

Social Class and Canadian Politics:

Replication and Extension

by

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CHAPTER I

SOCIAL CLASS AND POLITICAL BEHAVIOUR:  
CANADA AS A DEVIANT CASE

Introduction

There is a widespread belief among students of politics that Canada is virtually unique among Western industrialized democracies in that the association between social class and its electoral politics appears to be almost non-existent (see Alford, 1963, 1967). This is indicated by a very low level of the class vote (see Figure 1.1). In addition, neither of the two major parties in Canada appeals to working class interests (see Ogmundson, 1975c). A review of the literature shows that there are two opposing lines of explanation which have attempted to illuminate this anomaly - the "mass" explanation (which explains the classless nature of Canadian politics mainly in terms of the nature of mass sentiments) and the "elite" explanation (which explains the classless nature of Canadian politics mainly in terms of elite activities). The research will examine the utility of these two perspectives in two different contexts - Canada and the United Kingdom. This will be done by comparing Canada with the United Kingdom in terms of elite activities and mass sentiments. In the course of doing this, the work of Ogmundson (1972) with the 1965 Canadian election data will be largely replicated using the 1968 and 1974 election data. It is expected that the findings in this research will support one or the other of these general lines of thought. Consequently, the findings will cast some light on the oddities associated with Canadian politics. It is also expected that this research will give further insights into the democratic processes of Western industrialized countries.

FIGURE 1.1

INTERNATIONAL RATES OF VOTING ON THE BASIS OF CLASS

.58	-	Norway, 1957
.49	-	Finland, 1958
.40	-	United Kingdom, 1952-1962 (.35-.44)
.33	-	Australia, 1952-1962 (.27-.37)
.28	-	France, 1956
.26	-	Netherlands, 1956
.16	-	United States, 1952-1962 (.13-.23)
.08	-	Canada, 1952-1962

The figures for the United States, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom are drawn from Alford, 1963:102. The figure for the Netherlands is drawn from Lijphart, 1971:20. The other figures are drawn from Lenski, 1970:362. All of these figures are calculated using Alford's Index of Class Voting which subtracts "the percentage of non-manual workers voting for "Left" parties from the percentage of manual workers voting for "Left" parties. We have taken the liberty of putting a point in front of them so as to make these figures similar to the tau beta which we will use in our own calculation. The numbers are very similar in any case.

## Class and Politics

The relationship between social class and political behaviour has been one of the major concerns of students of politics at least since the time of Marx. Class phenomena have attracted great interest since "they represent a junction between the social, the economic and the political order". (Campbell et al, 1960:184) One usually expects to find some degree of class sentiments within the populations of industrialized countries. Given these sentiments, one expects that they will be related to the party system and politics generally. Eulau (1955:364) suggests:

"Voting for one party or the other is obviously very much related to people's socioeconomic position and to the social structure of society generally. Indeed, from Aristotle to Harold J. Laski, the relationship between "class" and "party" has been one of the "grand problems", so called, of political speculations."

Similarly, Alford (1963:37) asserts that an association between social class and voting behaviour is a natural phenomenon in Western democracies due to the existence of class interests, the regular association of certain parties with these interests, and the tendency of voters to adhere to class loyalties. Furthermore, Epstein (1967:85) has also suggested that:

"..... class regularly receives and probably deserves the most attention because it seems to divide twentieth-century parties, in substantial though varying degrees, in every western democracy ....."

It is widely believed that political parties in electoral democracies will represent any interest which concerns a large number of voters. Thus, in a system where class interests exist, political parties are expected to assume political stands which reflect the

interests of different classes. At the same time, a substantial proportion of the voters are also generally expected to vote for one party or the other in accordance with their class interests (see MacIver, 1974:123). Indeed, empirical findings have generally shown that there is some relationship between social class and the vote (see Alford, 1967: 68). As Butler and Stokes (1971:6) argue: "..... the enfranchisement of the industrial working class in Britain created circumstances favourable to the rise of a working class party and a greater polarization of electoral alignments along class lines." Furthermore, Lipset (1960: 234) has suggested that social class forms the chief basis of political cleavages in Western democracies:

"More than anything else the party struggle is a conflict among classes, and the most impressive single fact about political party support is that in virtually every economically developed country the lower-income groups vote mainly for parties of the left, while the higher-income groups vote mainly for parties of the right."

More recently, Lipset and Rokkan (1967; see also Epstein, 1967: 85, 87) have suggested that additional social cleavages, such as religion and region, also influence political behaviour. Furthermore, an empirical study by Rose and Urwin (1971:222) of 17 democracies has found that "normal" countries base their politics on two main cleavages - class and religion. Hence, class, while not being as predominantly important as was earlier anticipated, is nonetheless one of the two major cleavages with which political behaviour in Western democracies is generally associated.

#### Social Class and Canadian Politics

Various studies (e.g. Alford, 1963; McDonald, 1969; Meisel, 1972;

Schwartz, 1974) have suggested that Canadian politics is quite "normal" in that its voting behaviour is strongly related to religion. However in the spectrum formed by Western industrialized democracies, Canada stands out distinctly as a country in which the relationship of social class to electoral politics appears to be almost non-existent. Alford (1963:102), using Gallup Polls from 1952-1962 as his data base, reports that the association of social class (whether measured by occupation, education or income singly or in combination)<sup>1</sup> with voting averages only about .08. This figure is the lowest among the four countries - the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia and Canada - he studied. Lenski and Lenski (1974:356), in a survey of nine countries, found that the association of social class with the vote as measured by Alford's Index of Class Voting<sup>2</sup> varies from a high of +58 in Norway to a low of +7 in Canada (see Figure 1.1).

According to the findings of the 1965 and 1968 Canadian National Surveys, Canada also deviates from the international norm in terms of party class support (see Gagne, 1970; Meisel, 1972). The class support which Canadian parties receive apparently differs immensely from what many students of politics would have predicted. The Liberals - the major party considered by Alford and Dawson to be "Centre-Left" (Alford, 1963) - is supported predominantly by the middle classes<sup>3</sup> instead of the working classes. Meisel (1972:4), in his 1968 Canadian study, finds that the Liberal party has the greatest appeal to the middle class groups (whether measured by occupation, education or subjective class status) and least to unskilled labour and farmers. The Progressive Conservatives - the major party viewed by conventional experts as being to the Right - receives inconsistent class support across the provinces. Meisel

(1972:4-5) reports that the Conservatives are supported mainly by the middle classes in Ontario and the Atlantic provinces and by farmers in the Prairies. As well, Meisel finds that among the manual workers, the unskilled were more disposed than the skilled to vote Conservatives. The New Democratic Party (NDP) - the minor party to the Left - gains its major support from skilled labour. In Quebec, however, it attracts people of the middle classes - especially the high-ranking occupational groups (Meisel, 1972:5). The Social Credit Party and the Creditistes in Quebec - the minor parties conventionally viewed as "Radical Right" - receive most of their support from the working classes (Meisel, 1972:8).

Internationally, Rose and Urwin (1971:220), in their survey of seventeen countries, found that Canada is among the three - the United States, Ireland and Canada - without a nationwide class party. Furthermore, experts (e.g. Scarrow, 1965) who compare the United States and Canada have suggested that political parties in the United States are much more clearly associated with class than in Canada.

All this serves to indicate that Canadian political parties and Canadian voting behaviour provide an exception to the usual generalizations one would make about the role of social class in Western industrialized democracies. Indeed, the apparently minimal role of social class in Canadian politics has presented us with an interesting deviant case. Its analysis, consequently, is likely to be unusually fruitful (Lipset et al, 1956:12).

## ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS FOR THE CLASSLESS NATURE OF CANADIAN POLITICS

### The Mass Explanation

A review of the literature shows that there are two differing lines of explanation which attempt to illuminate the anomalies associated