

The Once-Forgotten Battlegrounds: Studying Provincial Elections in Canada

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Abstract: This special edition of *Canadian Political Science Review* tests many of the leading assumptions surrounding Canada's ten provincial electoral battlegrounds. Based on data and research emerging from the Comparative Provincial Election Project, these studies reveal how many theories based on federal-level evidence require refinement when it comes to their applicability to the provincial realm.

Keywords: provincial politics; surveys; federalism; party politics

Résumé: Cette édition spéciale de la revue des "sciences politiques canadiennes" teste de nombreuses hypothèses entourant dix campagnes électorales provinciales au Canada. Basée sur les données de recherches émergentes du Projet Comparatif des élections provinciales, ces études révèlent le nombre des théories basées sur un niveau fédéral qui ont besoin de perfectionnement pour être appliquées au niveau provincial.

Mots-clés: Mots clés : politique provinciale, enquêtes, fédéralisme, partis politique

Can we truly understand a country's electoral politics by focusing almost exclusively on nation-wide elections? This appears to be the assumption underlying generations of political science research in Canada. Whether measured by the weight or volume of literature, or the content of university courses on the subject, "Canadian politics" have become synonymous with "federal politics". Discussions of parties, media, voters, and democracy revolve around the federal-level, sub-national actors and trends receiving far less attention. These assumptions persist, despite the fact that an increasing amount of important political activity is being undertaken outside federal politics.

Indeed, for such a decentralized federation, there is a staggering lack of understanding of politics at the provincial level in Canada. While generations of researchers, hundreds of volumes, and millions of dollars have been spent analyzing federal politics, few research projects have focused on democracy in Canada's ten, smaller "political worlds". This neglect is understandable on some level. Scholars may assume that the dynamics at play at the pan-Canadian level ought, logically, to apply to the sub-national units. Assumptions like these pervade the literature in other federations, as well, like the United States and Australia. This ecological fallacy is an easy trap in which to fall, but it is a fallacy and trap, nonetheless.

At the other end of the spectrum, scholars may view provincial politics as too parochial and idiosyncratic to be of interest or value to audiences outside their borders. This bias is also often applied to the study of municipal politics in Canada and elsewhere, and manifests itself in numerous ways throughout the

research cycle. Provincialists seeking to secure grant funding or space in flagship journals often encounter resistance from their peers, who fail to see the broader applicability of their research to national and international politics. A vicious cycle ensues, denying would-be students of provincial politics of the tutelage or resources to produce top-quality primary or secondary research.

Whatever its source, this lack of attention to provincial politics in Canada is disappointing, and is becoming increasingly indefensible. For one, a growing proportion of Canadian politics is taking place within the provincial realm, with issues like healthcare, environmental conservation, education, and economic recovery dominating the public agenda. With the federal government vacating much of this policy space, provinces are not only assuming leadership in their traditional areas of jurisdiction. Provincial governments are also assuming a larger presence in areas of federal responsibility. This is true in the international sphere, by virtue of their own positions within the globalized economy and their concerted efforts to engage with foreign partners; in immigration; and in areas like Aboriginal affairs. Considering the leading role played by provinces in these areas, the study of sub-national politics is a necessary element of understanding Canadian politics, as a whole (not to mention politics on the global scale).

Second, provincial political systems have undergone dramatic changes since the "high tide" of research over thirty years ago. The last major, concerted effort to study provincial politics came amid the constitutional debates of the late 1970s and early 1980s, as scholars and governments aimed to gain a better understanding of Canada's

Small Worlds (Elkins and Simeon, 1980). Even then, the research program was very limited in scope and volume, and was based on admittedly rudimentary data. In the decades that followed, there was so little systematic comparison of provincial elections that two leading observers remarked, “it is only possible to sketch in a general fashion the variety that now marks them” (Carty and Stewart, 1996: 65). Writing at the turn of the twenty-first century, another lamented “the literature in some areas is now so dated that any generalizations are becoming dangerous” (Dunn, 2001: 441).

Some scholars kept the torchlight burning. There were periodic election studies in Ontario, BC, the Maritimes, Quebec, and Alberta. And several volumes on provincial politics have emerged since that low ebb. Yet these studies remain exceedingly rare compared to those focusing on the federal level. Christopher Dunn (2015) edits the only textbook on provincial politics presently in print, with his volume organized thematically, such that each article addresses all ten provinces according to one of eighteen (18) topics ranging from political culture, democracy, institutions, political economy, and public policy. Other recent books have focused on specific issues, relating to public policy (Atkinson et al., 2013), executives (Bernier et al., 2005), and political economies (Brownsey and Howlett, 2001). The *Canadian Political Science Review* provides space for the chronicling of individual provincial election campaigns as they occur. Unfortunately, none of these sources have included a systematic, comparative examination of elections in the Canadian provinces – a surprising gap, given the immense amount of research that continues to be conducted on the topic at

the federal level (see Kanji et al., 2012; Courtney, 2004).

Third, the lack of concerted analysis of provincial politics means that students of Canadian politics have missed an opportunity to contribute meaningfully to the global literature on federalism, democracy, and elections. The Canadian provinces represent a series of under-used laboratories for comparative analysis in this regard, offering political scientists an unparalleled opportunity to explore the complex nature of campaigns, parties, competition, elections, and other elements of democracy, with lessons that could extend well beyond Canada’s borders. As Imbeau et al. (2000: 803) explain, the provinces provide researchers with several notable advantages: “low variation on potentially disturbing variables; high variability on variables that are central to research questions; a number of cases sufficient to allow for potentially complimentary comparative analyses in any of the explanatory schemes used in social sciences; and relatively modest research costs than for international research.”

The following articles close these gaps, taking a “laboratory”-based approach to understanding Canadian politics through the comparative lens of its provincial communities. The purpose of the following studies is straightforward: to test the common wisdom generated from decades of research at the federal-level, to see if our understanding of elections, electors, and electioneering in Canada applies beyond the pan-Canadian to the provincial level. Each article tests an element of prevailing knowledge about Canadian politics, drawn almost exclusively from federal-level research. Some of this conventional wisdom is reinforced through the

provincial-level analysis in this edition, while other accepted understandings are refined or rejected. At the same time, the edition aims to improve our knowledge about Canadian politics by employing the provincial laboratories to establish new models and understandings that are best tested using the comparative method.

An unprecedented cluster of nine (9) provincial elections held within a two-year period (2011-2013) provided the foundation for these analyses. (Only New Brunswick voters failed to visit the polls during this interval.) This timing allowed researchers to control for many national and global effects, while providing for advance planning in ways that have been previously problematic. Fixed-election dates in many of these jurisdictions provided researchers with the luxury of planning a coordinated, pan-Canadian study. This special edition is structured around a single, over-arching research question: *Considering conventional wisdom is grounded in federal-level research, how can a comparison of provincial experiences help us better understand politics and elections in Canada as a whole?* Each article explores this question by outlining the inherited theoretical framework, the detailed methodology employed to test it, the findings of this comparative analysis, and a discussion of how this analysis contributes to a better understanding of politics and elections in Canada.

It is important to note: this edition is not designed to compare politics at the federal versus provincial levels. (That is certainly a worthy objective, and one to which scholars should turn their attention.) Rather, this edition delves deeply into politics at the provincial level as a means of better understanding *Canadian* (not *federal*) politics. Despite the research bias, Canadian politics is not

equivalent to federal politics. Just as an awareness of federal politics is essential to an understanding of Canadian politics, so, too, is a grasp of provincial politics. This special edition focuses on the latter.

Regrettably, the edition also suffers from the same shortcoming of most studies of subnational politics in Canada: it neglects the study of elections in the three territories. It has become all too commonplace to justify this omission for lack of expertise, secondary literature or funding, although all of these excuses factored into the decision to confine the present study to provincial politics alone.

The approaches in this edition are intentionally varied. Each author brings his or her unique skills and perspective to the study of provincial politics. Several team members have published in the areas of voter participation, political attitudes, and the demographic influences on political behaviour. The edition brings together experts in the behaviour and strategies of political parties, elites, and media. In addition, the authors possess a wealth of knowledge about politics in their individual provinces, having researched, published, and taught in these areas.

This diversity of talent is fortunate, as a mixed-method research design is required to offer the sort of holistic examination required to understand electoral politics in the Canadian provinces. Some authors have approached their studies from a quantitative perspective, others from a more qualitative angle. Some have employed original survey data, while others have used government statistics or media content.

This edition's focus is inherently comparative, meaning that readers seeking a comprehensive examination of the politics of a single province will not

find it here. At times, some authors have chosen to incorporate all ten provinces in their analyses; at others, they have tightened their focus to include a handful of provincial cases. This narrowing was as much a product of research constraints as it was conscientious research design. For instance, a full, ten-province study of political marketing, media politics, or campaign finance is not only resource-prohibitive. In many cases, the data to conduct a full ten-province study does not exist; in others, the detail necessary to complete a comprehensive analysis would far surpass the space allotted in this edition.

Overall, the collective aim of contributors to this edition has been to shed light on provincial politics as a window into Canadian politics as a whole. To accomplish this, the articles are divided into three main sections: those dealing with electioneering (campaigns), electors (voting), and electoral democracy (civic culture). The three concepts are inextricably linked, in that an understanding of voter behaviour relies on an appreciation of how parties and the media behave during campaigns, and vice versa. By the same token, the state of democracy at the provincial level in Canada – its civic culture – relies heavily on an assessment of how these political actors interact.

Electioneering and Campaigns

Whether from the perspective of the citizen, media, or academics, the campaigns, themselves, have always drawn the lion's share of attention when it comes to Canadian politics and elections. Leaders' biographies and insider exposes by renown strategists like Tom Flanagan (2007), Warren Kinsella

(2012), and Brad Lavigne (2013) remain among the most widely-read accounts of Canadian campaigns. Empirical research, like studies found in MacIvor (2010), have shed more concentrated light on issues like constituency campaigning, candidate selection, resource allocation, online campaigning, and polling. Indeed, for decades, pioneers like Young and Jansen (2011) have been carving space for the study of campaign finance in Canada, just as leading researchers including Sampert and Trimble (2009) have established a niche for 'media politics' within the Canadian political science community. More recently, with advent of political marketing as a subfield in the discipline, scholars including Marland, Lees-Marshment and Giasson (2012) have begun exploring the ways in which marketing principles, research, and campaign tactics pervade electioneering in Canada. This broad range of research activity has contributed immensely to our understanding of Canadian political campaigns... at least as they are conducted at the federal level.

We know, for instance, that technological innovations, persistent polling, year-round fundraising, fixed election dates, and the advent of the twenty-four-seven media cycle have all ushered in the era of "permanent campaigning" in federal politics, one featuring an increased focus on negative and online communications. Aside from anecdotal evidence or media coverage, however, we have lacked hard evidence of these forces and effects present at the provincial level. Alex Marland addresses this gap in the first article. Employing qualitative content analysis of advertising and media coverage in recent elections across Canada, Marland finds strong evidence of the permanent campaign in provincial politics, replete with the same

normative implications for the quality of Canadian democracy. His article raises important questions about the future of Canadian campaigning, particularly as it surrounds the world of unregulated online content.

The media plays a central role in the permanent campaign, often framing the contests as “games” to be won or lost by the leading contenders, as opposed to great debates over substantive policy issues. In this vein, federal-level research confirms that most pan-Canadian media outlets are just as market-oriented as the parties they cover – often prioritizing their own market share over their responsibility to contribute to a substantive, policy-based dialogue during elections. In the second article, Shannon Sampert and Adelina Petit-Vouriot present the first comprehensive, comparative analysis of media framing ever conducted at the provincial level. Based on quantitative content analyses of newspaper coverage in six provincial elections across the country, their findings suggest that game-framing and market logic are not nearly as pervasive as federal-level research would have us believe. While outlets in larger markets tended to behave like national papers, smaller papers and those covering elections with little prospect for changes in government tended to offer more substantive (issue-based) content. Their conclusions suggest that Canadians living in different parts of the country experience distinct modes of media politics.

Polling is also an indispensable part of the permanent campaign in Canada. Political operatives need public opinion to shape their strategies and tactics, just as the media relies on it to sell their audiences on the intensity of the ‘horserace’. An average of two polls were

released publicly per day over the course of the 2011 federal election campaign – a number that does not include the many internal polls conducted by parties and candidates, themselves. For the most part, nation-wide forecasts have been fairly accurate, with private sector firms competing to be the most reliable when it comes to predicting outcomes. While smaller in volume, public polling in provincial elections has grown steadily with the arrival of more cost-effective techniques and sampling methods. Over one hundred private sector polls were published during the nine elections in the 2011-2013 cycle. With so many unique environments, these campaigns provided pollsters with a fertile testing ground for new approaches to public opinion research, and academics with an opportunity to examine the accuracy of their forecasts. All told, these provincial elections produced mixed results for Canada's private sector polling firms. As a whole, the polling industry did well forecasting the six of the nine elections, but the surprising results in Quebec, Alberta, and British Columbia raised serious questions about whether it is still possible to accurately measure voter intentions during a provincial election. In the third article, pracademic insiders David Coletto and Bryan Breguet assess the polling conducted during each provincial election between 2011 and 2013, concluding that a lack of focus on ‘likelihood to turnout’ led many firms to produce less than reliable results.

Our focus on campaigning closes with a discussion of the role of money in provincial elections. For decades, federal-level researchers have grappled with two key challenges to studying campaign finance in Canada: the inapplicability of international theories and models, and the inaccessibility of data on party

revenues and spending. Despite these obstacles, a robust (if small) body of literature has evolved, providing the foundation for vigorous debate over the federal regulatory regime, in general, and its fundraising caps and public subsidies, in particular. Due to the lack of comparability with other nations, Canadian scholars have relied largely on longitudinal comparison to study the consequences of changes to the federal campaign finance regime over time. Considering the many other changes in the Canadian political system over the same period, it is difficult to isolate the effects of campaign financing rules on party behaviour. In this sense, a cross-sectional study of provincial-level regimes is long overdue. In the fourth article, David Brock and Harold Jansen examine the impact of party and election finance rules on political competition in British Columbia (BC), Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. Constrained by the lack of accessible provincial-level data across Canada, their three-province study reveals the power of regulation, nonetheless. Unique sets of spending caps and limitations on fundraising sources, in particular, have helped shape the different party systems we see in these three Western provinces.

Electors and Voting

Once the campaign is complete, our focus shifts to explaining the outcome. As Anderson and Stephenson (2010) suggest, deciphering why Canadians vote the way they do is akin to solving a puzzle. And Canadian political scientists have proven keen puzzle-solvers, with the study of vote choice remaining one of their most popular pre-occupations since the first Canadian (National) Election Study (CES) in 1965

(Kanji et al., 2012). In the early years, these pan-Canadian surveys included questions probing attitudes toward both federal *and* provincial politics. The latter were steadily phased out of the survey beginning in 1988, and were dropped entirely in 2000. Since that time, the CES has focused almost exclusively on federal-level politics. With fewer than 400 respondents per province in most cases, even using “province” as an independent variable has proven challenging.

Fortunately, there has been a recent resurgence in provincial politics surveys, particularly since 2011. Stand-alone election studies in Saskatchewan and Alberta, the “Making Democracy Work” surveys in Ontario and Quebec, and Vote Compass initiatives in Ontario, Quebec, Alberta, and BC have produced a wealth of data for students of these individual provinces. These recent investments notwithstanding, there has been little effort to implement a *pan-Canadian* comparative survey of provincial electorates.

This was the driving force behind the creation of the Comparative Provincial Election Project (CPEP), which included the largest survey of its kind in Canadian history.¹ In addition to studies of political marketing, media coverage, election platforms, and other facets of provincial elections, CPEP involved a series of post-election surveys designed to compare political behavior and attitudes across the Canadian provinces. The twenty-minute questionnaire gauged residents’ attitudes toward government, public policy, politicians, the media, election administration, the nature of electioneering, and the dominant political culture. Data was collected by Abacus Data beginning the day after each election, using a mix-mode survey. Respondents were recruited using two

methods. First, respondents were selected from the Probit online research panel which was randomly generated using random-digit dialing (RDD) live telephone recruitment. If the online panel was insufficient to complete all the survey (as was the case in NL, PEI, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Alberta, and Nova Scotia) Interactive Voice Response (IVR) to Web technology was used to randomly recruit participants. Survey respondents were recruited from across Canadian society, to obtain a representative sample of all eligible voters in terms of gender, age, education, community size, number in household, immigration status, religion, religiosity, income, and occupation. Geographically, northern regions of each province were also oversampled. Unless indicated otherwise, findings are produced by weighting cases according to gender, age, education, and region, using census data. Sample sizes and survey dates for data employed in the articles in this Edition are reported in Table 1. The complete CPEP dataset now includes all ten provinces, with repeat elections in Quebec (2014) and Alberta (2015).

Several authors in this edition employed CPEP survey data to test several well-accepted (federal-level) theories about voting in Canada. In the fifth article, Jason Roy and David McGrane begin by testing the suitability of the two most popular vote choice models when it comes to explaining electoral behaviour. They find predictive value in both the bloc recursive and valence models – the former allowing for far greater precision and detail, the later providing a much tighter, cogent explanation. Each is equally accurate, however, when it comes

to predicting vote choice in provincial elections. Subsequent articles delve more deeply into specific explanatory variables in the vote-choice equation. McGrane, Kirk Clavelle, and Loleen Berdahl (sixth article) examine the effect of economic perceptions on voting attitudes and behaviour. Their principal findings – that sociotropic evaluations (of the broader economy) trump egocentric evaluations (of one's own economic well-being) when it comes to formulating opinions about parties, leaders, and governments – help refine our understanding of how the economy influences election outcomes in Canada. By the same token, Roy, Andrea Perrella, and Joshua Borden's dissection of residence-based factors helps to clarify the important distinctions between rural, urban, and *suburban* voters in Canada (seventh article). Their analysis reveals the importance and uniqueness of the latter category when it comes to explaining vote choice and election outcomes in the Canadian provinces, something often overlooked or undervalued in federal-level research that focuses solely on the rural/urban divide. Likewise in the eighth article, Andrea Rounce and Karine Levasseur introduce a novel variable to our understanding of vote choice in Canada, probing the differences between electors in the public, private, and *non-profit* sectors. While, their overall findings conform to what we would expect – namely that private sector employees tend to lean further to the right and lend more support to conservative parties than those from the public and non-profit sectors – their provincial-level analysis uncovered intriguing nuances across the country.

Table 1: Comparative Provincial Election Project Survey Details, by Province

<i>Province</i>	<i>Sample Size</i>	<i>Survey Dates</i>
PE	509	October 4 to 25, 2011
MB	775	October 5 to 31, 2011
ON	1044	October 7 to 31, 2011
NL	851	October 12 to 30, 2011
SK	821	November 8 to 21, 2011
AB	897	April 25 to May 15, 2012
QC	1009	September 5 to October 11, 2012
BC	803	May 15 to 29, 2013
NS	797	October 9 to November 3, 2013

Electoral Democracy and Civic Culture

Canadians' political attitudes neither begin nor end with their choice at the ballot box, of course. It is also important to understand their perceptions of Canadian democracy, its representativeness, and its relationship to their sense of political community.

According to existing research, civic engagement and democratic satisfaction are at all-time lows throughout much of the country. Nationwide studies confirm that participation in elections and other traditional political activities have declined considerably over the past four decades, as has the public's faith in the political process and its leaders (see: Archer and Wesley, 2006; Blais et al., 2002: ch. 3; Gidengil et al., 2004: 108-116; LeDuc and Pammett, 2006; Nevitte et al., 2000: ch. 5; Pammett, 1991; Pammett and LeDuc, 2003; Rubenson et al., 2007). Supplementing these studies, a recent "Canadian Democratic Audit" assessed the performance of eight key federal institutions and actors, finding many of them lacking in terms of public participation, inclusiveness, and responsiveness (Barney, 2004; Courtney, 2004; Cross, 2004; Docherty, 2005;

Greene, 2004; Smith, 2005; White, 2005; Young and Everitt, 2005). Whether the result of a "decline of deference", poor performance on the part of politicians and institutions, or a combination of both, these developments have prompted concern among academics and advocates, alike (Belanger and Nadeau, 2005; Nevitte, 1996).

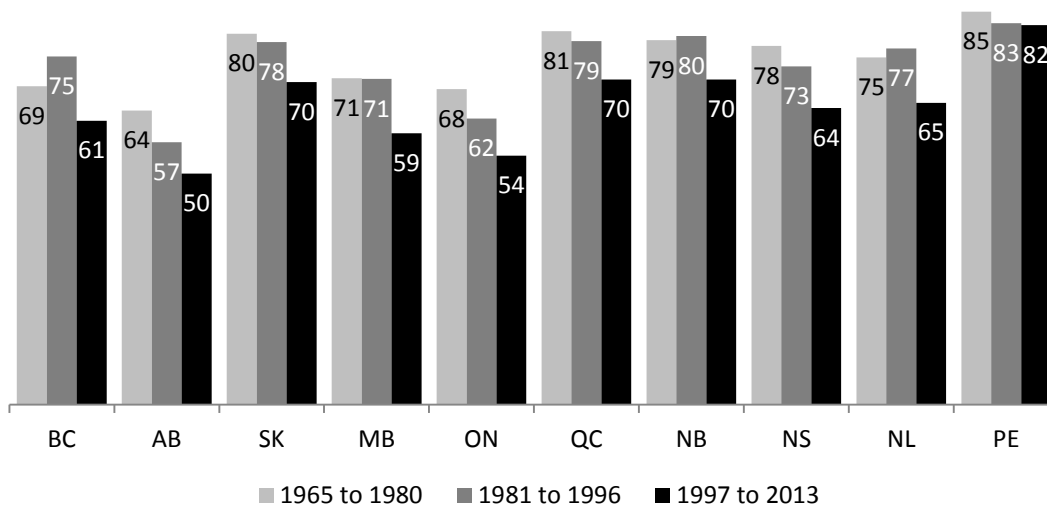
This long-term decline in citizen confidence, interest, and participation in politics has resulted in what many observers call a "democratic deficit" in Canada – a situation in which "ostensibly democratic organizations or institutions in fact fall short of fulfilling what are believed to be the principles of democracy" (Levinson, 2007: 859-860). Again, these conclusions are based primarily on assessments at the federal level (Cross, 2010; Milner, 2002), leaving many unanswered questions surrounding the scope of the democratic deficit in the various Canadian provinces. Indeed, the picture emerging from nation-wide studies appears to mask important sub-national patterns and trends. As illustrated in Figure 1, rates of voter turnout in provincial elections vary widely across the country, as do levels of political knowledge, efficacy, and social capital (Wesley, 2010). Some provinces,

like Saskatchewan, appear to have experienced a civic revival in the last decade, while others, including Manitoba, Ontario, and Newfoundland, have experienced record-low levels of voter participation. Existing research offers few explanations of such disparities, little sense as to how residents actually perceive the quality of democracy in their provinces, and few clues as to the contribution of institutions and elites to the democratic malaise. In sum, political scientists remain "puzzled" by the way democracy appears healthier in some provinces than others (Gidengil et al., 2004: 116-120).

The third section of this edition addresses these gaps in our understanding of provincial democracies, beginning with Canadians' propensity to turnout at the polls. In the ninth article, Alan Siaroff and Jared Wesley provide a

longitudinal, ecological analysis of voter turnout across the Canadian provinces. Their findings suggest that would-be voters in Canada live in very different political worlds, and that contextual factors like the competitiveness of the election and the strength of left-wing parties in their respective provinces have a strong impact on whether or not they will turn out to vote. These contextual variables are often lost on survey-based analyses conducted at the federal (pan-Canadian) level. Lori Thorlakson builds on this aggregate-level analysis in the tenth article, exploring the disjunction between Canadians' propensity to vote in provincial versus federal elections. Her study confirms that citizens who vote more often in provincial elections than in federal elections are more likely to feel a positive connection to, and higher level of interest in, their provincial government.

Figure 1: Mean Voter Turnout, 1965-2013, by Province



Voter turnout may be a convenient, short-hand measure of a community's democratic deficit; in most Canadian provinces, it is the only sort of evidence

presently available to researchers. Yet, turnout alone is by no means a valid measure of a province's democratic deficit. In the eleventh article, Joanna Everitt

examines the challenges associated with incorporating gender and sexual diversity in provincial election campaigns. Her study of “demand” and “supply” side factors concludes that the strength of left-leaning parties is the strongest predictor of whether a province's elections will feature women and lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) candidates. The twelfth and final article in this edition explores the determinants of Canadians' attitudes toward the quality of democracy in their provinces. Mebs Kanji, Kerry Tannahill, and Vincent Hopkins explore Canadians' connections to their various provincial and federal-level communities, concluding that citizens' judgements as to the performance of their respective leaders and governments has a significant influence on their support for their political communities.

All told, many of the federally-founded models and theories tested in these studies were found to have applicability at the provincial level. Federal-level findings related to the permanent campaign, under-representation of traditionally-disadvantaged groups, and vote choice frameworks were largely replicated in the provinces examined in the following articles. This is good news for Canadian politics observers who had assumed as much, and solace for those who had been waiting for empirical confirmation. This said, several of the studies in this edition found existing, federally-based approaches wanting when it comes to analyzing provincial politics. Some failed to account for the unique nuances found in particular jurisdictions, while others were missing variables necessary to understand politics at the provincial level. In this sense, contributors to this edition have helped refine our understanding of polling, campaign finance, turnout, suburban and non-profit sector voting, and efficacy in Canada. And some provincial-level analyses in this edition overturned conventional wisdom in other areas, particularly, media

politics and economic voting. Together, these studies demonstrate the value of province-based analysis, not only for the sake of understanding individual jurisdictions, but for understanding Canadian politics more generally.

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