In Canada, a political party is an organization that seeks to control the government by being elected to power. The party’s ideology keeps its organization intact and attracts voters. The following section briefly examines Canada’s major political parties and their ideologies.

**Progressive Conservative Party**

The Conservative Party originated before Confederation and gave Canada its first prime minister, John A. Macdonald. At that time, it favoured high tariffs, assistance to big business, and a strong British presence in Canada. In the late 19th century, the Conservative Party devised a National Policy that protected Canadian industry, supported railway construction, and increased Western settlement. It sought an east–west economic axis to defend Canada from the southern pull of American influences. The Conservative Party’s championing of British traditions hurt its fortunes in French Canada. The hanging of French speaking Métis leader Louis Riel for treason, in 1885, and the imposition of conscription during World War I, also added to its unpopularity. In addition, its failure to find strong francophone party leaders made electing Conservative MPs in Quebec difficult. Brian Mulroney, a bilingual Quebecker, was Conservative prime minister from 1984 to 1993. The party collapsed after that time partly because it could not maintain a strong foundation in Quebec.

The Conservative Party adopted the adjective “Progressive” in 1942 in an attempt to present a reformist image. At this time, the party was probably slightly to the right of the Liberals, Canada’s other major political party. For the most part, the Progressive Conservatives supported the social welfare and human rights measures introduced by the Liberals. Progressive Conservative Prime Minister John Diefenbaker introduced Canada’s first *Bill of Rights* in 1960. The party’s commitment to human rights was emphasized in 1988 by the apology and compensation it offered to Japanese Canadians who had been interned and whose property had been confiscated during World War II.
Conservative ideology opposes large-scale government intervention in the economy. However, Progressive Conservative administrations created such large government institutions as the Canadian Pacific Railroad, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and the Bank of Canada. In December 2003, members of the Progressive Conservative Party voted to merge with the Canadian Alliance Party to create the Conservative Party of Canada. This was precipitated by the declining electoral fortunes of the Progressive Conservatives in the 1993, 1997, and 2000 federal elections and by the failure of the Canadian Alliance Party to secure votes east of Manitoba in the 2000 election.

**Reform Party and Canadian Alliance Party**

The Reform Party of Canada arose in 1987 because of Western Canadian discontent with Liberal and Progressive Conservative policies. The founder and first leader of the Reform Party was Preston Manning. From the beginning, the party adopted a strong free-market and limited-government stance. It promised tax reduction and repayment of the national debt. It sought to have senators elected to the Canadian Senate. It criticized government extravagance. On social policies, the party tended to downplay the full-equality aspirations of such groups as French Canadians, women, and homosexuals. The party also opposed gun control.

When the 1993 Canadian federal election reduced the Progressive Conservative Party’s representation from 169 to 2 seats in the House of Commons, the Reform Party moved into the vacuum created on the centre-right. Reform won 54 seats, only one representing a victory east of the Ontario–Manitoba border. In 1997, the Reform Party became the official opposition in Parliament. To attract more voters, the Reform Party evolved into the Canadian Alliance Party in 2000 and elected former Alberta Cabinet minister Stockwell Day its new leader. In the 2000 federal election, the Canadian Alliance remained the official opposition, winning 66 seats. The Liberal Party adopted some Reform–Alliance principles, such as reducing government spending and eliminating deficits, in the 1990s. Many commentators believe that the Canadian Alliance was too far right to gain support from centrist voters.

In December 2003, the Canadian Alliance Party merged with the Progressive Conservative Party to form the new Conservative Party of Canada. The new party’s first elected leader was Stephen Harper.
The Liberal Party originated with a reform tradition and a willingness to look outside the British political model. The Liberal Party has always paid special attention to the aspirations of francophone Canadians. From its earliest history, the party selected francophone leaders from Quebec: Wilfrid Laurier, Louis St. Laurent, Pierre Trudeau, and Jean Chrétien. This strategy translated into frequent election victories.

The Liberal Party’s historical approach to French Canada placed it to the left of the Conservative Party. The Liberals further consolidated their position on the left by introducing federal programs to improve economic equality: baby bonuses, unemployment insurance, old age security, university student loans, and national health care. The Liberals introduced policies of bilingualism and multiculturalism. Under Liberal Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms was entrenched in the Canadian constitution in 1982. However, sensing a public swing toward conservative economic values in the last decade of the 20th century, the party shifted to the right. It cut back government spending in an effort to eliminate deficits and shelved new social programs, such as a national daycare program.
New Democratic Party

In 1961, the merger of the CCF and the unions in the Canadian Labour Congress created the New Democratic Party (NDP). The NDP has formed provincial governments in British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ontario. Historically, the party is to the left of the Liberal Party on the political spectrum. However, in order to gain power in provincial politics, the NDP has shifted to the right in recent years like other parties. At the federal level, the NDP is considered a third party, with little likelihood of forming the government.

From 1972 to 1974, the NDP supported the minority government of Pierre Trudeau. During this time, it persuaded the Liberals to introduce some social democratic measures, such as the establishment of the government owned oil company Petro-Canada.

Bloc Québécois

The Bloc Québécois has a single focus: sovereignty for Quebec. The party was formed in 1990 by disaffected members of the Conservative and Liberal parties who came together under the leadership of former Conservative Cabinet minister Lucien Bouchard. In the 1994 federal election, the Bloc won 54 seats and became the official opposition in Parliament. In the next elections, its representation dropped to 44 and then to 38 seats. In the 2004 general election, the Bloc regained its 54 seat peak it earned a decade earlier, and popularity continues to rise given discontent with the Liberal Party over the sponsorship scandal of its Quebec wing. On many issues, the Bloc leans to the left. However, as a single-issue party promoting Quebec sovereignty, the Bloc attracts voters from both the left and the right. A declining interest in sovereignty in the early 21st century presented a challenge to a party with such a narrow ideological focus.

Questions

1. Describe similarities between the Conservative and Liberal parties.
2. Why is it possible to image Paul Martin as leader of the Conservative Party and Joe Clark as leader of the Liberal Party?
3. Some people view the New Democratic Party as the “conscience” of Parliament. Do you agree with this description? Explain your view.
4. How does the Bloc Québécois attract voters from both sides of the political spectrum?
5. Describe the ideological differences between the Canadian Alliance and the Progressive Conservative parties.
6. How have leaders in Canada and other countries repositioned their parties in recent years?