

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/266674806>

# Of Wedge Issues and Conservative Politics in Canada. The Case of Gun Registry Elimination

Conference Paper · April 2012

---

CITATION

1

---

READS

385

2 authors, including:



[Thierry Giasson](#)

Laval University

34 PUBLICATIONS 133 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)

***Of Wedge Issues and Conservative Politics in Canada. The Case of Gun Registry Elimination.***

Thierry Giasson, Université Laval  
David Dumouchel, Université Laval

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, April 2012

**Abstract:**

While international scholars have investigated the potential effects of wedge issues on turnout and vote's valence, Canadian research has been silent on how these issues are used by political parties who try to maximise their electoral efficiency. This paper investigates how, from 2008 to 2011, the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC) has engaged in wedge politics by invoking the elimination of the gun registry (EGR) issue. The study presents content analysis data of all mentions made in federal parliamentary debates to the EGR. The prevailing context of minority governance of the period also constitutes an interesting research environment, where wedge issues should be instrumentalized by the governing party as a way to gain a majority. The description of this strategy will help better understand *how* wedge issues divisive properties are activated, thus shedding new light on the debate about their potential vote mobilizing effects. The paper also contributes to knowledge production on Canadian's wedge politics, a concept broadly discussed in the media but that has not received sufficient scientific attention.

**Draft version. Please to not cite without authors' consent.**

The issue of the elimination of the gun registry (EGR) has been a favourite subject of the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC) since it came into power in January 2006. The issue was invoked at least once during almost 60% of the parliamentary debates that occurred between 2006 and 2011. However, a survey<sup>1</sup> conducted immediately after the 2006 elections revealed that the EGR was at the bottom of the list of concerns of Canadian citizens, far behind other issues such as health, responsibility and ethics, taxes, the sponsorship scandal and the environment. How can the insistence of the CPC on this marginal issue be explained? Why has it become the pet subject of Stephen Harper, a politician recognized by many for his strategic acumen (Castonguay, *Le Devoir*, 2010; Martin, 2010a)? It seems logical to assume that the EGR present a special strategic interest for the CPC. This hypothesis seems to be echoed by the opposing parties as evidenced by the following comment of NDP MP Jim Maloway: “The government really does not want to get rid of the gun registry. It would like that issue to hang around as long as possible because it is worth thousands of votes” (2010, 1898).

Along the same lines, a number of journalists believe that the EGR is an ideal “wedge issue” for the CPC (Fiorito, *Toronto Star*, 2010; Moore, *National Post*, 2010). The media do not properly define the concept, but suggest that these issues were chosen according to their divisive potential. The topic is popular among journalists; hundreds of articles, editorials and columns have been dealing with it every year since the Conservative Party of Canada came to power<sup>2</sup>. According to the press, Harper would be a “master of wedge politics” (Bourgault-Côté, *Le Devoir*, 2011) who would not hesitate to risk everything “on narrow appeal and wedge issues” (Martin, *Globe and Mail*, 2010b). Despite all this media attention, no Canadian study has focused on this issue. This paper presents the exploratory results of an initial study on how Canadian political parties invoke wedge issues. It examine how the CPC mobilizes the issue of EGR in its political discourse in order to feed dissension among the opposition parties and make electoral gains. Before outlining the methodology used in this research, we will present a brief review of the literature on the concepts of wedge politics and wedge issues, followed by our research questions and hypotheses. Results will then be introduced.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Canadian Election Studies — 2006 Post Election Survey*. Consulted at <http://www.queensu.ca/cora/index.html>

<sup>2</sup> Over the past two years, 243 articles that explicitly referred to wedge politics and wedge issues were published in *The Toronto Star*, *Globe and Mail* and *National Post*. Since the concept was not yet francized, it is more difficult to assess the quantity of texts dedicated to it in the French press, although they are numerous.

### *Of issues and wedge issues in politics*

In their seminal work on wedge issues and wedge politics, Wilson and Turnbull offered a definition that clearly illustrates their systemic nature:

We take wedge politics to be *a calculated political tactic* aimed at **using divisive social issues** [our emphasis] to gain political support, weaken opponents and strengthen control over the political agenda. [...] For populist or divisive politics to count as wedge politics, another layer of political calculation must be involved: to take advantage of issues or policies that undermine the *support base of a political opponent*. The tactical effect is twofold: to use strategically populist measures to appeal to an opponent's political base, which then forces the opposing party either to distance itself from unpopular causes or face political marginalization (2001: 386).

Conducting wedge politics necessarily involves instrumentalizing an issue having the potential to divide the opposing political coalitions. The term “coalition” refers to all MPs of a political party and to all electors supporting them or likely to do so. By definition, all issues are divisive since they involve two opposing claims (Crowley, 1994: 33). More specifically, issues are “debatable topics of public interest that are connected with controversial opinions, expectations, or problem solutions” (Röttger, 2008). The political science literature distinguishes two types of issues: hard issues and easy issues (Carmines and Stimson, 1980). Easy issues have three characteristics: “it would be symbolic rather than technical; it would more likely deal with political ends than means; it would be an issue long on the political agenda” (*Ibid.*: 79). They also have the particularity of producing “gut” responses, i.e., a response that is not a [a] “conscious calculation of the policy benefits for alternative electoral choices” (*Ibid.*: 78), but rather an emotional response rooted in an individual's beliefs and values. Conversely, hard issues are pragmatic, *ad hoc* and focused on the means to reach a goal that generally enjoys wide consensus support (*Ibid.*: 81).

Wedge issues are easy issues (Bowman, 2006: 14; Taylor, 2009: 4). They are defined by *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* as being “an issue that divides or causes conflict in an otherwise unified group<sup>3</sup>”. They however have characteristics that separate them from other issues. First of all, they are not very important to the majority of citizens, but they have a major influence over certain segments of the population. McGowan spoke in this regard about an “intensity gap in feeling” (2007: 5). In more specific terms, a wedge issue cannot

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/wedge+issue>

be very high on the national agenda; at the same time, it must be important enough to determine the vote of certain constituents.

The consideration given to such an issue by these constituents must also confront them to a “political dilemma”. Hillygus and Shields refers to such voters as *cross-pressured partisans*, who seem to be “willing to reassess their expected support for their party’s nominee if they come to believe that an issue about which they disagree with their party is at stake in the election” (2008: 4). The idea of “political dilemma” therefore refers to the pressure produced by an irreconcilable incompatibility between a voter’s position on an issue that is of uttermost importance to him and that of his “natural” party for which he would vote without taking this issue into consideration. Identifying wedge issues involves carrying out market intelligence to identify different segments of constituents that might be facing such political dilemmas. In this respect, Wilson and Turnbull said that wedge issues are identified through several political marketing methods, such as surveys, focus groups, media monitoring and consumer profile analysis (2001: 386).

However, the wedge issue, in itself has no effect. Its divisive potential is only activated when it is invoked by a political player seeking to produce dissension within opposing political coalitions, in order to gain a strategic advantage or to tighten his control on the political and media agenda (Wilson and Turnbull, 2001: 386). Wedge politics involve invoking a wedge issue for strategic purposes.

Although there may at times be confusion regarding the terms used, the dimensions brought up by all conceptual definitions remain the same. On the one hand, wedge politics implies the calculated instrumentalization of a wedge issue by a political player (Hillygus and Shields, 2008; McGowan, 2008; Wiant, 2002; Wilson and Turnbull, 2001). On the other hand, it must provide a strategic advantage to the one who invokes it. This advantage might come in two forms, which are not mutually exclusive: creating dissension within opposing political forces (either in the electorate or in the group of MPs) and strengthening its control over the political and media agenda.

The scientific literature presents a lively debate on the importance of issues during election campaigns and their influence on electoral results. A number of researchers have demonstrated the crucial role of issues when people are choosing whom to vote for (Abramowitz, 1994; Eijk and Franklin, 1996). The few researchers who have studied the effects of wedge politics on voters have found some significant ones (Hillygus and Shields, 2008; McGowan, 2007; Snyder et coll., 2009; Wilson and Turnbull, 2001).

For example, during the 2004 American presidential elections, nearly one out of three voters was exposed to “cross-pressures”, i.e., their position on one or more issues conflicted with that of his “natural” party (Hillygus and Shields, 2008: 79). A third of them voted against their party in different swing states, in which political parties invest most of their resources (*Ibid.*: 93). In Ohio, where George W. Bush’s campaign had targeted African-American Evangelical Churches by emphasizing his opposition to gay marriage, he gained 7% of this community, versus only 2% in the rest of the country (McGowan, 2007: 11). This percentage climbed to 17% of voters who went to church more than once a week, “voters statistically more likely to feel intensely opposed to gay marriage” (*idem*). Even in states where efforts to persuade were less intense, 11% of American citizens voted against their “natural” partisan affiliation (Hillygus and Shields, 2008: 94). One study showed a comparable influence during the 1996 Australian national election, which was marked by the strategic use of wedge issues on social security and unemployment (Wilson and Turnbull, 2001).

Based on a statistical approach using national post-electoral surveys, these studies appear to be an oversimplification since they reduce wedge politics to its effects on voters. The work of Bowman (2006) showed, however, that wedge issues can also have an influence on politicians. Bowman proposes a case study regarding a vote on two bills in the California State Legislature on stem-cell research, a well-known wedge issue in the United States (Hillygus and Shields, 2008: 60). All representatives whose seats were hotly disputed during the previous election had aligned with the opinion of constituents in their district. Only six out of the 53 MPs voted “against” the will of their voters (Bowman, 2006: 51). The study’s results thus suggest that politicians are sensitive to voters’ opinions on wedge issues, which opens up some interesting areas for research.

To date, research only looked at the effects of wedge politics on voter turnout and on vote valence. However, its success depends on several factors:

[There] are undoubtedly many other factors we have not considered that will influence the success of the [wedge] strategy, including the broader media dialogue, the incumbent's performance, interest group pressures, candidate credibility on the issue, the technical difficulty of the issue, and the framing of the message, among others (Hillygus and Shields, 2008: 38).

It is logical to assume that the effects of a message can in no way be dissociated from how it is delivered. In this view, previous work on wedge politics is fragmented and incomplete. Therefore, it appears necessary to re-assess these results in light of the study of communications tactics used to publicize the issues that are mobilized with a divisive purpose in mind. Like Hillygus and Shields, we are convinced of the importance the framing of wedge issues plays in generating their full effects. However, our approach does not focus on the conceptualized framing process in terms of its competitive dimension, i.e., a game between the different players involved in the political communication process to control the definition of a situation or of an issue (Entman, 2004). Our main focus rather concerns the intentions expressed by political players who use wedge issues in their official communications. We would like to understand how political parties mobilize wedge issues in their political communications strategies.

No analysis has specifically looked at the way in which wedge issues are invoked, at the manner in which wedge political tactics manifest themselves in language. And yet, this is a fundamental issue, since it is likely to considerably influence the success of any wedge strategy. Our study attempts to provide an initial explanation for this question. Since our process is based on an exploratory approach, the research question discussed is deliberately broad.

### ***Research question and hypothesis***

Political marketing is now used in all Western democracies (Lilleker and Lees-Marshment, 2005). Canada is no exception to the rule (Marland, Giasson and Lees-Marshment, 2012; Marland, 2005). Researchers have linked the recent election success of the Conservative Party of Canada with its market research efforts and the incorporation of the resulting information into its communications strategy (Marland 2012; Turcotte, 2012; Paré and Berger, 2008). Consequently, we will conduct a case study of the Conservative Party of Canada. In spite of the reputation of the

Harper government regarding wedge politics (Bourgault-Côté, *Le Devoir*, 2010; Cornellier, *Le Devoir*, 2010a; Martin, *Globe and Mail*, 2010 b), the subject has not yet been studied in the Canadian context. The case is all the more appropriate considering the CPC has governed in a rather singular political context since it came to power. In six years, it went through three elections, formed two minority governments and experienced several politically turbulent periods. We believe this context favours the use of any strategy that would destabilize opponents and help control political debate. Indeed, a specific culture prevails in a minority parliament, “in which the threat of an election guides each step, every word, every strategic choice” (Cornellier, *Le Devoir*, 2011). Everything leads to believe that wedge politics were well represented there.

Our study of this wedge political strategy focuses specifically on the issue of the elimination of the gun registry (EGR). During the 2006 election campaign, 43.2% of Canadians surveyed in the Canadian Election Study<sup>4</sup> said they were in favour of the full abolition of the gun registry. Yet, only 0.9% of those surveyed said this was the most important issue in their eyes, far behind healthcare (22.2%), accountability and ethics (13.3%), the sponsorship scandal (5.7%), taxes (3.5%) and the environment (2.7%). In fact, the issue of the gun registry stands at number 19 on the list of priorities identified by voters during that election, of equal importance as the defense of the interests of Quebec and provincial-federal relations. Thus, the issue was not a priority on the national agenda, but was of primary importance for a minority of voters.

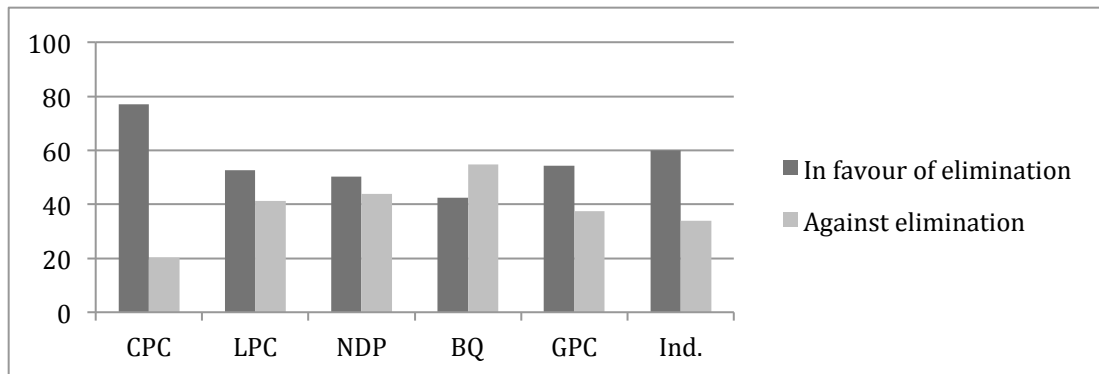
The issue of the EGR was also the source of a “political dilemma” for a large number of these voters. Indeed, only the CPC recommended that the registry be dismantled, while citizens of all political stripes wanted otherwise, as shown in Figure 1. There is no doubt that the CPC is the party in which the troops are the most united on the issue of EGR. Hence, it becomes logical for the party to invoke this divisive issue in order to attempt to obtain the support of certain voters affiliated with other parties but who also favour the elimination. The 2006 election results tend to confirm that other parties’ partisans who focused on the EGR were likely to offer their support to the CPC. Among the voters who identified the EGR as being the most important issue in the election, a considerable majority (60%) indeed voted for the Conservatives. The most obvious gains were from undecided voters and regular Liberal partisans.

---

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.queensu.ca/cora/index.html>



Figure 1. Position on EGR According to Partisan Identification in 2006



Source: *Canadian Election Study – 2006. Post-Electoral Survey.*

Thus, the issue of the EGR is not a priority for the majority of voters, but is very important for a slight proportion of them. It generates a political dilemma in those who wish to abolish it, but who would vote for a party other than the CPC. From a conservative perspective, the EGR is a wedge issue whose main quality is to have the support of consensus among the members of the political coalition. It offers many strategic opportunities to be used for the CPC, but not for the Liberals and New Democrats. As well, it presents several characteristics that are of particular relevance for this study. On the one hand, it is described in the Canadian media as a wedge issue for the Conservative Party of Canada (Fiorito, *Toronto Star*, 2010; Moore, *National Post*, 2010). On the other hand, it was the subject of Conservative election promises during the 2006, 2008 and 2011 elections; it prompted many debates in Canadian Parliament and was the subject of two private bills in Parliament. All these reasons support the choice of this issue as a case study.

The purpose of the study is to understand how elected representatives of the Conservative party mobilized the wedge issue of the EGR in federal parliament between 2008 and 2011. This case is interesting in several ways. The study was carried out in the context of a minority government; the CPC was fighting to obtain a majority mandate. It ultimately formed the government in 2006 and therefore could strategically act to put pressure on its opponents. Two private bills (S-5 and C-391) supporting the EGR were presented by Conservative MPs during their minority government. They forced the MPs of other parties to clearly position themselves around this issue, which, by this very fact, provided the Conservatives with tools to emphasize the division of other parties. It is logical to assume that they often used these tools, attempting to bring out the

divisions within the opposing coalitions and the personal inconsistencies of MPs, especially in the NDP and the Liberal Party.

With the Conservatives being impervious to the negative effects of the debate around the EGR, everything led us to believe that they could mobilize the issue as they pleased, sometimes to underscore the dissidence of certain opponents, sometimes to maintain this dissension among their opponents, and sometimes to target the groups that they knew to be sensitive to the issue. How did the Conservative government capitalize on these strategic advantages when it invoked the EGR issue in Parliament? Did it see it best to state explicitly the effects of the wedge issue invoked? A content analysis of the CPC's official communications will help answer this question and infer the Conservative strategic goals.

By definition, the same issue does not have the same wedge potential for all political parties. In certain cases, its divisive power is almost nil within a given political coalition. It therefore cannot be invoked by the opponents of a party that engages in a wedge strategy. It is only a wedge issue for the party that can mobilize it in order to create, maintain and reveal dissension among its opponents. Since it provides an undeniable strategic advantage, it is very likely that the political player who can use it as a wedge issue will invoke it more often than his adversaries. Four hypotheses related to the divisive character of the issue are being examined in our study:

H1 – A political actor who mobilizes an issue as part of a wedge strategy invokes it more often in his official communications than do his competitors, who cannot benefit from his divisive potential.

H2 – When a political actor invokes a wedge issue, he strongly targets certain electoral segments by frequently mentioning them in his official communications.

H3 – When a political actor invokes a wedge issue, he strongly targets certain ridings by frequently mentioning them in his official communications.

H4 – A political actor who mobilizes around an issue as part of a wedge strategy will point to the dissension that this issue produces among his opponents more often than other players who invoke the same issue.

### ***Research method***

In order to investigate the validity of these hypotheses, we conducted a quantitative analysis of the content of all statements made in French (or translated into French in the Hansard review) in the House of Commons between 2008 and 2011 regarding the issue of the gun registry. This paper covers 285 days of debates that took place between November 2008 and March 2011. The statements were taken from the Hansard using a keyword search based on the syntagm “**registr**”, which allowed us to find any mention of the “**registre des armes à feu de chasse**” (long gun registry), but also “**enregistrement des armes à feu**” (gun registration) and “**armes enregistrées**” (registered guns). A second search used the expression “**contrôle des armes à feu**” (gun control).

The corpus was analyzed using a codebook that provided a systematic and objective review of the hypotheses. First, each statement addressing the EGR issue was identified in the corpus using the syntagms. A statement starts as soon as an MP speaks and ends when another MP speaks. Given the non-partisan role of the Speaker of the House of Commons, we have excluded his statements from this paper.

Second, each paragraph of the identified statements was coded using the codebook. There are many advantages to using the paragraph as the unit of analysis: it provides meaningful thematic groupings; it offers a well-balanced account of the length and consistency of the argument in the statement; and it is easily located within a transcript. However, the transcription process that the debates undergo is arbitrary as to the division of paragraphs. MPs do not divide their statements into paragraphs. The transcriptionists do so in their verbatim texts. Therefore, we must proceed with caution when making interpretations based on this coding unit.

The coding grid contains four main sections: 1- Identification of the paragraph; 2- Identification of the speaker; 3- Context of the statement; and 4- Content of the paragraph. The first section assigns the paragraph coded an ID number and then records the date the statement was made. The second section identifies information on the speaker. Every time an MP talks about the EGR, we noted his name, his political status (MP, minister, party leader, etc.) as well as his political affiliation. The third section lists the context in which the statement was made. Parliamentary debates offer several different communication situations: ministerial initiatives, question period,

etc. Given the free-form format of those categories, it is important to identify whether the political actor is invoking the issue of the EGR on his own (i.e., during the first statement of the period, or as a response to a question on another subject) or whether he is answering a question or following a statement about the same topic. These data will enable us to better understand the invocation patterns of the EGR.

Lastly, the last section in the codebook is devoted to the content of the statement based on two categories. The first refers to the way dissension is “highlighted” by political players who are invoking the wedge issue. Revealing this dissension means invoking the positions taken by those taking part in the debate on the EGR and linking these positions to show any inconsistency they might present. The political player can therefore refer to his position, that of his opponents, political parties, voters and provincial or non-parliamentary players. He may also underscore the antagonism or congruence of these positions so as to turn up the pressure on his opponents. The second category refers to the arguments made about the wedge issue. Political players who express their views regarding the EGR generally centered their argument around three main themes: economic argument, political argument or criminality and justice argument.

### ***Results***

The first hypothesis (H1) will be verified if the CPC is the political party that invokes most often in parliament the EGR of its own initiative. Preliminary data suggest that this is the case. Table 1 shows that nearly 58% of statements bringing up the issue are made in the House of Commons by Conservative MPs. Even more significant, the majority (62.6%) of statements are voluntary, i.e., the MP brings up the issue on his own. The only other party to have a positive differential is the Bloc Québécois. It is also the only other party whose official position is in line with that of the majority of its partisans (see Figure 1). It is logical to deduce that the party believes that it is in a position of strength on this issue, which can be seen with its frequent and voluntary invocation.

Table 1: Number of EGR Statements by Political Party

	CPC	LPC	NDP	BQ
<b>Voluntary statements*</b>	62.6 (280)	44 (40)	41.5 (22)	56.3 (103)
<b>Statements provoked*</b>	37.4 (167)	56 (51)	58.5 (31)	43.7 (80)
<b>(N)</b>	447	91	53	183

Note: Data are percentages, and the numbers between parentheses are the respective frequencies.

\*  $p < 0.001$  - Statistical significance (p) correspond to the Chi-square bilateral hypothesis test.

During the 18 months analyzed, the CPC invoked the EGR more often than its three opponents combined, adopting an offensive approach, which put the parties that were more sensitive to the issue on the defensive. More than a third of the coded Conservative paragraphs targeted the LPC and nearly a quarter of them targeted the NDP. Taking only into account the cases where CPC MPs were explicitly targeting a party, the proportions jump respectively to 66.7% and 43.3% (the total exceeds 100% since certain coded paragraphs target more than one party).

### ***Targeted communications***

Developing a wedge strategy always begins with identifying the electoral segments likely to support the political player who will implement it. The second hypothesis (H2) will be verified if traces of this segmentation can be found in the statements of the CPC. In order to eliminate the electoral segments mobilized either in an *ad hoc* or anecdotal manner, only those that were mentioned in more than five different statements were recorded. For obvious reasons, we did not consider the mention to “all Canadians” to be a reference to an electoral segment. Accordingly, these references were not taken into account when testing H2. Table 2 points out the exceptional intensity of Conservative targeting. The preferred framing elements of the CPC testify to its willingness to link the EGR with the country’s rural populations (first three categories in the table). Its MPs mentioned the rural regions in 45 out of their 447 statements. They also referred to farmers in 13% of their statements and hunters in 14.1% of cases. In total, there was nearly one Conservative statement out of four (24.1%) that directly referred to one of these three electoral segments. This insistence suggests that the CPC wanted to position itself as a defender of the rural regions and the people living there.

Table 2: Number of Statements Mentioning Electoral Segments by Political Party

	CPC	LPC	NDP	BQ
<b>Farmers</b>	13 (58)	0	5.7 (3)	0
<b>Hunters</b>	14.1 (63)	1.1 (1)	7.5 (4)	0.5 (1)
<b>Rural inhabitants</b>	10.1 (45)	1.1 (1)	7.5 (4)	0.5 (1)
<b>Women</b>	0	5.5 (5)	0	3.3 (6)
<b>Quebeckers</b>	0.9 (4)	2.2 (2)	1.9 (1)	14.2 (26)
<b>(N) Statements</b>	447	91	53	183

Note: Data are percentages, and the numbers between parentheses are the respective frequencies.

The only other party to have insistently targeted an electoral segment is the Bloc Québécois. It is no surprise that it invoked Quebec voters several times, attempting to underline their consensus regarding the need to maintain the long gun registry. However, this result must be interpreted while taking into account the regional nature of the BQ, a sovereigntist party created in 1990 following a constitutional crisis to defend the interests of Quebec in Canada's federal parliament. It only runs candidates in Quebec and never claimed to speak on behalf of all Canadians. Hence, the BQ's action should not be assimilated to a segmentation effort of its electorate, since it does not distinguish between the different segments in his Quebec base of support.

### *Targeted MPs and Ridings*

Market research that is conducted prior to any step in developing wedge politics also allows to identify certain ridings whose voters are likely to support a given political party. Regarding communications, there are two ways of targeting a riding: via its constituents or via the MP representing it. The H3 verification conditions therefore involve significant Conservative activity at both levels.

From this point on, the unit of reference will be the paragraph. Indeed, it is possible through a given statement to target several different ridings and MPs. Hence, it would be counterproductive to ignore the finer nuances resulting from a deeper breakdown of the studied corpus. Table 3 presents the number of paragraphs from each party that mention the position of certain voters vis-à-vis the EGR.

**Table 3 — Frequencies of Invocation of the Position of Voters by Political Party**

	<b>CPC</b>	<b>LPC</b>	<b>NDP</b>	<b>BQ</b>
<b>Voters - Riding of MP*</b>	8.1 (85)	2.4 (7)	5.9 (10)	2.3 (11)
<b>Voters – Other Riding*</b>	5.1 (54)	0.7 (2)	0	0
<b>(N) Paragraphs</b>	1055	286	170	486

Note: Data are percentages, and the numbers between parentheses are the respective frequencies.

\*  $p < 0.001$  - Statistical significance (p) correspond to the Chi-square bilateral hypothesis test.

The preliminary data shows that the Conservative MPs who talk about the EGR invoke seven times more often their voters than the MPs of other parties. Moreover, they are nearly the only ones to refer to the position of voters in other ridings. Similarly, the CPC is the most active in invoking or asking for clarification regarding the current or past positions of other MPs. Table 4 compiles the number of occurrences in which the position of another elected representative is invoked. The numbers between parentheses refers to the proportion of these invocations in relation to all statements made by each political party. The prevalence of Conservative action is clear here. Ten percent of the coded paragraphs related to a statement made by a CPC member mentioned the current position of an MP from the opposition, nearly 11% invoked the past position of an MP from the opposition regarding the EGR, and 9.2% referred to a motion for further clarification regarding of the position of an opposition MP on the issue.

**Table 4 – Invocation of the Position of Other MPs by Political Party**

	<b>CPC</b>	<b>LPC</b>	<b>NDP</b>	<b>BQ</b>
<b>Current position of another MP*</b>	10.4 (110)	2.8 (8)	3.5 (6)	1.4 (7)
<b>Past position of another MP*</b>	10.7 (113)	0	1.8 (3)	0.4 (2)
<b>Motion for particulars for another MP*</b>	9.2 (97)	4.5 (13)	1.2 (2)	2.5 (12)
<b>(N) Paragraphs</b>	1,055	286	170	486

Note: Data are percentages, and the numbers between parentheses are the respective frequencies.

\*  $p < 0.001$  - Statistical significance (p) correspond to the Chi-square bilateral hypothesis test.

The consistency of the conservative rhetoric is worth mentioning. The six most targeted ridings through their voters are all rural<sup>5</sup>. In fact, when an elected Conservative representative referred to

<sup>5</sup>According to Statistics Canada, a riding is made up of at least 400 inhabitants per square kilometre. For more information, see [http://www41.statcan.ca/2006/3119/ceb3119\\_002-eng.htm](http://www41.statcan.ca/2006/3119/ceb3119_002-eng.htm)

the position of voters in a riding other than his own, in over 95% of cases, it was a rural riding. Of the 15 elected MPs most targeted by the Conservatives, 12 represented a rural riding. The three others were Mark Holland, Michael Ignatieff and Jim Maloway, respectively Liberal critic on Public Safety, leader of the Liberal Party of Canada and a member of the New Democratic Party who on several occasions in the past had showed his willingness to have the Gun Registry abolished.

Highlighted conservative communication tactics indicate that CPC members are most active in targeting ridings, as much through voters as through MPs representing them. The preliminary data indicates that H3 is verified and suggests a deliberate targeting strategy by the Conservatives. The party aims at specific ridings in its interventions in Parliament, with a particular emphasis on those located in rural areas. The results help reveal the tory strategic goal, namely to position the party as the only legitimate defender of rural areas in the federal parliament. In light of these data, it is interesting to remember that the Conservatives' French slogan for the 2011 federal election was "Ma région au pouvoir" (My Region in Power).

### ***Creating and revealing dissension***

The conditions for validating H4 are dependent on the meaning given to the concept of dissension. Our research defines dissension using its general meaning, i.e., "a violent or deep division of feelings, interests or convictions"<sup>6</sup>. In other words, the concept of "dissension" involves inconsistency between at least two elements that are normally aligned. Any communication aimed at revealing dissension is carried out in two stages: 1) It states at least two elements (position taken, opinions, acts) related to a same issue, and 2) it emphasizes the inconsistency.

The previous sections indicate that the Conservative government developed a strategy of interventions in the House that would reveal dissension within the opposition parties regarding the EGR issue. Table 5 shows the dedication of CPC MPs to do so. It is clear that Conservative action was focused on three main fracture lines: 1) MPs who contradict themselves (*flip-flop*); 2) those whose position is not aligned with their voters; and 3) those who are not aligned with their

---

<sup>6</sup> [http://btb.termiumplus.gc.ca/tpv2alpha/alpha-fra.html?lang=fra&i=1&index=frt&\\_\\_index=frt&srchtxt=dissension&comencsrch.x=0&comencsrch.y=0](http://btb.termiumplus.gc.ca/tpv2alpha/alpha-fra.html?lang=fra&i=1&index=frt&__index=frt&srchtxt=dissension&comencsrch.x=0&comencsrch.y=0)



party. In these three cases, Conservatives were the only ones to significantly emphasize dissension.

Table 5: Revelation of Dissension by Political Party

	CPC	LPC	NDP	BQ
<b>1) Flip-Flop*</b>	9.2 (97)	0	0	0.2 (1)
<b>2)MP-voter split*</b>	17.3 (183)	4.5 (13)	1.2 (2)	0.6 (3)
<b>3) MP-party split*</b>	9.7 (102)	1.4 (4)	0	0.6 (3)
<b>4) Party-party split</b>	1.3 (14)	1 (3)	0	2.1 (10)
<b>(N) Paragraphs</b>	1,055	286	170	486

Note: Data are percentages, and the numbers between parentheses are the respective frequencies.

\* p < 0.001 - Statistical significance (p) correspond to the Chi-square bilateral hypothesis test.

Our data clearly reveal the regularity with which the CPC emphasizes the disconnect between targeted MPs of the opposition and their voters. Just over one conservative paragraph out of six expressed this dissension. This is an interesting fracture line to capitalize on for electoral purposes. A party indicating that the MPs from another party are not defending the interests of their constituents or are not representing their voter’s opinion in the House is a party that could rack up points with this electorate. In this regard, the CPC is doubly effective: it creates a double fracture line between an MP, his voters and his party, as the statements of Conservative MP Ed Fast illustrate:

... and this week we vote on whether to scrap the costly and ineffective long gun registry. No longer can the NDP and Liberal MPs hide by saying one thing in their ridings and quite another thing when they are in Ottawa. Let us take the NDP leader. After promising to allow a free vote, he is now secretly trying to force 12 of his MPs to vote to keep the \$1 billion registry rather than do the right thing and listen to their constituents. Then there are the eight Liberal MPs. Last November, they followed the wishes of their constituents and voted to eliminate the wasteful registry. Today they have sold out to a Liberal leader who proudly states, “It’s my way or the highway” What a sad and sorry state of affairs: 12 NDP MPs and 8 Liberal MPs all making a solemn promise to their constituents. On Wednesday, Canadians will know whether they can be trusted or not (Hansard, p. 4093).

This tactic was used 56 times by the CPC against the Liberals or New Democrats. In other words, in 6.2% of the conservative paragraphs coded, Conservative MPs emphasized an irreconcilable incompatibility among opposing MPs, who must choose between the demands of their party or those of their constituents. The frequency at which this dichotomy is found in Conservative

speech is significant. It shows the effectiveness of tactics implemented by the CPC at creating and revealing dissension among his opponents.

The analysis of electoral differentials between 2008 and 2011 in the ridings most targeted by the Conservatives indicates that this dissension targeting strategy may have worked. Table 6 reveals the gains (or losses) of each party in these ridings. The data suggest that the CPC focused its action on riding they deemed “winnable”, hoping to make sufficient gains to be elected. In the end, they successfully won three of the six most targeted ridings (in bold in the table). The average Conservative gains in the six ridings most targeted by the party were 4.1% greater than their national average. The Conservative wedge strategy seemed to have had some success. However, our analysis does not allow us to conclude that there was a causal relationship between the tory targeting strategy and the 2011 election results. Many other factors may have influenced voting in these ridings. This being said, our study revealed that, between 2008 and 2011, there was deliberate targeting of certain ridings in the Conservatives’ wedge politics strategy regarding the issue of the EGR, in which the party made gains during the 2011 vote.

Table 6: Electoral Differential<sup>7</sup> between 2011 and 2008 by Political Party.

	CPC	LPC	NDP
<b>1 - Yukon</b>	1	-12.3	5.4
2 - Timmins—James Bay	13.5	-6.4	-6.2
3 - Malpeque	-0.2	-1.8	4.9
4 - Sackville—Eastern Shore	9.7	-1.5	-7.4
<b>5 - Nipissing—Timiskaming</b>	4.3	-8	4.9
<b>6 - Madawaska—Restigouche</b>	7.4	-12.2	3.1

Note: Data are given in percentage

### *Conclusion*

Our content analysis revealed results in accordance with the theoretical expectations of international research on wedge politics. This first analysis enabled us to classify EGR as a wedge issue that can be used by the Conservative Party of Canada. Examining the Conservative parliamentary speech shows the strategic opportunism of the party, which exploited the issue for the purpose of creating and revealing dissension within opposing political coalitions, especially

<sup>7</sup> Election differentials were calculated based on official data from Elections Canada.  
<http://www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=ele&document=index&dir=pas/41ge&lang=f>

by targeting electoral segments, MPs and rural ridings. A large part of its argument focused on the fracture lines that separated these groups and appeared to create a distance between the party leadership, its MPs and their constituents.

A second phase of the study is planned for the period between April 2006 and September 2008. It will be interesting to verify whether these data corroborate the conservative strategy presented in this paper. However, the 2006–2011 study period will not allow us to offer clear, general rules regarding the *modus operandi* of a wedge strategy. Indeed, the context of a minority government that typifies the entire period is likely to foster a disproportionate use of wedge issues since the political parties are fighting hard to obtain a majority. The *permanent campaign* is so intense that it can trigger the next election at any time.

In this way, the exceptional activity of the Conservative Party must be put into context and into perspective. It would be tempting to generalize our conclusion to broader practices of wedge politics. However, the Conservative case might not allow generalization on the implementation of a wedge strategy. As well, the study of a single wedge issue has similar limits. It also seems logical to consider that the political context can have a defining influence on the line of attack selected by the political player using a wedge strategy. A coalition government would perhaps be more sensitive to inter-party splits. It would then be more appropriate to capitalize on this weakness in order to apply pressure on certain parties participating in the coalition. Research on wedge politics would be greatly enriched by the study of various political contexts where this type of strategy is applied.

However, our preliminary data look promising. They show that, between 2008 and 2011, the CPC used the issue of the EGR as part of a coherent and well-developed wedge strategy. The issue created a wedge in the Liberal and New Democrat coalitions. The results of our investigation suggest that wedge issues can be mobilized by governments, planning for upcoming election, as suggested also by Bowman (2006), but that they can also be mobilized very successfully in legislative fights.

## References

- Abramowitz, A. I., 1994. "Issue evolution reconsidered: racial attitudes and partisanship in the U.S. electorate". *American Journal of Political Science*. 38, 1–24.
- Bourgault-Côté, Guillaume. 2011. "Cinq ans de pouvoir minoritaire — Le survivant". *Le Devoir*. Online. <http://www.ledevoir.com/politique/canada/315275/cinq-ans-de-pouvoir-minoritaire-lesurvivant>. Consulted March 25, 2011.
- Bowman, Kate. 2006. *Wedge Issue Politics: The Effects of Controversial Issues on Legislative Behavior*. Senior Honors Thesis. The Ohio State University, 54p.
- Canada. 2010. House of Commons, *Hansard*. Vol. 145 (32), 1895–1934.
- Carmines, Edward G. and James A. Stimson. 1980. "The two faces of issue voting". *American Political Science Review*. 74(1), 78–97.
- Castonguay, Alec. 2010. "Comment la droite s'organise". *Le Devoir*. Online. May 22. <http://www.ledevoir.com/politique/canada/289527/comment-la-droite-s-organise>. Consulted October 25, 2010.
- Cornellier, Manon. 2011. "Le Parlement nouveau est arrivé". *Le Devoir*. Online. September 19. <http://www.ledevoir.com/politique/elections-2011/320283/micro-campagnes-mega-effet>. Consulted April 4, 2011.
- Crowley, Sharon. 1994. *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 364p.
- Eijk, C. van der, Mark N. Franklin. 1996. *Choosing Europe? The European Electorate and National Politics in the Face of Union*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 516p.
- Entman, Robert M. 2004. *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 229p.
- Fast, Ed. 2010. [Gun Registry] In Canada. Parliament. *Debates—House of Commons*. 40th Parliament, 3rd Session, 145(66) (September 20), 4093. Ottawa: Public Works and Government Services Canada.
- Fiorito, Joe. 2010. "The gun registry needs fine-tuning, not scrapping". *Toronto Star*. Online. September 20. <https://vpnexterne1.ulaval.ca/+CSCO+d0756767633A2F2F7479626F6E792E736E706776696E2E70627A++/ha/default.aspx>. Consulted Decembre 5, 2010.
- Hillygus, D. Sunshine and Todd G. Shields. 2008. *The Persuadable Voter: Wedge Issues in Presidential Campaigns*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 249p.
- Lilleker, Darren G. and Jennifer Lees-Marshment. 2005. *Political marketing: A comparative perspective*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 230p.
- Maloway, Jim. 2010. In Canada. Parliament. *Debates—House of Commons*. 40th Parliament, 3rd Session, 145(32) (April 23), 1897-1898. Ottawa: Public Works and Government Services Canada.
- Marland, Alex, Thierry Giasson and Jennifer Lees-Marshment (eds). 2012. *Political Marketing in Canada*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 305p.
- Marland, Alex. 2012. "Amateurs versus professionals: The 1993 and 2006 Canadian Federal Elections" In Alex Marland, Thierry Giasson and Jennifer Lees-Marshment (eds). 2012. *Political Marketing in Canada*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 59–75.

- Marland, Alex. 2005. "Canadian political parties: Market oriented or ideological slagbrains?" In Darren G. Lilleker and Jennifer Lees-Marshment (Dir.), *Political Marketing: A Comparative Perspective*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 59–78.
- Martin, Lawrence. 2010a. *Harperland: The Politics of Control*. Canada : Penguin Group, 320p.
- Martin, Lawrence. 2010 b. "The Tories risk all on narrow appeal and wedge issues". *The Globe and Mail*. Online. May 20. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/opinions/the-tories-risk-all-on-narrow-appeal-andwedgeissues/article1574615/>. Consulted April 2, 2011.
- McGowan, Luke. 2007. *Driving Voters Apart: Can a Wedge Issue Be Used to Win an Election?* Essay presented at the Center for the Study of the Presidency and Congress. Online. <http://www.thepresidency.org/storage/documents/Calkins/McGowan.pdf>. Consulted October 27, 2010.
- Moore, John. 2010. "Much ado about 'elitism'". *National Post*. Online. September 21. <http://www.nationalpost.com/todays-paper/Much+about+elitism/3553405/story.html>. Consulted December 2, 2010.
- Paré, Daniel J. and Flavia Berger. 2008. "Political marketing Canadian style? The Conservative party and the 2006 federal election". *Canadian Journal of Communication*. 33(1), 39–63.
- Röttger, Ulrike. 2008. "Issue Management". *The International Encyclopedia of Communication*. Online. <http://ariane2.bibl.ulaval.ca/ariane/?jsessionid=9C656387D400D71D13B130D635AE7D7A?wicket:interface=:1:tabPanel:tabs:panel:noticesDataView:1:contents:0:liensAccesD:0:accesDirectLink::ILinkListener::>. Consulted February 26, 2011
- Snyder, Jack, Robert Y. Shapiro and Yaeli Bloch-Elkon. 2008. "Free hand abroad [for the US], divide and rule at home". *World Politics*. 61(1), 155–187.
- Taylor, James Benjamin. 2009. *Do Wedge Issues Matter?: Examining Persuadable Voters and Base Mobilization in the 2004 Presidential Election*. Master's thesis, Georgia State University. Online. [http://digitalarchive.gsu.edu/political\\_science\\_theses/25](http://digitalarchive.gsu.edu/political_science_theses/25). Consulted October 23, 2010.
- Turcotte, André. 2012. "Under New Management : Market Intelligence and the Conservative Party's Ressurrection" In Marland, Alex, Thierry Giasson and Jennifer Lees-Marshment (eds.). 2012. *Political Marketing in Canada*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 76–90.
- Wiant, Fredel M. 2002. "Exploiting factional discourse: wedge issues in contemporary American political campaigns". *Southern Communication Journal*. 67(3), 276–289.
- Wilson, Shaun and Nick Turnbull. 2001. "Wedge politics and welfare reform in Australia". *Australian Journal of Politics and History*. 47(3), 384–402.