

Hope and Fear Revisited: A Contextual Explanation of the 2007 Saskatchewan Provincial Election

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Abstract

The 2007 Saskatchewan provincial election ended 16 years of NDP rule when it brought the Saskatchewan Party to power in the Province. Observers have been divided over the significance of the rise of the Saskatchewan Party between those who see provincial politics here as continuing its historical course of ideological polarization between the left and the right against those who detect a convergence at the political centre. Arguing that polarized politics is best understood by a sociological approach to party systems and convergence politics by an institutional approach, this paper examines the evidence for polarization and convergence in Saskatchewan politics. It concludes that there is evidence for a new party system based on convergence, a system that first appears when Roy Romanow becomes leader of the NDP in 1991 but is consolidated by the election of the Saskatchewan Party in 2007.

Introduction

The Saskatchewan election of November 2007 seems to mark a significant break with the past. Lorne Calvert's NDP was decisively defeated by a new political entity, the Saskatchewan Party, under a new and relatively youthful leader, Brad Wall. The defeat – which brought an end to 16 consecutive years of NDP government – was neither unexpected nor catastrophic. The Saskatchewan Party had a commanding lead in the opinion polls for a year or more before the writ was dropped and Wall protected that lead with a low key, carefully scripted and uncontroversial campaign. While the NDP's share of the popular vote was lower than at any time since the 1930s (marginally lower even than at the time of the Grant Devine sweep in 1982, when the party was reduced to a rump of 9 MLAs), the Liberal vote held up just well enough to leave Calvert with 20 members in a 58 seat legislature. However, something unusual and interesting was clearly taking place.

Mr. Wall was certainly eager to give this impression. In his victory speech to a packed campaign headquarters in Swift Current, he surprised the party faithful by introducing a new theme in the form of

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a slogan: "Hope Beats Fear", which he inserted over and over again with the expectation that supporters would take up the chant on cue. While "Hope Beats Fear" echoed the rhetoric of presidential campaigns in the United States, it was also a reference to the tactics of the outgoing government. The NDP had purchased advertising space before the election campaign had even begun depicting their Saskatchewan Party opponents as wolves in sheep's clothing in an effort to propagate the view that the Saskatchewan Party had a hidden agenda and were not to be trusted. This strategy had worked for the NDP in the 2003 election when the original Saskatchewan Party leader, Elwin Hermanson, had appeared fatally evasive on the subject of the Province's crown corporations and never recovered. The suspected privatization of the Crowns under a potential Saskatchewan Party government became the pivotal issue of the 2003 campaign and the NDP used the opportunity to successfully portray themselves as a party worthy of the public trust. In the 2007 campaign, the NDP's repeated assertions that Brad Wall had a hidden agenda which involved the wholesale transformation of key provincial institutions and was not to be trusted seemed tired in comparison to the upbeat and confident campaign lead by Wall. Unlike the campaign of 2003, the Saskatchewan Party had a new, young and energetic leader whose appeal was bolstered by booms in both the resource and agricultural sectors of the province. Calvert's government, Wall insisted, was depleted of new ideas and it was not just "time for a change" but it was also safe to make that change. This proved to be a winning formula.

However, at a deeper level, in a province steeped in political history, Wall was surely trying to suggest that his was now the party of political change in a larger sense than merely a change in government. The Cooperative Commonwealth Federation – the antecedent of the NDP – had swept to power in 1944 offering the hope of a New Jerusalem to be achieved by the transformation of a tired, corrupt and unjust society. Wall's slogan: "Hope Beats Fear" hinted that this transformation, if it had ever taken place, had now run its course and that hope for a different future lay elsewhere – perhaps in his repeated emphasis on "common sense" throughout his victory speech. In any case, if Wall had supposed that this slogan would immediately catch the imagination of his supporters, he was sadly mistaken. In spite of repeated and uncomfortable efforts, they declined to take up the chant that evening and the words themselves faded away, never again appearing on any set occasion of the new government.

Wall's failure to define his new government in these transparently ideological terms – a failure to convince even diehard party activists at their moment of triumph – is significant. It suggests that political scientists who have argued that a less ideological, more pragmatic approach to politics in the Province are correct. The debate around pragmatism, which has been going on its present form at least since the appearance of the Saskatchewan Party in 1997, pits those who see the new party as simply the latest embodiment of a province polarized between the left and what Pitsula and Rasmussen (1990) refer to as the "new right"; and those who claim to see a growing convergence between the two major parties (Wishlow, 2001). While it is important to stress Bobbio's (1996) caution that the categories of "left" and "right" are not abstract terms, but rather, the products of history, contemporary usage suggests that political parties located on the left side of the political spectrum are characterized by their commitment to equality (Bobbio, 1996). Equality from this perspective must be achieved through collective action since inequality is understood by the left to be the product of socio-political and economic decisions (McKay 2005). On the other hand, political parties who are located on the right of the political spectrum may be characterized by their acceptance of inequality as natural or inevitable (Bobbio, 1996). Pitsula and Rasmussen (1990) argue that the "New Right" which characterized

Saskatchewan's right-wing political parties from the 1980s onwards were adverse to government intervention and collectivist approaches in general in favour of *laissez faire* capitalism and a commitment to socially conservative moral policy-making (1). Each of their respective party principles and mission statements reinforce these categorizations. The Saskatchewan Party, for example, states among its guiding principles a commitment to "smaller, less intrusive, more efficient government" and "economic growth and job creation through the private sector, not government, as the engine of the economy" (http://www.saskparty.com/principles_policies.html). This can be contrasted with the characteristics of the political left embedded in the mission and legacy statements of the Saskatchewan NDP where the latter, in particular, asserts that the NDP "...are guided by an unwavering belief in economic and social sustainability, and the power of people working co-operatively through democratic institutions to achieve the common good" (<http://www.saskndp.com/about>). In Saskatchewan, there is *prima facie* evidence that the Saskatchewan Party began life as a party of the "New Right" and the NDP as a party of the traditional political left.

The debate between proponents of the ideological polarization and convergence theses of party politics is essentially a difference of opinion about whether sharp ideological distinctions between parties can survive the realities of contemporary electoral politics. The debate is occurring wherever ideologically distinct parties play an important role in politics, most notably in many parts of Europe (Bobbio, 1996), but also in the provinces of British Columbia, Manitoba and Ontario as well as Saskatchewan. Underlying the *polarization thesis* is the assumption of a party system with centrifugal tendencies, driven by deep ideological division forcing the major parties apart; underlying the *convergence thesis* is the assumption of a party system with centripetal tendencies in which the major parties become ever more alike as they battle to control the political centre. According to Bobbio (1996) political parties that locate in the centre of the ideological spectrum are opportunistic and without vision, or as a more sympathetic analyst might argue, they are just pragmatic.

At one level, the debate between proponents of these two theses is easy to understand and carried on at a familiar level of analysis somewhere between political commentary and higher journalism. The evidence for convergence over policy prescriptions during the 2007 campaign and the way in which both parties sought to outbid each other over a small range of proposals is clear enough (McGrane, 2008). At this level, the debate always ends up being about whether either party is really sincere in its efforts at convergence or whether there is a "hidden agenda" of traditional ideological prescription behind a bland facade – a charge that both parties tried to make a part of the election campaign itself. At a more sophisticated level, the convergence thesis appeals to the idea of a new climate of opinion analogous to the Blairite "third way" or de-clawed neoliberalism, leaving little for the parties to argue about except who will offer the best value for the voter's grudgingly-proffered tax dollar (Wislow, 2001).

Attempts to provide a more general explanation of this phenomenon, one that could be the basis for comparison among developments in the different provinces, are hampered by the usual methodological conflicts. On the one hand, there are those who take a sociological approach, explaining voter preferences and party competition as the surface effects of such underlying variables as class or geography. On the other, an older institutionalism – now powerfully reinforced by both public choice and new institutionalist theories – looks to features of the formal and informal rules of the political game as the basis for party and voter behavior. On the sociological approach, convergence reflects an underlying shift towards suburban values and lifestyles in the electorate at large, overcoming the old

urban/rural cleavage that some saw as the sociological foundation of polarization (Rasmussen, 2007). Institutional convergence theorists on the other hand see party convergence as driven by the logic of the single member plurality (SMP) system combined with an inability to define the issues or exploit cleavages in ways that would give one party a permanent edge over the other. In Saskatchewan, the sociological approach has dominated discussions, not least because of the enduring influence of Seymour Martin Lipset's classic study, *Agrarian Socialism* (1959). And yet, as Smith (2007) notes, within four years of the publication of *Agrarian Socialism*, Lipset had revised his analysis of the rise of third parties to include an institutional explanation that stressed the impact of federalism, party discipline and SMP.

It is possible, of course, that Lipset was just a victim of confusion. Smith, for one, finds Lipset's institutional arguments wholly unconvincing. However, as Ware (1996) has argued, it is not that one approach is obviously right and the other wrong. Indeed, it is possible to read Lipset's later collaboration with Rokkan (1967) as an attempt to marry both the institutional and sociological approaches. Nevertheless, for our purposes, there are circumstances in which sociological arguments seem to work and others where institutional features come to prominence. To explain the need to appeal to both approaches, Ware suggests that in societies where deep social cleavages form the basis for party support based on social solidarity and where parties themselves reach down into society to play a role in the day-to-day lives of the electorate between elections, the sociological explanation will tend to gain some traction. In societies where social solidarity becomes less relevant and voters are open to switching parties on the basis of policies and personalities, clever moves by parties to exploit the rules of the game will prevail (1996: 199-202). If this is so, we can test the claim that Saskatchewan politics has become pragmatic by turning Ware's argument on its head. When the link between voters and parties is a pragmatic one, then we ought to be able to give an explanation of the party system largely in institutionalist terms. In fact, the point at which an institutionalist explanation begins to have more purchase will be the point at which the shift towards pragmatism is taking place. On the other hand, to the extent that the link between voters and parties is still social solidarity mediated by ideology, a more sociological explanation will be needed to make sense of the party system. We are proposing a *contextual explanation* of party systems that will most often combine elements of both sociological and institutionalist approaches. After briefly outlining the electoral history of the Province, we consider each of these explanations of the 2007 election in turn.

Elections, Parties and Party Systems in Saskatchewan

Commentators generally agree on four central features of Saskatchewan's political history. First, there is a pattern of surface stability as illustrated in Appendix 1: 26 elections spanning just over a century have resulted in only 8 changes in the governing party. This pattern has inevitably meant serial election victories by the same party interspersed with long periods consigned to opposition. Second – and related to the first point – the creation of the CCF, its belated transformation into the NDP, and its extraordinary staying power in both government and opposition form a major part of the story. The characterization of Saskatchewan politics as ideologically polarized rests heavily on the persistence of the CCF/NDP. The provincial Liberals and Progressive Conservatives (PCs), on the other hand, have more often than not stressed their singularity as provincial parties responding to local conditions – as Courtney and Smith (1978) note, they have rarely failed to play the anti-Ottawa card when it seemed

prudent to do so. As a result, they have come and gone, and sometimes come again, in a different pattern to the persistence of the CCF/NDP. The creation of the Saskatchewan Party is, in this sense at least, part of a larger pattern of provincially-oriented political parties created to provide credible opposition to a natural governing party. As a result of this pattern, it sometimes seems that the story of Saskatchewan politics is the story of Saskatchewan political parties (Leeson, 2001).

Third, there have been two interesting and highly significant episodes of coalition government, defying the maxim that coalitions are not found in Westminster systems outside wartime or other emergency. The first, in 1929, was, as Marchildon (2006) argues, an offensive coalition, engineered by an increasingly frustrated opposition to bring an end to nearly a quarter century of Liberal rule. Conservatives had cooperated with Progressives and Independents not to run candidates against each other where there was a chance of defeating a Liberal and post-election cooperation in government was relatively easily accomplished. The coalition partners were destroyed by the Depression and the election of 1934 which consigned the Conservatives and their heirs – the PCs – to nearly 50 years in the political wilderness. However, the failure of the Conservative coalition did open up space for a new opposition party, a space that was soon occupied by the fledgling CCF. Courtney and Smith (1972) argue that the election of 1934 thus marks the transition from a first party system, marked by patronage politics and dominated by the Liberals (who seized the levers of patronage in 1905), to a second party system featuring effective two party competition between the Liberals and the CCF. This is a characterization that will be taken up in the sociological analysis.

The second coalition was a rather different animal. It was constructed after the 1999 election, (the first contested by the Saskatchewan Party) which saw the reduction of the governing NDP's majority to a plurality (see Table 1). While the Liberal MLAs may have taken some pleasure in frustrating their erstwhile colleagues who had defected to the new party by supporting the NDP government, there was little real connection with the NDP and there had been no attempt to coordinate activities during the election. The effect of this election was disastrous only for the junior partner, the Liberals, as they were subsequently shut out of the legislature in both the 2003 and 2007 elections. While Marchildon (2006) seeks to distinguish the second coalition from the first as defensive rather than offensive, there are clearly some important parallels between the two in respect of their impact on the provincial party system. The very unusual occurrence of a coalition itself suggests a break from the normal pattern of competitive interaction between parties in a plurality electoral system.

Fourth, and finally, there is the curious but possibly misleading parallel between the two major parties who opposed the CCF/NDP. Ross Thatcher's Liberals came to power in 1964 after a confused and turbulent period in the politics of Saskatchewan. The physicians' strike of 1962 and the exit of Tommy Douglas to federal politics were only the most familiar features of a period that appeared to herald the breakdown of two party competition in the late 1950s, only to see it reasserted with Thatcher's two-term government and an NDP opposition. Two-party competition did eventually break down again in 1975, as the PCs rose phoenix-like from the ashes of the Liberal defeat and their subsequent party infighting, sweeping the 1982 election under Grant Devine and collapsing in their turn after two terms. The failure of the Liberals to re-establish themselves as a credible opposition in the 1990s brings us to the formation of the Saskatchewan Party in 1997, and ultimately, to Mr. Wall's victory a decade later. The significance of his victory depends very much on whether it is just the latest swing in the ideological pendulum from left to right and back again, or whether it marks the creation of a new two party system

featuring pragmatic accommodation between the two major parties. If the former, our contextual approach suggests that we should be able to explain the whole sequence sociologically. If the latter, we would expect to find institutionalist explanations increasingly persuasive. Where an overlap appears between the two explanations, we find that there is a transition period between the two systems, a point that we identify with the election of Roy Romanow's NDP in 1991.

A Sociological Explanation: The Long Shadow of Seymour Martin Lipset

The enduring interest of Lipset's (1959) sociological explanation for Saskatchewan party politics cannot be overstated. Unlike the institutionalists, who are concerned with the logic of competitive behaviour under a given set of rules and procedures, Lipset viewed political parties as organic institutions whose identities were rooted in deep social cleavages. In the Saskatchewan context, Lipset observed that the first elected socialist government in North America – the CCF – battled the Liberals in something akin to a microcosm of the ideological battles of the Cold War era (Lipset, 1959; Leeson, 2001). Peace – or victory – in this battle has been declared a number of times – from the “end of ideology” thesis of the 1960s to the collapse of communist regimes after 1989 – and each time, commentators in Saskatchewan have confidently predicted that ideological polarization would come to an end. Yet, as recently as 2001, one political scientist reflected that “Saskatchewan could not afford capitalism” (Leeson, 2001: 6) and emotional rhetoric evoking rosy memories of Tommy Douglas continue to be used by the NDP, helping to entrench the perception of ideological polarization as a distinctive feature of Saskatchewan political culture.

In fact, of course, the sociological approach used by Lipset in *Agrarian Socialism* and again in his later collaboration with Rokkan (1967) does not consider ideology as the only independent causal variable. Other factors include how parties are structured and organized, their leadership styles, their societal penetration, and the relative level of political competition (Patten, 2007). The real key to Lipset's contribution to understanding Saskatchewan politics is his analysis of parties as fluid institutions. Influenced by his own reading of Michels (1962) – for whose classic text on the “iron law of oligarchy”, he wrote a modern introduction – Lipset regarded it as inevitable that a political party which began life as the electoral voice of subordinate populations and radical social movements would become institutionalized and lost its oppositional edge. Under SMP, as in Saskatchewan, the result should be a party that oscillates between a 2 or 2 ½ party system as third parties or new grassroots movements appear to champion the cause of the disgruntled party faithful. The new party either reinvigorates one or both of the dominant parties or supplants one of them to become a governing party in turn. Parties are punished for convergence; polarization is thus constantly renewed.

If our own contextual thesis is correct, a Lipset-inspired approach should have considerable success at explaining the party system where the key assumptions of significant social cleavages and party penetration based upon them hold true. In fact, the two party systems identified by Courtney and Smith (1978) lend themselves well to sociological explanation: the first extending from the creation of the Province in 1905 to the election of the CCF in 1944 and the second from the CCF's first term in office in 1944 to the re-emergence of the PCs in 1975. In each of these periods, there is an observable pattern of protest, growth and entrenchment, followed by a period of transition where the rise of a protest party –

from either end of the ideological spectrum – or the resurgence of disaffected dominant party supporters motivates a period of change before the pattern is repeated again. Turning then, towards a more detailed historical and sociological account of the evolution of Saskatchewan party politics, we can see the patterns just outlined.

Prior to the creation of the Province in 1905, the Territorial government was largely non-partisan under the Premiership of Frederick Haultain. Haultain had vigorously championed the view that the provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan should be united and continue to be governed on a non-partisan basis. He had also been a vocal critic of the Liberals government under Laurier in Ottawa. When Saskatchewan became a province in 1905, Haultain was passed over as Premier by the newly-installed Lieutenant Governor, Amedee Forget, who used his powers to appoint a Liberal Leader, Walter Scott, as the Province's first Premier (Archer, 1980). Haultain responded by creating and leading the Provincial Rights party, campaigning against the education and natural resources components of the *Saskatchewan Act*.

Despite the Provincial Rights' party's failure to form a government, its institutionalization created a stable two-party system until the election of 1921. At this point in history, the provincial Liberals benefited from their identification with the federal Liberals' immigration policies while the supporters of the Provincial Rights party vented their frustration with Ottawa's policy impositions and the lack of adequate infrastructure (Archer, 1980; Eager 1980). Thus, from 1905, Saskatchewan's two dominant political parties experienced a period of growth and entrenchment, rooted in the developing social structures of the province.

The election of 1917 marked the peak of support for Saskatchewan's two main parties in the first party system. As Lipset (1959; Lipset and Rokkan, 1967) would have predicted, the two parties became increasingly institutionalized, choosing new leaders from their own political elites and becoming less representative of, and responsive to, their own voters. They gradually lost substantial elements of their support which sometimes shifted to new radical parties or movements. The outlet for disaffection with the major parties was at first, Independent candidates, who collectively captured 25.5% of the popular vote in 1921 to secure Official Opposition status in the Saskatchewan legislature and reduced the Conservatives to below 5% (see Table 1, p.7). From 1921 onwards, a number of new parties also appeared representing specific social groups, leading to the Farmer-Labour Alliance and ultimately, to the CCF. On the sociological account, the failure of the two major parties to respond to their own loss of appeal to key groups of voters created the conditions for the rise of third and fourth parties.¹

Lipset's analysis has a certain amount of traction in the second, post-1944, party system as well but it soon starts to run into difficulties. While the older of the two major political parties, the Liberals, were the first to suffer attrition from a more ideologically radical competitor, the Social Credit party of the 1950s, it was nonetheless able to stave off the collapse predicted by Lipset. It did so by electing a radical outsider, the former CCF federal MP and free-enterpriser, Ross Thatcher as its leader. Thatcher's leadership was entirely successful, forcing Social Credit out of contention as an opposition party, making Crown Corporations a key election issue (as they would remain for the next 40 years) and bringing the Liberals to power in 1964. While the "iron law of oligarchy" that so impressed Lipset predicts that mature political parties will continue to elect leaders from inside their own political elite until driven out of business, in Saskatchewan, as in this case, the reverse was true. Nonetheless, the underlying logic of the sociological explanation seems to explain the result: however implausibly, the Liberals were able to

find their way back to the ideological corner favoured by their supporters in a province characterized by deep ideological cleavages and they were duly rewarded for doing so.

With the benefit of hindsight, we know that the outcome of the Thatcher government was not the permanent reinvigoration of the Liberals. With Ross Thatcher dead, the Liberals in opposition and the PCs assuming Social Credit's role as the protest party of the right, the stage is set for another political transformation of exactly the kind Lipset would have predicted. It begins in 1975 when the Saskatchewan Liberals were punished for not responding to the centrifugal tendencies of the electorate and the PCs ousted them from their position as the official opposition. The latter then took up the familiar pattern of leadership change in opposition, replacing Dick Collver with Grant Devine, and they swept to power in the election of 1982.

At this point, however, the sociological account seems to run out of steam. Devine's PCs were elected on a 1980s New Right campaign platform that promised both tax cuts and increased spending – a combination which ultimately resulted in the accumulation of a massive provincial debt and deficit (Praud & McQuarrie, 2001). The Devine government marked a very sharp transition from its predecessor, Blakeney's NDP administration. Devine reversed many of Blakeney's initiatives, culminating in the sell-off of some of the Province's Crowns in an effort to get government out of the economy (Pitsula and Rasmussen, 1990). So far, so good. But the response of the NDP to Devine's administration was not to emphasize its own ideological distinctiveness. Rather, the election of Roy Romanow as leader was generally understood – even at the time – as the election of a pragmatic and competent public manager rather than an ideologue. Not only was the NDP successful in 1991 on this basis, but the resulting turmoil in the party system took place among the opposition, involving the disappearance of first, the PCs and shortly after, the Liberals. These developments led directly to the formation of the Saskatchewan Party. Thus, while the temptation to argue that the polarization thesis still holds is understandable (neither the PCs nor the Liberals were true to their roots, they were duly punished, and their place has been taken by a new party of anti-establishment protest) the possibility that Saskatchewan politics had begun to undergo a fundamental change now looks equally plausible.

According to Lipset, the rightward shift of Romanow's NDP should have been offset by the rise of a third party acting as a source of protest against two complacent political parties increasingly out of touch with their own core supporters. At first, it appears that this will occur. The Liberals - who received 23% of the popular vote in the 1991 election under the leadership of Saskatchewan's first female political leader, Lynda Haverstock - ousted the PCs from the position as official opposition in the election of 1995. But the Liberals at this time are an ideologically moderate party not a party of political protest at all (let alone a party on the political left). On the contrary, when the NDP lose their majority in the legislative assembly in 1999, the Liberals build a coalition with Romanow's NDP to keep the fledgling protest party, the Saskatchewan Party under Elwin Hermanson, out of office. The coalition, as we have noted was fatal for the Liberals, who decline in importance from that point onwards as a viable third party. The lack of electoral punishment for the shifts of the NDP adds weight to the idea that the 1990s mark the transition between the dominance of the sociological and institutional explanations of the Province's party system. The dramatic drop in voter turnout levels in 1995, similarly suggests that voter motivations are undergoing a significant change.

The election of 2003, then, is central to the confrontation of the polarization and convergence theses. On the *polarization* interpretation, as our introduction notes, the error by the leader of the Saskatchewan Party, Elwin Hermanson, in appearing evasive about the future of the Crowns allowed the NDP to reassert its position as the guardian of ideologically left values in the province, galvanizing its traditional bases of support and increasing voter participation for the first time since 1991. Without this error, the NDP might have been electorally punished for their ideological disloyalty sooner than in the subsequent election of 2007. As Pitsula and Rasmussen (1990: 3) have pointed out: "(t)he well-entrenched social democratic tradition of the province requires right-wing political parties in the Province to package their ideology and policy ideas carefully so as not to offend large sections of the electorate." As we have seen, this is a mistake Brad Wall's Saskatchewan Party was careful not to repeat in 2007.

On the *convergence thesis*, however, Hermanson's waffling was a false step precisely because it appeared to reintroduce the possibility of ideological confrontation that no longer made sense to a pragmatic electorate. The NDP countered by promising business as usual and a safe hand on the tiller and was duly rewarded. In 1997, for example, the NDP government introduced the *Building Independence, Investing in Families* social policy framework which essentially reduced social assistance caseloads by moving people onto schemes resembling workfare. They also further impaired the Party's relationship to organized labour by legislating the Saskatchewan Union of Nurses (SUN) back to work in the middle of a protracted dispute with the Saskatchewan Association of Health Organizations (SAHO). Additionally, as both McGrane (2008) and Warnock (2004) note, the Calvert government continued with the market liberalization policies of his predecessor and despite some popular innovations, such as a tuition freeze (a policy that appeals above all to middle-class parents), social welfare liberalization also continued apace. Without a "sociological base" to alienate, the Saskatchewan Party was able to target key groups of voters; for example, their unusual tactical appeal to SUN may have been a significant contribution to their 2007 electoral success.

Sociological explanations for convergence nonetheless remain possible. As we have noted, the "suburbanization" thesis sees parties responding to a convergent value shift in the electorate. The trend is sometimes expressed in traditional terms as a shift to the "right" but increasingly appears as a phenomenon that cannot be accurately captured on the left-right scale. The convergent value shift may be the result of many factors: increasing urbanization, the changing nature of work, and the increasing global hegemony of neoliberal values. All of these and others have contributed to a convergence around consumer behaviours whereby citizens engage in politics and political decision making on an election-by-election or issues basis guided by their assessment of the political party best able to deliver the most desirable package of goods. However, we note that this contemporary version of the sociological thesis does not sit well with the older version that has dominated sociological explanations of politics in Saskatchewan under the long shadow of *Agrarian Socialism*. This latter account lays stress on the penetration of society by political parties and the reciprocal obligation of parties to respect and respond to social cleavages if they are to survive. It is clear that this explanation does not apply here. On our contextual account, we would expect an institutionalist explanation to do better. The question is: when does it start to do so?

An Institutional Explanation: Pragmatism All the Way Down?

An institutionalist explanation must at least begin with the most significant institution for a party system, the electoral system (Cairns 1968). The connection between plurality systems and "two partism" has often been noted. Indeed, it formed the basis for Duverger's (1954 infamous and obviously overstated "law" connecting the two. Nonetheless, the connection is important as a kind of limiting case. If parties really are free to compete over a whole range of issues, the expected outcome under SMP is likely to be two "brokerage" parties. The key assumptions here, of course, are twofold. Firstly, parties have no burden of ideological baggage or other deeper connection to a segment of the electorate that impairs their freedom to propose different policy packages. And secondly, policy preferences are roughly evenly distributed in the electorate across one or more dimensions. An explanation of this kind underlies Evelyn Eager's (1980) general interpretation of Saskatchewan politics and in a rather more sophisticated form, supports the arguments of Wishlow (2001) and Rasmussen (2007) about the appearance of a new party system in the province.

Eager's (1980) argument is much the more sweeping. Writing in the late 1970s, just as the PC revival was beginning, Eager set out to demolish what she called the "myth" that Saskatchewan voters were especially attracted to co-operation on ideological grounds. This same view is also noted by Eisler (2006). On Eager's view, *contra* Lipset, Saskatchewan farmers were, like farmers everywhere, rugged individualists. Finding themselves at the mercy of a hinterland economy in the midst of drought and economic depression, they saw virtue in cooperation but strictly as a strategy for survival:

(t)he homesteader remained an individualist but he was not independent. Co-operative enterprises which arose from his dependence were not usually based on idealistic or theoretical premises. Co-operation was pragmatic. It was developed in specific areas of prairie life to meet practical needs, and it was meant to serve an individualistic purpose. Co-operation was the means to an end: the end itself was the ownership and operation of an individual farm. (1980: 2)

In addition, Eager argued, commentators had been far too quick to imagine that "farmers" were an homogenous group, sharing the same interests. There were always a variety of cross cutting cleavages in the electorate: large farms and small ones, urban interests and rural ones, northern and southern, and so on.

Although Eager's account is resolutely innocent of theory, the overall effect that she depicts is much more like the distribution of interests assumed in the simple institutionalist account. Thus, the outcome, from the beginning of the province's political history, should have been a two party system featuring brokerage parties subject to a strong centripetal pull minimizing the ideological distance between them. Other kinds of parties may well have arisen as a result of the misguided fervour of party activists or simple miscalculation by the party leadership but, to survive, they must become pragmatic in their search for votes (a logic that supplies Eager with her account of the transformation of the CCF into a brokerage party). Repeated mistakes of this kind will cause the rise of enterprising third parties, eventually supplanting those who fail to adapt to the discipline of two partism.

To assess this claim, we first need a working definition of two partism and a measure, however rough and ready, for identifying it. According to Sartori (1976), third and subsequent parties should count in a

party system (leaving aside the perennial question of whether they are "half" parties or not) when they have either the positive potential to be included in a coalition or the negative potential to blackmail the other parties to take their proposals seriously. The latter might include responding to these proposals in election campaigns rather than simply ignoring them or even drafting them into their own platforms, for example. As a measurable indicator, Courtney and Smith (1972) propose that smaller parties need not be taken seriously if the combined proportion of the vote attributable to the two major parties in an election reaches 80% or more. This is a robust, if somewhat arbitrary measure appealing to the fact that, under SMP, the residual 20% of the vote, when spread amongst several small parties, will almost certainly result in the two major parties monopolizing all the seats in the legislature. This claim in turn rests on the assumption that there is no regional party that can turn a smaller percentage of concentrated votes into seats won - not an unreasonable assumption in provincial elections. The occasional Independent member elected as a result of some obscure local grievance can safely be discounted for the purposes of analyzing a party system.

Ware (1996), on the other hand, takes issue with the approach through proportion of votes cast for the major parties because of the distorting effect of the way that different electoral systems translate votes into seats. While Ware's concern is really directed at comparative studies encompassing jurisdictions with very different electoral systems, it is worth remembering that Saskatchewan experimented with multi-member constituencies in the cities during Ross Thatcher's government, an innovation that was intended precisely to alter the way votes translated into seats in favour of the Liberals themselves. Ware proposes instead that a two party system is one in which no other party achieves more than 3% of the seats in the legislature.

For the sake of inclusiveness, we have used both measures and noted the occasions on which each used alone would give a different result than both taken together. As Table 2 below shows, using the combined measures there have been 12 elections where two-partism has broken down in Saskatchewan (almost half of the 26 elections). The five elections between 1921 and 1938 are all of this kind, accounting for nearly half of the total. It is noteworthy, too, that the "seats" measure correctly identifies 1929, the election that resulted in a coalition government, while the "votes" measure does not. This is the period when Courtney and Smith's first party system, based on Liberal patronage, came under stress and eventually broke down, but it is interesting to note that two-partism on our measures is not strictly restored until the watershed election of 1944.

The combined measures identify three more elections resulting in a multi-party system during the Tommy Douglas years, 1948, 1956 and 1960, though only one: 1956, would appear on the list if we counted seats alone. It is an interesting reminder of the extent to which the CCF benefited from a weak and divided opposition, including Social Credit (which elected 3 members in 1956). As noted above, while the Liberals formed the official opposition during this period, it was by no means clear that they would always do so. Here, the "votes" measure more accurately captures the feel of the politics of the time; the fact that third parties rarely elected any members to the legislative assembly did not mean that they were of no account at all.

After 1964, the situation changes dramatically. Between 1964 and 1986 there is only one election, 1975, in which two-partism breaks down (significantly enough, it is squarely during this period that Eager researches and writes her dissertation, published in 1980 as *Saskatchewan Government*). The period is

characterized by straightforward two party competition: between Thatcher's two-term Liberal government and Lloyd's CCF; Blakeney's three-term NDP government and a fading Liberal opposition (replaced in 1978 by the PCs); and finally, Devine's scandal-plagued two-term PC government with Blakeney's NDP, now in opposition. In any event, 1975 simply marked the turnover from one major party to another, and not, as Courtney and Smith (1978) imagined at the time, a transformation of the party system as a whole.

Finally, three of the multi-party elections, one quarter of the total, occur in sequence from 1991 to 1999. A transition is in evidence, similar to that taking place between 1921 and 1938. However, in this case the process is compressed and the measures are highly contradictory. In 1991, the two major parties take 76.6% of the popular vote but the residual votes translate into only 1 Liberal member. By contrast, in 1995, the two major parties (now NDP and Liberal) take 82% of the vote but 5 PC members are elected. Only in 1999 do the two measures converge: the NDP and the Saskatchewan Party between them take less than 80% of the popular vote, allowing the 4 Liberals to hold the balance of power and creating the conditions for the second coalition. From 2003 onwards, two-partism is clearly restored. The two major parties take 88% of the popular vote in 2007 and shut out the Liberals for the second consecutive election.

To what extent, then, does this pattern support the claim that Saskatchewan politics is either exclusively pragmatic or has been transformed at some point from an ideological to a pragmatic character? And, if the latter, can an institutional analysis pinpoint when and how the change takes place? If the measure of pragmatic politics under SMP is two-partism, then clearly pragmatism has had a rough ride. As Table 2 illustrates, barely more than half the elections have resulted in a two party system. While some of the multi-party elections may be accounted as transitional from one opposition party to another - 1934 and 1975, for example - the persistence of multi-party elections in extended sequences clearly indicates that something other than pragmatic competition was taking place. As we noted in the previous section, Lipset-inspired sociological explanations are much more convincing for these occasions.

The period from 1964 to 1986 is more difficult to interpret. There is clear evidence of a two party system that would normally tend towards convergence between the parties. Nonetheless, as noted in the previous section, the period is actually characterized by sharp ideological differences and sociological explanations assuming polarization works well. It reminds us of the limitations of simple institutionalism, the fact that, under certain circumstances, two-partism can be associated with what Ware calls "a style of bitter, divisive politics" that, in the case of inter-war Austria, for example, brought about the collapse of the political system itself (1996: 174). While nothing so cataclysmic occurred in Saskatchewan, Ware's description is not entirely out of place and reminds us that the connection between two-partism and consensus politics is a contingent rather than a necessary one. Nonetheless, the institutional analysis does point quite clearly to a breakdown of the system in the 1990s and the creation of a new party system in 2003.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is evidence to support the thesis that Saskatchewan politics has changed its character from polarization to convergence and that the transition took place in the 1990s. Our conclusion rests on our contextual thesis that sociological explanations will do better explaining the party system that emerges when politics is based on polarized social solidarities and institutional explanations are superior in explaining the party system that emerges from brokerage politics.

The pattern of major parties being punished for deserting their ideological roots, allowing for the rise of third parties in a system that ought otherwise to be characterized by two-partism is clearly evident from 1905-1986. Within this period, there may be more than one party system based on features such as the peculiarities of the dominant party and the nature of the issues. Courtney and Smith's characterization of two different party systems separated by the transitional years 1929-1934 has held up very well in this respect. However, our analysis also points to a similar set of transitional years during the 1990s, culminating in the election of 2003 and consolidating in 2007. It reasserts two-partism on the basis of convergence rather than polarization. The NDP led the way towards brokerage politics. The Saskatchewan Party, hampered by Hermanson's ties to the past in 2003, learned its lesson and successfully applied the winning formula in this context in 2007.

Finally, if it now seems fairly clear that the shift from polarization to convergence has in fact taken place, what are the implications for the future of politics and policy in Saskatchewan? Much of the rhetoric around the convergence thesis has been positive, even self congratulatory – not only in this Province, but as we saw in the presidential campaign in the United States. Here at home, convergence is understood to represent the belated modernization of politics in a province too long mired in the disputes of an increasingly distant past, leading to a welcome focus on issues of effective public management and efficient service delivery. Yet, convergence may also mean the marginalization of interests and perspectives that lie outside the comfortable suburban consensus that will be the battleground for future votes. Not everyone shares the dream of an SUV in every garage, and plenty of those who do are still excluded from its attainability. Huber and Ingelhart (1995) have emphasized the enduring legacies of left-right political categorizations globally; as boom turns to bust, a more polarized kind of ideological politics may yet reassert itself in Saskatchewan.

Endnotes

1Lipset's own analysis is much more complex at this point because he is interested not just in explaining the rise of any third party but why this particular third party should be a socialist party in a province largely populated by farmers. As Cairns (2007) convincingly demonstrates, Lipset was too honest an historian to fail to note the role played by sheer historical contingency in any explanation of singular events, especially the crucial timing of the elections of 1921 (before Saskatchewan farmers could

organize their own political party) and 1938 (after questions about Aberhart's leadership of Social Credit in Alberta had surfaced).

Appendix 1 – Saskatchewan Election Results

	Winning Party	% votes	Seats/ total	Official Opposition	% votes	Seats/ total	Combined Share of Pop. Vote	Other Seats	% Voter turnout
1905	Liberals (Scott)	52.25	16/25	Provincial Rights (Haultain)	47.47	9/25	99.72	0	
1908	Liberals (Scott)	50.79	27/41	Provincial Rights (Haultain)	47.88	14/41	98.67	0	
1912	Liberals (Scott)	56.96	45/54	Conservatives (Haultain)	41.98	7/54	98.94	0	
1917	Liberals (Martin)	56.68	51/59	Conservatives (WB Willoughby)	36.3	7/59	92.98	1 IND	
1921	Liberals (Martin)	51.39	46/63	Independent	25.73	7/63	77.12	6 PRO 3 CON	
1925	Liberals (Dunning)	51.51	50/63	Progressive	23.04	6/63	74.55	3 CON 2 IND 1 lab/lib 6 IND	
1929	Liberals (Gardiner)	45.56	28/63	Conservatives (Anderson)	36.44	24/63	82		
1934	Liberals (Gardiner)	48	50/55	Conservatives (Anderson)	26.75	0/55	74.75	5 CCF	85
1938	Liberals (Patterson)	45.45	38/52	CCF (Williams)	18.73	10/52	64.18	2Unity 2 SC	84
1944	CCF (Douglas)	51.13	47/52	Liberals (Patterson)	35.42	5/52	88.55	0	81
1948	CCF (Douglas)	47.56	31/52	Liberals (Tucker)	30.6	19/52	78.16	1 IND	83
1952	CCF (Douglas)	54.06	42/53	Liberals (Tucker)	39.27	11/53	93.33	0	83
1956	CCF (Douglas)	45.25	36/53	Liberals (McDonald)	30.34	14/53	75.59	3 SC	84
1960	CCF (Douglas)	40.76	36/54	Liberals (Thatcher)	32.67	17/54	73.43	0	84

1964	Liberals (Thatcher)	40.4	32/58	CCF (Lloyd)	40.3	25/58	80.7	1 PC	83
1967	Liberals (Thatcher)	45.57	35/59	NDP (Lloyd)	44.35	24/59	89.92	0	78
1971	NDP (Blakeney)	55	45/60	Liberals (Thatcher)	42.82	15/60	97.82	0	83.22
1975	NDP (Blakeney)	40.07	39/61	Liberals (Steurt)	31.67	15/61	71.74	7 PC	80.28
1978	NDP (Blakeney)	48.12	44/61	PC (Collver)	38.08	17/61	86.2	0	79.44
1982	PC (Devine)	54.07	55/64	NDP (Blakeney)	37.64	9/64	91.71	0	83.9
1986	PC (Devine)	44.61	38/64	NDP (Blakeney)	45.2	25/64	89.81	1 LIB	82.12
1991	NDP (Romanow)	51.05	55/66	PC (Devine)	25.54	10/66	76.59	1 LIB	83.22
1995	NDP (Romanow)	47.21	42/58	Liberals (Haverstock)	34.7	11/58	81.91	5 PC	64.59
1999	Sk. Party * (Hermanson)	39.61	29/58	NDP* (Romanow)	38.73	25/58	78.34	4 LIB	65.5
2003	NDP (Calvert)	44.68	30/58	SaskParty (Hermanson)	39.35	28/58	84.03	0	70.95
2007	SaskParty (Wall)	50.92	38/58	NDP (Calvert)	37.24	20/58	88.16	0	74

Appendix 2 Saskatchewan elections resulting in more than two significant parties

	Winning Party	Combined Two-party Share of Pop. Vote	# of other Parties over 3% of seats	Other Parties	Three or More Parties? (Votes/Seats)
1905	Liberals (Scott)	99.72	0	0	
1908	Liberals (Scott)	98.67	0	0	
1912	Liberals (Scott)	98.94	0	0	
1917	Liberals (Martin)	92.98	0	1 IND	
1921	Liberals (Martin)	77.12	2	6 PROG 3 CON	Yes/Yes
1925	Liberals (Dunning)	74.55	1	3 CON 2 IND 1 LAB/LIB	Yes/Yes
1929	Liberals (Gardiner)	82	1	5 PROG	No/Yes
1934	Liberals (Gardiner)	74.75	1	5 CCF	Yes/Yes
1938	Liberals (Patterson)	64.18	2	2 UNITY 2 SC	Yes/Yes

1944	CCF (Douglas)	88.55	0	0	
1948	CCF (Douglas)	78.16	0	1 IND	Yes/No
1952	CCF (Douglas)	93.33	0	0	
1956	CCF (Douglas)	75.59	1	3 SC	Yes/Yes
1960	CCF (Douglas)	73.43	0	0	Yes/No
1964	Liberals (Thatcher)	80.7	0	1 PC	
1967	Liberals (Thatcher)	89.92	0	0	
1971	NDP (Blakeney)	97.82	0	0	
1975	NDP (Blakeney)	71.74	1	7 PC	Yes/Yes
1978	NDP (Blakeney)	86.2	0	0	
1982	PC (Devine)	91.71	0	0	
1986	PC (Devine)	89.81	0	1 LIB	
1991	NDP (Romanow)	76.59	0	1 LIB	Yes/NO
1995	NDP (Romanow)	81.91	1	5 PC	No/Yes
1999	Sask. Party (Hermanson)	78.34	1	4 LIB	Yes/Yes
2003	NDP (Calvert)	84.03	0	0	
2007	Sask Party (Wall)	88.16	0	0	

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