

Alberta joins Prairie 'normal'

BY DAVID MCGRANE, THE STARPHOENIX MAY 8, 2015

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Alberta has always been the odd man out on the Canadian Prairies. Whereas Manitoba and Saskatchewan have routinely elected CCF and NDP governments, Alberta has been dominated by conservative dynasties for the past 80 years.

While some may chalk up the NDP's surprising win this week in Alberta to the personal popularity of leader Rachel Notley or a poor campaign by Jim Prentice and the Conservatives, there is something deeper going on.

On Tuesday night, Alberta became a "normal" Canadian Prairie province with an electorate sharply divided along left-right lines, like Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

As a co-investigator of the Comparative Provincial Election Project, I have been involved in postelection polling after every provincial election in Canada since the fall of 2011, including Alberta's last provincial election in 2012. This polling has revealed two interesting things about the Alberta electorate.

First, Albertans on the whole are neither more nor less right-wing than other Canadians. In fact, they are in the middle of the pack when it comes to most measurements of ideology. When it comes to taxation, Albertans are even to the left of most Canadians, preferring higher personal and corporate taxes.

Second, any provincewide consensus that once may have existed around conservative ideology and policies in Alberta has been fractured. Similar to Saskatchewan and Manitoba, its electorate has become almost equally split between a left-of-centre camp and a right-of-centre camp.

Progressive Conservatives under Alison Redford were able to win in 2012 by stealing soft left-of-centre voters from the Liberals and the NDP, as well as attracting soft right-of-centre voters from the Wildrose Party. Essentially, they succeeded by becoming a party of the centre.

Coming out of the 2012 Alberta provincial election, our polling identified a problem for the PCs: Centrist parties rarely thrive in situations of left-right ideological polarization. In fact, Alberta was an outlier. In all other provinces where the electorate was deeply divided between right and left, parties that relied on centrist voters did poorly. Parties trying to assemble a coalition of centrist voters need a certain level of ideological consensus within a provincial electorate to stay competitive. If an electorate is being pulled into two distinct left-right ideological camps, the centrist party is squeezed out.

That's what has happened to the Liberals over recent years during both Saskatchewan and Manitoba provincial elections. It is this left-right squeeze that explains the Alberta NDP's shocking victory.

The roughly 40 per cent of left-of-centre voters - mostly living in Alberta's cities - who were spread among the PCs, the NDP and Liberals in 2012 all coalesced behind the NDP this time around. Despite its leadership woes, Wildrose remained strong enough to divide the right-of-centre vote with the PCs. Since the Wildrose's core vote was efficiently grouped in rural areas it ended up as official Opposition and the PCs became a rump of 10 seats in the legislature.

What does the future hold?

If the electorate remains polarized, the Alberta NDP could become a perennial contender for power, like its counterparts in Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Look for the Alberta NDP to try to maintain its coalition of left-of-centre voters by adopting a pragmatic Prairie model of social democracy that is similar to that of Roy Romanow, Lorne Calvert and Gary Doer.

Notley will encourage private investment through targeted tax incentives, skills training and subsidies meant to diversify the economy away from oil production. There may eventually be some

increases to resource royalties after her government's review is finished. However, such increases will be relatively modest, and she will ensure the royalty regime remains competitive.

Similarly, the minimum wage may rise slowly throughout her time in power, and labour legislation could become slightly more pro-union. However, these policies will never get too out of whack with neighbouring provinces.

To pay for increases in spending on education and health care, Notley will probably eliminate Alberta's flat personal income tax and bring in a three-bracket system that is similar to what Premier Brad Wall held over from the NDP years. She will want to go into the next election with a balanced budget, so look for her to slowly bring down the provincial deficit through higher tax revenue, lower spending on non-priority programs and economic growth.

If this scenario unfolds, the future appears bleak for the once mighty PCs. They will probably either fade away or eventually join the Wildrose, mimicking the process that created the Saskatchewan Party in the 1990s.

In short, Alberta's politics may come to look and sound a lot like politics in Saskatchewan and Manitoba - an electorate polarized along left-right lines and anchored by a pragmatic social democratic party and its conservative opponents.