The Canadian political system

Summer 2023

Objectives of the seminar

- To have a basic understanding of Canadian politics

- To analyze the balance of powers in Canada

- To evaluate the relation between gender and politics

- To examine the complex relation between the Federal power and the provincial governments

Canada is a democracy and a constitutional monarchy

- Democracy (the people decide who governs or not through elections) + division of powers (The government, the House of Commons/The Senate, the provincial governments and the city councils)

- Constitutional monarchy (symbolic power of Charles III). The government appoints governors that represent the link to the monarchy

- Three important constitutional steps for Canada (1867 – 1931 – 1982)

- Five political parties are currently represented in the House of Commons (Conservative Party / Liberal Party / NDP / Bloc Québécois / The Green party)

- People directly elect the MPs of the House of Commons

- The senators are appointed by the Prime Minister until their 75th anniversary

The government of Canada

- The Prime Minister is the leader of the party that won the majority

- Possibility of having "minority government" when the remaining parties have the most votes

- In each province, there is a *premier* minister (provincial government)

- The results of the last election in 2021 (https://newsinteractives.cbc.ca/elections/federal/2021/results/)

- The red colour is used for liberals, the blue one for the Conservatives, the orange one for the New Democratic Party and the green one for the Green party. 338 elected seats in the House of Commons

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The making of laws

- The Senate reads and amends bills (105 Senators)

- Senators are appointed by the Governor General and under the advice of the Prime Minister

- The government initiates the legislative process with the discussion of bills

- Discussions in the House of Commons, the Senate can contribute to finalize the draft but the law is officially enacted after approval of the Senate and the Crown (The Governor general)

- The Prime Minister chooses his/her cabinet among MPs

- The Cabinet: "the government-of-the-day" (Hodgetts, 2021). The size of the federal cabinet increased (from 12 to 40 members), especially under Brian Mulroney's mandate

The composition of the Senate

- Maritimes Division : 24 seats (10 each for New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, 4 for Prince Edward Island)

- Quebec (24 seats), Ontarion (24 seats), 24 seats for western division (6 for British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba)

- Additional seats (Newfoundland and Labrador, Northwest Territories, Yukon and Nunavut) (Foot, 2022)

Governors general

- Until 1931, the governor general was directly appointed by the Crown

- From 1931 on, the Canadian government made recommendations and in 1952, Vincent Massey was nominated by the Prime minister

- Vincent Massey had a major influence on Canadian studies with a projection of an image of the Canadian nation

- "We have a complicated national pattern. We are a land of many cultures. There is a large French part, a large English part, and a host of smaller ethnic parts. Every part by itself is a **minority, separate and distinct**. Quebec is the home of French culture in North America and so is more that just one of our ten provinces. Some say that our plural society is a **mosaic**; others call it a **salad**" (Massey 1965: 49-50)

The current governor general

- Mary May Simon (Canada's first Indigenous governor general)

- The 30th governor general since the creation of the Confederation

- Former president of the Circumpolar Conference

- Jeanne Sauvé (the 23rd governor) was the first woman to serve as a governor general

- Adrienne Clarkson, the 26th governor general (first governor general with Asian heritage) (McIntosh et al., 2023)

- On the provincial level, presence of lieutenant-governors (Saywell, 2015)

/Source: https://www.gg.ca/en/governor-general/governor-general-mary-may-simon/biography

British North America Act (8 March 1867)

- This act was passed by the British Parliament with the royal assent of Queen Victoria on 29 March (1st July 1867: the Act came into effect)

- A **Privy council** advises the Crown. Today, "Privy Councillors are appointed for life by the governor general on the prime minister's recommendation. They include the chief justice of the Supreme Court, provincial premiers, former and present federal cabinet ministers, and speakers of the House of Commons and the Senate" (Hodgetts 2022)

- One federal union of the colonies of Canada, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick

- 1949: Newfoundland was the last province to join the Union

- 1999: Nunavut is the newest territory (self-governance for the Inuit population)

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Canadian women in politics

- Agnes **Macphail** became the first woman to win a seat in the House of Commons in 1921 when women won voting rights (Strong-Boag, 2021)

- Creation of the **National Council for Women** in Canada in Toronto in 1893 to advocate for women's rights (Strong-Boag et al, 2016)

- Cairie Reay Wilson "was the first woman appointed to the Senate of Canada" (Gwiazda, 2018). In 1949, she became the first female delegate to the United Nations (Gwiazda, 2018).

- The first woman who was Prime Minister was Kim Campbell (June to December 1993). She took the leadership of the Progressive Conservative Party after Brian Mulroney (Boykoy, 2021). She was the first female justice minister. Under Justin Trudeau, half of the members are women. Choice of cabinet (women, francophones, Indigenous leaders, skills)

From a two-party systems to a multi-party system

- The first party system (1867-1921) Monopole of power (Liberal and Conservative parties) (Dyck et al., 2017: 309)

- "The Conservative Party is usually said to have had its beginnings in 1854 when John A. Macdonald formed a coalition of four pre-Confederation groupings: **Tories and Moderates** from Upper Canada (Ontario), along with **English businessmen and French Conservatives** from Lower Canada (Quebec). Party lines for individual politicians were quite flexible in those days, and many MPs were called **"ministerialists"** because of their promise to support the ministry of the day in return for government favours" (Dyck et al., 2017: 309)

- One-party dominance

The construction of a multi-party system

- The second party system (1921-1957). More alternatives between Liberals and Conservatives

- Emergence of other parties such the Social Credit in Alberta of William Aberhart (Morley, 2015)

- The Third Party System (1957-1993) – Alternatives of majority and minority governments. Progressive Conservative Party (Conservative party) / Liberals and the CCF (Cooperative Commonwealth Federation) which was founded in Calgary in 1932. Renewal of this party led to the creation of the New Democratic Party in 1961

- The fourth party system (1993-)

Prime ministers 1993-2023

- Jean Chrétien (1993-2003) – Liberal

- Paul Martin (2003-2006) – Liberal

- Stephen Harper (2006-2015) – Conservative

- Justin Trudeau (2015-) – Liberal

- *Bloc québécois*, Federal party which was created by 1991

- Multi-party system that has produced a political stability in the relations between the Federal government and the provinces

The results of the federal elections of 2021

Political party	Elected	Vote share	Total
Liberal	160	32.6%	5,556,835
Conservative	119	33.7%	5,742,635
Bloc Québécois	32	7.6%	1,301,496
New Democratic Party	25	17.8%	3,035,715
Green	2	2.3%	398,746
People's Party	0	5%	344,076
Other	0	0.9%	156,429

Source: https://newsinteractives.cbc.ca/elections/federal/2021/results/

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Symmetrical federalism versus asymmetrical federalism?

- Constitutional tensions between Ottawa and Quebec in the 1970s and early 1980s (Dyck et al., 2017: 409)

- The Quebec referendum 1980: the Parti Québécois had plans on an idea of « sovereignty-association » (Hudon, 2017).

- Mandate to negotiate a new constitutional agreement with Canada (almost 60% rejected the plan)

- The Constitutional act of 1982 in Canada (patriation). Patriation: transfer of the British North America Act from the authority of the British Parliament to Canada's federation and provinces. Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

- « Gang of eight » (eight provinces that were against the plan of patriation). Pierre Trudeau won the battle as the Federal court allowed him to negotiate the patriation.

The Meech Lake accord

- April 1987 – Brian Mulroney negotiated with the provinces (the *premiers*) a new agreement on the relations Federation/provinces (Dyck et al, 2017: 206).

- Pierre Trudeau was against this agreement which gave too many prerogatives to the provinces and recognized Quebec as a full distinct society.

- After three years of negotiation, the agreement was dead.

- This agreement reflects the complex articulation of federal power and provincial government

- Assymmetrical federalism: when some provinces have more powers than the others (Symmetrical federalism: centralized federal power with equal treatment of the provinces)

Conclusion

- Creation of a very original multi-party system

- Difference with the U.S where the two-party system consolidated the political landscape

- Federalism which is under constant negotiation with the relation Federal government/provinces

- Canadian politics has become more inclusive (women / Indigenous representatives)

- "In Canada, the increased access of people of colour to citizenship was likewise the result of both their struggles for inclusion and the state's recognition of the need for harnessing their labour. People of colour organized and fought racist labour laws and racist trade unions; they pooled resources and organized community institutions to sustain their presence in the country, and they struggled for access to social entitlements" (Thobani, 2007: 160)

Sources for the images

- Image 1 (House of Commons of Canada, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/House_of_Commons_of_Canada#/media/File:West_Block_Temp_House_of_Commons,_2022.jpg, created by Hutime, 5 August 2022, CC BY-SA 4.0)

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