

# Parliamentary Privilege?

## Kinship in Canada's Parliament

In the Canadian parliamentary context, there are numerous contemporary and historical examples of dynastic politicians, but there has been curiously little academic study of this phenomenon. Many questions pertaining to kinship in parliaments remain unanswered. What is the rate of kinship in the Canadian parliament? What has been the rate of change in political kinship over time and can this change be explained? What advantages may dynastic politicians possess and what constraints do they face? This article measures the prevalence of kinship within the lower house in Canada's federal parliament and presents data on kinship since Canada's first parliament. After looking at economic and electoral data, it argues that change to make the electoral system more open and socially inclusive offers an explanation for the observable drop in rates of kinship over time. Finally, the paper will conclude with suggested courses for future research.

**Matthew Godwin**

### Rates of Kinship since Canada's First Parliament

The below analysis begins in 1867, when Canada was granted Dominion status from Great Britain, up to the 2011 federal election, and provides data points in Figure 1 of 'Kinship by Seat Total'; which is to say, the percentage of MPs who have had relatives serve in the House of Commons as a proportion of total MPs. The data points for the 'Kinship by Number of MPs Elected to each Parliament' reflects the number of 'dynastic' MPs elected to the House of Commons in that election. Kinship in Canada's parliament has clearly declined steadily since Confederation (with slight variations over time) and the goal of this article is to offer explanations as to why this happened.

A total of 287 Canadian Members of Parliament since Confederation can be considered dynastic by way of a paternal relationship, such as a father having served in Parliament prior to a daughter or a Grandfather having served in Parliament before his grandson. For example, in 1921 James Woodsworth, the first leader of the Canadian Commonwealth Federation (CCF), was elected to the 14<sup>th</sup> Parliament. His daughter, Winona Grace MacInnis, would go on to represent the New Democratic Party (NDP) in 1965 in the 27<sup>th</sup> Parliament.

A further 35 Members of Parliament have had kin in parliament through marriage. Winona Grace MacInnis was married to CCF MP Angus MacInnis, who served concurrently with her father. A number of female MPs in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were related to other members through marriage, such as the Independent Conservative MP Martha Louise Black. She was the second woman elected to the House of Commons and held Yukon's riding for one term in 1935 while her husband was ill. Her husband, George Black represented Yukon between 1921 and 1945, save for the parliament of 1935. In recent parliaments, there have been a number of spouses sitting concurrently in the House of Commons, perhaps most famously Toronto MPs Jack Layton and Olivia Chow in the 2006, 2008 and 2011 parliaments, respectively.

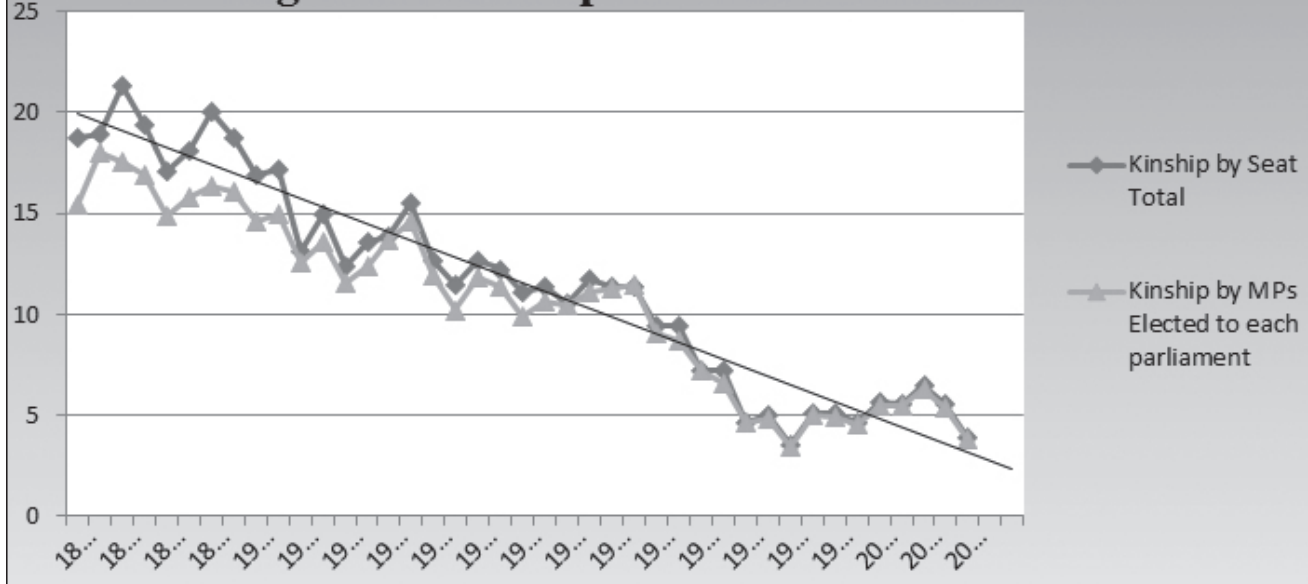
Finally, there have been 95 MPs in the House of Commons who are related to existing or former parliamentarians through the bonds of brotherhood or sisterhood. One exceptional example is that of the three Geoffrion brothers of Quebec, who passed on the Chambly-Verchères riding<sup>1</sup> amongst themselves three times, collectively holding the riding from 1867 to 1911.<sup>2</sup>

Overall, a total of 395 Members of Parliament since Confederation have been related to another MP or Senator. Out of a total number of 4206 MPs elected for the first time, this represents roughly 9.39 per cent of the total. The range over the 144-year period for kinship by seat extends from a height of 21.35 per cent

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**Figure 1: Kinship in Canada's Parliament**



in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Parliament to a low in the 33<sup>rd</sup> parliament of 3.54 per cent. Kinship by Member of Parliament ranges from a high of 17.97 per cent in the second parliament to a low of 3.47 per cent in the 33<sup>rd</sup> parliament and is at 3.83 per cent at the time of writing.

Pairing these two trend lines allows us to gauge the impact electoral turnover has on the rate of kinship in parliament. It is notable that the most significant divergence between the lines is in the first half of the table, where turnover was much higher; as many as 40 by-elections were held to fill vacancies between parliaments. As the amount of turnover has diminished overtime, so has the variation between the lines. This suggests there is a negative relationship between kinship in parliament and the turnover of Members of Parliament.

Despite several small variations, the decline over time is clear. It now remains to consider why this nearly steady decline in the rate of kinship has taken place.

#### Population Growth

At first glance, a simple explanation may be that the decrease in the prevalence of kinship can be explained by the gradual increase in Canada's population since Confederation. Clubok et al.<sup>3</sup> provide a formula to dispel this relationship in the American context and the same formula can be applied here.

The results indicate there is a significant divergence between the actual number of MPs with relatives in each parliament and that predicted by simple population growth. This suggests there are factors involved when it comes to kinship in Parliament other than changes in Canada's population over time.

#### Electoral Upheavals

Canada has experienced its share of electoral upheavals and shifting fortunes for its political parties. When one party loses a significant number of seats to another party, with the incumbent party losing many seats, it may be hypothesized that numerous dynastic MPs would be defeated and a new slate of candidates elected, leading to a "refresh" with a much lower kinship percentage.

Perhaps the most transformative election which casts doubt on this argument is the 1993 election in which the governing Progressive Conservatives were wiped out, save two seats. Following this election, however, there was no change in the percentage of dynastic MPs in the House of Commons.

This question could be alternatively approached from the opposite perspective – can a significant drop in the rate of kinship be explained by electoral outcome? The parliament following the 1908 election resulted in one of the largest drops in kinship in the House of Commons, more than four per cent.

However, the election itself produced very little change politically. The Liberal Party under Sir Wilfrid Laurier had been in office since 1896 and would remain so after this election. The seat change between the two major parties was trifling, with the Conservatives winning just 10 additional seats across the country and the Liberals losing only three.<sup>4</sup> There doesn't appear to be a correlation between major changes in kinship percentage and dramatic electoral change.

### Access to Office

While population growth and electoral upheaval appear to have little impact on kinship, one possible explanation for high levels of kinship in Canada's early history may be linked to institutional advantages for incumbents which are now uncommon and deemed inappropriate in contemporary Canada. Until the Liberals took power in 1878, for example, contracts with the federal government could be awarded through favouritism rather than through a transparent tender process (and this at a time when major, national infrastructure projects were underway). The use of public works contracts in exchange for electoral support created endemic patron-client relationships, impeding the entry of non-establishment candidates. It wasn't until the 1910s that Parliament began to truly reduce pork-barrel politics. Both parties worked

together to "abolish trading in patronage, to fill public offices by merit and not by favouritism, and to establish honest and open competition in awarding contracts and buying supplies."<sup>5</sup> Changes in access to the political system in Canada's early history would have created more windows of opportunity for new entrants to the political system.

Increasing access to the electoral system and the extension of suffrage was a gradual process in the late nineteenth century. Early Canada had a patchwork of electoral laws differing from province to province. In 1885, for example, about 26 per cent of the population in Ontario was eligible to vote or seek office. Possessing property, and of a certain amount, was a common prerequisite for obtaining a ballot in many provinces. As a result, many working-class Canadians were ineligible to cast a ballot or stand for office. The franchise was extended incrementally until the *Dominion Elections Act* of 1920, which granted the franchise to most citizens, removed property requirements and provided women the right to vote.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the Chief Electoral Office was established, removing the power and authority for changes in electoral procedures and processes from the government. The removal of these institutional advantages reduced barriers to new entrants and increased the pool of eligible, non-establishment candidates.

**Table 1**  
**Populations Growth Model**

Parliament	Date	Number of MPs with Relatives Expected by Regression Equation	Number of MPs with Relatives Predicted by Population Model
1	1867	34 (18.8)	34 (18.8)
6	1887	39 (18.13)	30 (13.9)
11	1908	29 (13.12)	21 (9.9)
16	1926	38 (15.51)	16 (6.5)
21	1949	29 (11.068)	19 (7.2)
26	1963	31 (11.32)	9 (3.3)
31	1979	13 (4.6)	7 (2.4)
36	1997	14 (4.65)	6 (1.9)
41	2011	12 (3.89)	5 (1.6)

## Social Modernization and Kinship in Parliament

Using Robert Michels' typology components, which are more usefully described as wealth, kinship and education, and pairing them with the Clubok et al. frame, it's possible to test whether social modernization may offer some insight into the decline of kinship.

### Wealth Trends in Canada<sup>7</sup>

Real Gross National Product (GNP) per capita in Canada, as depicted in Figure 2, is in constant 1985 Canadian Dollars. Real GNP per capita has grown steadily since Confederation, with slight variations, particularly during the Great Depression. Overall, this trend indicates a growing standard of living and level of wealth amongst Canadians.

Michels argues that economic superiority was one of three characteristics separating the "leaders from the led."<sup>8</sup> With increased access to disposable income and capability for capital investment, financial and time constraints involved in mounting a political campaign would be gradually ameliorated for middle and working-class Canadians. The capital resources once only available to those at the upper echelons of Canadian society have become gradually more accessible. This change has made the barriers precluding new entrants from politics on the basis of wealth more permeable.

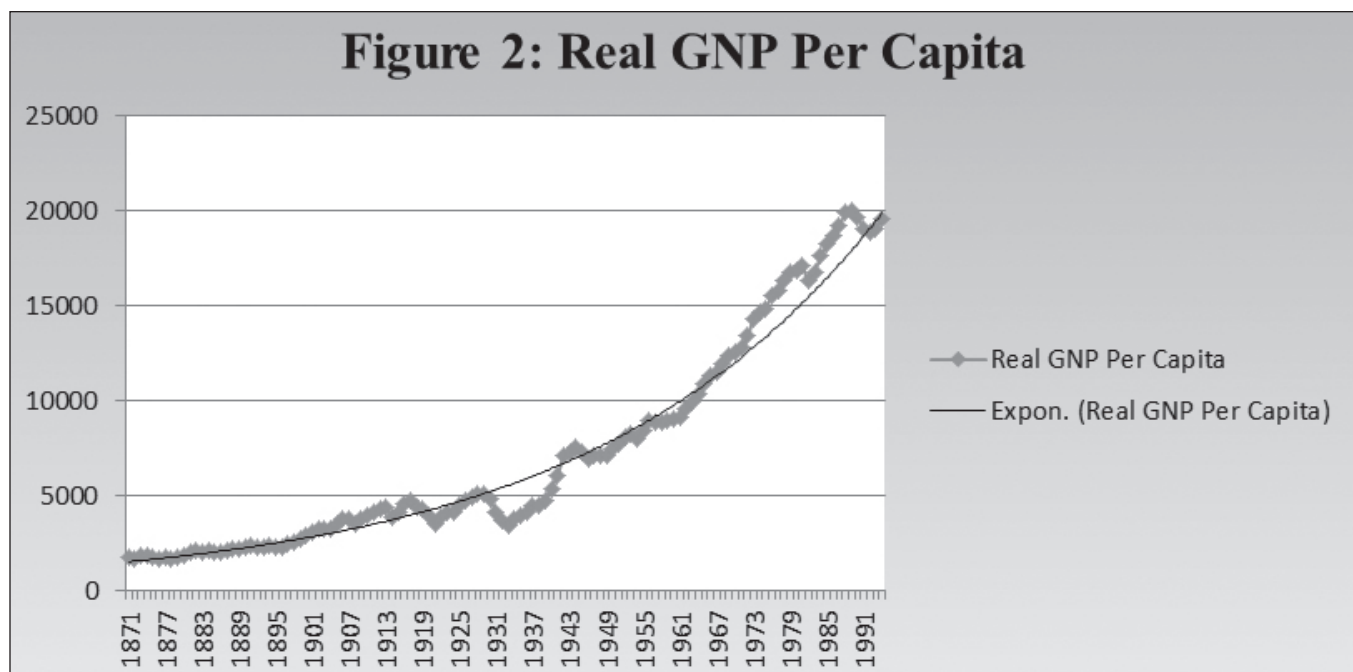
The trend line depicted in Figure 2 is nearly a mirror image of the trend line in Figure 1, indicating that the diminishing number of dynastic Members of Parliament parallels the growing real wealth that average Canadians possess.

### Educational Attainment in Canada

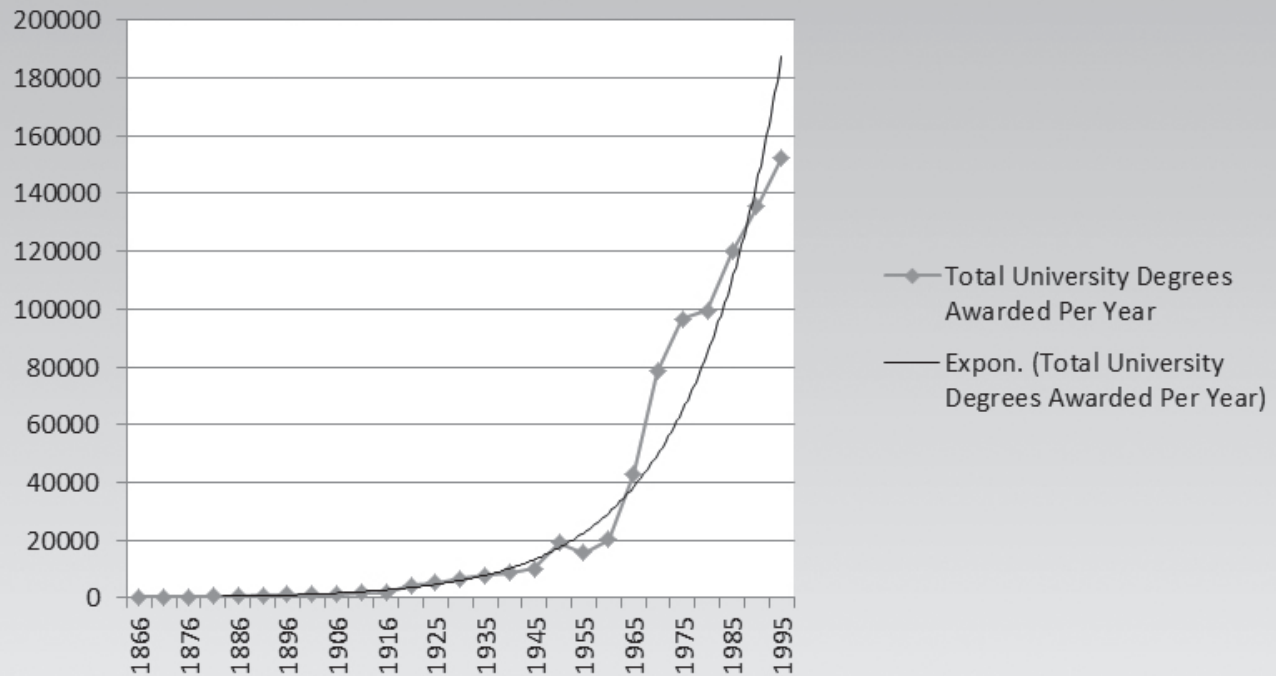
Figure 3 depicts the gradual growth in the number of Canadians obtaining a bachelors, masters or earned doctoral degree since Confederation. The table depicts a very gradual increase beginning in the early twentieth century, followed by a dramatic increase beginning in the 1950s and soaring with the establishment of the welfare state from the 1960s onward.

It is interesting to note that Members of Parliament are far better educated than the average Canadian, even today.<sup>9</sup> A recent survey of MPs conducted by Samara Canada found that 86 per cent of MPs in the Canadian House of Commons held at least one post-secondary degree and nearly half had more than one degree. As of 2009, 25 percent of the general population held a university degree.<sup>10</sup>

Michels argues that intellectual superiority plays an important role in the maintenance of power for established groups and it is clear that elected officials in Canada are far more educated than the general populace. Significant strides in access to post-



**Figure 3: Total University Degrees Awarded Per Year**



secondary education have been made since the middle of the last century with the trend expected to continue, which will ensure an increasingly level playing field with respect to educational attainment.

### **Relational Advantages and Institutional Constraints**

The legislative kinship literature identifies a number of factors dynastic politicians have benefitted from or been constrained by in countries around the world. The following section reviews these factors in the Canadian context and categorizes them into relational and institutional factors. Canadian politicians benefit from relational advantages, but are mostly constrained by institutional advantages.

Relational advantages include the inheritance of institutional knowledge, networks and financial resources as well as the family brand from contemporaries or predecessors. They are relational in that they are internal to the families involved in the political occupation and there is little that can be done by reformers to mitigate these advantages.

In Canada's complex federal system, the individual mechanics of each party as well as complicated legislative and procedural processes can be daunting to those uninitiated into the political process. Add to this electoral finance and campaign regulations, and institutional knowledge becomes a significant advantage to those entrants who possess it. Knowing how to form a campaign team, manage finances and organize campaign resources is knowledge not attainable through most other Canadian professions.

Dal Bó et. al<sup>11</sup> argue tenure length offers increasing returns for building political capital. The longer a politician remains in office, the more capital they are able to build and subsequently pass on to a relative. They associate tenure with increasing opportunities to gain experience, such as through leadership on committees. In their analysis, the more positions within the party and legislative apparatuses a legislator obtains, the more knowledge they acquire and are able to pass on to kin entering the same profession.



Tenure length in previous studies solely considers the tenures of elected politicians. Many Canadian MPs, regardless of their length of elected tenure, have been subsequently appointed to the Senate. While in the Senate they do not face the threat of re-election, furthering their knowledge of Canada's parliamentary institutions years afterward. Canadian dynastic entrants will clearly gain an advantage from having institutional knowledge communicated to them by family members.

From an agency perspective of profit-maximizing voters, Laband and Lentz<sup>12</sup> argue that voters may view dynastic candidates as potentially more effective legislators given the presumption of greater institutional knowledge. Through the knowledge gained by having family members in office, politicians become more informed and by extension more influential representatives with a greater capacity to benefit their districts.

A second relational advantage is the inheritance of capital resources and political networks. Inheriting financial resources from one generation to the next, or transferring them to a spouse or sibling creates a significant advantage for any entrant into the electoral process. Lists of campaign contributors and access to political organizers and strategists are all considerable electoral advantages. Resources such as donor lists, campaign organizers and networks within communities allow dynastic, successor candidates to have early access to entry points to community power structures through their predecessor. These access points may not be available to the non-dynastic candidate.

Finally, the most closely studied relational advantage in the literature is the transferable benefit obtained from having the same surname as a family relation who currently or previously held office. Dynastic entrants take full advantage of this asset and are strategically aware of the dividends it can provide. In the United States, Dal Bó et al. find that dynastic legislators are more likely to seek office in the state from which their anterior relative served as a Congressional representative. Feinstein<sup>13</sup> bolsters this conclusion with his finding that of the 46 dynastic candidates he analyzed in the U.S., 44 ran in the states where their relative held office. Additionally, he utilizes survey data indicating voters prefer dynastic candidates. Feinstein finds that voters may not be able to recall those specific qualities of a dynastic candidate they prefer, but respondents nevertheless view them more favourably than non-dynastic challengers.

In the Canadian context many institutional factors are better viewed as constraints and may have served to mitigate the preponderance of dynastic politicians in Canada and to hasten the gradual decline. The institutional constraints considered below include the inability of MPs to spend funds directly in their constituencies, an unelected Upper Chamber, no term limits, high turnover of MPs and strict party discipline.

Pork-barreling is the practice of dispersing state benefits to political supporters.<sup>14</sup> Beginning with direct spending in constituencies, one of the fundamental principles of Westminster parliamentary systems is the inability of individual members of the House of Commons to spend government funds in their ridings. While the Crown is only able to spend money with the consent of Parliament, the power to spend discretionary funds amongst individual members is limited to office budgets and personal expenditures, such as meals and travel. For MPs, these small expenditures are reviewed by non-partisan civil servants.<sup>15</sup>

A second institutional constraint in Canada is its unelected Upper Chamber. According to the literature, having an elected upper chamber creates an opportunity for the advancement of dynastic politicians and, more importantly, an access point for other family members.<sup>16</sup> In the Philippine and American contexts, members sitting in the lower house often seek advancement to the more prestigious upper chamber, which leaves their lower house seat vacant. This creates an access point for arrivals from the same family who would benefit from the above noted relational advantages in obtaining the vacant seat. Dal Bó et. al find that dynastic legislators are more common in the U.S. Senate (13.5 per cent) than in the House of Representatives (7.7 per cent). Given that MPs are unlikely to seek membership in the Senate, new access points in the House of Commons for family members through voluntary vacancies are unlikely to appear.<sup>17</sup>

A third institutional constraint for Canadian MPs is the absence of term limits. Canadian Members of the House of Commons are subject to five-year terms, but these terms are rarely realized to their full extent. Canadian MPs may seek office *ad infinitum*. In the Philippines, the 1987 constitution attempted to address the preponderance of dynastic families retaining public office by introducing term limits, with Senators being limited to two six-year terms and congressmen limited to three, three-year terms. This reform was

meant to diminish the incumbency advantage, but has perversely had the effect of further entrenching dynastic families by allowing new family entrants to assume lower offices as members of the same family leave those offices at the end of their term and ascend to higher office. Querubin also argues that term limits may create agency problems by compelling potential new entrants to wait until the incumbent's term has been exhausted, thereby discouraging new entrants from challenging incumbents prior to their departure.

A fourth institutional constraint mitigating the potential for high rates of parliamentary kinship is the relatively high level of political office turnover in Canada. Canada has had a high turnover of representatives at the national level since the beginning of Parliament.<sup>18</sup> Since Confederation, the average years of service for MPs has ranged from three to eight years, with an overall mean of 5.675 years of service. Roughly one third of MPs following a given election are new to Parliament Hill.

The literature universally argues a link between tenure length and the likelihood of having posterior relatives follow in office. In the American context, Dal Bó et. al conclude that a second term in office doubles the probability of having a relative enter Congress afterward. Querubin finds the same with respect to the correlation between term lengths and the probability of legislators being followed by relatives, although the likelihood is far higher in the Philippines than anywhere else in the literature.

A final institutional characteristic which may serve to limit the rate of kinship in parliament is Canada's highly centralized policy and agenda-setting process, which is concentrated almost entirely in the Leader's Office of all major Canadian parties. MPs do have the capacity to introduce Private Member's bills in the House of Commons, but these rarely become law. As a result, the opportunity for MPs to "take credit" for individual policy or legislative successes is very limited, which inhibits the building of political capital in their riding and within their party.

Furthermore, MPs also have very little discretion with respect to how they vote on legislative matters. In general, they vote as their respective parties dictate and face a heavy toll for defiance of party directives, including banishment from the caucus and/or the party.<sup>19</sup> Party constraints such as these diminish the capacity for representatives to build the political capital necessary to pass on to relatives seeking office.

## Conclusion

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Compared to other countries considered in the literature, legislative kinship in Canada ranks at the bottom with 3.8% as of the 41<sup>st</sup> parliament. This is far below countries such as the Philippines, which counts more than two-thirds of its national assembly as dynastic. Japan's legislative kinship rate is roughly one-third and Canada is also below the United States at six per cent.<sup>20</sup>

The Canadian House of Commons since Confederation has seen a steady, nearly uninterrupted decline in kinship. Population growth does not explain this process and neither do electoral upheavals. However, changes to Canada's electoral laws and the expansion of suffrage have created opportunities for new entrants. Finally, the diminishment of parliamentary pork-barrelling in the early twentieth century also limited the capacity for families to secure a multi-generational presence in parliament.

Michels argues that kinship, wealth and education bolstered the capacity for elites to remain in positions of power. Interestingly, his suppositions appear to be given new credence when trends in rising wealth and levels of education in Canada are contrasted with the decline of kinship over time. As the general population became more educated and had greater access to capital, the number of new entrants to the political process increased, challenging established families.

Canadian politicians benefit from relational advantages such as institutional knowledge, access to financial and organizational networks and name recognition. Yet these relational advantages sit in contrast to a number of institutional constraints embedded in Canadian politics, including an inability to transfer state funds directly into constituencies, the presence of an unelected upper chamber, the absence of term limits, a high rate of turnover and the centralization of legislative authority in the Leader's Office.

## Notes

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- 1 The riding had previously been referred to as "Verchères, Quebec".
- 2 It is worth noting here that Canadian Members of Parliament are not subject to term limits and may seek office as many times as they are eligible to do so and in any constituency.

- 3 Alfred B. Clubok et al. "Family Relationships, Congressional Recruitment, and Political Modernization." *The Journal of Politics* 31 (4), 1969: pp. 1035–1062.
- 4 J. Murray Beck. *Pendulum of Power: Canada's Federal Elections*. Prentice-Hall of Canada: Scarborough, 1968, p. 106.
- 5 Lawrence Leduc, Jon H. Pammett, Judith I. McKenzie, André Turcotte. *Dynasties and Interludes: Past and Present in Canadian Electoral Politics*. Dundurn Press: Toronto, 2010, p. 93.
- 6 Ibid., p. 98.
- 7 <http://guides.library.dal.ca/data> - Real Gross National Product Per Capita
- 8 Robert Michels. *Political parties; a sociological study of the oligarchical tendencies of modern democracy*. Free Press: Glencoe, Ill., 1949, p. 53.
- 9 C.E.S. Franks. *The Parliament of Canada*. University of Toronto Press: Toronto, p. 66.
- 10 This data only includes Canadian provinces. See [http://www5.statcan.gc.ca/access\\_acces/alternative\\_alternatif.action?l=eng&teng=Educational%20attainment%20of%20the%20population%20aged%2025%20to%2064&tfra=Niveau%20de%20scolarité%20de%20la%20population%20âgée%20de%2025%20à%2064%20ans&loc=/pub/81-582-x/2010003/excel/d6.3-eng.xls](http://www5.statcan.gc.ca/access_acces/alternative_alternatif.action?l=eng&teng=Educational%20attainment%20of%20the%20population%20aged%2025%20to%2064&tfra=Niveau%20de%20scolarité%20de%20la%20population%20âgée%20de%2025%20à%2064%20ans&loc=/pub/81-582-x/2010003/excel/d6.3-eng.xls)
- 11 Ernesto Dal Bó, Pedro Dal Bó and Jason Snyder. "Political Dynasties." *Review of Economic Studies* 76 (1), 2009: p. 115-142.
- 12 David N. Laband and Bernard F. Lentz.. "Favorite Sons: Intergenerational Wealth Transfers Among Politicians." *Economic Inquiry* 23 (3), 1985: pp. 395-414.
- 13 Brian D. Feinstein. "The Dynasty Advantage: Family Ties in Congressional Elections." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 35(4), 2010: pp. 571-98.
- 14 Maureen McTeer. *Parliament: Canada's Democracy and How it Works*. Random House of Canada: Toronto, 1987, p. 91.
- 15 An exception to this practice are the Ministers of the Crown, who oversee departments and departmental expenditures. Ministers are able to direct the spending priorities of their departments and have, at both levels of government, been accused in the past of using this authority for political advantage.
- 16 Pablo Querubin. "Political Reform and Elite Persistence: Term Limits and Political Dynasties in the Philippines." Harvard Academy for International and Area Studies, 2012. URL: [http://pclt.cis.yale.edu/leitner/resources/papers/Querubin\\_Term\\_Limits.pdf](http://pclt.cis.yale.edu/leitner/resources/papers/Querubin_Term_Limits.pdf)
- 17 Additionally, unlike in the United States, politicians in Canada do not continually seek to advance up a hierarchical "ladder" from lower office to higher office. Barrie and Gibbons (1989) find very few Canadian MPs have provincial experience. In comparison, many American legislators move from state office, to the House of Representatives and finally to the Senate or the presidency. This disinclination to move from one office to another through a hierarchy of prestige creates fewer windows of opportunity for family members to seek the former office of a relative.
- 18 Franks, p. 74.
- 19 Franks, p. 35.
- 20 Ronald U. Mendoza, Beja Jr., Edsel L., Venida Victor Soriano and David Yap. "An Empirical Analysis of Political Dynasties in the 15th Philippine Congress." Social Science Research Network, 2012. URL: [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1969605](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1969605)