

Article

Resource revenue, political volatility, and Alberta's evolving party system

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Abstract

With the emergence of the New Democratic Party, who have demonstrated legitimate competitiveness for three consecutive elections, there is now little doubt that Alberta has transitioned into a Two-Party system. This article situates that outcome within a longer period of political instability, grounded fundamentally in volatile resource prices that have played an important and underappreciated role in fracturing the province's traditional party system. Drawing on historical electoral data and a narrative analysis of leadership contests and policy disputes, the article demonstrates that Alberta's long-standing governing formula, or "Holy Trinity" of Alberta politics: well-funded government services, low taxes, and balanced budgets has depended heavily on stable resource revenues. When oil prices have dropped sharply, electoral trouble, if not defeat, for the PCs (and now UCP) has followed – a pattern that emerges across several decades. As oil prices have become increasingly volatile since 2008, consecutive conservative governments struggled to reconcile competing ideological wings, weakening the PCs and later the UCP, and facilitating the emergence of sustained electoral competition.

Résumé

Au cours de trois élections consécutives, le Nouveau Parti démocratique s'est avéré un adversaire de taille au Parti Conservateur, prouvant que l'Alberta est passée à un système bipartite. L'article situe ce résultat dans une période plus longue d'instabilité politique, fondée principalement sur la volatilité des prix des ressources, qui ont joué un rôle important bien que sous-estimé dans la fragmentation du système partisan traditionnel de la province. S'appuyant sur des données électorales historiques ainsi que sur une analyse narrative des luttes de leadership et des conflits de politiques publiques, l'article montre que la formule traditionnelle de gouvernance Albertaine, la « Sainte Trinité », c'est-à-dire des services publics bien financés, de faibles impôts et des budgets équilibrés, dépendait fortement de la stabilité des revenus tirés des ressources. Lorsque les prix du pétrole ont chuté brutalement, des difficultés électorales, voire des défaites, se sont pointées pour les progressistes-conservateurs (désormais le Parti Conservateur Uni). Le schéma s'observe sur plusieurs décennies. Depuis 2008, les prix du pétrole devenus de plus en plus volatiles, les gouvernements conservateurs ont eu du mal à concilier des courants idéologiques concurrents, ce qui a affaibli le PC puis le UCP et a facilité l'émergence d'une concurrence électorale durable.

Keywords: The "Holy Trinity" of Alberta Politics, natural resource revenues, Two-Party System

Mots-clés : la sainte trinité de la politique en Alberta, les revenus des ressources naturelles, système bipartite

Introduction

The New Democratic Party's (NDP) victory in Alberta's 2015 election is widely perceived to be a seismic shift in the politics of the province. On one level this is undeniably true. A social democratic party won a sizable majority in Canada's conservative heartland, a province that had elected consecutive right-leaning majority governments since at least 1935. Less well understood in the rest of Canada is the fact that Alberta politics have been characterized by continuous volatility from roughly 2006. Indeed, consider that, after experiencing only three different premiers over a span of 35 years, Alberta subsequently had eight different premiers

between 2006 and 2022! (See Table 1 below). Central to this volatility has been a high degree of internal strife within the long-ruling Progressive Conservative (PC) party, despite winning large electoral majorities in 2004, 2008 and 2012 (each under a different leader no less), and the United Conservative Party (UCP), which became the province's main conservative party in 2017. The internal machinations within the PC, and eventually UCP, parties set in motion a number of unexpected political outcomes in the province: the sudden emergence in 2007/8 of a well-funded and ultimately quite competitive party on the far right of the spectrum (the Wildrose), three PC leadership contests between 2006 – 2014 despite never having lost an election during that period, a shocking “floor-crossing” in 2014 when the leader of the Wildrose and the vast majority of their caucus unexpectedly joined the governing PCs after 6 years of near-constant attacks on the party's record, the Wildrose's subsequent, and again quite unexpected, re-emergence under a new leader installed mere months before the 2015 election, and of course, the NDP benefiting from a split of the centre-right vote and shocking the nation by winning a large majority in 2015. That the NDP, only 3 months ahead of the 2015 election, were polling at 17% compared to the PCs at 46% added even more intrigue to this story (EnviroNics 2015). The once-mighty PCs, who by 2015 had led a province for the longest consecutive period in Canadian history, merged with the Wildrose in 2017 to form the UCP. Then, for the first time in Alberta's history, the governing party lasted only one term, when Jason Kenney and the UCP handily defeated the NDP in the 2019 provincial election. Finally, over a year before the province's next mandated election, Kenney resigned in the face of a wave of unpopularity, and was replaced by Danielle Smith, former leader of the Wildrose who was soundly defeated in her home riding in 2015 after leading the aforementioned “floor-crossing” in 2014. In the midst of this long string of political absurdities is the shocking fact that, in a province routinely described as Canada's most conservative, the last conservative premier to serve a full term in office was Ralph Klein!

Table 1. Alberta's Premiers, 1971 - 2019

<i>Premier</i>	<i>Party</i>	<i>Tenure</i>
Peter Lougheed	Progressive Conservative	1971 - 1985
Don Getty	Progressive Conservative	1985 - 1992
Ralph Klein	Progressive Conservative	1992 - 2006
Ed Stelmach	Progressive Conservative	2006 - 2011
Alison Redford	Progressive Conservative	2011 - 2014
Dave Hancock (interim)	Progressive Conservative	2014 (March – September)
Jim Prentice	Progressive Conservative	2014 - 2015
Rachel Notley	New Democratic Party	2015 - 2019
Jason Kenny	United Conservative Party	2019 - 2022
Danielle Smith	United Conservative Party	2022 -

As this quick overview of nearly two decades of the politics of the province suggests, there has been a high degree of volatility in Alberta politics in general, and within the province's

conservative parties in particular, that seems quite unusual given the eighty plus years of consecutive conservative rule in the province. Bratt (2022) has argued, convincingly, that a significant outcome of this political volatility has been the recent transition in Alberta politics to a “two party” system wherein conservative parties are no longer assumed to be the only legitimate contender. The aim of this article is to explore this political volatility, and the broader transition to a “two party system,” and demonstrate that, although a number of different factors have certainly played a role, the instability in the worldwide price of oil that Alberta’s fiscal position is so dependent upon has been a consistent underlying factor that has yet to be fully unpacked.

To highlight the importance of oil prices for Alberta is certainly not, in itself, a novel contribution. In fact, the province is routinely described as a form of “petro-state” (Adkin 2016; Smith 2015; Urquhart 2010). It is my contention, however, that the finite and long-running relationship between oil prices and the province’s electoral politics over several decades has not been well understood, despite the vast amount of scholarly attention Alberta politics receive from Canadian political scientists. More specifically, this paper will argue that volatile resource prices, and especially ill-timed price shocks (nearly always experienced as sharp drops in prices), have played an important and underappreciated role in fracturing the province’s traditional “single dominant party” system. Moreover, this is a pattern that has played itself out in meaningful ways throughout Alberta’s history. Indeed, hidden beneath the historical narrative of one-party dominance in Alberta is the fact that, when oil prices have drop sharply, electoral trouble, if not defeat, for the PCs (and now UCP) has followed – a pattern that emerges across several decades. In other words, oil prices have long intersected with the province’s party system in underappreciated ways.

The remainder of this paper expands on these points by first providing a narrative account of the volatility experienced by the province’s conservative political movement since 2006. Next, the paper considers the nature of Alberta’s party system over a longer historical period, noting the specific ways wherein oil prices intersected meaningfully with the province’s electoral politics, despite the PCs remaining in office for an unprecedented 44 years. Finally, the paper concludes with some thoughts on the emergence of the UCP, the rise and fall of Jason Kenney as premier, and the accession of Danielle Smith, within the broader context of this paper’s thesis regarding the important and ongoing ways in which oil prices intersect with the province’s party system.

The volatility of conservative politics in Alberta: 2006 - 2015

In February of 2015, only 3 months prior to the NDP’s unexpected victory, the PCs had the support of 46% of Albertans, with the opposition Wildrose, Liberals and NDP all hovering between the 16-18% level (Enviroics 2015). Only a couple months previously, PC leader Jim Prentice had seemingly secured an unobstructed path to electoral victory when he convinced 11 MLAs from the 16-member right-wing Wildrose caucus to cross the floor to the PCs thereby decimating the Official Opposition and what was assumed to be the PCs sole serious electoral rival. After surviving a close call in the 2012 election, when the Wildrose were outpolling the Alison Redford-led PCs for much of the campaign only to fall behind in the last days, Prentice had essentially united the right in the province and, in early 2015, exactly zero pundits were predicting anything but another significant stretch of PC rule in Alberta’s future. That the PC party would end up losing the May 2015 election by the NDP is

thus a noteworthy reminder of the maxim: “campaigns do matter”. In that sense, understanding the demise of the long-ruling PCs is as simple as examining the period between February and May 2015, with specific focus on the campaign itself. Indeed, there is little doubt that specific moments in the campaign, especially the Leader’s Debate, turned the tide in favour of the NDP. Although exploring a counter-factual, namely that had Prentice performed differently during the campaign, the PC’s would have likely won the 2015 election, is intriguing, this paper will move in a different direction. As has been noted elsewhere (Bratt 2019; Taras 2019), the PCs had been in a slow downward spiral since the final days of Ralph Klein’s premiership in 2006 and, despite winning large electoral majorities in 2008 and 2012, experienced an unusually volatile decade prior to losing power in 2015. At the heart of this slow decline has been the struggle within the PC caucus to keep united the socially and especially fiscally conservative wing of the party, on one hand, and the more moderate, centrist wing, on the other (Stewart and Sayers 2023). One of the least well understood aspects of the PCs long reign, at least in terms of observers from outside of the province, has been the big-tent nature of the party who, at their zenith, were incredibly adept at governing from the centre in a way that kept two distinct types of conservatives largely content. This section aims to provide a brief narrative account of the period of volatility within the conservative ranks beginning in 2006 wherein the unity between these two wings began to disintegrate.

Ralph Klein won the leadership of the PCs and thus became premier in December 1992 and would serve in that position for a full fourteen years, winning 4 electoral majorities. Having announced prior to the 2004 election that he intended to serve only one more term, pressure mounted from those inside the party who were eager for him to step aside far sooner than his announced 2008 departure. In a surprising act of defiance against a traditionally popular figure, only 55 % of PC members endorsed his leadership in 2006, thereby hastening his departure from provincial politics. Little did observers understand at the time, the resulting leadership contest marked the beginning of a period of intense volatility for the party, eventually culminating in its demise.

Former PC cabinet minister Jim Dinning entered the 2006 leadership contest as the frontrunner, with Ted Morton, a University of Calgary academic representing the chief challenger from the right. After the first round of voting, which utilized a runoff ballot, Dinning was the clear leader, with Morton second and Ed Stelmach, a lesser-known former PC cabinet minister, well behind in third place. When Dinning was unable to secure a majority of support, the contest moved to a second and eventually third ballot before Stelmach, the longshot who just so happened to be almost everyone’s “second choice,” prevailed over the two heavy albeit polarizing favorites. Although Stelmach would lead the PCs to another convincing electoral victory in 2008, it was his decision in 2007 to initiate a review of the province’s oil and gas royalty rates that set the stage for a brief internal struggle culminating in significant number of conservatives in the province shifting their loyalty to the upstart Wildrose party, initially an amalgamation of largely social conservatives who had long existed on the fringes of Alberta politics. Stelmach’s initial pledge to hike resource royalty rates was not well received by the province’s oil and gas sector, leading to a sizable increase in donations to the Wildrose thereby giving them an instant boost in credibility (Bratt 2019, 38-39). Over the next few years, the Wildrose continued to grow as traditional PC supporters, donors, and eventually a handful of MLAs became increasingly aggrieved at the consecutive high deficits that the Stelmach government were running. By early 2011,

the internal battle within the PC caucus over these high deficits, as well as the broader electoral threat represented by the more fiscally conservative Wildrose, led Stelmach to announce he would resign, setting the stage for a leadership contest later that year.

In the Fall of 2011 Gary Mar, another former Klein-era cabinet minister with a reputation as a centrist, emerged as the clear front-runner to become leader. Doug Horner, a long time PC cabinet minister joined the race as did Morton, again the favoured candidate of the right-wing of the party although, truth be told, a sizable number of right-leaning supporters had already drifted to the Wildrose. Alison Redford, who had entered politics in 2008 and served as Alberta's Minister of Justice, entered the race as the dark horse candidate. The majority of the PC caucus and party executive endorsed Mar resulting in a commanding first ballot lead over Redford (40.8 versus 18.7%). However, for the second consecutive PC leadership contest, the establishment candidate and first ballot leader was unable to secure victory. Capitalizing on party rules that allowed \$5 PC memberships to be sold in the two-week period between the first and second ballots (Morton 2013), Redford successfully used the time between ballots to advance a centrist platform that garnered strong support from teachers and parents of school age children, most of whom were not traditional PC voters (Ashenburg 2013; Steward 2012). Riding a wave that brought nearly 20 thousand additional voters to the second ballot, Redford narrowly defeated Mar and became Alberta's 14th premier.

Although Redford's surprise victory provided a positive bump in the polls, the PCs soon found themselves trailing the Wildrose for much of the 2012 electoral campaign. However, in the final days of the campaign Wildrose leader Danielle Smith refused to both repudiate the homophobic comments of a Wildrose candidate and acknowledge that the science behind climate change was settled allowing Redford to portray Wildrose as a party of social conservatives and climate change deniers. This in turn produced a last-minute surge in PC support among centrist and left voters who feared a potential Wildrose government (Davison 2012; Kellog 2012), thereby helping the PCs capture yet another majority government.

For those conservative voters who had initially resisted the call of the Wildrose party in the 2012 election, Redford's willingness to continue to run budget deficits and take progressive positions such as those related to LGBTQ issues were troubling. Rumours of strife inside the PC caucus also began to spread, inflamed mostly by Redford's supposed aggressive and combative leadership style (Banack 2019; Cryderman and Walton 2013). Although 77 percent of party members approved of her leadership in November 2013, a series of expense scandals led to a dramatic drop in public support for her as well as the PC Party by the Spring of 2014. As details emerged of costly international trips, a luxurious penthouse near the legislature, and extensive use of government jets for questionable purposes, Redford found it hard to escape allegations by Wildrose that she was a profligate spender out of touch with the lives of average citizens. Sensing their party's electoral vulnerability, PC MLAs, constituency association presidents and eventually the party executive began to denounce Redford publicly. The premier's public approval rating plummeted to 18 percent from 35 percent only two months earlier and 58 percent after winning the PC leadership (Commisso 2014). Like Klein and Stelmach before her, Redford was effectively pushed out not long after winning a large electoral majority. On 19 March 2014, Redford resigned as premier, setting the stage for yet another leadership contest.

As Bratt has noted (2019, 36), the persistent in-fighting and literal axing of both Stelmach and Redford, despite winning large majorities, caused much harm to the PC brand in the eyes of the public. Yet by late 2014 Prentice, who had easily secured the leadership of the party in a much less “open” leadership contest earlier that year,¹ had seemingly reinvigorated the party. Months after the infamous Wildrose floor-crossing, polls suggested the PCs had regained their traditional position, far more popular than any and all challengers. Of course, the 2015 electoral campaign went poorly for Prentice, Notley performed admirably in the leader’s debate and, perhaps most importantly, the Wildrose, left for dead after the floor-crossing, surpassed all expectations under new leader Brian Jean and captured roughly 24% of the vote, thereby creating a centre-right split allowing the NDP to creep up the middle and slay the PC dragon, the first election they had lost since 1967.

It is true that one could point to any number of small political outcomes, decisions, or outright coincidences that, had they gone differently, the PCs may still be in power. For instance, perhaps it is fair to suggest that had either Dinning or Mar, clear frontrunners in the 2006 and 2011 PC leadership contests, secured first ballot victories, Alberta politics would have unfolded quite differently over the last decade. Similarly, had Stelmach not had the misfortune of announcing a resource royalty hike, which polls suggested was quite popular with Albertans at the time, just months before the Great Recession of 2008, or had Redford decided to fly economy to Nelson Mandela’s funeral, the PCs may still be in power. Nevertheless, it is still my contention that something profoundly important has been occurring below the surface of Alberta politics over the last decade that has been applying incredible pressure upon the existing party system that served the PCs so well for decades. Put bluntly, the resource wealth that has undergirded so much of the PCs success since 1971 has become, essentially since 2008, far less reliable than in the past. Tombe (2023) has been especially adept at noting, in much detail, the shifting fiscal landscape in Alberta associated with declining oil and gas revenues. This in turn, I contend, has prevented the PCs from continuing to offer the “Holy Trinity” of Alberta politics: well-funded government services while simultaneously keeping taxes low and running budget surpluses. As the next section will illustrate, whenever this “Holy Trinity” becomes impossible to maintain, the PCs become very vulnerable electorally due largely to the party’s inability to maintain unity among its disparate wings.

Alberta’s Single Dominant Party System

Alberta’s political track record, at least outside of the NDP’s unexpected one-term government, seems to leave little doubt that it is Canada’s most conservative province. Indeed, the Alberta Social Credit’s (SC) remarkable nine straight electoral majorities (1935-1971), were subsequently outdone by the even more remarkable longevity of the PCs who would win 12 straight majorities (1971-2015). Although the NDP upset the applecart in 2015, leading to a number of commentators suggesting that Alberta was not the unabashedly conservative province the rest of Canada had long accepted, Kenney led the newly formed UCP to a decisive victory in 2019, seemingly putting the province back upon its traditional conservative trajectory, defeating Notley and her “accidental government.” At the heart of this pattern of Alberta politics has sat a single dominant party system. That is, for the vast majority of provincial elections stretching back to 1935, Alberta experienced “an electoral situation in which only one party has a realistic chance to win elections and form

governments” (Patten 2015, 256). Surely between 1935 and 2015 there have been other parties active in the province, but, aside from basically three elections (1971, 1993 and 2012), electoral outcomes were never really in doubt. And, of these three elections that were actually competitive, they were basically contests between two different right-of-centre parties: in 1971 the PCs overtook the SC, in 1993 an unusually fiscally conservative Liberal Party nearly toppled the PCs, and in 2012 the right-wing Wildrose nearly defeated the PCs. In basically every other election over that 80-year period, electoral campaigns in Alberta did not seem to matter. This lack of electoral competition over such a long stretch is the essence of a single dominant party system.

Yet Alberta’s politics are much more complex than the conservative stereotype often suggests. As McCormick (1980) long ago demonstrated, the single member plurality electoral system has severely distorted the legislative seat counts relative to popular vote in Alberta. Yes, the historical track record clearly reveals that conservative parties have been the most popular and successful in Alberta politics. But it also remains true that, despite massive legislative majorities for both the SC and PC parties for decades on end, nearly half of Albertans have consistently voted against the governing party. In addition, pundits who bemoan long stretches of one-party rule often fail to note the significant differences in approach and policy between the somewhat interventionist William Aberhart and the firmly free-market approach of his SC successor Ernest Manning, or the wide gulf between the activist administrations of PC leader Peter Lougheed (1971-1985) and the neo-liberal approach of Klein’s PCs (1992-2006). Recent research that highlights the high per-capita spending record of both SC and PC provincial governments, or the relatively moderate political views on both moral and fiscal dimensions held by the majority of contemporary Albertans further complicates the notion of Alberta being an unabashedly conservative province. Stewart and Sayers (2013; 2019) have been especially illustrative on this point, pointing to public opinion polling that demonstrates the contemporary population’s general support for relatively high levels of government spending while simultaneously expressing uneasiness with respect to the amount of political power possessed by oil companies and an openness to increasing resources royalty rates on oil and gas companies. In addition, Ellis (2019) has been providing polling data for years that demonstrates the high levels of progressive support by Alberta citizens for social issues such as abortion, medically-assistance in dying and same sex marriage. Wesley (2024) has gone even further, highlighting the rather paradoxical conclusion that, despite the fact most Albertan’s hold individual political preferences that are demonstrably “centrist” on social and fiscal issues, most also continue to believe that the majority of citizens hold views much further to the “right” than they actually do.

So, what gives? Albertans are not unusually conservative when it comes to individual values yet, with one obvious exception in 2015, conservatives always win! Classic attempts to explain this have pointed to the initial socio-economic conditions of the province including its so-called homogeneous class composition and quasi-colonial status (Macpherson 1953; Dacks 1986), its unique inheritance of American agrarian settlers (Wiseman 1981), its early religious make-up (Clark 1945; Mann 1955) and the religiously-inspired political values of its formative leaders (Banack 2016), and its economic reliance on specific resource staples and the conservative economic pressures such a reliance placed upon governments (Richards and Pratt 1979; Tupper et al 1992). In addition, Wesley (2011) has noted the

importance of the re-occurring conservative “code” in Alberta’s politics that further entrenches a conservative political culture, while Stewart and Sayers (2009) have pointed to the PC’s leader-centred politics and especially the use of a particular brand of plebiscitary voting to select party leaders as key reasons behind their success. The PCs ability to utilize a type of client-patron politics, especially in rural areas (Epp 2019), and outright intimidation in certain cases with respect to municipalities, provincial agencies and boards (Patten 2015) are also important factors. And, given the undeniable strength of western alienation among its citizens, the PC’s and UCP’s ability to play the great “defender of Alberta,” protecting the province’s interests from the ever-suspicious federal government (Taras 2019, 22) is also crucial to understanding their dominance. Low voter turnout, especially among a largely depoliticized working class, electoral financing laws that favoured the deep-pocketed PCs, numerous follies on the part of opposition parties, and the general capacity the PCs demonstrated to adapt to changing economic circumstances and select distinct leaders who pursued objectives more appropriate to the times, further worked to the disadvantage of centre or left-leaning parties in Alberta politics.

There is little doubt that a full accounting of Alberta politics thus requires grasping these many factors. However, one of the most important aspects undergirding the longevity of the single dominant party system in Alberta may also be the most straightforward in terms of the province’s uniqueness in Canada: the overall economic prosperity enjoyed by the province thanks to its oil and natural gas riches. This has allowed consecutive conservative governments to often spend generously on a wide array of programs while maintaining relatively low tax rates and balanced budgets, the “Holy Trinity” mentioned earlier as being the key to keeping the right and centrist wings of the PC party united. The same equation largely applied to the SC governments post-1947. As Finkel (1989, 122-139) argued in reference to the SC’s long period of uninterrupted rule, a key distinction that structures much of Alberta’s politics is that between “rich government” and “big government.” In the case of SC, Premier Manning’s penchant for high per capita spending on health, education, and infrastructure (made possible by impressive resource royalties) while simultaneously vilifying socialism and avoiding high taxes rates in the 1950s and 1960s created a scenario wherein ordinary Albertans came to expect the benefits of “rich government” while being ideologically groomed to oppose the so-called oppressive nature of a redistributive “big government.” One sees the persistence of such sentiment in contemporary Alberta politics wherein per capita government expenditures consistently rank well above most other provinces, yet taxes remain low and budgets were frequently balanced. The most direct way to see this connection between resources revenues and the provinces politics over the past several decades is to consider the moments since 1971 wherein the PCs looked the most vulnerable electorally: they clearly coincide with periods wherein depressed oil and natural gas prices prevented PC governments from high per capita spending without simultaneously running up significant budget deficits.

Table 2. Alberta Election Results, 1971 - 1993

<i>Year</i>	<i>PC's Seats (% of Vote)</i>	<i>Social Credit Seats (% of Vote)</i>	<i>Liberal Seats (% of Vote)</i>	<i>NDP Seats (% of Vote)</i>	<i>Other Seats (% of Vote)</i>
1971	49 (46.4%)	25 (41.1%)	-	1 (11.4%)	
1975	69 (62.7%)	4 (18.2%)		1 (12.9%)	
1979	74 (57.4%)	4 (19.87%)	0 (6.16%)	1 (15.75%)	
1982	75 (62.3%)	0 (0.8%)		2 (18.7%)	0 (11.8%)*
1986	61 (51.4%)		4 (12.2%)	16 (29.2%)	
1989	59 (44.3%)		8 (28.7%)	16 (26.3%)	
1993	51 (44.5%)		32 (39.7%)	0 (11%)	

Consider first the late 1980s and early 1990s. As Table 2 demonstrates, after capturing power in a close contest in 1971, the PCs under Lougheed would go on to enjoy very strong voter support in the 1975, 1979, and 1982 elections. No doubt Lougheed was a hugely popular premier, and part of his success was related to his strong defense of Alberta and its constitutional rights to control and benefit from its natural resources during a period of great regional tumult in the country, culminating with the introduction of the federal Liberal's notorious National Energy Policy. However, between 1973 and 1985, oil prices also rose substantially, from a low of just over \$4 (us) per barrel to a high of over \$37 in 1981, then stabilizing somewhat between \$27 and \$33 until 1985.² For the Lougheed PCs, this led to previously unimagined riches. By 1982, annual provincial resource revenue had peaked at roughly \$7200 per person, allowing for substantial spending increase on the part of the government (Kneebone and Zwicker 2019, 230-31). The dramatic fall in oil prices in 1986, which essentially halved the price per barrel in under a year, led to a loss of roughly 40% of the province's resource revenue and corresponding sizable budget deficits from 1987 to 1993, despite efforts to reduce spending (Kneebone and Zwicker, 231).

Don Getty had the misfortune of becoming premier in 1985 and the bulk of his tenure was spent dealing with the dramatic decline in the province's fiscal position. Unsurprisingly, the PC's vote share fell in the 1989 election, although they retained power largely because the Liberals and NDP split the opposition vote, 28.7% and 26.3% respectively. Getty's popularity continued to decline, leading to the selection of Klein as leader in 1992 and a subsequent narrow electoral victory over the suddenly fiscally conservative Liberals led by Lawrence Decore. Indeed, the Liberals essentially outflanked the PCs on the right in the early 1990s by campaigning on the promise to address the province's rapidly rising debt by way of significant spending cuts. Despite temporarily trailing in the polls, Klein followed the Liberals lead by promising drastic spending cuts allowing the PCs to eek out an electoral victory in 1993. The PCs won the popular vote by only 4.8%, the closest the PCs would come to losing the popular vote until losing the election outright in 2015. What is perhaps even more interesting about this period is that, because those involved in the surging hard-right

federal Reform Party of Canada, largely headquartered in Alberta, decided after some debate to *not* form a provincial counterpart, the PCs were essentially spared the fate of having to compete against a potentially powerful foe from the right that would have clearly siphoned away their support from the more fiscally conservative in the province.³ In fact, had the folks involved in the Reform movement decided differently, it is fair to speculate that the conservative-leaning vote in Alberta would have been split in the same manner it did between 2008 and 2017, perhaps opening the door to a Liberal or NDP victory some twenty or thirty years ago, thereby providing a very different flavour to the story of Alberta politics.

Through the remainder of the 1990s, oil prices remained largely stagnant, ranging between \$15-20 per barrel, with the exception of a temporary drop in 1998. These prices were a long way from the highs in the early 1980s, but the Klein government's substantial spending cuts ensured the province ran budget surpluses for the entirety of his premiership. However, these cuts were hugely unpopular across a wide swath of Albertans thereby ensuring the Liberals (now less fiscally conservative) and NDP garnered respectable percentages of the vote between 1997 and 2004, but neither came close to toppling the PCs who were able to maintain unity between the different wings of provincial conservatives. This is illustrated in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Alberta Election Results, 1997 - 2004

<i>Year</i>	<i>PC's Seats (% of Vote)</i>	<i>Liberal Seats (% of Vote)</i>	<i>NDP Seats (% of Vote)</i>	<i>Other Seats (% of Vote)</i>
1997	63 (51.17%)	18 (32.75%)	2 (8.8%)	
2001	74 (61.9%)	7 (27.3%)	2 (8%)	
2004	62 (46.8%)	16 (29.4%)	4 (10.2%)	1 (8.7%)*

As oil prices began to increase in the early 2000s, topping out at an annual average price of over \$92 per barrel in 2008, the PCs continued to poll well, although the commitment to fiscal restraint that had dominated the 1990s was largely set aside. In fact, by 2009 the gap between government spending and government revenues from taxation was nearly \$4000 per capita (Kneebone and Zwicker, 231-232). Yet sky-high resource revenue allowed the government to continue posting budget surpluses. Despite some internal strife within the PC party surrounding the retirement of Klein and especially the surprise victory of the little-known Stelmach in the 2006 leadership contest, the party cruised to yet another virtually uncontested electoral victory in 2008, on the strength of what the PC's had seemingly always delivered: hefty program spending and consecutive budget surpluses, all made possible by the worldwide price of Alberta's non-renewable resources. However, the latter months of 2008 and especially 2009 would end up being a significant turning point in the fortunes of the PC party and Alberta politics in general.

As mentioned, the selection of Stelmach as leader did not sit well with some within the party. The dramatic drop in oil prices in 2009 (down from over \$90 per barrel to under \$60 as a result of the Great Recession), and the resistance on the part of Stelmach to calls from

the right-wing of the party to institute Klein-like cuts to government spending to ensure continued balanced budgets significantly exacerbated tensions within the party between the right and centre wings. To make matters worse, Stelmach's decision to raise royalty rates in 2007 had inadvertently provided a boost to the then fledging right-wing Wildrose party, who were suddenly looking more attractive to fiscal conservatives. Despite a rebound in the price of oil in 2010 and beyond, Stelmach was unable to balance the provincial budget leading to internal criticism from the more fiscally conservative in caucus, who eventually pressured him into resigning in early 2011. The subsequent surprise selection of Redford, an obvious red tory who campaigned on a clear centrist platform pushed even more fiscal conservatives into the Wildrose fold. As mentioned, it was perhaps only the "bozo interruptions" at the tail-end of the 2012 electoral campaign, and especially leader Smith's seeming indifference to them, that prevented the Wildrose from capturing power. But the divide between the PCs and Wildrose persisted, even after the infamous 2014 floor-crossing by Smith and most of her Wildrose colleagues to the PCs, opening to the door to an unexpectedly unified opposition vote from the centre and left in the historic 2015 election. This is illustrated in the following table.

Table 4. Alberta Election Results, 2008 – 2015

<i>Year</i>	<i>PC's Seats (% of Vote)</i>	<i>Wildrose Seats (% of Vote)</i>	<i>Liberal Seats (% of Vote)</i>	<i>NDP Seats (% of Vote)</i>
2008	72 (52.7%)	0 (6.8%)	9 (26.4%)	2 (8.5%)
2012	61 (43.97)	17 (34.28%)	5 (9.89%)	4 (9.85%)
2015	9 (27.79%)	21 (24.22%)	1 (4.18%)	54 (40.62%)

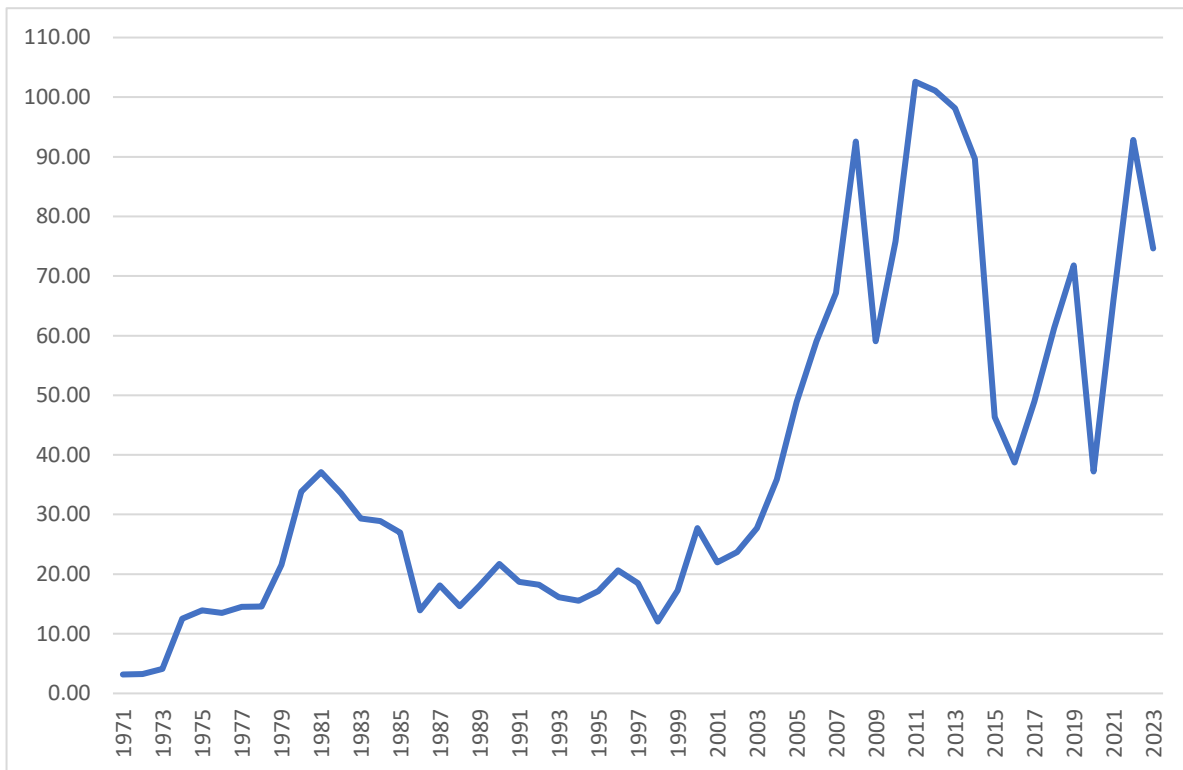
Obviously much could be (and has been) said about the 2015 campaign and the specific factors that allowed the NDP, first, to bring together such a large coalition of non-PC voters for the first time in Alberta's history, and second, to make up a 30-point polling deficit in the span of three months to capture government (Bratt et al. 2019) But, as this chapter has argued, the more fundamental shift in Alberta's politics is rooted not just in a long list of political machinations but perhaps more so in the declining fiscal position of the province given the decade long stretch of depressed oil prices. After enjoying long periods of electoral dominance on the back of high spending, low taxes, and frequent budget surpluses, the PCs, since at least 2008 have struggled mightily to square the circle of citizen demands given the swiftly declining resources royalties that this approach to governance has depended upon. With this magic genie no longer appearing as frequently as in the past, the PCs were simply unable to maintain the support of fiscal conservatives on one side and more centrist voters concerned with properly funded government services on the other. Consequently, this internal battle between these two sides decimated the PC's image in the eyes of the electorate. From this perspective, playing the "what if" game in terms of the leadership politics of the PCs over the past 15 years becomes far less relevant. Given the fundamental fiscal challenges the government has faced, it is difficult to imagine Dinning, or Mar, or

anyone else for that matter, being able to maintain the support of 45% - 60% of the electorate over the long term.

Conclusion: Oil Prices, the UCP, and Alberta's Party System Going Forward

Alberta politics has always featured two distinct strands of conservatism – the libertarian-leaning right-wing fiscal and social conservatism of Ernest Manning, the Reform party crowd, Ralph Klein, and figures like Stockwell Day, Ted Morton and Danielle Smith, and on the other side the traditional centre-leaning “red Tories” – the likes of Lougheed, Mar, Redford, Hancock and Prentice. Perhaps the simplest historical explanation of Alberta politics reads as follows: the degree to which a conservative-leaning party can contain these divergent strands explains its general level of support among the similarly split electorate and thus its level of success in elections. But, to take this just a step further, I am suggesting that a fundamental factor to maintaining unity amongst this disparate group has been access to the natural resource royalties required to keep both sides of this equation satisfied. The history of Alberta politics, thus, very closely mirrors the market price for oil. As the corresponding historical trends in Figures 1 and 2 below demonstrate: when prices rise and remain strong (ie: throughout 1970s, the late 1990s through most of the 2000s, and again in 2009/2010 and 2022/23), the PC's (and UCP's) vote share has risen or remained very strong. After all, absent a significant scandal, what opposition party (especially a divided opposition) stands a chance against a party that can spend high, tax low and maintain surpluses?

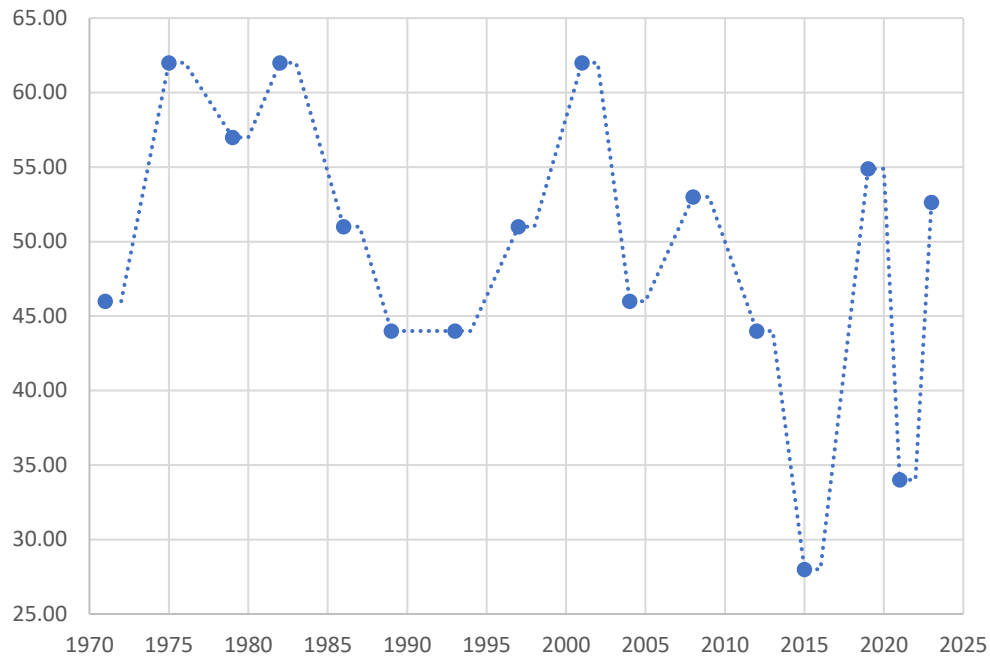
Figure 1. Oil Price (\$US): 1971-2023*



Similarly, when oil prices drop sharply, electoral trouble for the PCs has followed: first in the late 1980s/early 1990s, with the PCs ultimately surviving a stiff electoral challenge in 1993 thanks in large part to the decision of many fiscal conservatives in the province to *not* form a right-wing

competitor to the PCs and second, in the mid to late 2000s, wherein a fiscally conservative competitor *did* emerge, nearly defeating the PCs in 2012 and ultimately splitting the vote in 2015 allowing for an NDP victory.

Figure 2. PC and UCP Vote Share (%): 1971 - 2023*



*Note that the value entered for 2021 is a poll result, not an electoral outcome. See 338 Canada (2024).

So, what can be drawn from this interpretation of Alberta politics that is applicable to its politics going forward taking into account the emergence of the UCP and its capture government in 2019, and was re-elected in 2023?

Table 5. Alberta election results, 2019 and 2023

Year	UCP Seats (% of Vote)	NDP Seats (% of Vote)	Alberta Party Seats (% of Vote)	Liberal Seats (% of Vote)
2019	63 (54.9%)	24 (32.7%)	0 (9.1%)	0 (1.0%)
2023	49 (52.63%)	38 (44.05%)	0 (0.7%)	0 (0.2%)

Given the percentage of votes received in 2019, the UCP has seemingly managed to replicate the PCs traditional levels of support from the right and centre-right vote in the province. Winning essentially 55% of the vote is no small feat, but was it really reminiscent of many of the past majorities won by PC governments in times of bounty in the province? The short answer is no. The UCP's success in the 2019 election was not, as has usually been the case, a

result of a conservative government being able to deliver the “Holy Trinity” due to high resource revenues. Rather, low oil prices from 2015-18, the NDP’s decision to resist sharp spending cuts and instead run sizable budget deficits, and the overall bleak economic and employment situation in the province largely pressured the two conservative wings back together. In fact, the desire to oust the NDP was so strong among these groups of voters that a long list of scandals that dogged the UCP throughout the campaign made next to no difference in the minds of conservative-leaning voters (Patriquin 2019). However, I do not interpret the UCP’s undeniably strong showing in the 2019 election, or their slightly less dominant victory in 2023, as an indication that Alberta is destined to again be ruled by a conservative party for a generation or two. Rather, unless oil prices rebound and remain at pre-2009 levels, the government will inevitably face the very same challenges the PCs did in the late 80s/early 90s and from 2008-2015. Put simply, the revenues required to deliver what both ideological wings of the UCP desire will simply not be there. Indeed, absent such a surge in revenue, Alberta’s fiscal situation going forward looks grim (Tombe 2023). Given the trade-offs the province will be forced to make in response to this situation, it seems inevitable that the UCP will face internal divisions similar to the earlier PC party.

The sudden fall of Jason Kenney, forced to resign as premier in 2022 in the face of intense criticism from a group of rebellious UCP caucus and party members angered at his handling of the Covid-19 Pandemic, and the subsequent emergence of Danielle Smith to the premiership, provides an interesting recent case to probe with respect to this thesis. It is certainly true that Kenney’s performance over the course of the Pandemic was widely criticized (Dryden, 2021; Livesey, 2021), and the grassroots groups most responsible for hounding Kenney and strongly supporting Smith in the subsequent leadership race were motivated primarily by a populist, far right agenda built around a libertarian conception of “freedom” in general and a distinct anti-science, anti-Covid mitigation stance in particular (McLean et al. 2024). Why this far-right wing of the party, much more aligned with the right-wing populist politics of Donald Trump, or even Erdogan in Türkiye or Modi in India, than a traditional Alberta conservative stalwart like Ralph Klein, emerged victorious in a battle with the more centrist-wing of the UCP party, is a vitally important question that deserves more attention, although it is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is significant to note that the UCP infighting that ultimately led to Kenney’s resignation *also* took place against the backdrop of yet *another* precipitous decline in oil prices.

Within weeks of the World Health Organization declaring the Covid-19 outbreak a “pandemic” in March 2020, per barrel global oil prices were trading in the low \$20s, down from roughly \$75 just 3 months prior. By the end of 2020, prices had rebounded to near \$60, and continued to climb in 2021, peaking at an over \$120 in May 2022. However, the fiscal damage to Alberta had been done. The province ended the 2020/21 fiscal year with a \$17 billion deficit, some \$12 Billion more than had projected just months earlier (Tombe 2023: 263). Interestingly, numerous opinion polls throughout 2020 and early 2021 hinted that a significant tightening was occurring between the UCP and NDP in terms of voter preference, with some polls even suggesting the NDP pulling ahead (338 Canada, 2024). DeCillia (2023: 68) notes that, had an election been called in early 2022, the NDP would have likely won, due largely to the declining popularity of Kenney, whose public approval ratings had plunged from 50 percent in 2018 to under 20 per cent by late 2021. It is foolhardy to dismiss the significant disruption to “politics as normal” that the pandemic represented during this period, and especially the growing popularity of conspiracy theories and blatant anti-science

rhetoric related to the pandemic that spread across the globe via social media, as significant factors that undoubtedly fueled the populist-right uprising within Alberta that ultimately led to Kenney's demise. Yet, it is also foolhardy to ignore that this split within the UCP, which had seemingly re-established conservative dominance in Alberta only 3 years prior, and found themselves falling rapidly in voter opinion polls in 2020/21, again occurred within the broader context of a sharp decline in oil prices (See Tables 5 and 6 above), and the generation of a significant budget deficit.

Ironically, oil prices rose to their highest levels in over 15 years the same month Kenney stepped down and, although they fell back to the \$70-80 range in the months surrounding the 2023 election, the province enjoyed what the CBC (2023) dubbed "a petro-powered \$11.6 Billion surplus" in the 2022/23 fiscal year. This provided plenty of cushion for Smith and the UCP to make a wide range of expensive promises leading into the 2023 election, including a personal income tax cut, an extension of the existing freeze of the provincial fuel tax, and a promise to contribute \$330 million provincial dollars for the construction of a new hockey arena and event centre in the critically important electoral battleground of Calgary (Global News 2023) – promises that seemed to belie the libertarian, small-government ideology that Smith and many on the right of the UCP adhered to. Again, it is difficult not to see the subsequent outcome of the 2023 election, close as it was in many key ridings in Calgary, through the historical prism of the "Holy Trinity" that sat at the foundation of numerous conservative party electoral victories over the history of Alberta politics: well-funded government services, low taxes, and budget surpluses, all on the back of high resource revenues.

More generally, it seems true that Alberta truly has joined the rest of the Canadian provinces in evolving beyond a one-party system, with the NDP seemingly poised to represent a serious challenger to the UCP for the foreseeable future. Just as interesting is the current make-up of this party system. On one hand, the UCP has, at least in 2024, moved some ideological distance away from the traditional PC political powerhouse that successfully governed from the centre throughout much of its dynasty. One the other, who would have guessed, even a decade ago, that it would be the NDP, and not the Liberals, or even the Alberta Party, that would manage to build an effective and enduring coalition of non-conservative voters in the province sizable enough to consistently challenge the UCP? There are, of course, a number of factors that can help to explain these developments, but a full accounting of contemporary Alberta politics is well outside the scope of this (or any single) paper. However, as I have argued throughout, there has been a consistent thread that has interwoven itself with electoral politics in Alberta going back several decades that has yet to be fully appreciated: the ever-shifting global price of oil (and natural gas) that has such a significant impact on the province's fiscal position and, inadvertently, has intersected with its party system in meaningful ways, including its transition to a two-party system.

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End Notes

¹ Having seemingly learned their lesson from leadership contests that produced suboptimal winners in 2006 and 2011, the PCs essentially abandoned many of the rules that allowed Stelmach and Redford to win. See: Sayers and Stewart 2019, 406.

² All oil prices taken from: "Short-Term Energy Outlook," U.S. Energy and Information Administration. <https://www.eia.gov/outlooks/steo/realprices/>

³ For poll results that suggest a provincial Reform Party would have easily defeated the PCs see: Harrison 1997, 53. On the Reform Movement's more general impact on provincial politics in Alberta in the early 1990s see: Taras and Tupper 1994, 66-67.

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