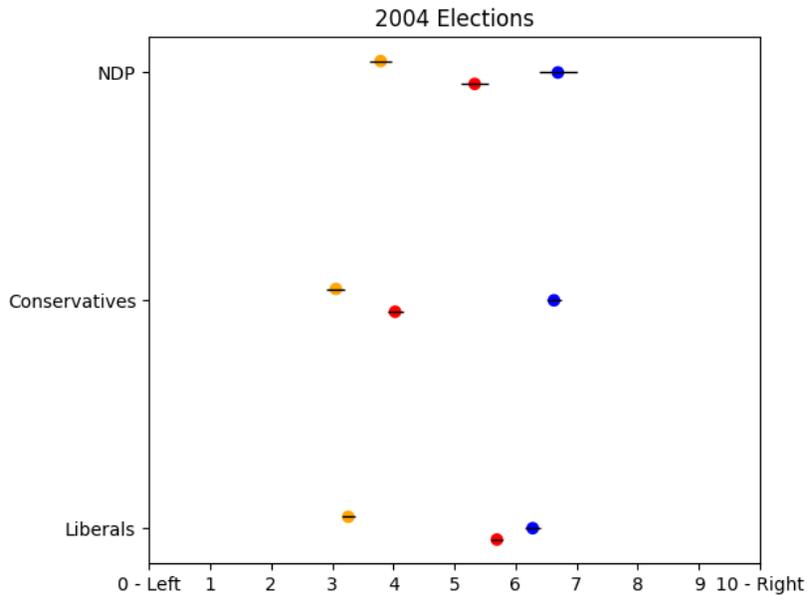
The results show that partisans of the New Democratic Party (NDP) in Canada, a minor party, seeks to bring themselves ideologically closer to the two majority parties (Liberals and Conservatives). By contrast, the two majority parties tend to estimate a larger ideological gap between themselves and the NDP.

By accentuating similarities with the majority parties, partisans of the NDP may be seeking the same benefits of the Liberals and Conservatives. However, de-emphasizing one's partisanship may have adverse effects for the party as partisans may be more open to strategic voting.

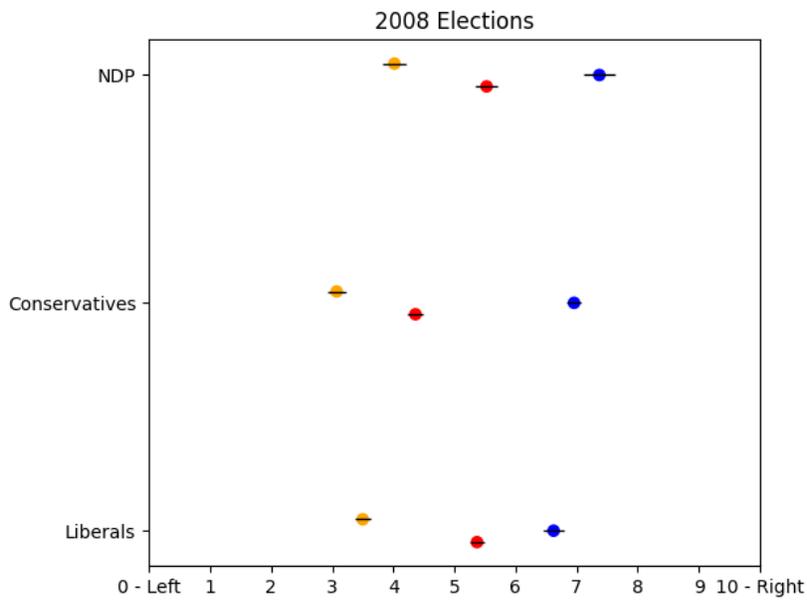
Future analyses should consider identity strength and perceptions of group status (chances of winning).

Annex:

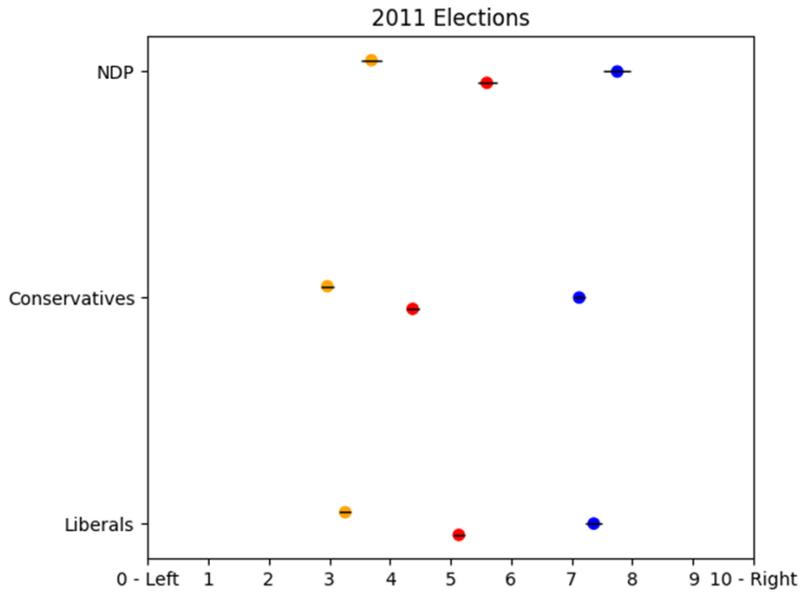
Graphs of party placement by political identification for each election (2004, 2008, 2011, 2019):



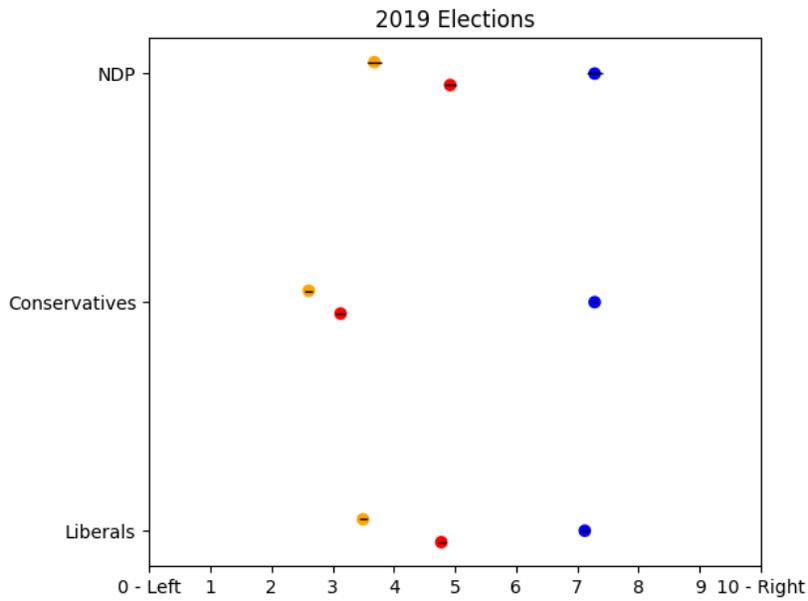
Graph 1: 2004 elections



Graph 2: 2008 elections



Graph 3: 2011 elections



Graph 4: 2019 elections

Means of party placement by political identification for each election (2004, 2008, 2011, 2019):

	LR-Liberals	LR-Cons.	LR-N.D.P.
Liberals	5.62	6.24	3.29
Conservatives	3.85	6.67	3.16
NDP	5.22	6.38	3.88

Table 2. Party placement means for each party by political identification - 2004 CES

	LR-Liberals	LR-Cons.	LR-N.D.P.
Liberals	5.38	6.62	3.49
Conservatives	4.36	6.95	3.07
NDP	5.52	7.37	4.01

Table 3. Party placement means for each party by political identification - 2008 CES

	LR-Liberals	LR-Cons.	LR-N.D.P.
Liberals	5.13	7.36	3.26
Conservatives	4.37	7.12	2.96
NDP	5.59	7.75	3.69

Table 4. Party placement means for each party by political identification - 2011 CES

	LR-Liberals	LR-Cons.	LR-N.D.P.
Liberals	4.77	7.12	3.49
Conservatives	3.12	7.28	2.60
NDP	4.92	7.28	3.68

Table 5. Party placement means for each party by political identification - 2019 CES