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REVIEW ESSAY/ESSAI CRITIQUE

Party Unity and Discipline in Canadian Politics

Lost on Division: Party Unity in the Canadian Parliament

Jean-François Godbout, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020, pp. 312.

Whipped: Party Discipline in Canada

Alex Marland, Vancouver: UBC Press, 2020, pp. 480.

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Anyone with a passing understanding of Canadian politics is aware of the stubborn presence of party discipline in the parliamentary system. It is not a phenomenon that has been left to the stuffy corners of the ivory tower. Political actors and the media have complained about party discipline for decades. Reforms have been proposed; party leaders have promised new ways forward. As a central trait of Canadian Parliament, party discipline has driven away voters—it has even inspired the development of new political parties. What role can Canadian political science play in understanding party discipline 75 years after these familiar sentiments appeared in the predecessor to this journal: “How could this control [party discipline] be destroyed, and the individual member be made an independent critic of government and of legislation, and a responsible servant of the people” (Morton, 1946: 136)? It turns out Canadian political science has much to offer. With the publication of J. F. Godbout’s *Lost on Division: Party Unity in the Canadian Parliament* and Alex Marland’s *Whipped: Party Discipline in Canada*, 2020 has been a monumental year for the study of Canadian Parliament and political parties.

While much important work has emerged in recent decades (see Johnston, 2017; Koop et al., 2018), comprehensive exam reading lists are still anchored on pre-twenty-first century canonical classics such as the late Ned Franks’s *The Parliament of Canada* (1987) and David Docherty’s *Mr. Smith Goes to Ottawa* (1997). In presenting new research grounded in painstaking data mining, exhaustive qualitative research and insider accounts, Godbout and Marland have dropped a new anchor in our understanding of Canadian Parliament and political parties.

Coming on the heels of Marland’s 2017 Donner Prize-winning *Brand Command: Canadian Politics and Democracy in the Age of Message Control* (2016), *Whipped* delivers what scholars and readers have come to expect from his work. In his new book, Marland asks how party discipline and parliamentary politics in Canada have evolved in the contemporary political communications environment. Marland presents evidence that party discipline has been intensified by the increase in message discipline. Supported by 131 interviews and almost 40 pages of works cited, Marland builds on his previous work on political party branding. *Whipped* renews our understanding of Canadian parliamentary politics and party discipline in the modern

setting, where we see intensifying message discipline across a range of new platforms and technologies. Writing in accessible plain language, Marland pushes his argument forward with a mix of convincing new primary research. This research includes political actors' anecdotes and government documents that illuminate the modern Canadian parliamentary environment. For example, in his chapter titled "Caucus Research Bureaus," Marland presents daily issues briefing emails and "social media shareables" from the Liberal Research Bureau that convincingly demonstrate the influence of this relatively overlooked parliamentary office. The sheer amount of new primary data Marland reveals lays the groundwork for many other scholars to pick up where he has left off.

At times, Marland's deep, detailed and primary research-supported descriptions of the secret worlds of Canadian Parliament—cabinet, caucus and the Prime Minister's Office—feel almost Tocquevillian, as he reveals insight into institutions the field has struggled to understand. The nuanced account of how prime ministers manage dissent in meetings, the complicated role of the party whip or the evolving approaches party leaders have taken to caucus leadership all add immensely to both scholars' and Canadians' understanding of Canadian Parliament and its collision with modern political parties. Yet while the book helps us understand the current climate, especially with a chapter dedicated to 2019's SNC-Lavalin affair, Marland does not neglect the past. While Marland's book is up-to-date with references to parliamentarians' use of TikTok, GIFs and complicated databases, the text is anything but ahistorical, with John Diefenbaker or Brian Mulroney examples lurking in the pages soon after tables presenting candidate retweets. The choice to move beyond a contemporary case study and to a more comprehensive view of the institution was a key decision, and it strengthens the theory building of this work.

Marland presents some of the first academic accounts of the Justin Trudeau cabinet and caucus. In so doing, he not only contributes to the Canadian parliamentary, political party and political communications literature but also to literature on the Canadian political executive. Dedicating a chapter to "Government Centralization," Marland builds on the recent excellent contributions by Ian Brodie (2018) and Patrice Dutil (2017) to continue in Donald Savoie's footsteps, examining an institution that is doggedly difficult to study. Further, and possibly in the spirit of recent research and advocacy work by the excellent Samara Centre for Democracy, Marland concludes the book with a chapter of "Advice for a New Parliamentarian," adding applicability to an already accessible text. Notably, Marland presents a table of "Stereotypes of Canadian parliamentarians" that will be especially useful in future academic study frameworks, terrific for teaching about Parliament and a resource for pundits seeking helpful adjectives in explaining the behaviour of elected officials.

J. F. Godbout's outstanding *Lost on Division: Party Unity in the Canadian Parliament* is a master class in identifying the gaps in an area of research, demonstrating full command of the previous literature and posing and answering research questions with inspiring scope and breadth. Godbout's central research concern is with the origins of party discipline in Canadian Parliament. With an unprecedented dataset (the House of Commons portion includes 2,346,490 individual voting decisions) and statistical tests that fill almost 50 tables and figures, Godbout finds that changes to parliamentary rules played a key and overlooked role. The thoroughness of Godbout's search for a better understanding of Canadian parliamentary party discipline is an extraordinary feat.

Godbout organizes the book in logical sequence, unpacking the puzzle of party voting unity in Parliament by using his data to test such individual-level determinants of voting as parliamentary rules, electoral pressure or career and socialization effects. Beyond the multiple tests of independent variables on party unity, Godbout includes more focused case studies of parliamentary and political party phenomena such as religious alignment, regionalism and the emergence of third parties. Even while maintaining a comprehensive approach and presenting as

contemporary an account as possible, the book concludes with a detailed historical analysis of developments in Canadian Parliament's upper chamber, the Senate. Like Marland, Godbout offers deep historical perspective juxtaposed with the most up-to-date data and examples.

One of the major strengths of Godbout's writing style is that he makes the reader feel like they are in his office with him, peeking over his shoulder at the massive amount of data, asking him question after question about what hypothesis he is testing, why this method fits, what he hopes to find next. And there he is, patiently answering each question in a painstakingly methodical fashion. As deep as Godbout takes the reader in exploring his new data, similarly to Marland's *Whipped*, the text is brought to life with qualitative, archival, historical evidence to support the argumentative narrative. The close attention paid to Robert Borden's Union government and the literature of the early 1920s farmers' movement is effective in illuminating critical points of the quantitative evidence. While Godbout takes the reader down many diverging paths of inquiry, he never loses sight of the underlying research question and contribution of the book's narrative: the place of Parliament and parliamentary rules in the understanding of Canadian political party development.

The enduring contribution of Godbout's work will most likely be the effectiveness in which he pursues his research objective: to help better explain the development of party unity over time, with historical systematic data on legislative behaviour. In challenging foundational Canadian party system theses (Johnston, 2017) with the novel perspective of how Parliament explains the development of the party system, Godbout's theoretical positioning and methodological approach insulate him from the risks of this daunting task. In the end, the book presents a "chain of evidence" that will inspire future research questions on Canadian political parties and Parliament and inform how these phenomena are taught in classrooms.

Unlike Marland in *Whipped*, Godbout does not conclude his book with a section on institutional reform proposals or advice for parliamentarians, but this difference in the two authors' approaches highlights why these two new books complement each other so well. Both authors present an authentic voice and a clear approach to addressing and answering the research questions they pose. As exciting as the new evidence—both qualitative and quantitative—is for our understanding of Canadian political parties, Parliament and parliamentarians, Godbout and Marland have provided outstanding models for manuscript-length treatments of political inquiry.

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