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Alberta's Forgotten Experiment with Electoral Reform: The Hybrid Single Transferable Vote/Alternative Vote and the Quasi-party System

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Abstract

A persistent yet understudied aspect of Alberta's "quasi-party system" is the role of the electoral system. While many authors have rightly pointed out that a majoritarian single-member plurality system has helped Alberta's ruling parties produce disproportionate majorities, the province has not always operated under this electoral arrangement. From 1926 until 1955, Alberta had a "hybrid" system, consisting of the Single Transferable Vote (STV) in multi-member constituencies in Edmonton and Calgary and the Alternative Vote (AV) in single-member constituencies in the rest of Alberta. This unusual attempt at electoral reform played an important role in the dominance of the United Farmers of Alberta (UFA) and the early Social Credit Party (until 1955). AV acted as an essentially majoritarian system in rural Alberta, producing statistically indistinguishable results from First Past the Post (FPTP.) This contrasts the Albertan case with other attempts at implementing the Alternative Vote. On the other hand, STV benefited the UFA and Social Credit in two distinct ways. STV increasing proportionality in Edmonton and Calgary, as it has in many other jurisdictions. However, due the hybrid system, the urban opposition in Edmonton and Calgary to the UFA was fragmented by a proportional system like STV. Social Credit, with its larger urban base, used STV to maximize its urban vote through a process of voter transfers. Finally, rural malapportionment is a key feature in both the hybrid system and the subsequent return to single-member plurality. Rural seats, operating under both AV and FPTP, have been the electoral bedrock for Alberta's long lived political dynasties. The unique case of Alberta's hybrid electoral system serves as an important potential case study in debates surrounding electoral reform in Canada and around the world.

Introduction

In explaining what C.B. Macpherson (1962) famously called Alberta's "quasi-party system," a variety of camps within the scholarship have emerged. Explanations for Alberta's long-lived political dynasties punctuated by sudden, rapid shifts in electoral fortunes (i.e. the "quasi-party system") have included Alberta's history of class development; Alberta's quasi-colonial relationship with Ottawa (patterns of migration, settlement, and American Protestantism to name a few) (see Leadbeater 1984; Macpherson 1962; Wiseman 2007; Banack 2013). One understudied institutional explanation within the literature, however, is Alberta's electoral system.

Some authors have suggested that the single-member plurality system (i.e. First-Past-the-Post or FPTP) has contributed to one-party dominance within Alberta (Kornberg, Mishler, and Clarke 1982, 274–75; McCormick 1980). This is not an unreasonable assertion to make. There is ample evidence that single-member plurality has affected electoral outcomes at both the federal and provincial levels, exaggerating majorities and contributing to the dominance of larger parties within Canadian political discourse (Blais and Carty 1988; Milner 1999; McCormick 1980; Soron 2005, 66). The distortions and problems of single-member plurality are well documented in other jurisdictions as well (Singer 2013).

However, the single-member plurality system has not always been in place in Alberta. Alberta has a surprisingly varied history of experimentation with alternative electoral systems. The 1909, 1912, 1913, and 1921 Albertan provincial elections saw some municipalities adopt alternatives to single-member plurality (Barnes, Lithwick, and Virgint 2016, 14–15). More interestingly, between 1926 and 1955, Alberta adopted a system of single transferable vote (STV) in urban ridings (i.e., Edmonton and Calgary) and a system of alternative vote (i.e., instant runoff voting or AV) in the rest of Alberta (15). The Social Credit party reverted Alberta back to a single-member plurality system after the 1953 election (15). Despite having operated under two separate electoral systems from 1926 to 1955 versus 1959 onwards, Alberta maintained similar one-party dominance. Did the unusual hybrid STV/AV system exaggerate the majorities of Alberta's ruling parties (as FPTP has) or did the hybrid system produce more proportionate results and more diverse legislatures? Moreover, did the hybrid STV/AV system help distort electoral results for the UFA and Social Credit in a distinct way from the distortions created by single-member plurality? We will see that Albertan history has interesting implications for our modern discourses about electoral reform.

Methodology

To investigate Alberta's history of electoral reform, I will conduct a temporal comparative analysis. We can begin by dividing Albertan history into two periods: the period of hybrid STV/AV (1926 to 1955), and the period of single-member plurality (1959 to present). Albertan elections before 1926 will be disregarded, as they were conducted under a constantly changing mix of single-member and multi-member districts (Barnes, Lithwick, and Virgint 2016). We will keep these systems outside the scope of our analysis, as it is difficult to meaningfully compare electoral systems that did not maintain themselves for a significant period of time. We will then examine how the electoral systems in both eras affected Albertan electoral outcomes, as documented in the literature and in Albertan elections data (with an obvious focus on the hybrid STV/AV era).

Notably, while the effect of FPTP on Albertan elections has been well documented, Harold Jansen (1998) notes that there has been little work done on Alberta's experiment with electoral reform (1-3). In one particularly egregious example, Jansen (1998, 2) discovered that Kornberg, Mishler, and Clarke (1982) neglected that Albertan and Manitoba had undergone electoral reform at all! To supplement this analysis, we will examine the broader literature on how both STV, and AV systems have performed in other jurisdictions. Have other cases shown whether STV or AV increase proportionality, political diversity, and engagement on the part of voters?

After understanding these effects, we can undertake a comparative study of the effects of single-member plurality versus the hybrid STV/AV system on Albertan elections. Notably, the era of electoral reform in Alberta mostly coincided with the Social Credit dynasty (though Social Credit would persist for over a decade after the return to FPTP). Did the two systems distort electoral results in similar ways? Or did the shift in the electoral system give different advantages to Alberta's ruling

parties, that nonetheless allowed them to maintain Alberta's "quasi-party" system? Situating our data within the context of the Albertan party system, we will see how the unusual hybrid electoral system interacted with other institutional factors and Alberta's party system to produce two political dynasties – the United Farmers of Alberta and the Social Credit Party – from 1926 to 1955.

Studying the hybrid electoral system

We will begin with a focus on the electoral system itself and its effects, as documented by the literature.

Single Transferable Vote

For all of its fame, the implementation of STV in Edmonton and Calgary (for both provincial and municipal races) represents one of only a handful of implementations of the STV system (Farrell and Katz 2014, 13; Jansen 1998, 19–20). Edmonton and Calgary join a small group including Ireland, Malta, the Australian Senate, and a handful of other sub-national and local legislatures in the use of an STV system (Farrell and Katz 2014, 13).

Alberta implemented STV, specifically the Hare system, in Edmonton and Calgary for every provincial election between 1926 and 1955 (Jansen 1998, 91–93). Harold Jansen offers what appears to be one of the few comprehensive analyses of the effects of STV in Alberta in "The Single Transferable Vote in Alberta and Manitoba." Jansen finds that STV had little appreciable effect on voter behaviour (91-93). The number of candidates in each election was not affected by STV; the number of independent candidates did not increase with STV, either (91). STV had no discernable impact on voter turnout in Alberta; Jansen finds that turnout mostly depended on changes in the party system (92). The only appreciable effect on the voters, it seems, was a marked increase in the number of spoiled ballots (91).

STV did, however, have a significant effect on the party system where it was implemented. By Jansen's calculation, STV produced fairer and more proportional results than single-member plurality in Alberta; other factors affected the extent of this proportionality, however (Jansen 1998, 117). STV also increased the number of parties that had representation in the Legislature, with a greater diversity of parties gaining seats in the Legislative Assembly representing Edmonton and Calgary (Jansen 1998, 148–49).

Jansen's findings seem to somewhat fall in line with the consensus on STV, in the few jurisdictions that have implemented it, but the Albertan case is unique in certain ways. STV is widely seen as a way to increase proportionality (Reilly and Maley 2000, 265). STV is also seen as a way to produce a more diverse set of parties and voices within legislatures (269-70). However, Albertan STV did not produce the candidate-centred politics that many of STV's proponents predict (267-68). Rather, STV had little effect on voter partisanship in Alberta. Voters mostly marked lists along party lines, especially in the Social Credit era (Jansen 1998, 171). Social Credit seemed to master the STV system with "disciplined vote transfers," wherein voters transferred votes from one Social Credit candidate to another in an orderly fashion. This disciplined party loyalty ensured the maximization of the urban Social Credit vote (Jansen 1998, 215). Notably, studies have shown similar patterns in other jurisdictions that have implemented STV (Clark 2013). One final claim is that STV reduces strategic voting (Bartholdi and Orlin 1991; Reilly and Maley 2000, 268–69). Jansen (1998) is notably silent on strategic voting. There is wide disagreement on the role of strategic voting in Canada and it is difficult to measure. Thus, it is difficult to draw any meaningful connection between STV and strategic voting in Edmonton and

Calgary from 1926 to 1955 without significant further investigation (Merolla and Stephenson 2007).

Alternative Vote

The adoption of two parallel electoral systems created an unusual hybrid of STV and AV in Alberta as Massicotte and Blais (1999) characterize this situation as "coexistence." However, approximately 80 percent of Albertan MPs were elected under an AV system from 1926 to 1955, as STV was confined to only Edmonton and Calgary (Jansen 1998, 650). Given its use in a vast majority of seats in the Legislative Assembly during this period, an investigation into the nature of alternative vote in Alberta will likely reveal the most about the relationship between the electoral system and UFA/Social Credit dominance in this time period.

Harold Jansen, once again, offers the only comprehensive analyses of the alternative vote system in Alberta. The most important aspect of the AV system in Alberta, Jansen (1998, 115; 2004, 653) finds, is that it was essentially majoritarian, not proportional. Alternative vote in Alberta did not produce more proportional results than single-member plurality; AV and FPTP were statistically identical in the Albertan case (Jansen 1998, 115–16; 2004, 651).

Jansen (2004) finds that disproportionality rose in Alberta simultaneously with the adoption of AV and continued to do so after the return to FPTP (651). Unlike STV, the shift to and away from AV had little effect on the number of parties represented where it was used (653). Like Jansen, however, we can attribute some of this to dynamics beyond the electoral system itself; we know that Social Credit dominated the rural ridings where AV was implemented, as we will examine later (Wiseman 2007, 350). Beyond this, Jansen (2004) finds that STV and AV performed similarly in Alberta; AV had little effect on voter turnout and caused an increase in spoiled or rejected ballot (655-58).

Given Jansen's unfavourable assessment of the alternate vote in Alberta, we can, at first glance, examine another jurisdiction that has consistently used AV, Australia (where AV is known as *preferential voting*). Alternative vote is usually lauded as a moderating force, that incentivizes coalition building and centrist politics; the main mechanism for this is the exchange of preferences between parties (Flanagan 1999, 88–89; Sharman, Sayers, and Miragliotta 2002). The Australian experience has been generally positive in this regard, with parties historically tending towards the centre and preference trading incentivizing parties to build broad coalitions (Reilly 1997; Sharman, Sayers, and Miragliotta 2002). However, the alternative vote did not produce these sorts of coalitions in Alberta. Moreover, Australia's unique electoral dynamics– compulsory voting, compulsory preferences, and a strong tradition of coalition between the Liberal and National parties– makes the Australian example of limited use (Jansen 2004, 661–64). Two other jurisdictions that use an AV system for their legislatures are Fiji and Papua New Guinea. However, both nations have been fraught with ethnic divisions, and there is considerable debate about the role of AV in either moderating or exasperating ethnic conflict (Fraenkel 2001; Horowitz 2007). These dynamics make it hard to draw a comparison with Alberta. One final possibility is Maine, where AV has been recently adopted by referendum (Santucci 2018). The extremely recent nature of this change, however, means there is a lack of studies on the electoral effects.

Thus, it seems that there are few general lessons that can be drawn from the example of other jurisdictions. The Australian political experience – coalitions and preference trading – was not replicated during most of this period. Moreover, AV acted nearly identically to FPTP in Alberta. In

the majority of cases, candidates had 50 percent of first preferences. Even more so, candidates not leading after the first round rarely attracted the second choice preferences to overtake the leading candidate (Jansen 2004, 666).

There is one exception, however. The 1955 election saw the Social Credit party beset by scandal and unpopularity (Finkel 1989, 127–30; Jansen 2004, 662). In this election, an alliance between the Liberals and the CCF saw a great deal of preference trading; this would allow the Liberal to defeat a significant number of Social Credit candidates in rural AV ridings (Jansen 2004, 662). It is in this one election that Alberta's results resembled the Australian example, wherein AV facilitated a coalition against an unpopular government. The next election, however, would see the return to single-member plurality.

The electoral system and single-party dominance

STV/AV, the UFA, and Social Credit

Both the beginning and the end of Alberta's decades-long experiment with electoral reform reveal the relationship between the hybrid STV/AV system and the "quasi-party" system. We will also see that an inherent imbalance between rural and urban under this hybrid system allowed both the UFA and Social Credit to create disproportionate majorities from their rural bases within the hybrid STV/AV system.

We have found in our investigation that STV and AV acted in two distinct ways in Alberta. STV in Alberta acted much as it has in other jurisdictions; proportionality increased, and a wider number of parties were represented. AV, on the other hand, acted in a distinct way in Alberta. As we noted earlier, AV was nearly statistically identical to single-member plurality (with the exception of 1955 election, as we will see later).

The reason for Alberta's unusual interaction with the alternative vote lies in where and how it was implemented. The UFA implemented the unusual hybrid STV/AV system to little fanfare and controversy reflecting the broadly popular nature of electoral reform (Jansen 1998, 53–54). Jansen notes that the unusual system fit the UFA's philosophy of "group government" (57). The UFA believed that "since rural areas shared an essential commonality of interest, multiple representatives were not necessary for any constituency" (57). Urban areas (namely Edmonton and Calgary), in contrast, "featured more occupational groupings and proportional representation was necessary to represent the full diversity of occupations in the legislature" (57-58). Nonetheless, the implementation of the hybrid system, and importantly, its long-term persistence, carried shades of partisan self-interest. The key feature of the hybrid system is the UFA and Social Credit's political dominance within rural Albertan ridings throughout this time period.

The *Edmonton Bulletin* was very conscious of this fact in 1924, when they noted "the preferential system will do nothing to imperil the chances of [UFA] candidates in country constituencies, while the 'proportional' arrangement is calculated to make impossible the return of solid delegations of Opposition members from the cites... the [UFA] is trying to legislate itself into power for another term..." (as cited in Jansen 1998, 56). The *Bulletin* would prove correct in its prediction. AV acted nearly identical to FPTP in the rural areas where the UFA dominated; UFA candidates won over 50 percent of the vote in the first round in many cases in 1926 and 1930 ("Alberta," n.d.; Jansen 1998, 57; 115–16). Meanwhile, STV's tendency towards proportionality further fragmented the urban bound opposition (Jansen 2004, 57). This can be seen in Edmonton and Calgary's seats being divided up among the Liberal, Conservative, and Dominion Labor under

STV ("Alberta," n.d.). The benefits of this hybrid system for the UFA is clear – in 1926 and 1930, the UFA would win two decisive majorities under their new electoral system, despite only winning approximately 39 percent of the vote ("Alberta," n.d.). We see the UFA dominate essentially majoritarian seats in rural Alberta, while the Liberals, Conservatives, and Dominion Labour divide the urban seats in Edmonton and Calgary among themselves.

If the UFA used the hybrid system to their advantage, Social Credit mastered it. Social Credit attained a position so dominant in rural Alberta that many voters did not bother marking any preference beyond the Social Credit candidate, a practice known as *plumping* (Jansen 1998, 167) This strength in the rural areas, combined with the majoritarian AV system, would be the bedrock of Social Credit dominance. It would allow William Aberhart to survive a near defeat in 1940, where a united opposition nearly tied Social Credit in the popular vote; nonetheless, Social Credit's strength in the rural ridings using AV returned a disproportionate, if narrower majority, for Social Credit (Finkel 1989, 190–91). However, as Edward Bell (1993, 30–31) argues, the Social Credit movement had a significant urban element to it, even from its beginnings in 1935. As noted earlier, urban Social Credit voters loyally marked only Social Credit candidates, maximizing the effectiveness of Social Credit's urban vote. Alberta's election data seems to reflect this under Ernest Manning where Social Credit had a steady presence in STV-using Edmonton and Calgary ("Alberta," n.d.; Jansen 1998, 215).

The end of the hybrid system reveals, however, that it did not inherently produce lopsided results. In 1955, Social Credit suffered what had hitherto been its greatest electoral defeat, with the opposition winning 24 of 61 seats. As seen earlier, opposition parties managed to finally take advantage of the AV system in order to break the Social Credit's grip on rural Albertan seats (Hesketh 1987, 127–30). Efficient vote transfers between the Liberals and the CCF allowed multiple Social Credit candidates to be defeated in rural, AV ridings (Hesketh 1987, 127–28).

Social Credit, in turn, would immediately return Alberta to FPTP. Armed with their argument of reducing spoiled ballot and simplifying the electoral system, Social Credit managed to neutralize the furious but ineffective opposition by the other parties (Hesketh 1987, 135–36). By Hesketh's (1987, 139) account, it seems only Progressive Conservative MLA Cam Kirby sensed that a return to FPTP was motivated by a desire to prevent the opposition from consolidating against Social Credit as they had in 1955.

The return to Single-Member Plurality

The distortions of single-member plurality are obvious and frequently cited as a major reason for Alberta's long-lived political dynasties. S.M. Lipset, in his 1954 critique of Macpherson, attributes a great deal of Social Credit's dominance to the single-member plurality system (Lipset 1954, 196–98; Rich 1979, 122).[1] While Lipset neglects that Social Credit began under a different electoral system, single-member plurality would prove favourable from Social Credit as well.

Cam Kirby proved correct in his prediction. In 1959, first election after the return to FPTP, Social Credit won 94 percent of the seats with only 55 percent of the popular vote (Finkel 1989, 134). Ironically, the Social Credit era would end due to the electoral system they had implemented

[1] Oddly enough, Lipset (1954), while railing against the British single member plurality system, neglects the fact that Alberta and Manitoba had been operating under alternate electoral system for decades at the time of his writing. This oversight, this researcher argues, further confirms the point of Jansen (1998) that Alberta and Manitoba's experiments with electoral reform are often neglected.

in the face of 1955. A small change in the Social Credit popular vote (a swing of 3.5 percent away from Social Credit) and the consolidation of the opposition vote behind the Progressive Conservatives turned a large Social Credit majority in 1967 into a Social Credit rout in 1971 ("Alberta," n.d.; Finkel 1989, 190). The opposition, divided since the implementation of FPTP, united behind the Lougheed Progressive Conservatives and swept Social Credit from the cities and much of rural Alberta (Finkel 1989, 190–91).

Similar disproportionate majorities were a feature throughout the Progressive Conservative era and are well studied. One particularly egregious example is 2004, where a mere 21 percent of eligible voters gave Ralph Klein a majority government (Soron 2005, 66). Beyond the Lougheed premiership, the false majorities of the PC era would share one factor in common with the era of hybrid STV/AV.

Rural malapportionment

Over the course of this investigation, we have found that the hybrid STV/AV system allowed both the UFA and Social Credit to produce disproportionate majorities in a distinct manner from single-member plurality. Nonetheless, there is one final factor common to both electoral system: malapportionment in favour of rural ridings. Rural Alberta has been consistently overrepresented in the Legislature, though the late urbanization of the province kept the relative level of malapportionment low until after WW2 (Archer 1993, 183–85). Nonetheless, the overrepresentation of rural areas allowed the commanding rural bases of both the UFA and Social Credit to dominate the Legislature, a situation neither party had particular incentive to change (Archer 1993, 185; Jansen 1998, 57; McCormick 1980). While Peter Lougheed would defeat Social Credit in 1971 through an urban coalition, the Progressive Conservatives still overtook Social Credit in just over half of the seats outside of Edmonton and Calgary (Finkel 1989, 191). Alfred Thomas Neitsch (2011) finds that, despite their urban strength in Calgary, the Progressive Conservatives would come to rely on a rural base as well. Moreover, the Progressive Conservatives would perpetuate the system of rural overrepresentation, just as the UFA and Social Credit had before them (Neitsch 2011)

Throughout Alberta's history, rural ridings have been overrepresented, whether they operated under alternative vote or single-member plurality; this phenomenon has been deliberately perpetuated by successive UFA, Social Credit, and Progressive Conservative governments, using their rural bases to dominate the Legislative Assembly. This malapportionment has not ended in the present, as evidenced by the most recent report of the Alberta Electoral Boundaries Commission (Bielby et al. 2017, 16–18). At the time of writing, Alberta's current electoral boundaries (as determined by the 2016-17 Electoral Boundaries commission) overrepresent rural ridings by a significant margin (16-18). Two ridings, Central Peace-Notley and Lesser Slave Lake, continue to maintain an exception under Section 15(2) of the Election Act to represent a population up to 50 percent below the average population of a riding (22-23).

Recall our findings on the proportionality of both AV and FPTP in Alberta. It is clear that Alberta has consistently combined rural malapportionment with majoritarian systems (be it AV or FPTP). Alberta's ruling parties dominating these overrepresented rural ridings under both electoral arrangements is vital to understanding how both the hybrid STV/AV system and single-member plurality have facilitated a "quasi-party" system.

Conclusion

Alberta's hybrid STV/AV system distorted electoral results in a broadly similar, but distinct way from single-member plurality. AV, as the primary system in use during this period, would prove no more proportional than single-member plurality. The alternative vote allowed both the UFA and Social Credit to dominate rural ridings in an essentially majoritarian system. In urban ridings, the single-transferable vote fragmented the opposition to the UFA. Social Credit, on the other hand used efficient, disciplined vote transfers from their urban base to dominate the STV system as well. Finally, the overrepresentation of rural ridings was present in both the hybrid system and single-member plurality, and promoting the dominance of the UFA, Social Credit, and the Progressive Conservatives alike.

They are both similarities and stark differences between the Albertan experience with electoral reform and those of other jurisdictions. How many of these differences can be attributed to the hybrid system versus Alberta's political culture, as well as other factors, remains to be seen. I must acknowledge that the bulk of this work has drawn from the work of Harold Jansen (1998; 2004), as he has offered the only comprehensive analyses of Alberta's experience with electoral reform. The increasing popularity of electoral reform necessarily includes a discussion of STV and AV. Alberta offers an important example of the effects, and importantly, the perils of both systems. Another comprehensive study of Alberta's hybrid electoral system (and of Manitoba's similar but distinct experiment) is something that Canadian political science is sorely lacking.

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