

Red Toryism and Neo-Liberalism in Alberta Conservative Party Ideology

By Trista Peterson

Introduction

Alberta's political history has been almost entirely dominated by conservative parties, and thus, Albertans have earned an almost caricature-like reputation as obstinate conservatives whose dogged devotion to their right-wing politics does them more harm than good. In reality, the situation is more nuanced. Large ideological divides between different strains of conservatism are present, which will be referred to as red toryism and neo-liberalism in this article. Red toryism is marked by an approach to governance that conceptualizes society as "an organic whole rather than a mere aggregation of individuals," (Patten 2001, 137) which is at times willing to "violate the liberal commitment to the limited state," having "accepted public assistance and the social infrastructure associated with the modern state" (137). Conversely, the neo-liberal strain of conservatism identifies "deficit reduction, deregulation, and privatization" as the ideal "approach to governance" (139). Alberta's conservative political parties are generally thought to have evolved from a red tory party to one of a more distinctly neo-liberal flair, and there has been a great deal of academic research and armchair speculation exploring this ever-present and perplexing trend. This article presents a continuation of this research, suggesting that conservative party ideology tends to shift between red tory and neo-liberal ideology in response to provincial economic conditions.

Literature Review

Research regarding the transition toward the adoption of neo-liberal ideology in Alberta conservative party politics can be divided into several primary schools of thought. First, there is a consensus among political scientists that the overall transformation of conservative ideology from red tory to neo-liberal occurred in lockstep with an unprecedented downturn in the economy both at the provincial and international level from 1970-onwards. The Keynesian, red tory economic policies of PC premier Peter Lougheed experienced its heyday during the economic boom of the 1970s (Tupper 2004). Steve Patten (2015) explains that Lougheed's government harnessed "the powers of the state" (259) to promote economic development, using profits from Alberta's booming oil and gas sector to expand infrastructure, provide subsidies to farmers and small-business owners, expand the size and number of government departments, and other interventionist policies. However, the recession of the 1980s hit Alberta hard, and the decline in wheat and oil required Lougheed's PC successor, Don Getty, to adopt the tenets of neoliberalism consensus. This neo-liberal consensus included cutting social spending, lessening economic regulation, and encouraging the export of goods. As Harrison, Johnson, & Krahn (1996) stated, the 1980s brought forth "sizeable tax increases, declines in real income, growing criticisms of centralized decision making, increased levels of political alienation, and the failure of state projects to create the "just

society” [which] combined to discredit left/liberal solutions” (163). The PC’s underwent a leadership change in the 1990s, and with Ralph Klein at the head of the party, Alberta entered a new era of neo-liberal conservatism (Barrie 2006). He campaigned on promises to reduce the “debt crisis” by fixing Alberta’s “spending problem,” delivering aggressive cuts to public services, including healthcare, education, and the civil service, demonstrating a sizeable shift towards neo-liberalism in Alberta’s conservative party history.

The other relevant school of thought revolves around the success of populist politics in Alberta, particularly during times of economic decline. As a resource-dependent province, the economy is susceptible to severe fluctuations. Klein has often been described as a populist who successfully framed the civil service and other government expenditures as the enemy against whom Albertans needed to rally in order to win back the “Alberta Advantage” (Harrison 2005). Though Alberta’s economic woes were attributable to a decline in resource revenues, Klein successfully framed them as a result of unfettered spending.

Previous literature has explored the transition of Alberta’s conservative parties from red tory to neo-liberal and how populism has allowed previous conservative parties to harness the feelings of economic insecurity present in the electorate to a party’s advantage. However, it has not fully addressed the non-linearity of this shift. This article will explore this gap through a study of election results and the provincial economy, suggesting that successful conservative parties tend to espouse red tory ideology in times of economic wellbeing and neo-liberal ideology during economic downturns.

Findings

The findings presented in this section build off of the existing knowledge that, perhaps intuitively, the economy tends to play the most significant role in the ideological iteration of conservatism employed by Alberta politics. To do this, six important Alberta general elections and the economic conditions to which they correspond were reviewed. These elections took place in 1971, 1986, 1993, 2008, 2015, and 2019. These economic conditions are measured by gross domestic product (GDP), that is, “a measure of the economic production which takes place within the geographical boundaries of a province or country” (Alberta Government website n.d.). GDP serves as “the traditional measure of economic prosperity and is the basis for the economic growth figures that appear in the media” (Anielski 2002, 4). In 1971, the Progressive Conservatives ended the Social Credit Party’s 31-year reign. Led by Peter Lougheed, the PCs promised to fund education, transportation, daycare services, universities, and economic development. The PC’s “believe[d] in the concept of putting [the government’s] money and resources to work for improvement and progress” (Wesley, n.d.); this was an ostensibly red tory approach that took a dramatically different tack than Social Credit Premier Ernest Manning, quoted as saying that he had “come to appreciate... the disadvantages of government’s becoming involved in areas that the private sector can handle” (Bell 2004, 163). This distinction suggests that the success of the PC’s was perhaps due to a preference for a more interventionist state, and at the time, Alberta could afford it. Oil revenues were undergoing an unprecedented boom, the population was increasing, unemployment was low, and according to a report published by the Pembina Institute, “economic growth was [at its] highest in the 1970s when the GDP grew by an average 8.7 percent per annum” (Anielski 2002).

The 1980s were a turbulent time for Alberta's economy, and Lougheed resigned in 1985. He was replaced by Don Getty, who was serving as premier when Alberta's economy took a dramatic nose-dive in 1986. Oil prices plummeted from US \$28-\$35 a barrel to a low of \$11, interest rates rose, and the provincial debt increased (Taft 2012). Alberta experienced its "slowest GDP growth at 2.2 percent per annum" during this decade (Anielski 2002). In response to the economic downturn, Getty cut spending on public programs such as education and healthcare and shrank the size and scope of the provincial government. As such, the trajectory of the PC government throughout the 1980s can be described as transitioning from a red tory party to neo-liberal in its approach to governance.

When Getty's successor, Ralph Klein, won the 1992 provincial election, Alberta's debt was at a record high. Previous governments had relied on borrowing money to continue public spending, and Klein's government vowed to put an end to this with a radically neo-liberal approach to governance. He blamed previous governments for overspending, promoting the notion that, as former PC finance Jim Dinning notably said, Alberta "ha[d] a spending problem, not a revenue problem" (Taft, McMillan, and Jahangir 2012). Before his election, Klein campaigned on a platform of "severe program cuts, government downsizing and privatization of services" (Global News 2019). The neo-liberal bent to his politics was successful, and the PC government under Klein went on to successfully form the government for 14 years. During their years in government, Klein's government slashed public spending until Alberta's expenditures had nearly flatlined. Klein privatized many of Alberta's public services, such as vehicle registration, liquor stores and driving exams. Meanwhile, Alberta's GDP experienced "a resurgence, averaging 4.9 percent per annum up until 1999" (Anielski 2002).

In 2008, the PC's returned to their red tory roots-- albeit for a limited time-- when Ed Stelmach replaced Klein as leader of the PC's and became premier in 2008 (Global News 2019). He campaigned on a platform of "ensur[ing] sufficient investments were made in Alberta's health and education systems" (Harrison 2015). During his campaign, Alberta's GDP was on the rise (Alberta Government 2019). The financial crisis of 2008 correlated with a drop in Alberta's GDP and his government began to run a large deficit. He resigned in 2011 after announcing that a surplus would not be possible for several years, a "stance opposed by many within the party," especially with the popularity of the "the right-wing libertarian" Wildrose Party (Harrison 2015).

In 2015, the election of the NDP under the leadership of Rachel Notley upended the PC's 44-year reign. Her government, often compared to that of Peter Lougheed's PCs, did not shy from public spending. During the NDP's mandate, health and education, among other public services, received increases to funding (Giovanetti 2019). Her government was heavily criticized for its spending, and during its first year in office, Alberta entered into one of the "most severe" recessions in the province's history (Gibson 2006; Craig 2008, 6). Meanwhile, the PC party was united with the Wild Rose Party to create the UCP, led by Jason Kenney, which won a decisive majority in 2019. The UCP campaigned on a dedication to eliminate the debt and "restore the Alberta advantage"-- the death of which, according to Kenney, was due to reckless spending on the part of the NDP. Albertans, over a quarter of a century later, watched history repeat itself as this new iteration of Alberta conservatism harkened back to the neo-liberal days of Ralph Klein (Dawson 2019); the 'Blue Ribbon Panel,' who convened prior to the release of Alberta's 2019 budget, stated that "Alberta has a spending problem" (Antoneshen 2019).

In studying both the results of these six critical elections and considering the economic trajectory of these periods, it appears that the economy is largely predictive of election outcomes; Albertans tend to elect neo-liberal conservative governments during periods of recession and red tory conservative governments when the economy is in better shape. Ups and downs in the economy are not unusual, but Alberta is unique in the extent to which global fossil fuel prices influence the economy, creating a situation wherein the volatility of the natural resources market is a “significant part of the explanation for the high variability of the provincial economy.” (Mansell & Schlenker, 2006).

Discussion

So far, this article has focused on two different approaches to government and spending— neo-liberal and red tory— and how Alberta’s conservative parties have shifted between the latter to the former from 1971 to the present day. The findings of this research are consistent with previous literature related to this subject: the economy of Alberta is ostensibly the most significant indicator of what type of conservative government Albertans will elect. It has found that successful conservative leaders have garnered support during hard times by uniting Albertans behind the idea that the neo-liberal ideals of small government, decreased spending, and privatizing public services is the only way to combat the economic woes that befall the province during periods of low oil revenue. The discussion that follows will explore possible explanations for why Albertans seem to favour conservative parties with a neo-liberal approach to governance when the economy is underperforming.

Alberta is unique from its neighbouring prairie provinces in its propensity for neo-liberal ideology in times of economic hardship. Saskatchewan, for example, tends to do the exact opposite (Enoch 2011). Saskatchewan’s political history features a heavy presence of social-democratic governments, and they tend to be the most successful during times of economic downturn. This indicates that there are substantial differences between the attitudes and priorities between these two similar provinces, and perhaps the best measure of this is the unique political culture of each province. Saskatchewan’s political culture is often regarded as being collectivist in nature, “emphaciz[ing] security and egalitarian social development”, while Alberta inherited an entrepreneurial political culture that espouses a sense of “individualistic pursuit of liberty and prosperity” from its early inhabitation by American Liberals (Marchildon 2005, 11; Wesley 2011, 20). These differences in political culture ostensibly lead to different priorities, and recent research by Wesley et al. (2019) suggests that Albertans hold “the economy” as a top priority. When Alberta begins to run a deficit budget or suffer due to low resource revenues, the main concern becomes getting the provincial economy, and thus their personal economic wellbeing, back on track. This gives political actors an in-road to capturing the hearts and minds of Albertans in times of economic under-performance: vow to eliminate debt, create jobs, and promise prosperity for all, uniting Albertans under the rallying cry of “balancing the budget” or “bringing back the Alberta advantage” even if at the expense of public services. This brand of populism is defined by leaders such as Ralph Klein and Jason Kenney, who have vowed to fight for “the people” against the overspending, red tory, “political elites.” They use what Simon Enoch (2011) describes as “debt and deficit discourse to prepare the way for neo-liberalism”. Interestingly, the definition of “the people” appears to remain consistent over the decades; in his days as PC leader, Ralph Klein often spoke of Henry and Martha, the “severely normal” Albertans (Pratt 2009). Before the release of the 2019 provincial budget, Premier Jason Kenney spoke again of these “normal Albertans,” that is,

“the folks who just try to get by and take care of their families with an ever-rising cost of living” (Leavitt 2019).

The results of this study seem to support the hypothesis that neo-liberal populism resonates with Albertans. Take, for example, the near-clean sweep of the Conservative Party of Canada in 2019’s federal election with their slogan, “it’s time for you to get ahead.” (Aiello 2019), and the UCP’s 2019 continuous campaign refrain of “jobs and the economy, jobs and the economy.”

The success of this pattern is perplexing when considering the evolving political culture of Alberta; the “ordinary people” and “Henry and Marthas” of Alberta are no longer the majority, though Alberta retains a reputation as a socially and fiscally conservative province. Research suggests that Albertans are not entirely deserving of this. When asked to place themselves on a ten-point political spectrum, Albertans, as a whole, are no more conservative than other Canadians (Wesley et al. 2019). For the most part, they want public services, are not opposed to government spending, and support initiatives related to Indigenous reconciliation, women’s rights, and lessening the gap between the rich and the poor. However, progressive parties—whether red tory conservative or NDP—struggle to make inroads during economic downturns. It may be the case that economic insecurity triggers what Diana C. Mutz (2018) refers to as “status threat”: that is, the idea that “one’s status in the domestic or international hierarchy has suffered” (9). “Status threat” was highly predictive of Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential victory in the United States, and Alberta’s tendency to swing towards right-wing, neo-liberal governments may be influenced by this as well. Voter turnout tends to peak during elections marked by victories of neo-liberal conservative parties vowing to cut spending, shrink government, and eliminate provincial debt in the face of provincial economic downturn. This pattern suggests that Albertans feel most strongly about their political preferences or perhaps economic issues during particularly populist campaigns; In 1993 and 2019, voter turnout was at its highest (Elections Alberta n.d). This effect may also be due to wanting to “punish” a previous government for their perceived economic irresponsibility. There is still much to explore in this area; one may start with exploring this pattern of voter turnout, and if it is indeed affected by populist politics.

This research has its limitations, of course. There are many factors involved in elections besides GDP and populism that were beyond the scope of this research. Future research may explore this topic in more depth by reviewing a longer time period and more economic indicators.

Conclusion

The previous paragraphs have focused on the shifting of Alberta’s conservative political parties between those with a red tory approach to governance to those with a neo-liberal approach. Researching the results of elections as well as Alberta’s economic trajectory has revealed that Albertans seem to prefer conservative parties with neo-liberal ideology during times of economic hardship and red tory ideology during more prosperous times. This article has also explored the use of populist political tactics to frame government spending as the culprit for economic hardship to great success. This information may be predictive of future election outcomes and add to the body of knowledge about Alberta conservatism.

References

- Aiello, R. 2019. "Conservatives Unveil Campaign Slogan, New TV Ad as Election Call Nears." CBC News, August 23, 2019.
<https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/conservatives-unveil-campaign-slogan-new-tv-ad-as-election-call-nears-1.4562193>
- Alberta Government website. n.d. "Gross Domestic Product." Accessed March 11, 2020.
- Anielski, M. 2002. "The Alberta GPI: Economy, GDP, and Trade." *The Pembina Institute*.
https://www.pembina.org/reports/01.GPI_EconomyGDPandTrade_techrpt.pdf
- Antoneshyn, A. 2019. "'Alberta Has a Spending Problem': Blue Ribbon Panel Says Health, Education, Public Sector Need Change". CTV News, September 3.
<https://edmonton.ctvnews.ca/alberta-has-a-spending-problem-blue-ribbon-panel-says-health-education-public-sector-need-change-1.4575755>
- Bell, E. (2004). "Ernest Manning" *In Alberta's Premiers of the Twentieth Century*, edited by R.J. Rennie. Canadian Plains Research Center, University of Regina.
- Barrie, D. 2006. *The Other Alberta: Decoding a Political Enigma*. Regina, SK. University of Regina, Canadian Plains Research Center, 2006.
- Barrie, D. 2004. "Ralph Klein" *In Alberta's Premiers of the Twentieth Century*, edited by R.J. Rennie. Canadian Plains Research Center, University of Regina.
- Craig, C. 2018. "Sustainable Government, Prosperous Future; 2018-19 Pre-Budget Submission to the Government of Alberta." *Canadian Taxpayers Federation*. Accessed March 13, 2020.
- Elections Alberta. n.d. "Overall Summary of Ballots Cast and Voter Turnout 1975-2019". *Elections Alberta*.
<https://www.elections.ab.ca/news-reports/reports/statistics/overall-summary-of-ballots-cast-and-voter-turnout/>
- Enoch, S. 2011. "The 'New Saskatchewan.'" *Socialist Studies* 7, No. 1: 191-215.
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=poh&AN=67046813&site=eds-live&scope=site>
- Dawson, T. 2019. "United Conservatives Outline Agenda of Repeal, With Aim to 'Restore the Alberta Advantage'". *The National Post*, May 21, 2019.
<https://nationalpost.com/news/politics/united-conservatives-outline-agenda-of-repeal-with-aim-to-restore-the-alberta-advantage>

- Gibson, J. 2016. "Alberta Recession One of the Most Severe Ever, TD Economics Report Finds." *CBC News*, July 18, 2016. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/td-economics-report-alberta-recession-gdp-fore-cast-1.3684056>
- Global News. 2019. "A Look at Every Alberta Election Since the Province was Created in 1905." *Global News*, March 20, 2019. <https://globalnews.ca/news/5075401/alberta-provincial-election-history/>
- Harrison, T., Johnston, B., & Krah, H. 1996. "Special Interests and/or New Right Economics? The Ideological Bases of Reform Party Support in Alberta in the 1993 Federal Election." *Canadian Review of Sociology & Anthropology*, 33, no. 2: 159–179. Retrieved from <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rch&AN=9608131048&site=eds-live&scope=site>
- Harrison, T. 2005. *The Return of the Trojan Horse*. Montréal: Black Rose Books, pp. 9-12
- Harrison, T. 2016. "Antiquated Neoliberalism and Alberta." *The Parkland Institute*. Retrieved from: https://www.parklandinstitute.ca/media_antiquated_neoliberalism_and_alberta
- Harrison, T. 2015. "Edward Stelmach." *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Retrieved from <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/edward-stelmach>
- Leavitt, K. 2019. "Jason Kenney and the Language of Division." *The Star Edmonton*, September 28, 2019. <https://www.thestar.com/edmonton/2019/09/28/jason-kenney-and-the-language-of-division.html>
- Marchildon, G., ed. 2005. "The Heavy Hand of History: Interpreting Saskatchewan's Past." *University of Regina Canadian Plains Research Centre*.
- Mutz, D. C. (2018). "Status Threat, Not Economic Hardship, Explains the 2016 Presidential Vote." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 115 no. 19: 9. doi: 10.1073/pnas.1718155115
- Patten, S. 2001. "'Toryism' and the Conservative Party in a Neo-Liberal Era." *In Party Politics in Canada*, edited by Hugh G. Thorburn, pp. 135-145. Scarborough, ON: Prentice-Hall Canada.
- Patten, S. 2015. "The Politics of Alberta's One-Party State" *In Transforming Provincial Politics: The Political Economy of Canada's Provinces and Territories in the Neoliberal Era*, edited by Charles W. Smith and Bryan M. Evans, 259. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing Division

- Pratt, S. 2009. "Martha and Henry Retire: The End of Ralph Klein's "Severely Normal" Master Narrative." *Alberta Views*, May 1, 2009. <https://albertaviews.ca/martha-henry-retire/>
- Smith, C. W., & Evans, B. M. 2015. *Transforming Provincial Politics: The Political Economy of Canada's Provinces and Territories in the Neoliberal Era*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing Division.
- Taft, K. 1997. *Shredding the Public Interest: Ralph Klein and 25 years of one-party government*. University of Alberta Press and Parkland Institute.
- Taft, K. McMillan, M.L., and Jahangir, J. 2012. *Follow the Money: Where Is Alberta's Wealth Going?* Calgary: Detselig Enterprises.
- Taras, D. (Editor) et al. 2019. *Orange Chinook: Politics in The New Alberta*. 1st ed., University of Calgary Press.
- Tupper, A. 2004. "Peter Lougheed, 1971-1985." In *Alberta Premiers of the Twentieth Century*, edited by B.J Rennie. Canadian Plains Research Center, University of Regina. p. 206-220, 234-238.
- Wesley, J. J. n.d. Prairie manifesto project: election materials. *University of Calgary*.
- Wesley, J. J. 2011. *Code Politics: Campaigns and Cultures on the Canadian Prairies*. Vancouver: UBC Press
- Wesley, J.J, et. al. 2019. Alberta political culture project. Ongoing.