

# Why do Publics Support Minority Governments? Three Tests

**Yannick Dufresne\* and Neil Nevitte**

*Department of Political Science, University of Toronto, 100 St. George Street, Toronto, Canada M5S 3G3*

\*Corresponding author: [yannick.dufresne@utoronto.ca](mailto:yannick.dufresne@utoronto.ca)

First-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral rules usually produce legislative majorities. But minority governments appear to be an increasingly common electoral outcome in political systems operating under those rules. What, then, drives citizens' views about minority governments? The Canadian case is instructive; it operates under FPTP rules and has recently experienced three minority governments in a row. This investigation proposes three explanations for why citizens might support minority governments and these explanations are empirically tested using Canadian Election Study data. The analysis indicates that people support minority government outcomes mostly for partisan strategic reasons. Pragmatic considerations are important but, surprisingly, principled motivations have quite a modest effect.

Major political parties in a number of advanced industrial states seem to be finding it more difficult to win electoral majorities. Westminster systems like the UK and Canada in which parliamentary majorities have long been considered the norm have recent experience with the same phenomenon. First-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral systems, according to longstanding theory, tend to stack the deck in favour of majority outcomes by limiting the number of parties (Duverger, 1954). Those rules accord a proportionally larger number of seats to the winning party (Butler, 1950). In May 2010, however, Britain elected its first hung parliament in more than 35 years. And Canada recently experienced the longest interlude of minority government in its history. How do publics evaluate those outcomes? The Canadian case provides a unique opportunity to empirically explore citizens' views about having minority governments. Based on the Westminster model, the Canadian electoral rules use an FPTP voting system, and the country experienced three minority governments in succession in 2004, 2006 and 2008. Fortunately, the Canadian Election Studies (CES) surveys

conducted before and after these three elections included a number of questions that were specifically designed to probe public attitudes towards minority governments.

As in the UK, the conventional wisdom is that Canadians prefer electoral majorities (Brazier and Kalitowski, 2008). Eugene Forsey (1964) noted some 50 years ago that '[a] popular Canadian notion about minority government is that it is necessarily bad: incompetent, weak, indecisive, if not worse'. (3) Leduc (1977) notes that it is 'a commonplace of political commentary of all types in Canada to note that there exists a strong preference for majority governments in the British tradition of parliamentary politics [...]' (311). And, most contemporary analysts suggest that 'the parties, the public, and the media perceive minorities, and expect them to operate, as 'fragile constructs, capable of providing a short bridge between majorities but otherwise untrustworthy as governing instruments'. (Cody, 2008, p. 27)

Despite these somewhat negative evaluations, a review of public opinion evidence concerning citizens views about having a minority government electoral outcome turns out to be somewhat uneven. In 1965, during Canada's second experience with three consecutive minority governments, a Gallup survey asked Canadians: '...do you think this minority government has been good or bad for the nation?' On that occasion 62% of the public thought that it was a 'bad thing' (September 1965). Eight years later, Gallup asked Canadians to reflect on their experiences 'over the last ten years or so' and for their evaluations of whether these minority governments had been 'good or bad, for the nation'. 54% reckoned that it had been 'good for the nation' (March 1973). Five years later, Gallup probed the same idea somewhat differently: 'Would you prefer to see the next government in Ottawa have a majority or minority government?' 64% said 'a majority' (May 1978). But when asked a very similar question 15 years later, 51% said that they would prefer 'a minority' (Gallup, February 1993). And just a month later, Gallup put an almost identical question to respondents: 'Would you prefer to see the next government in Ottawa have a majority or minority of seats?' On that occasion, 57% said that they would 'prefer a majority' (Gallup, March 1993). The most prudent conclusion to draw from these commercial poll results might be that public opinion about minority governments is volatile. Regardless of whether the survey questions evoke prospective or retrospective judgements, Canadians seem to be divided on the matter.

There is no single body of theory dedicated to explaining why publics might support or oppose having a minority government. But plausible conjectures about what considerations might drive citizen's view about minority governments can be drawn from a variety of sources. Most of the scholarly commentary about minority governments comes from those cases where minority parliamentary formations are a relatively common electoral outcome (Italy, Fisichella, 1975;

Spain, [Artés and Bustos, 2008](#); Norway, [Strøm, 1990](#)). Canada's recent experience with minority governments attracted more commentary weighing the advantages and disadvantages of Canada's minority government experience but most do so through an institutional prism (for example: [Thomas, 2007](#); [Cody, 2008](#); [Docherty, 2008](#); [Russell, 2008](#); [Godbout and Høyland, 2009](#)).

## 1. Theory and hypotheses

One possible explanation for why people support the idea of having minority governments may well have to do with partisan considerations. Partisan outlooks capture preferences and can serve as information shortcuts to circumvent citizens' apparent lack of political knowledge ([Sniderman \*et al.\*, 1991](#); [Lupia, 1994](#)). Minority government electoral outcomes introduce a variety of complex challenges that require a certain level of political sophistication to navigate those challenges, many of which have an intrinsic partisan character. People might adjust their attitudes towards minority governments in a manner suggested by strategic voting theory: citizens' choices may be keyed to anticipated electoral outcomes ([Popkin, 1991](#); [Niemi \*et al.\*, 1992](#)). That strategic logic can be extended to apply to the support or opposition to minority governments.

In the Canadian setting, analyses of vote choice and electoral participation suggest that the scale of strategic voting is generally quite modest ([Blais and Nadeau, 1996](#); [Blais \*et al.\*, 2001](#)). The significant caveat here, though, is that the conclusions of these particular analyses adopt a specific, and quite restrictive, definition of what pool of voters qualifies as being available to strategic considerations.<sup>1</sup> When it comes to the case of support for minority governments, however, the potential pool of strategic supporters turns out to be much larger than that narrow definition implies. Indeed, when the most popular political party fails to gain the support of a majority of the electorate, those who might benefit strategically from a minority government outcome amount to a majority of the electorate.

Strategic considerations might shape citizen orientations to minority governments in at least two ways. First, supporters of small political parties might qualify as strategically motivated voters because they stand to reap the legislative dividends that accrue to small political parties under a minority government status quo. Under those conditions, clearly, minor parties can punch above their electoral weight exerting a greater influence in the balance of legislative power than their share of the vote might suggest ([Thomas, 2007](#); [Artés and](#)

---

<sup>1</sup>Those studies define a strategic voter as a person who voted for a party (candidate) other than their first choice, and who did so because of her expectations about the electoral outcome (see [Blais \*et al.\*, 2001](#), pp. 343–352).

Bustos, 2008). Secondly, supporters of major political parties who believe that their own political party will lose an upcoming election might also stand to gain from a minority outcome. For them, a minority outcome might be preferable to a legislature controlled by their major party opponents.

Institutional commentaries about the merits and limitations of minority governments suggest a somewhat different set of possibilities, and there are at least two recurring themes in this literature. First, some institutionalists make the case that minority legislative outcomes provide better governing conditions (Russell, 2008). Minority governments are associated with a more open style of democracy. Under minority government conditions, parliamentary checks on governmental decision-making might amount to a veto; they certainly constrain the power of the governing party in the House of Commons and provide, perhaps, a counterweight to the increasing concentration of power observed in a variety of parliamentary democracies (Foley, 1993; Savoie, 1999). And for the individual voter, a preference for more dispersed authority approximates the logic of cognitive Madisonianism that has been demonstrated in other settings (Ladd, 1990). The increased legislative bargaining power of the opposition may also promote greater government accountability (McCandless, 2004). After all, under parliamentary conditions a minority government of the day cannot take for granted the confidence of the House of Commons, and so governing parties are constrained from freely advancing their agendas without giving at least some consideration to the positions of the opposition. The upshot, according to these lines of speculation, is a more diffused expression of authority that is more responsive to the broader electorate by offering a more inclusive approach to policy-making (Forsey, 1964).

These appraisals are not embraced by all those who subscribe to the institutional perspective. Some argue that minority governments place too much power in the hands of minor parties (Norton, 2008). Others worry that the legislative bargaining that takes place between political parties under minority government conditions has the potential to blur the locus of responsibility for governmental actions (Jenkins, 2008). These debates are reminiscent of efforts to calibrate the relative benefits of consensual versus majoritarian institutional designs, and the inherent tensions between responsiveness and leadership (Przeworski *et al.*, 1999).

A second quite distinct line of speculation turns on the possible economic consequences of having a minority government. Edin and Ohlsson (1991), for example, contend that the absence of a majority in the legislature produces weak governments, and weak governments, in turn, are more susceptible to higher public debt and a lack of fiscal discipline. According to this line of reasoning, minority governments are more tempted than their majority government counterparts to open the public purse in an effort to reap short-term electoral gains (Persson and Tabellini, 2005). The assumption that economic considerations are salient to voters is surely plausible (Key, 1966; Fiorina, 1981). Less clear is what

are the economic consequences of having minority governments in power. Some counter for instance that the type of government, be it a majority or a minority, has no impact on fiscal policy (de Haan *et al.*, 1999). Pech (2004) even makes the case that under some circumstances minority governments may be more inclined to reduce government expenditures. The empirical evidence probing these different perspectives is modest, and the results are mixed (Pinho, 2004).

These strategically and institutionally grounded perspectives produce three quite different research hypotheses each of which is amenable to empirical investigation.

If support for minority governments is motivated by strategic considerations then:

Hypothesis 1. Supporters of major political parties who expect their own party to lose the election, along with supporters of minor political parties, will be more likely to support the idea of having a minority government.

If support for minority governments is driven by principled considerations, then:

Hypothesis 2. People who are more averse to the concentration of authority will be more inclined to support minority governments.

Finally, if economic considerations drive public opinion on minority governments, then:

Hypothesis 3. Voters who are more concerned about the performance of the economy will be more inclined to oppose minority governments.

## 2. Data

The Canadian Election Study data are particularly useful for exploring these hypotheses for a combination of reasons. First, they are timely. The Canadian Election Study data encompass the 2004, 2006 and 2008 Canadian federal elections, elections that produced three successive minority governments. Secondly, each of these surveys contain a series of questions that probe respondents' orientations towards both support for the principle of minority government as well as support for particular combinations of minority and majority legislative outcomes. Moreover, the wordings of the question probing views about minority government outcomes were constructed with a concern for cross-time comparability. Thirdly, these surveys also include question probing public's normative evaluations about the performance of democratic institutions. Thus, with these data it is possible to explore empirically the linkages between democratic outlooks and support for minority governments. Other questions probed the public's economic concerns, making it possible to evaluate the impact of these economic considerations on support for minority governments. Furthermore, these surveys canvassed respondents' expectations about the partisan

composition of parliament following an upcoming election. These questions are especially pertinent for evaluating the strategic hypothesis.<sup>2</sup> Importantly, these data sets also contain a consistent set of socio-demographic along with a number of other relevant control variables. The sampling and data collection strategies were the same for each of these three elections (see <http://ces-ec.org>).

### 3. The dependent and independent variables

The key dependent variable for this analysis captures views about whether respondents support the idea of minority government. Respondents were asked: Do you think minority governments are a good thing, a bad thing or are you not sure?<sup>3</sup> Note, this particular survey question probes attitudes about the abstract idea of having a minority government; it makes no reference to partisan considerations.<sup>4</sup>

A number of independent variables are used to test these three hypotheses. These include partisan considerations, attitudes towards concentrated authority and economic concerns. Each of these independent variables is captured by scales that are constructed from multiple measures, a strategy that reduces measurement error and reveals more stable issue preferences (Ansolabehere *et al.*, 2008).<sup>5</sup> The use of scales introduces some technical complexity, but the clear advantage is that they permit a more fine-grained analysis and more readily interpretable results.<sup>6</sup>

The first hypothesis considering strategic considerations relies on scales measuring individual' attitudes towards the four principal Canadian federal political parties. Two groups might be motivated to support minority governments for strategic considerations. The first consists of those who support one of the major parties but who believe that their own party might not win the upcoming

---

<sup>2</sup>The question about the expected partisan composition of the new government was not asked in the 2004 Canadian Electoral Study surveys. Consequently, a measure of expected government composition in 2004 is constructed from the question probing expectations about what chances that each party might have of winning the next election.

<sup>3</sup>The 2004 question probing this dimension was worded slightly differently: There may be a minority government, would that be a good thing, a bad thing or do you have no opinion?

<sup>4</sup>This question does not probe the level of support for particular partisan configurations of minority government outcomes. A second version of this minority government support question introduces such partisan considerations.

<sup>5</sup>The scales are based on the factor scores for the first factor of principal factor analyses. As Ansolabehere *et al.* (2008) note: 'There is nothing magical about the factor scores. In fact, up to an affine transformation they are almost exactly what we get by simply averaging the survey items.' (Ansolabehere *et al.*, 2008, p. 220).

<sup>6</sup>In all cases, the results have been reproduced with each of the individual survey items used in the scales. The substantive conclusions are not affected by that methodological choice.

election. All respondents were asked: What do you think the election result will be: a Liberal majority, a Liberal minority, a Conservative majority or a Conservative minority? The second group under consideration consists of those who support minor parties. In this case, then, it is supporters of the New Democratic Party and the Bloc Québécois who qualify for consideration. For minor parties, winning a plurality of the seats at an election is improbable at best. The CES data show, for example, that only a negligible number of NDP partisans expected their party to lead the upcoming government.<sup>7</sup> And the Bloc Québécois ran candidates only in the province of Quebec, and so it is hardly conceivable that the Bloc would be in a position to form a government.

The test of the second hypothesis concerning principled support for minority governments considers respondents' aversion towards concentrated authority. Conceptualising and operationalising principled motivations is somewhat challenging not least of all because the precise conceptual boundaries of open democracy, responsiveness, representativeness or deliberative democracy are contestable. But in this case the analysis relies on a battery of question probing principles that tap attitudes towards concentrated authority. The significant empirical point is that the factor analytic results show that the responses to these questions form a single dimension.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, the test of whether pragmatic considerations motivate support for minority government outcomes relies on multiple measures probing different economic attitudes. These variables tap the salience of economic issues and respondents' positions on such economic matters as taxation and free trade.<sup>9</sup>

Age, education and income are included as standard socio-demographic controls in the statistical models; these variables often feature as significant predictors of political behaviour in the Canadian setting (Nevitte *et al.*, 2000; Blais *et al.*, 2002). The second and third hypotheses are tested both with and without controls for party attachment.<sup>10</sup> Finally, measures of political interest and political knowledge are included as control variables to take into account issue complexity (see Luskin, 1987; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Fournier, 2002). The analysis turns out to be robust to the inclusion of a full set of socio-demographic variables.

---

<sup>7</sup>The question probing these expectations does not include NDP as a response category. Less than 0.5% of the respondents voluntarily answered that they were expecting a government that would be led by a party other than the Conservatives or Liberals.

<sup>8</sup>All results are reproduced using the individual items in place of the scale. The results are substantively similar to those results using the scale.

<sup>9</sup>According to factor analytic results, those measures also form a common underlying dimension.

<sup>10</sup>This procedure tests whether the variables of interest are independent of individuals' party attachment.

## 4. Findings

The results are presented in two stages. The place to begin is with descriptive statistics concerning the levels of public support for minority government outcomes across the three elections. The investigation then turns to empirical tests each of the three hypotheses.

### 4.1 *Support for minority government*

The variations in levels of public support for minority governments noted at the outset provide useful background. In the run-up to the 2004 federal election, a commercial poll by CROP, asked Canadians: 'Are you hoping for a minority or a majority government?' Fewer than half (48%) said that they hoped for 'a majority' while a substantial 43% indicated that they wanted 'a minority' (June 2004). But when Harris Decima, another polling firm, asked Canadians in 2009 if they would 'prefer that a minority or a majority government be elected' in the next election, almost two-thirds (64%) responded that they would prefer 'a majority' while about one in four (24%) said that they would prefer 'a minority' (July 2009). Once again, the descriptive evidence from more contemporary commercial polls indicates a divided public.

The CES adopted a two-fold approach for probing systematically the depth and breadth of support for minority governments in 2004, 2006 and 2008. The first approach aimed to ascertain the levels of public support for the principle of having a minority government. The second approach introduced partisan considerations; it probed levels of public support for different partisan configurations of minority and majority government outcomes. The basic findings from the CES data are summarized in Table 1.

First, the data reported in Table 1 indicate that support for the principle of minority government is relatively stable. At each time point, a plurality of respondents indicated that minority governments were a 'good thing'. Somewhere between one in four (2006) and one in five (2008) took the view that minority governments were a 'bad thing'. A fairly substantial portion of respondents, about one in three, expressed no opinion or said that they were not sure.

When respondents are invited to consider the particular partisan configuration of the hypothetical minority or majority government (Table 1), the results are more fragmented. Support for some sort of majority government outcome increases to somewhere between 40 and 47%. But a substantial minority, between 33% (2006) and 43% (2004), respectively, supported at least some sort of minority government outcome. A comparison of the results from Table 1 certainly indicate that there are some partisan effects at work. But the

**Table 1** Support for minority government and preferred government composition, 2004–2008

Respondents saying . . .	2004 Election	2006 Election	2008 Election
A minority government would be (%)			
A good thing	48.5	39.3	45.2
A bad thing	22.4	23.3	20.0
Don't know/no opinion	29.1	37.4	34.6
Preferred government composition (%)			
Liberal majority	21.3	23.4	18.7
Liberal minority	32.7	19.2	16.5
Conservative majority	18.5	23.7	26.9
Conservative minority	10.5	14.0	17.7
Other	4.9	3.5	6.3
Don't know	7.8	12.3	11.8
Refused	3.3	2.1	2.5
n	3146	2152	3257

Source: Canadian Election Study, 2004, 2006 and 2008 (Weighted). Panel removed.

Questions: (a) There may be a minority government, would that be a good thing, a bad thing or do you have no opinion? (2004) Now, your views on minority governments. Do you think minority governments are a good thing, a bad thing or are you not sure? (2006, 2008). (b) On election day were you personally hoping for a Liberal majority, a Liberal minority, a Conservative majority or a Conservative minority? (2004); [which government composition] would you prefer: a Liberal minority, a Conservative majority or a Conservative minority? (2006, 2008).

more telling point for the present purposes is that support for the idea of minority governments cannot be reduced to partisan considerations alone.<sup>11</sup>

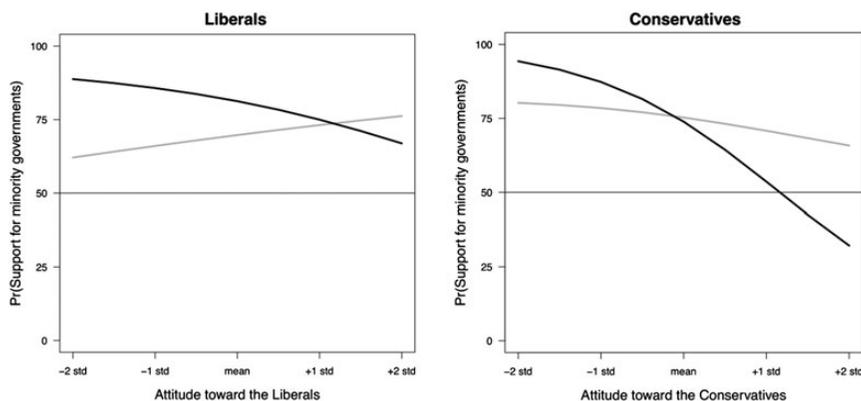
The Canadian public faced three federal elections producing minority government outcomes in just four years, yet there is no evidence from these data that support for minority governments waned. More to the point, none of these data support the conventional wisdom that most Canadians prefer majority electoral outcomes. That basic finding raises another set of questions: What factors shape support for minority electoral outcomes?

#### 4.2 *Is support principled? Economic? Or strategic?*

To determine whether support for minority governments is motivated by strategic, principled or pragmatic considerations, the analysis turns to binary logistic regression because the primary focus is on voters who support or oppose minority governments.<sup>12</sup> Probability plots are used to report the results of the

<sup>11</sup>Correlations between considering minority governments as a 'good thing' and preferring a minority government outcome from the upcoming election are: 0.31 (2004); 0.35 (2006); 0.44 (2008).

<sup>12</sup>Those respondents expressing no opinion about minority governments, or who say that they are not sure, are omitted from the analysis. It turns out that different strategies for managing the large number of undecided respondents have a modest impact on some estimates, but they do not affect the substantive conclusions.



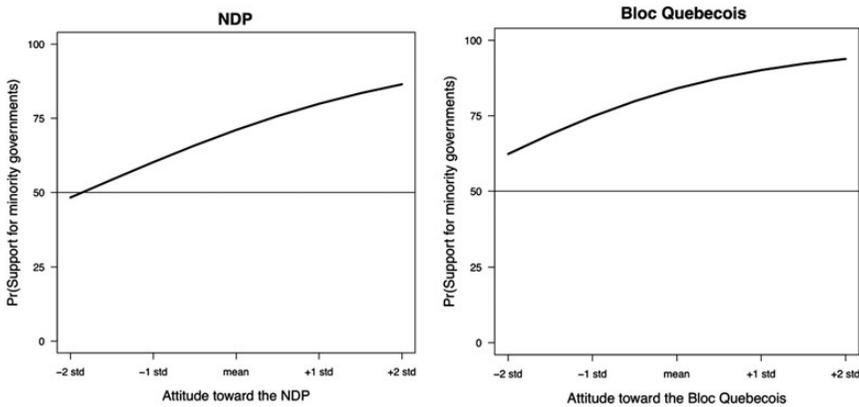
**Figure 1** Attitudes towards the major parties by expected legislative outcomes. *Source:* Canadian Election Study, 2008 (unweighted). Method: binary logistic regression ( $n = 860$ ). Dependent variable: now, your views on minority governments. Do you think minority governments are a good thing, a bad thing or are you not sure? The darker lines represent the probability of supporting minority governments when the party is expected to win the upcoming election and the lighter lines when it is the other party that is expected to win.

different tests. Each plot illustrates the probability of supporting minority government for different values of each independent variables used to test each hypothesis.<sup>13</sup> The results for the test of the first hypothesis concerning strategic motivations are presented separately for each set of potential supporters in Figures 1 and 2. The darker lines in Figure 1 represent the probability of supporting minority governments when the corresponding party is expected to win the upcoming election. The lighter lines, in contrast, reflect the probability of supporting minority governments when that same party is expected to lose.

One general result comes as no surprise at all. People who hold positive views about the major parties, either the Liberals or the Conservatives, are significantly less likely to support the idea of having a minority government. But two striking findings also emerge from Figure 1. First, the expectations concerning the legislative outcomes of the upcoming elections do not seem to matter that much. The effect of different expected legislative outcomes on responses is relatively small, and barely statistically significant.

The second noteworthy finding concerns the asymmetry of the results. Notice that attitudes towards the Conservatives have greater impact on the probability of supporting or opposing minority governments than do the attitudes towards the

<sup>13</sup>These graphs allow for easy interpretation of logit models without resorting to methodological jargon (King *et al.*, 2000). All independent variables are standardized to facilitate comparisons. For economy of presentation, only the 2008 results are shown in the graphs. But the results from the logit models for 2004 and for 2008 are presented numerically in the appendix.

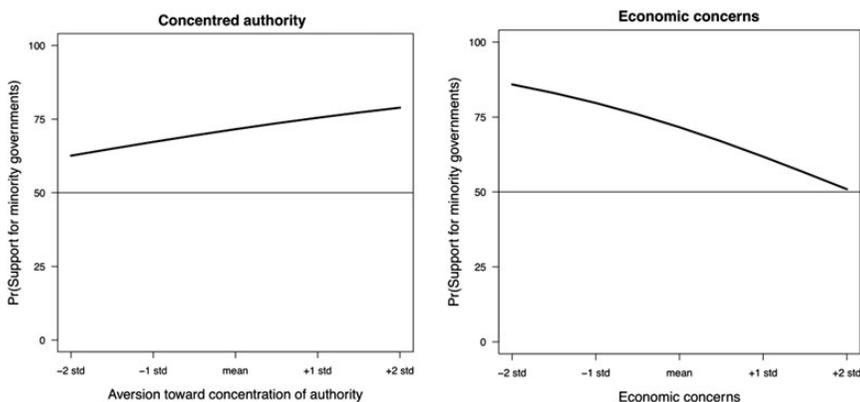


**Figure 2** Attitudes towards the minor parties. *Source:* Canadian Election Study, 2008 (unweighted). Method: binary logistic regression (n = 879). Dependent variable: now, your views on minority governments. Do you think minority governments are a good thing, a bad thing or are you not sure?

Liberals. The probability of supporting minority governments is especially high when people’s attitudes towards the Conservatives are very negative. That effect is even stronger in 2008. Conversely, holding strong positive attitudes towards the Conservatives in 2008 is the most powerful predictor of opposition to the idea of minority governments. And that finding holds even among Conservative partisans who expect their party to lose.

What about the results for the minor parties? In those cases, evidence of the impact of strategic considerations is particularly clear: the more positive people’s attitudes are towards a minor party, the greater is the probability of supporting a minority government outcome. Support for the first hypothesis is confirmed by these results. It is conceivable that minor party support for minority governments might be driven more by the ideological appeal of these parties rather than their status as a ‘minor’ party. A background investigation of that possibility indicates that there is no substantive difference in the results when left-right self-placement is taken into account.

To what extent do principled considerations affect levels of public support for having a minority government outcome? Figure 3 shows that those considerations do matter. People who are averse to concentrated authority, cognitive Madisonians, are more likely to support minority government electoral outcomes. Indeed, that finding holds even after partisanship is taken into account. There are no significant interactions between attitudes towards concentrated authority and level of formal education or partisan identification. On balance, these results support hypothesis 2: principled considerations clearly do shape support for minority governments. But, these outlooks matter less than strategic considerations.



**Figure 3** Attitudes towards concentrated authority and economic concerns. *Source:* Canadian Election Study, 2008 (unweighted). Method: binary logistic regression ( $n = 1067$ ). Dependent variable: now, your views on minority governments. Do you think minority governments are a good thing, a bad thing or are you not sure?

Recall that previous attempts to demonstrate a link between pragmatic economic concerns and views about minority government produced mixed results. In this case, the test results show that people who are concerned about the economy are more likely to oppose minority governments. It is possible that these findings mask underlying partisan considerations. After all, those who are more pre-occupied with economic issues might be more inclined to support the Conservatives. The data do not support this line of speculation. When attitudes towards the Conservative Party are controlled, the substantive effect on pragmatic considerations is minimal. Indeed, none of the interactions between partisan groups or income groups turns out to be statistically significant. On balance, the third hypothesis is confirmed: concerns about the economy do have some effect on levels of support for minority governments.

One strategy for determining whether principled, pragmatic or strategic incentives drive support for minority governments is to consider all of the rival hypotheses together; to estimate a model that includes all predictors.<sup>14</sup> The results of that more expansive test (not shown) reveal that strategic considerations have the strongest effect on support for minority governments, but pragmatic considerations also matter. Principled motivations, in contrast, have smaller effects; they move public opinion about minority governments in the predicted direction but do so more modestly.

<sup>14</sup>Such fully specified model introduces analytic challenges (see [Achen, 2005](#)).

## 5. Concluding discussion

The conventional wisdom, at least in the Canadian setting, is that citizens prefer to have legislative majorities in parliament rather than face the uncertainties that come with having minority governments. A brief review of the available polling evidence going back some 60 years, however, suggests that public preferences in this respect are somewhat volatile and that Canadians are divided on the matter. It is possible of course that these variations might be attributable to differences in question wording or data collection strategies. But evidence from three recent Canadian Election Studies that coincided with minority government outcomes points to a different conclusion. Those data, which come from repeated responses to identical questions, and which use the same data collection strategy, indicate that substantial portions of the Canadian public prefer minority governments. These findings suggest a reevaluation of the conventional wisdom.

No single body of theory offers an explanation for why people would support having a minority government. One goal of this project has been to propose and test three potential explanations. One possibility is that citizens are moved by a sort of cognitive Madisonian impulse: support for minority governments might be driven by a preference for more dispersed authority. In effect, people might prefer a minority government because that electoral outcome checks legislative power and encourages governments to be more responsive to publics.

A second line of speculation holds that public reaction to minority governments might be driven by pragmatic economic considerations. Like some elite counterparts, citizens might associate minority governments with higher levels of public debt and a lack of fiscal discipline. Finally, there is also the possibility that partisan strategic considerations matter; people support having a minority government if such an electoral outcome would serve the interests of the party they support.

The empirical tests of these explanations clearly show that strategic and principled motivations are more important than the principled ones. The sharpest findings come from tests of the strategic hypothesis: people who like minor parties, or who support major parties but anticipate that their party will lose an upcoming election, consistently prefer minority government outcomes. Furthermore, people who are more concerned about the economy are less likely to support minority governments. There is also evidence that people do indeed support the idea of minority government because they are averse to a concentration of authority. When these rival explanations are tested against each other, the evidence is that strategic considerations are clearly the most powerful motivation for why citizens support the principle of minority government. Economic considerations also matter, but less so. And there is much less support for the institutional hypothesis that principled considerations matter.

Considered together, the evidence shows that some arguments evident from elite discourse do resonate with the public in predictable ways. But the findings prompt other research questions. Why, for example, do principled considerations have such a modest impact on public views about minority outcomes? It is possible that, for some, the linkages between minority government status and notions of the democratic accountability and responsiveness are relatively abstract. One implication of that line of speculation is that principled considerations might become more important as publics become more knowledgeable.

## References

- Achen, C. (2005) 'Let's Put Garbage-can Regressions and Garbage-can Probits Where They Belong', *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, **22**, 327–339.
- Ansolabehere, S., Rodden, J. and Snyder Jr., J. M. (2008) 'The Strength of Issues: Using Multiple Measures to Gauge Preference Stability, Ideological Constraint, and Issue Voting', *American Political Science Review*, **102**, 215–232.
- Artés, J. and Bustos, A. (2008) 'Electoral Promises and Minority Governments: An Empirical Study', *European Journal of Political Research*, **47**, 307–333.
- Blais, A. and Nadeau, R. (1996) 'Measuring Strategic Voting: A Two-Step Procedure', *Electoral Studies*, **15**, 39–52.
- Blais, A., Nadeau, R., Gidengil, E. and Nevitte, N. (2001) 'Measuring Strategic Voting in Multiparty Plurality Elections', *Electoral Studies*, **20**, 343–352.
- Blais, A., Gidengil, E., Nadeau, R. and Nevitte, N. (2002) *Anatomy of a Liberal Victory*, Peterborough, Broadview Press.
- Brazier, A. and Kalitowski, S. (2008) *No Overall Control?* London, Hansard Society.
- Butler, D. (1950, January 7) 'Electoral Facts', *The Economist*, 5–7.
- Cody, H. (2008) 'Minority Government in Canada: The Stephen Harper Experience', *American Review of Canadian Studies*, **38**, 27–42.
- de Haan, J., Sturm, J.-E. and Beekhuis, G. (1999) 'The Weak Government Thesis: Some New Evidence', *Public Choice*, **101**, 163–176.
- Delli Carpini, M. X. and Keeter, S. (1996) *What Americans Know About Politics and Why it Matters*, New Haven, Yale University Press.
- Docherty, D. (2008) 'Minority Government in Canada'. In Brazier, A. and Kalitowski, S. (eds) *No Overall Control?* London, Hansard Society.
- Duverger, M. (1954) *Political Parties*, New York, Wiley.
- Edin, P.-A. and Ohlsson, H. (1991) 'Political Determinants of Budget Deficits: Coalition Effects versus Minority Effects', *European Economic Review*, **35**, 1597–1603.
- Fiorina, M. P. (1981) *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections*, New Haven, Yale University Press.

- Fisichella, D. (1975) 'The Italian Experience'. In Finer, S. E. (ed.) *Adversary Politics and Electoral Reform*, London, Wigram.
- Foley, M. (1993) *The Rise of the British Presidency*, Manchester, Manchester University Press.
- Forsey, E. (1964) 'The Problem of "Minority" Government in Canada', *The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, **30**, 1–11.
- Fournier, P. (2002) 'The Uninformed Canadian Voter'. In Everitt, J. and O'Neill, B. (eds) *Citizen Politics: Research and Theory in Canadian Political Behaviour*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Godbout, J.-F. and Høyland, B. (2009) 'Voting Coalitions and Minority Governments in Canada', *Paper Presented at the Annual Meetings of the American Political Science*, Toronto.
- Jenkins, S. (2008) 'Hung Parliaments are a Nightmare'. In Brazier, A. and Kalitowski, S. (eds) *No Overall Control?* London, Hansard Society.
- Key, V. O. (1966) *The Responsible Electorate*, Cambridge, Belknap Press.
- Ladd, E. C. (1990) 'Public Opinion and the Congress Problem', *The Public Interest*, **100**, 57–67.
- Leduc, L. (1977) 'Political Behaviour and the Issue of Majority Government in Two Federal Elections', *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, **10**, 311–339.
- Lupia, A. (1994) 'Shortcuts Versus Encyclopedias: Information and Voting Behavior in California Insurance Reform Elections', *American Political Science Review*, **88**, 63–76.
- Luskin, R. C. (1987) 'Measuring Political Information', *American Journal of Political Science*, **31**, 856–899.
- McCandless, H. E. (2004) 'Public Accountability in a Minority Government', *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, **27**, 31–35.
- Nevitte, N., Blais, A., Gidengil, E. and Nadeau, R. (2000) *Unsteady State: The 1997 Canadian Federal Election*, Toronto, Oxford University Press.
- Niemi, R. G., Whitten, G. and Franklin, M.N. (1992) 'Constituency Characteristics, Individual Characteristics and Tactical Voting in the 1987 British General Election', *British Journal of Political Science*, **22**, 229–254.
- Norton, P. (2008) 'The Perils of a Hung Parliament'. In Brazier, A. and Kalitowski, S. (eds) *No Overall Control?* London, Hansard Society, pp. 109–112.
- Pech, G. (2004) 'Coalition Governments Versus Minority Governments: Bargaining Power, Cohesion and Budgeting Outcomes', *Public Choice*, **121**, 1–24.
- Persson, T. and Tabellini, G. (2005) *The Economic Consequence of Constitutions*, Cambridge, MIT Press.
- Pinho, M.M. (2004) 'Political Modes of Budget Deficits: A Literature Review', Working papers.

- Popkin, S. L. (1991) *The Reasoning Voter: Communication and Persuasion in Presidential Campaigns*, 2nd edn, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- Przeworski, A., Stokes, S. C. and Manin, B. (1999) *Democracy, Accountability, and Representation*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Russell, P. H. (2008) *Two Cheers for Minority Government: The Evolution of Canadian Parliamentary Democracy*, Toronto, Emond Montgomery Publications Limited.
- Savoie, D. J. (1999) *Governing from the Centre: The Concentration of Power in Canadian Politics*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press.
- Sniderman, P. M., Brody, R. A. and Tetlock, P. E. (1991) *Reasoning and Choice: Explorations in Political Psychology*, New-York, Cambridge University Press.
- Strøm, K. (1990) *Minority Government and Majority Rule*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Thomas, P. E. J. (2007) 'Measuring the Effectiveness of Minority Parliament', *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, 30, 22–31.

## Appendix

### (a) Summary of the results from the logistic regression models

Focal independent variables <sup>a</sup>	2004	2008
Hypothesis 1: Strategic		
Attitudes towards the liberals	−0.39*** (0.10) [n = 803]	−0.40 (0.24) [n = 860]
Attitudes towards the Liberals × Expect to lose	0.39* (0.20)	0.57* (0.26)
Attitudes towards the Conservative	−0.41*** (0.09) [n = 1096]	−0.90*** (0.09) [n = 875]
Attitudes towards the Conservative × Expect to lose	0.24 (0.14)	0.73* (0.36)
Attitudes towards the NDP	0.52*** (0.07) [n = 1293]	0.49*** (0.09) [n = 879]
Attitudes towards the Bloc Quebecois	0.77*** (0.15) [n = 297]	0.57** (0.20) [n = 596]
Hypothesis 2: Principled		
Attitudes towards concentrated authority	0.26*** (0.07) [n = 997]	0.20* (0.09) [n = 596]
Hypothesis 3: Pragmatic		
Economic concerns	−0.34*** (0.05) [n = 1684]	−0.44*** (0.07) [n = 1067]

Source: Canadian Election Study, 2004, 2006 and 2008 (unweighted).

Method: binary logistic regression. Log odds (standard errors are in parentheses).

Dependent variable: there may be a minority government, would that be a good thing, a bad thing or do you have no opinion? (2004); now, your views on minority governments. Do you think minority governments are a good thing, a bad thing or are you not sure? (2006, 2008).

<sup>a</sup>Twelve models were run to test the effects of variables of interest. The full set of controls is excluded from the table, but the complete results are available upon request.

\*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01, \*\*\*p < 0.001.