

Quebec elections: Liberals win bare majority in record-low turnout

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Held under conditions of the biggest global economic crisis since the Great Depression, Monday's Quebec election was marked by the lowest voter turnout in at least 80 years (57 percent) and the near annihilation of the right-wing populist Action-démocratique du Québec (ADQ).

The Liberals—who have held power since 2003, but were reduced to a minority government in an election 20 months ago—secured a parliamentary majority, but only barely. With a 42 percent share of the popular vote, the Liberals won 66 of the 125 seats in the National Assembly, while the Parti Québécois (PQ), with 35 percent of the popular vote, reclaimed official opposition status.

Liberal Premier Jean Charest called the elections in early November claiming that Quebec needed a majority government to confront the financial crisis and looming recession. His real motivation was fear—fear that the economic crisis would rapidly undermine popular support for his government.

Even as the election campaign unfolded, reports emerged that the *Caisse de dépôt et placement du Québec* [the Quebec pension plan] had suffered massive losses due to the financial crisis. Charest, with the support of former PQ Premier Bernard Landry, denounced opposition calls for the government to reveal the extent of the Caisse's losses, because he well knew the hemorrhaging of the Caisse's balance sheet would give credence to opposition claims that the government might soon have to increase taxes, or even slash pension benefits to compensate for the Caisse's losses.

In their campaign for a parliamentary majority, the Liberals received strong backing from the Quebec elite. It calculates that a government assured of holding office till 2013 will be better able to implement public spending cuts, health care privatization, and other socially regressive measures in the face of popular opposition.

The size and scope of the collapse of the ADQ, which, as a result of the March 2007 election, had become the official opposition and narrowly missed forming a minority government, shocked, even stupefied, the professional political analysts. Twenty months ago these pundits had claimed that the surge in support for the ADQ was a "revolt" of the "real, true blue," i.e. traditionally conservative, Quebec.

In reality, the ADQ's strong showing in the 2007 elections was the result of a protest vote, born of the frustration and anger of working people, particularly in rural Quebec and the outer suburbs of Montreal, over stagnating living standards and deteriorating public services.

To be sure, the ADQ's founder-leader Mario Dumont waged in 2007, as in 2008, a right-wing populist campaign—a campaign that in the 2007 election was largely directed against immigrants and religious minorities. Dumont's success in the 2007 election was

largely due to the support he received from sections of the establishment, especially the tabloid press. Big business has long used the ADQ, which was born of a nationalist split-off from the Liberals, as a means of pushing the Liberals and PQ further right.

In the current campaign Dumont tried to revive his chauvinist campaign over the so-called "reasonable accommodation" issue, but found no support from the populace or press.

On Monday, the ADQ polled 16.35 percent of the vote and won just 7 seats, as compared with almost 31 percent of the vote and 41 seats in the 2007 election. Even more revealing is the freefall in the number of votes won by the ADQ. Whereas in 2007 the ADQ won 1,224,000 votes, on Monday it won substantially less than half that number, about 530,000.

So devastating was the ADQ's showing that Dumont announced his resignation as party leader in his election night speech. Given the role Dumont has played in the ADQ since its founding in 1994 (his name is even part of the party's official name, *Action démocratique du Québec/Équipe Mario Dumont*), his resignation places a question mark over the party's continued existence, at least as a significant player in Quebec politics.

The unprecedented low voter turnout suggests that many who voted for the ADQ in 2007 chose simply not to vote in this year's election. The October 14 federal election, it should be noted, also saw the lowest voter turnout in a century. The lack of interest in official politics is a distorted and confused expression of growing popular disaffection with a political set up in which the parties, whatever their election rhetoric, end up implementing the same right-wing policies on behalf of big business—the dismantling of public and social services, further limits on workers and democratic rights, and tax cuts skewed to benefit the most privileged layers of society.

A further factor in the ADQ's collapse bears mention. The corporate elite turned against it, having concluded after witnessing the ADQ as official opposition, that it was too untested and volatile to be trusted with a share of power. Newspaper editorialists lamented that the ADQ's social conservatism and immigrant-baiting cut across its promotion of a right-wing "free-market" agenda that directly articulates the needs of big business.

The press' coverage of the ADQ made clear that the Quebec elite wanted to see it returned to the status of a third-party—although not necessarily, as now is the case, one bereft of official status in the National Assembly—and the PQ restored as Quebec's official opposition. While the most powerful sections of Quebec and Canadian capital are opposed to the PQ's call for an independent Quebec, they recognize that the PQ has "proven itself" during its four governmental terms as a party ready to impose the demands of big business in the

face of popular opposition and, indeed, is particularly adept at doing so, precisely because of its close and longstanding ties to the trade union bureaucracy.

The seats the ADQ lost Monday were divided almost equally between the Liberals and the PQ. The PQ won most of the ADQ seats in the outer suburbs of Montreal and the Laurentian region north of Montreal. The Liberals captured ADQ seats in the Quebec City region and Eastern Townships.

The PQ, which since the 1970s has alternated with the Liberals as Quebec's governing party, was clearly ecstatic at regaining official opposition status and especially at the unexpectedly large number of seats it captured Monday, 51.

Opinion polls published in the weeks and days immediately prior to the election had indicated that the PQ would take a share of the popular vote on the order of 30 percent, not the 35 percent share it captured Monday. Unquestionably, the key factor in the unanticipated strong PQ showing was a popular reaction against the campaign that Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his minority Conservative government had mounted in the preceding week to stigmatize an attempt by the federal opposition parties to form an alternate government as illegitimate and a "separatist coalition." This campaign openly appealed to and fanned anti-Quebec prejudice. It culminated in a "constitutional coup," in which the un-elected and unaccountable Governor-General shut down parliament for seven weeks so as to prevent the opposition from defeating the Conservative government on a non-confidence vote.

Monday's election results were also a blow to Harper and his Conservatives in another sense. The Conservatives have developed close ties to the ADQ and during the course of the campaign Dumont came to the defence of the Harper government, denouncing the proposal for a Liberal-NDP coalition supported by the PQ's sister party at the federal level, the Bloc Québécois, as bad for Quebec. The rout of the ADQ leaves the Conservatives further isolated in Canada's second most populous and only majority French-speaking province.

That said, the PQ's "resurgence" is far less impressive when one scrutinizes the vote totals. The PQ polled just 14,000 votes more than in the last election, when it had its worst showing since its first-ever election in 1970.

The same, mind you, could be said of the Liberals. While they won 66 seats Monday, they did so with essentially the same number of votes (1.3 million) as in 2007, when they received their lowest-ever share of the popular vote.

There was one other significant development in Monday's election. *Québec solidaire* (QS), which describes itself as Quebec's left sovereignist or pro-Quebec independence party, won its first-ever seat, although its share of the province-wide popular vote remained less than 4 percent. Amir Khadir, an Iranian-born doctor and one of QS's two co-leaders, was elected in the Montreal riding of Mercier, defeating a prominent *péquist* (PQer) in what had long been considered a PQ bastion. Press reaction to Khadir's election was highly favourable, with such right-wing mouthpieces as the *Montreal Gazette* declaring that QS represents a legitimate current of opinion in Quebec that merits representation in the National Assembly.

This reaction reveals that the establishment has already taken the measure of *Québec solidaire*. The axis of QS's politics is to pressure the PQ to prevent it from moving too far right and to advocate limited social reforms within a "fiscally responsible" framework. (See: "Québec solidaire: Quebec's "left" party in the orbit of the big business PQ")

The lack of popular enthusiasm for the Quebec election campaign is largely bound up with the fact that apart from the PQ's advocacy of independence there is virtually nothing that distinguishes the policies of the two traditional parties of government. Both have presided over a massive erosion of the quality of public services.

The lamentable state of Quebec's public health care system did emerge as a campaign issue, leading the Liberals and *péquistes* to trade accusations as to who is responsible for hospital emergency-room overcrowding and months-long waiting lists for urgently needed medical operations and procedures. The PQ closed hospitals and imposed massive budget and job-cuts during its last two terms in office (1994-2003); the Liberals, for their part, have promoted health care privatization.

PQ leader Pauline Marois defended the PQ government's elimination of thousands of health care jobs as part of its socially regressive "zero-deficit" campaign, insisting that she would do the same if similar conditions arose. Marois also declared that in a period of crisis it would be irresponsible to rule out public spending cuts. Another measure of the right-wing tenor of the PQ campaign was Marois' suggestion that the PQ might form a coalition with the ADQ, which advocates wholesale health care privatization and other neo-liberal measures, in a minority parliament.

As the campaign progressed, the corporate media became increasingly critical of the politicians for trying to generate popular enthusiasm for their flagging campaigns with promises of limited social spending increases, rather than "preparing" the population for the "sacrifices" that the economic crisis will require. Typical was an editorial signed by André Pratte, *La presse's* chief editorial writer. "The party leaders speak of increasing public spending so as to make our social programs more generous," protested Pratte. "Are they unconscious of the gravity of the crisis? Or do they act this way because that's what voters want?"

The media is also troubled by the results of the election. The Liberals have only a tiny parliamentary majority and actually won the vote of less than one in four Quebecers. The elections, moreover, clearly demonstrated popular opposition to privatization and fiscal conservatism as represented by the ADQ and mass alienation from the parties of the elite and the official political process. Alain Dubuc, one of Quebec's most influential commentators, summed up some of the establishment's fears in a column published in *La presse*, Quebec's most important daily, Tuesday. A government, wrote Dubuc, "that wants to build for the future, must be able to launch reforms, to shake things up, to demonstrate audacity, to be an agent of change. And therefore to sometimes be unpopular. It is there that the Liberals' weak majority could become an obstacle."

However, the Liberals will be able to count on the support of the trade union-supported PQ and the ADQ rump in imposing the burden of the economic crisis on working people. Both Marois and Dumont have pledged to cooperate with the Charest Liberal government in responding to the crisis.



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