Report on the Provinces

Alberta's Transition to a Two-Party System: The 2015 and 2019 Elections

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Abstract

Alberta has historically been a one-party dominant system by electing a series of party dynasties from 1905 to 2015. However, Alberta started a transition to a two-party system when the NDP formed government following the 2015 election. This process was solidified with the 2019 election that saw the UCP and NDP as the only parties that won seats and received over 87% combined in the popular vote. The UCP (a consequence of a merger between the PCs and Wildrose Party) won a landslide election in 2019, but, unlike in previous Alberta elections, the former governing party did not disappear. The NDP won all but one seat in Edmonton, won seats in Calgary and Lethbridge, and re-elected Premier Rachel Notley and ten former Cabinet Ministers. Since the 2019 election, measures such as voter turnout, polling, fundraising, and the resilience of the UCP indicate the continuation of the two-party system.

Résumé

L'Alberta a toujours été un système à parti unique dominant en élisant une série de dynasties de partis de 1905 à 2015. Cependant, l'Alberta a entamé une transition vers un système à deux partis lorsque le NPD a formé le gouvernement après les élections de 2015. Ce processus s'est solidifié avec les élections de 2019 qui ont vu l'UCP et le NPD comme les seuls partis à avoir remporté des sièges et obtenu plus de 87 % combinés lors du vote populaire. L'UCP (conséquence d'une fusion entre les PC et le Wildrose Party) a remporté une élection écrasante en 2019, mais, contrairement aux précédentes élections albertaines, l'ancien parti au pouvoir n'a pas disparu. Le NPD a remporté tous les sièges sauf un à Edmonton, a remporté des sièges à Calgary et à Lethbridge et a réélu la première ministre Rachel Notley et dix anciens ministres du Cabinet. Depuis les élections de 2019, des mesures telles que la participation électorale, les sondages, la collecte de fonds et la résilience de l'UCP indiquent la poursuite du système bipartite.

Key Words: Two-party system, One-party dominant system, 2015 Alberta Election, 2019 Alberta election

Mots-clés : Système bipartite, Système dominant à parti unique, Élection albertaine 2015, Élection albertaine 2019

Introduction

For almost its entire existence, Alberta was seen as a prototypical one-party dominant province (Bell, Jansen, and Young, 2007). In characterizing party systems, political scientists distinguish amongst the number of overall parties with the number of "effective" parties. The number of effective parties is often measured with a variety of mathematical techniques, using seat share and vote share (Laakso and Taagepera, 1979). This has led to a typology that includes: one-party systems (USSR or China), one-party dominant systems (Mexico under the PRI or Japan under the Liberal Democratic Party), two-party systems (United States), two-party plus systems (Canada and the United Kingdom), and multi-party systems (many Western European countries). A one-party dominant system occurs when "despite free electoral competition, relatively open information systems, respect for civil liberties,

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and the right of free political association, a single party has managed to govern alone or as the primary and ongoing partner in coalitions, without interruption, for substantial periods of time, often for three to five decades, and to dominate the formation of as many as ten, twelve, or more successive governments" (Pempel, 1990, 1-2).

Alberta had been marked by a series of successive party dynasties. These parties would win for decades and usually by excessively high percentage of Legislative seats and vote share. There were no minority governments and only a handful of competitive elections. When there was a shift in dynasties, the former governing party would disappear and would never be a political force in Alberta politics again. This changed with the stunning 2015 election when the NDP formed government. It was further solidified with the 2019 election, when the United Conservative Party (UCP) – created after a merger between the Progressive Conservatives (PCs) and Wildrose conservative parties – formed government. The combination of the 2015 and 2019 elections has meant that Alberta has transitioned from a one-party dominant system to a two party system. A two-party system occurs when there are only two parties, typically on either side of the centre, that win all or almost all of the seats and have a realistic chance of forming a majority. Sartori further elaborates by identifying four conditions of a two party system: "i) two parties are in a position to compete for the absolute majority of seats; ii) one of the two parties actually succeeds in winning a sufficient Parliamentary majority; iii) this party is willing to govern alone; and iv) alternation or rotation in power remains a credible expectation" (1976, 167). Alberta now has a party on the right (UCP) and a party on the left (NDP) with a handful of parties who contest elections but, for now, remain outside of the Legislature. In this respect, Alberta is starting to resemble the other Western Canadian provinces. For example, BC has the Liberals on the right and the NDP on the left, Saskatchewan has the Saskatchewan Party on the right and the NDP on left, and Manitoba has the PCs on the right and the NDP on the left. Although BC, which had a hung parliament from 2017-2020, could be more accurately described as a two-party plus system because the Greens are a third party that has received over 15% of the popular vote in the last two elections and provided confidence and supply to the NDP minority government of 2017-2020.

This article has five sections. Part one describes the history of Alberta's one-party dominant system. Part two shows how the 2015 election shattered the one-party dominance of the PCs and the roots of a two-party system began. Part three explains how the 2019 election solidified the transition to a two-party system. Part four evaluates events since the 2019 election to show how the two-party system is continuing even under some stresses. Part five is a brief conclusion.

Alberta and its One-Party Dominant System (1905-2015)

Prior to 2015, Albertans elected party dynasties and when they fall, they never formed government again. The Liberals ran the province from 1905-1921, but have never won power again. In 2019, the Liberals lost their only seat and received less than 1% of the popular vote. The United Farmers of Alberta (UFA) governed the province from 1921-1935 and quickly disappeared after losing; even disbanding as a political party in 1939. Social Credit ran Alberta from 1935-1971, but once it was defeated it moved into obscurity (though it did have a large opposition caucus after the 1971 election). The Progressive Conservatives governed for an unprecedented 44 years (1971-2015), but after it was defeated, they merged

with the Wildrose Party to create the United Conservative Party. The PCs, as an independent party, was gone within two years of losing its dynasty.

It was not just the fact that Alberta elected dynasties, but there were also few competitive elections. Table 1 identifies a series of variables to measure the lack of competitiveness in Alberta's elections. In the 28 elections from 1905 to 2012, there were 28 majority governments. In 15 elections, the governing party received over 50% of the popular vote and four times it was over 60%. The vote share gap between the governing party and the second-place party was often very high. 21 times it was over 10%, 14 times it was over 20%, and nine times it was over 30%. In only seven elections in over a century did the governing party win by less than 10%.

Table 1 Measuring the Competitiveness of Alberta's Elections (1905-2012)

Number of elections with a majority government	28/28	2012, 2008, 2004, 2001, 1997, 1993, 1989, 1986, 1982, 1979, 1975, 1971, 1967, 1963, 1959, 1955, 1952, 1948, 1944, 1940, 1935, 1930, 1926, 1921, 1917, 1913, 1909, 1905
Number of elections with a minority government	0/28	n/a
Number of Elections where 1st place party had between 50-60% of the vote	11/28	2008, 1997, 1986, 1979, 1963, 1952, 1948, 1944, 1935, 1909, 1905
Number of elections where 1st place party had over 60% of the vote	4/28	2001, 1982, 1975, 1959,
Number of elections where gap in vote total was between 10-20%	7/28	1997, 1989, 1967, 1955, 1930, 1926, 1905
Number of elections where gap in vote total was between 20-30%	5/28	2008, 2004, 1986, 1944, 1909
Number of elections where gap in vote total was larger than 30%	9/28	2001, 1982, 1979, 1975, 1963, 1959, 1952, 1948, 1935

If we remove the initial victories of the UFA (1921)[1] and the PCs (1971) – the Liberals' victory in 1905 and Social Credit's initial victory in 1935 were not close – there were really only five other competitive elections. In 1913 and 1917, the Liberals, despite winning a large number of seats, had a much smaller lead in the popular vote over the opposition Conservatives: 4.1% in 1913 and 6.3% in 1917. In 1940, Social Credit won with only 0.4% vote share lead, although it won 17 additional seats compared to the second place "Independent Movement" (a group of Liberal, Conservative, and UFA candidates under a common banner). In 1993, the PCs won with only 4.8% vote share lead over the second place Liberals. In 2012, the PCs trailed in public opinion polls most of the campaign but pulled off a come from behind win. They had a 9.67% vote share lead over the second place Wildrose Party.

What explains the historical one-party dominance of Alberta? In the case of the longest, and most recent, party dynasty, David Taras has argued that the PCs were "able to maintain

its hold on power by governing from the political centre. The party tent was large enough to include many shades of blue as well as those who in other places and circumstances would have been Liberals" (2019, 16). Taras expands on this thesis by identifying several additional factors: "identity politics, economic prosperity, the weakness of the opposition parties, and a largely conservative provincial political culture. Each of these forces reinforced the others, resulting in an almost unbreakable chain-link fence" (2019, 17).

The PCs were also able to sustain their dynasty by changing unpopular leaders at opportune moments. For example, they replaced Don Getty with Ralph Klein in December 1992 and several months later, the rejuvenated PCs held off a hard charging Liberal challenge. This was replicated again when Ed Stelmach was forced out and replaced by Alison Redford in October 2011. Six months later, the PCs won a come from behind election against the Wildrose Party. The PCs tried this trick one more time, when Redford resigned under a cloud of scandal and was replaced by former federal Conservative cabinet minister Jim Prentice. While Prentice initially achieved an increase in PC popularity, ultimately it was not enough, and Prentice and the PCs went down to defeat in 2015.

2015 Election

The 2015 election was a political earthquake that reverberated across Canada and the world. Not only had the NDP gone from four seats and fourth place in the Legislature to 54 to form a majority government (see Table 2), but it defeated a 44-year-old dynasty. When you combine the PCs with the Social Credit party under Ernest Manning (after its first term), conservative parties had governed Alberta since the 1940s, and now a social democratic party had won.

The results of the 2015 election, like most elections, was a decision of Albertans finally deciding to "throw the bums out." The PCs, which for decades had been a big tent party, had lost much of its most conservative flank to Wildrose. Voters still remembered a series of scandals that forced out former Premier Redford in March 2014. The mass floor crossing of Wildrose leader Danielle Smith and most of her caucus to the PCs in December 2014 backfired spectacularly as it offended the democratic sensibilities of Albertans. Premier Prentice also witnessed the precipitous drop in oil prices that started in Fall 2014. This led him to deliver a budget on the eve of the election campaign that projected a budget deficit of $5 billion even with tax increases, user fees, and budget cuts. Finally, Prentice called an election a year early (Bratt, 2019). Voters looked closely at these events and believed that the PCs were the party of entitlement and deserved to be removed from office.

However, the 2015 election was not just about how the PCs lost, it was also about how the NDP won. The NDP had a likeable and popular leader in Rachel Notley. The NDP, which had a base of support in Edmonton, had taken prior steps to prepare for a potential breakthrough in Calgary and Lethbridge. It ran a professional and largely error-free campaign.[2] Finally, Notley had an outstanding performance during the leaders' debate; in fact, polls show that the debate was a turning point in the campaign as support swung to the NDP (Brown and Santos, 2019). If, indeed, Albertans wanted to "throw the bums out," the NDP had emerged as the "credible alternative" (Thomas, 2019).

Table 2 Results of 2015 Election

	Seats	Seat Percentage	Vote Share
NDP	54	62.07%	40.62%
Wildrose	21	24.14%	24.20%
PC	10	8.7%	27.8%
Liberal	1	1.14%	4.2%
Alberta Party	1	1.14%	2.2%
Others	0	0	1.0%

The 2015 election ended Alberta's one-party dominance by the PCs, but it did not necessarily mean that the province would move to a two-party system. Other options existed. One option would have been a continuation of one-party dominance except this time by the NDP. Previous Alberta dynasties were formed by parties who had never before that point won government. In addition, it would not be the first time that a small, or even non-existent party, suddenly formed government in Alberta (the UFA in 1921). A second option would have had Alberta moving to a multi-party system with three big parties (NDP, PCs, and Wildrose) and some smaller parties (Liberals, Alberta Party, Freedom Conservative Party, etc). Even though the PCs were defeated, and reduced to only 10 seats, they finished ahead of Wildrose in the popular vote (see Table 2), and still had a foothold in Calgary. There were also clear ideological differences on a number of issues that existed between the PCs and Wildrose. There was even some polling data in late 2015 that suggested some hope that the PCs had some potential for a comeback from its May 5, 2015 election debacle.[3] Thus, a merger between them was not inevitable, but was, as David Stewart and Anthony Sayers argue, a "political choice" (Sayers and Stewart, 2019).

However, the PCs were demoralized from losing power after 44 years. In addition, they were quickly losing seats: Jim Prentice resigned on election night, Manmeet Bhullar was killed in a car accident in November 2015, (though the PCs would retain his seat in the resulting by-election), and Sandra Jansen crossed the floor in November 2016 to join the NDP.[4] When the NDP quickly brought in new legislation, with the support of Wildrose, banning corporate donations, it also cut off the PCs financial lifeline. The hostility towards the NDP and a desire to return to power, even as part of a new merged party, was also strongly appealing. The result was the formation of the UCP in 2017. This meant that Alberta had transitioned from a one-party dominant system to a two-party system: the NDP on the left and the UCP on the right.

The architect of the merger was Jason Kenney. Kenney had been a senior cabinet minister in Stephen Harper's federal government. He returned from Ottawa with a plan for a new merged conservative party and completely overwhelmed vulnerable PC party members with his organizational political skill. On the eve of the 2016 Calgary Stampede, Kenney outlined his audacious merger plan. Step one was Kenney winning the leadership of the PCs. Step two was negotiating a merger agreement between the PCs and Wildrose. Step three was having that merger agreement ratified by members of both parties. Step four was Kenney winning the UCP leadership race. Step five was defeating what Kenney called the "accidental government" of Rachel Notley and her band of "radical ideologues" in the NDP. The plan was a clear echo of the process to merge the Canadian Alliance and Progressive Conservative

parties at the federal level in 2003-04 - a process in which Kenney was heavily involved (Bratt, 2016).

2019 Election

The parameters of the 2019 election campaign were put in place when Jason Kenney became leader of the UCP, thereby creating one conservative party, in October 2017. In effect, it was a year-and-a-half campaign between the left-wing NDP and the right-wing UCP. Alberta's economic recession, which had begun in Fall 2014 when the PCs were still in power, would continue until 2019 and beyond. However, the UCP were very effective in their political messaging to blame the economic downturn on the policies of the NDP as well as its relationship with the federal government (the UCP branded it the Trudeau-Notley alliance). The NDP was criticized for running multiple budget deficits and raising taxes on corporations and wealthier Albertans. However, the UCP's biggest criticism was the perceived antagonism that the NDP held towards the oil and gas sector. The NDP's introduction of an economy-wide carbon tax, announced with great fanfare in November 2015, was seen as driving out oil and gas investment and creating/maintaining high unemployment. The UCP also argued that the Notley government was insufficiently supportive of new pipelines. While it supported the Trans Mountain Pipeline, it had previously opposed the Northern Gateway, Energy East, and Keystone XL pipelines. In contrast, the UCP would campaign on "Jobs, Economy, and Pipelines," and released a detailed election platform. The platform emphasized two key economic items. First, it promised to reduce the expense (either through the overall amount of jobs and/or by cutting wages) of the public sector; arguing that it was the highest paid in Canada and that it had been protected from job losses (unlike the private sector) by the Notley government. Second that it would fight back against perceived enemies of Alberta's oil and gas sector. This would involve creating a war room to counter misinformation, establishing a public inquiry to investigate possible foreign-funding of environmental groups, repealing the carbon tax, fighting the federal government in court if they introduced a carbon tax backstop, conducting a referendum on the federal equalization program if pipelines were not built, enabling "turn off the taps" legislation that would allow it to reduce oil exports to British Columbia, and campaigning against the Trudeau government in the fall 2019 federal election. The NDP tried to defend its economic record, but much of its campaign tried to switch focus by attacking Kenney's social conservativism (gay rights, gender equality, race issues, etc). While voters may have been suspicious of Kenney, the economy trumped all other issues. The result was a landslide victory for the UCP (see Table 3).

The 2015 election ended Alberta's one-party dominant system. Post-election events, particularly the creation of the UCP, started the move to a two-party system. However, the 2019 election solidified the transition to a two-party system. Only two parties remained in the Legislature and together they received over 87% of the popular vote. It was possible that Alberta could have returned to a one-party dominant system led by a conservative party after a four-year interruption. That was surely the objective Jason Kenney when he campaigned against the "one and done" NDP. But it did not happen. While voters threw out the NDP from government they did not destroy the party. The NDP won all but one seat in its base in Edmonton, and it also won seats in Calgary and Lethbridge. They received over 32% of the popular vote (only 8 points lower than in 2015). Most importantly, they re-

elected Notley and ten other cabinet ministers. This was the first time in Alberta's history that a former Premier had stayed on as leader of the official opposition in order to contest a future election.[5] If a two-party system is about having a government and a government-in-waiting, those conditions were met with the 2019 election.

Table 3 Results of 2019 Election

	Seats	Seat Percentage	Vote Share
UCP	63	72.41%	54.88%
NDP	24	27.59%	32.67%
Alberta Party	0	0	9.08%
Liberal	0	0	0.98%
Others	0	0	2.39%

2019-2023?

The 2015 election ended Alberta's one-party dominant system. The creation of the UCP in 2017 shifted the province to a two-party system. The 2019 election solidified the existence of a two-party system. Events since the 2019 election have further entrenched the two-party system. This can be measured in four ways: voter turnout, polls, fundraising, and the resilience (so far) of the UCP despite internal turmoil.

Voter turnout is higher in competitive party systems, such as two-party systems. In the last decades of the PCs one-party dominant system (1997-2012), voter turnout ranged from 40.6% to 54.4%. However, the last two elections have seen turnout spike: 57.0% in 2015 and 67.5% in 2019. Indeed, the last time voter turnout was (just) above 60.0 percent was in 1993, which as noted earlier involved close competition between the PCs and the Liberals – and which was the only postwar election until 2019 when two parties won all the seats.

Polls throughout 2021 show a strong lead for the NDP over the UCP, but combined they are still receiving over 70-85% support (338Canada, 2021). In fact, according to a Janet Brown poll in April 2021, the number three choice of voters was "unspecified" (Anderson, 2021). Other parties (Alberta Party, Liberals, Wildrose Independence Party, et cetera) exist, but they lack permanent leaders, volunteers, media coverage, and support in public opinion polls. There is a small pool of voters, maybe 10 percent, clearly in the space between the NDP and the UCP, which is not sufficient to win seats because these voters are split between the Alberta Party and the Liberals and their support is spread out across urban Alberta (as opposed to being concentrated in several ridings). The situation might be a bit different if Alberta Party leader (and former Edmonton mayor) Stephen Mandel had been able to win his seat in 2019.

Fundraising data also helps to confirm the sustainability of Alberta's two-party system. As Table 4 shows, in 2020, the NDP and UCP received a combined 96.2% of all party donations. In the first half of 2021, the NDP and UCP received a combined 95% of all party donations.

Table 4 Party Fundraising (2020-2021)

	2020	Percentage of Overall party fundraising	1st half 2021	Percentage of overall party fundraising
NDP	$5,059,537.66	55.3%	$2,701,664.90	63.2%
UCP	$3,747,753.11	40.9%	$1,359,962.36	31.8%
Others	$334, 154.15	3.8%	$216,197.78	5.0%

Source: Elections Alberta, "Financial Disclose – Parties," Accessed on July 29, 2021 at
https://efpublic.elections.ab.ca/efParties.cfm?MID=FP

These points notwithstanding, there is a potential that Alberta's two-party system could break apart. This is because of the internal troubles within the UCP. As I have argued with my colleague Bruce Foster, there has been a tendency of conservative parties, both federally and provincially, to splinter and merge, and this has been most pronounced in Alberta. There are ideological cleavages between economic conservatives and social conservatives, urban/rural splits, principled supporters versus pragmatic supporters, establishment conservatives versus populists (Bratt and Foster, 2019 and Bratt and Foster, 2021). In addition, the UCP is a very new party; it was only formed four years ago. COVID-19, and the Kenney government's handling of it, has exacerbated these internal tensions. In early April 2021, a group of 16 rural UCP MLAs wrote a public letter criticizing the COVID-19 restrictions brought in by the Kenney government (Bartko, 2021). In May 2021, two UCP MLAs were expelled from caucus for their public attacks on Jason Kenney (Bellefontaine, 2021). Other UCP MLAs have been removed from cabinet or resigned party posts for their criticisms of Kenney (Johnson, 2021). As of writing, none of these individuals have joined an existing conservative party (such as the Wildrose Independence Party) or formed a new conservative party, nor have additional UCP MLAs joined them. If any of these potential events were to occur, it could lead to a serious splintering of the UCP. A splintering of the UCP could alter Alberta's current two-party system if it was significant enough. However, for the moment, the UCP has been resilient and withstood these tensions.

Conclusion

It is not uncommon for jurisdictions to switch party systems over time. Canada was a two-party system for the first 70 years of its history and then shifted to a two-party plus system with the emergence of the CCF, followed by other smaller or regional parties, in the 1930s. Ontario was a one-party dominant system during the decades of the "Big Blue Machine" (1943-1985), but has been a multi-party system since that time with the Liberals, NDP, and PCs all forming government over the last 30 years. Alberta fits this pattern. From 1905 until 2015, Alberta was a one-party dominant system (led by four successive parties). Since 2015, Alberta has transitioned to a two-party system. It took the election of 2015 to end the one-party dominant system, but it took a few years for the two-party system to replace it. While there are potential future changes to the system - centrists desiring a party in the middle of the UCP and NDP, and the possibility of the UCP splintering into two conservative parties – it is likely that the Alberta will remain a two-party system for the foreseeable future.

Notes

[1] The UFA even lost the popular vote in 1921 achieving only 28.9% while the Liberals won 34.1%. However, due to its greater vote efficiency in rural Alberta, the seat distribution was very different: UFA 38, Liberals 15, and other parties 5.

[2] The NDP made one big campaign mistake when its initial election platform made a miscalculation that resulted in a $1 billion mistake. But the next day, Prentice cancelled a planned reduction to the charitable tax credit, which gave the NDP an opportunity to release new recalculated numbers. This meant that there was little public attention to the NDP's mistake. During the leaders' debate though, Prentice tried to capitalize on it with a zinger aimed at Notley – "Math is hard!" However, the quip backfired spectacularly because most Albertans were unaware of the $1 billion error in the NDP platform, and instead found it a misogynist attack on a female leader.

[3] November 2015 polling showed the PCs with 30%, Wildrose with 30%, and NDP with 25%. If an election had occurred, it would have translated to a minority government: the seat estimates being Wildrose 36 seats, PCs 26 seats, NDP 22 seats, Liberals 2 seats, and Alberta Party with 1 seat. Janet Brown and Paul McLoughlin, "Wild Ride Update – November 2015." Provided to the author by Janet Brown.

[4] After the creation of the UCP, two other members of the old PC caucus refused to join the new party. Richard Starke sat as an independent and Rick Fraser joined the Alberta Party.

[5] It is true that Harry Strom, the last Social Credit Premier, stayed on as leader of the official opposition for over a year. However, he resigned as leader in November 1972

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