

The Dealignment and Realignment of Right-Wing Parties in Canada: The Fragility of a 'Big Tent' Conservative Party.

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Abstract. The history of right-of-centre political parties in Canada is replete with cycles of internal fracturing, which are then followed by periods of cohesion and stability. The conservative movement in Canada, federally and provincially, has a history of splitting into different political parties and then reuniting, thus repeating the cycle. This occurs at a frequency not shared by other parties of different ideological perspectives. Drawing in part from recently-uncovered confidential documents, specifically, efforts undertaken in the mid-1960s by Premier E.C. Manning to unify the Alberta Social Credit and Progressive Conservative parties, this paper undertakes to identify and explain the factors underlying this penchant for conservative political parties, especially in western Canada, to undergo the process of division and reunification as frequently as they do. We explain the conservative inclination for political party dealignment and realignment by examining three propositions: 1) Why does this process occur almost exclusively among right-of-centre parties? 2) Why has western Canada – Alberta in particular – been the prime location for this process, both historically and contemporarily? 3) What are the conditions and/or prerequisites underlying the process dealignment and realignment? We also consider four hypotheses to test the soundness of our claim. This paper makes the case that the process of dealignment and realignment is a common characteristic of right-of-centre parties, particularly in western Canada.

Introduction

[I]f the Canadian political situation continues to degenerate, and if the cause of conservatism continues to suffer and decline, not for the lack of merit or a willingness on the part of the Canadian public to support modern conservative principles and policies, but rather because of unnecessary dissension among politicians and parties, the idea of establishing a wholly new political party committed to the social conservative position will find an ever increasing number of advocates and supporters among a concerned and aroused Canadian public.¹

The political realignment going throughout the democratic world means that there can be no simple “reunite the right” strategy -- and there will be no return to a two-party system in Canada.²

[I am] personally convinced that the most effective way to get things done politically in the 21st century will be to build principled coalitions to pursue particular policy objectives.³

¹ E.C. Manning, *Political Realignment: A Challenge to Thoughtful Canadians*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1967, p. 86.

² Stephen Harper, *The National Post*, October 8, 1999.

³ Preston Manning, *Organizing political support for the natural city*. *Ekistics*, Vol. 71, No. 424/425/426. January – June, 2004, p. 133.

This paper draws its analytical footing from then-Alberta Premier E.C. Manning's attempt in 1966 to essentially assimilate the Progressive Conservative Party of Alberta, led by Peter Lougheed, into the Social Credit Party of Alberta. Though the PCs had not yet won a single seat in the Alberta legislature, Premier Manning regarded this upstart party and its dynamic young leader as a threat to both the Social Credit party's firm grip on power, and to the unity of the conservative movement in the province. The details of this proposed, confidential 'merger' were laid out in considerable detail in a confidential document released to the authors by Preston Manning in 2017. The following year, E.C. Manning published *Political Realignment* – a short book outlining the necessity of similar mergers at the national level of party politics.

These two early (and unsuccessful) efforts at party mergers provided a starting point for discerning a larger pattern at work, namely, the cyclical penchant of right-of-centre parties, especially those in western Canada, to split apart, and then unite as a reconstituted 'bigger tent' entity. According to the pattern we explicate herein, a party may fracture along any number of issues, be they competition from other parties, leadership issues, ideological/policy disputes, platform disagreements, and so on, which will then initiate a process of internal dissension, leading ultimately to dealignment. In time, efforts toward a realignment of conservative forces will commence – sometimes with new parties and participants – setting the process back to a starting point once again.

The history of conservative parties in Canada exhibits a pattern of dealignment and realignment at both national and provincial levels. At the national level, the various iterations of conservative vehicles, from Liberal-Conservative, to National Conservative, to Unionist, to Conservative, to Progressive Conservative, to the Reform Party, to the Canadian Reform Conservative Alliance, to the Canadian Alliance, to today's Conservative Party of Canada, have all contended with stretches of internal strife and threats of dealignment. At the provincial level, especially in western Canada, a similar dynamic has taken place, encompassing powerful party vehicles such as Social Credit (in Alberta and BC), a variety of Progressive Conservative parties, the BC Liberal Party, the Saskatchewan Party, the Wildrose Party, and the United Conservative Party. Over much of the 20th century, and into the early decades of the 21st, Canadian conservatism has been subjected to – and often divided by – attempts to merge its disparate ideological elements and policy preferences into a single, 'big tent' political party. Notwithstanding the formidable electoral successes of many of these parties, the pressures of dealignment remain arguably more potent and threatening to right-of-centre parties than parties elsewhere along the spectrum.

This process of party division, breakdown, and unification, of 'political realignment', to borrow from the title of E.C. Manning's 1967 book, is not an unfamiliar experience for any party of any political-ideological stripe. All parties undergo occasional internal reorganization and reassessment, be they parties of a more defined ideological perspective, or a catch-all brokerage party at the centre. This paper contends that such dealignment and realignment, though not limited to right-of-centre political parties, is nevertheless a consistent feature of them – and to a degree not experienced in parties of other

ideological dispositions.⁴ At the national level, this process appears to be energized in large part by western Canada's bouts of restlessness and dissatisfaction, with the rest of the country playing a less dynamic role.

The process is also replicated provincially. In addition to the early, secret plan of E.C. Manning to subsume the Alberta Progressive Conservatives, of interest to us as well is the most recent, successful outcome of the process as it unfolded in Manning's home province of Alberta, where the two principal provincial conservative parties agreed to dissolve and reunite as a single party. The objective to unite the Wildrose Party of Alberta (WRP) and the Progressive Conservative Party of Alberta (PCPA), the result of which by 2017 produced the United Conservative Party (UCP) led by former Harper cabinet minister Jason Kenney, has by any measure been a remarkable success. In less than two years, the UCP went from an idea to realign two (sometimes hostile) conservative parties, to winning an overwhelming majority of seats in the Alberta provincial election by April 16, 2019. As we discuss later on in the paper, this latest successful fusion of right-of-centre parties may in due course succumb to the historical pattern of internal strife, to be followed by dealignment, and then realignment.

Though the merging of political parties is not a common occurrence in Canada, the political science literature on such activities (realignments) is fairly accessible.⁵ This paper seeks a deeper understanding of the dynamics of conservative realignment *and* dealignment, with an emphasis on Alberta party politics. Our analysis is framed by the following questions:

- Why does this process occur almost exclusively among right-of-centre parties?
- Why has western Canada – Alberta in particular – been the prime location for this process, both historically and contemporarily?
- What are the conditions and/or prerequisites underlying the process dealignment and realignment?

To help answer these questions, we have developed four working hypotheses:

- *Hypothesis 1:* Dealignment occurs when one conservative party is in power;
- *Hypothesis 2:* Realignment occurs when both conservative parties are out of power;
- *Hypothesis 3:* Dealignment occurs for ideological/policy/platform reasons;
- *Hypothesis 4:* Realignment occurs for pragmatic reasons, i.e., when forming a government.

We address these hypotheses later in the paper. Next, we examine a pivotal document underscoring this analysis, namely, the 1966 strategy of Alberta Social Credit Premier E.C. Manning to merge with – more accurately, to assimilate – Peter Lougheed's Progressive Conservatives as the means to prevent a possible splintering of right-wing political power in that province.

⁴ There is also the additional influence of partisan inconsistency and instability of party identification in decentralized federal countries. See Stewart and Clarke (1998).

⁵ See, for example, Bélanger and Godbout (2010), Carson (2014), and Marland and Flanagan (2015).

The Alberta Political Proposal: ‘uniting’ the right through assimilation, 1966 – 1967

Realigning conservatism in Alberta

Premier Manning’s strategy was laid out in *Alberta Political Proposal* (hereafter the ‘Proposal’), a 43-page, highly confidential, methodical blueprint calling for the unification – a political realignment – of the ruling Alberta Social Credit Party with the upstart Progressive Conservative Party of Alberta, led by Peter Lougheed. It also called for a merger at the federal level between the Progressive Conservatives (at the time, going through the chaotic last days of John Diefenbaker’s leadership) and Social Credit.

The Proposal was the end result of a series of 10 confidential meetings held in Edmonton and Calgary during December, 1966.⁶ The major participants at these meetings were Erick Schmidt (consultant to the Manning cabinet), Joe Clark (future leader of the federal PCs and later Prime Minister; then-executive assistant to Peter Lougheed), Merv Leitch (future Attorney-General for Alberta), and Preston Manning. It is worth noting that at the time of this document’s release, the Alberta PCs held no seats in the Alberta legislature.

By late 1966, with the blessing of Premier Manning, an exploratory unification effort was launched by son Preston, along with Joe Clark and others. The Proposal provides a fascinating perspective as to the reasons why, even with a huge majority of 60/63 seats in the legislature, the Socreds would consider initiating what essentially was an outright (even hostile) take-over of the provincial Progressive Conservatives, which, at that time, was a small party led by a young Peter Lougheed, and with no seats in the provincial legislature.

There was no immediate threat to Social Credit’s firm hold on power at that time. But, to those with an eye to potential developments in Alberta’s conservative politics, there were signs that a threat to the Socred’s grasp on governance was perhaps imminent. The threat came from the Alberta PCs. We return to the Proposal’s focus on the PCs shortly. What follows below is the Mannings’ rationale justifying this pitch for a merger of the two parties.

The Proposal lists nine “strong reasons” for a merger between the Socreds and the Alberta PCs.⁷ They are as follows:

- Conservatism itself was “misunderstood and not as effective as it ought to be” (p. 1).
- “[T]here appears to be a very real danger that Canada could become a socialistic state” (*ibid.*)⁸

⁶ The authors are grateful to Preston Manning and the staff at the Manning Centre in Calgary for their generosity and time. Though the entire 1966 document has not been made public, Mr. Manning did describe many of its objectives in a February 3, 2017 article in *The Calgary Herald*.

See also <https://www.pressreader.com/canada/calgary-herald/20170203/281745564119993>

⁷ The Proposal applied much the same rationale to conservative parties at the federal level.

⁸ The Proposal argues further that, because of conservative disunity, socialism, i.e., the NDP, could come to power “by default” (*ibid.*). The NDP had won a surprising 1966 federal by-election victory in Pincher Creek-Crowsnest it clearly spooked conservatives in Alberta. The election was in October 1966 a couple of months before the Manning-

- Uniting the parties would demonstrate consistency within conservatism (p. 2).
- Albertans who vote for the Socreds provincially tend to support the PCs federally, and these people would surely welcome a united right at both levels.
- There are fringe elements in both parties who are “unrepresentative” of them, but who reinforce critics’ views that conservatism is “reactionary or eccentric” (*ibid.*).
- The Socreds at the provincial level and the PCs at the federal level are stronger than their counterparts (i.e., the provincial PCs and the federal Socreds). Thus, the stronger party at each level is to be responsible for “the principle of realignment” (*ibid.*)
- The Alberta Socreds are “long in office.” The federal PCs are “presently out of office.” Both parties are in trouble “unless revitalization and reorganization take place” (p. 3).
- There is evidence that the general membership in both Alberta parties are sympathetic to the “idea of realignment” (*ibid.*).⁹
- “The public appears interested,¹⁰ yet skeptical that anything concrete will result. [Therefore, t]he time has come when action is required” (p. 4).

Apart from the fear of conservative vote-splitting, and thus allowing a socialist party (namely, the NDP) to achieve power,¹¹ what stands out in these reasons is the fear, valid or not, that conservatism and its principal party vehicle, Social Credit, were close to the tipping point of fragmentation and with it, a possible loss of power. So, a realignment, a uniting (or assimilation), of conservative parties was for Manning the only effective cure to the ailment. As the Proposal (p. 5) makes clear, nothing but a complete merger of the two parties would suffice:

Coalitions, temporary alliances, and other half-way measures will not do. Not only are they inadequate, but such measures would appear to an already cynical and disillusioned public to be merely further political manoeuvres based on expediency...[T]he present situation calls for nothing less than total commitment to a complete, vital, enduring unification of conservative elements in Canada and Alberta. [Emphasis original.]

In an interview with the authors,¹² Preston Manning explained that his father was concerned that both the conservative movement and conservative parties, if not in serious trouble with voters at that time, were likely headed in that direction. What E.C. Manning sought was “new blood”¹³ to rejuvenate the

Clark negotiations in December. The same argument was invoked by the Alberta PCs during the 2015 Alberta provincial election, in which the NDP did win a majority government.

⁹ This was at best a debatable proposition.

¹⁰ No statistical evidence of such interest was provided in the Proposal.

¹¹ This fear would be echoed by BC Socred Premier W.A.C. Bennett during that province’s 1972 election campaign, where he warned of “the socialist hordes at the gates.” The Socreds lost that election to the NDP.

¹² Interview conducted May 30, 2017 at the Manning Centre, Calgary.

¹³ This is the same figure of speech Manning had employed in his inaugural address to the Reform Association in May, 1987.

movement. This would be accomplished by a merger of conservative parties, and thus, a much-needed realignment of conservative politics and power in the province. Conservatives in Alberta “needed an impetus for change,” said Preston Manning. Failure to embrace such change would result in damage to the Socred brand, if not to conservatism itself. Not lost on E.C. Manning was the fact that the PC party under Lougheed, despite having no seats in the legislature, was starting to attract public support, as well as money from some of the province’s wealthiest residents, such as Calgary’s powerful Mannix family. “Following the money” led the Mannings to conclude that, absent a merger, the future of conservative politics in Alberta could well belong solely to the Lougheed PCs.¹⁴

Though a name change for this new entity would be enacted to reflect the ostensible merger of the two principals – “The Social Conservative Party of Alberta” (6)¹⁵ – little else in the Proposal appears to acknowledge the PC party and its platform. With regard to the policy and legislative agenda as the new Social Conservative Party, the Proposal hinted strongly that the governing agenda of the (former) Socred party was to prevail.¹⁶ In the same vein, at this new party’s founding convention, the Proposal “...suggests that Mr. [E.C.] Manning should be the sole nominee for leader, and that Mr. Lougheed should be the sole nominee for president” (37).¹⁷ The Proposal was obviously more of a blueprint for an outright takeover attempt by the Socreds than an equitable merger of existing parties.

Influenced by son Preston’s interest in systems analysis,¹⁸ the Proposal provides detailed, methodical plans reinforcing the logic of the merger. From handling the media, to the establishment of various task forces, to realigning the constituency associations, to managing the founding convention, the Proposal reads as a methodical blueprint defending the rationale of the entire process. The PCs rejected the proposed merger outright. It is not difficult to understand why. Recalling one of the Proposal’s reasons outlined above, namely, that the stronger party is responsible for the process of realignment, this would in effect necessitate the collapse of the PCs into the then-larger Socreds. Uniting – more accurately, *assimilating* – one party into another before the next provincial election was vital, at least from the standpoint of the Mannings. The Proposal lists a number of reasons why a merger prior to the election was preferred, not the least of which was to bolster the Socred’s own internal organization and its public

¹⁴ Manning explained further that, in the 1967 Alberta election campaign, the Socreds spent about two-thirds of their election budget fighting the opposition parties (Liberals and NDP), while the PCs, now the beneficiaries of generous funding from the outside, could devote their energies largely to taking aim at the incumbent Socreds. In that election, the last before its majority victory in 1971, the PCs won 6/65 seats. The Socreds won 55 seats.

¹⁵ As Whittaker (2017:7) points out, ‘social conservative’ meant something different back then than it does today. In 1966, the term was meant as a name for the new party employing the labels from the 2 old parties. It was also supposed to signify the merger of the Depression-era ‘social concern’ of the Socreds with free-market principles.

¹⁶ At p. 25, the Proposal recommends that “[a]n Orientation Division [be established so as] to acquaint certain individuals (e.g. leading Conservatives who will now be identifying with the Government of Alberta) with the policies and programs of the present Administration.”

¹⁷ Typically, a president is part of the extra-parliamentary wing, rather than the caucus. The Proposal is silent as to whether it was suggesting, if the merger was successful, that Mr. Lougheed retire from elected politics and assume a purely administrative role in the new party.

¹⁸ Manning (1992:54) describes systems analysis as the analyses of measurable outputs (resources) which are the functional products of inputs (resources). Inputs are thus converted into outputs, and the entire complex can be scrutinized so as “improve the productivity of the organization.”

popularity: “...entering union would appear to the public to be negotiating from a position of strength” (11). To the Lougheed PCs, this was clearly a plan for the Social Credit party to swallow them up *before* they could beat them at the ballot box.

To add injury to the PC’s rejection, the Social Credit caucus rejected Manning’s merger plan, mostly because there was no apparent need to merge with or subsume a party that held no seats. After all, the Socreds had been in power since 1935 and in 1967, still held 55/65 seats in the legislature.¹⁹ Scepticism regarding such wholesale change when any need for change was unproven may have influenced the caucus’s thinking. Be that as it may, the results of the August 1971 provincial election, proved that Manning’s apprehension about the future of Social Credit was prescient. The PCs won a majority with 49/75 seats, while the Socreds were relegated to the opposition, winning 25 seats. The PCs would go on to form a political dynasty which would last almost 44 years.

The Proposal redux: political realignment at the national level

The Proposal provided a brief overview for political realignment at the federal level, beginning, not surprisingly, with Alberta. The plan called for all 17 of Alberta’s federal constituencies to help “...merge Social Credit and Progressive Conservative federal organizations across Alberta, and to establish new associations based upon the new federal constituency boundaries” (40).²⁰ No concrete plan for how this merger was to be carried out was offered; a strategy for the merger was to be published the following year.

So, and in similar fashion to his efforts at realignment as Alberta premier, (now) Senator E.C. Manning published *Political Realignment: A Challenge to Thoughtful Canadians* in 1967. This slight publication echoes the rationale of the Proposal, but with a focus on federal politics and the national party system. Exhibiting the same pessimism about the state of federal politics as he did with Alberta’s, Manning bemoaned the “[w]idespread disillusionment and frustration...among the electorate concerning the general performance of parties and parliament” (15). The structural solution to this malaise was to “...generate and sustain a rationalized, regenerative, two party, democratic system for Canada” (50).

After assessing the policy and ideological positions of all parties in Parliament at that time, Manning reasoned that his proposed national two-party system ought to comprise the Progressive Conservatives (assuming the party adopted Manning’s ‘social conservative’ platform), and the Liberals (they would also serve as the new political home for the federal New Democrats, or any left-of-centre political interests, generally). The merger of the two right-of-centre federal parties would mean the national Social Credit party’s absorption into the PCs.²¹ As did Peter Lougheed at the provincial level months before, federal PC leader Robert Stanfield rejected Manning’s plan outright.

Manning argued that a realigned federal Conservative party must reject the catch-all or brokerage party strategies of the Liberal Party. Instead, the party would embrace two arguably competing ideological

¹⁹ The May 1967 Alberta provincial election was a breakthrough for the Lougheed PCs: they won 6 seats.

²⁰ At that time, there were 15 PC and 2 Socred federal seats in the province.

²¹ The Quebec version of Social Credit, *le Ralliement des créditistes du Canada*, was to remain intact.

visions: economic liberalism and social humanitarianism. In short, the party would embrace the classical liberal market economy *and* traditional conservatism's collective social values, including retaining the basic principles of the welfare state (also see Flanagan, 1995:11). In Manning's (*ibid.*:63) own words:

The final product must successfully weld the humanitarian concerns of those with awakened social consciences to the economic persuasions of those with a firm conviction in the values of freedom of economic activity and enlightened private enterprise. If a label must be attached to this new ideology it might well be called the **Social Conservative** position [bold type original].

Political Realignment argued for a national two-party system characterized by sharper, as opposed to blurred, ideologies between the two major parties. The suggested two-party model would in effect cleave somewhere at the centre: those to the right would fit into one party, ideally a rejuvenated Progressive Conservative party. If that failed, a new party, to be called the Social Conservative Party, as in Alberta, would take charge. All those to the left of the conservatives would form the second party (either the Liberals or the NDP).

A key objective of the book was to rationalize the amalgamation of two seemingly disparate ideas, the free market and the welfare state, and recast them as unified 'social conservative' values. Unfortunately, that was a normative circle that could not have been squared. (However, twenty years after its publication, the basic premise of the book would be instrumental in getting the Reform Party of Canada off the ground, and in shaping its objectives, at least in part.) The Mannings were convinced that right-of-centre parties, notwithstanding their ideological kinship, were especially vulnerable to fragmentation. This strikes us as correct, and borne out by the empirical evidence, as we will see.

The Mannings never did provide precise reasons as to why the right was uniquely vulnerable in this regard, beyond the fact that a party's populist grassroots and caucuses could be a boisterous, demanding lot, *and* that long-established right-wing parties became less attractive (or even useful) over time. The upshot of their views was that the viability and electability of conservative parties, particularly those of a populist bent, were perpetually at risk. While it could be argued that conservatism in Alberta was in no immediate danger of losing its grip on power (nor would it be for two generations hence), this existential angst about the long-term health of the conservative movement at both levels would continue to shape Preston Manning's thinking, even as he prepared for his own career in federal politics beginning in the late 1980s.

Right-of-centre political parties and western Canada

Dealignment and realignment occur more frequently within conservative parties in western Canada than elsewhere in the country. The effects of the process however impact both national and provincial party politics. The Reform Party was largely an Alberta-based, right-populist outfit challenging the conservative status quo at the national level. Provincially, that same pattern tends also to spring from Alberta, with similar dynamics in BC, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. If we look at party structures elsewhere in English Canada, we generally see stability. Outside of the West, the Progressive

Conservatives, Liberals, and NDP have all been in power and, with few exceptions, no other parties have been a factor.²²

So, what makes right-of-centre parties and the pattern of dealignment-realignment peculiar to western Canada? When the authors asked Preston Manning, who remains an important figure in the process,²³ he responded with an overview of the settler-society patterns of the West.²⁴ In Manning's telling of the story, the West is the newest part of the country, and its political parties are more receptive to populist influences and demands. The West also manifests a more entrepreneurial spirit, due in large measure to the relative lack of 'old money' and its attendant elites and benefactors as is common in the East. Westerners are not as wedded to old ideas or to old parties, reasoned Manning, and remain more open to political reinvention than in other parts of the country.

The West's penchant for expressing harsh dissatisfaction with the political status quo and giving birth to a variety of protest movements and parties also infuses its brand of conservatism with an unsettled, non-doctrinal quality, where parties of long standing can find themselves under considerable pressure from upstart movements. Not content to endure the economic, ideological or party system status quo to the extent of their eastern cousins, westerners have typically demonstrated a willingness to engage in a form of creative destruction of the party system. As for the right wing in particular, Manning referred to this as changing the "containers of conservatism," and used a metaphor from Alberta's oil and gas sector, namely the expansion of fracking through horizontal drilling, to illustrate that the handling of those frequent demands for change has to be done with planning, care and foresight, lest the pressures build to the point of political disarray.

Conservatives in other provinces usually identify their political opponents as members of the other major parties, like the Liberals or the NDP. With conservatives in Alberta, it is not unusual to identify political opponents within their *own* party who are not sufficiently ideologically or policy compatible with their specific brand of conservatism. In other provinces, when conservatives would gather to strategize, they were focussed on their political opponents in the Liberal and/or NDP parties. But because of the sustained electoral dominance of conservative parties in Alberta (both federally and provincially) opponents were often found within an ostensible outlier wing of their own party. Internal party disagreements were thus as consequential, sometimes more so, than the differences between the parties themselves. If these disruptive "containers of conservatism" were not managed properly, one faction of the party could well break away and form their own more doctrinally-agreeable organization. The more strident fiscal and social conservatives in both the Reform Party and Alberta's Wildrose Party did just that, once they had distinguished themselves from what they saw as the left-leaning federal and provincial PCs.

²² In Quebec, the major dealignment of the party system was the emergence of the nationalist Parti québécois (PQ). In English Canada, ideological differences tend to separate political parties; but within Quebec's party system (since the early 1970s), it is the issue of sovereignty as addressed by the PQ and the Liberals. While there have been some short-term splinter parties (the Equality Party broke away from Liberals, and Québec Solidaire broke away from the PQ), the Quebec situation remains unique because the party system there operates on a different plane. While there has been dealignment in the Quebec party system, there has never been a western-style realignment. Quebec's current governing party, *Coalition Avenir Québec* (CAQ), is a neo-conservative party that emerged in 2011 and includes both sovereigntists and federalists.

²³ Preston Manning was intimately involved in the 1966 plan to unite Alberta's Social Credit and PC parties.

²⁴ Interview conducted May 30, 2017 at the Manning Centre, Calgary.

As Manning has written elsewhere (1991:Ch. 1), in its time, Reform was the latest in a historical line of western, right-populist challenges to the ideological status quo of conservatism and to the Canadian party system. Ellis (2005:1) summarizes that tradition this way:

The political history of western Canada is one of protest and dissent. After years, sometimes decades of attempting to achieve their political goals by participating in Canada's traditional national parties, westerners have demonstrated a habit of venturing out on their own, creating new, often radical, political vehicles capable of representing a political culture that many believe cannot be adequately represented within the larger, eastern-dominated Canadian parties.

Ellis (*ibid.*) points out further that the western penchant for protest and dissent helped transform the Canadian party system in major ways: first, in 1921, with the first wave of Progressives elected to Parliament; in the 1930s and 1940s with the rise of the Socreds and CCF; and in 1993, with Reform's first large-scale electoral breakthrough.

As stated above, this disruptive tendency to the prevailing system applies as well to the internalized world of conservative parties. And therein lies an important facet for understanding the conservative movement's inclination to division: these disruptions are typically the outcome of serious disagreements over ideological, doctrinal, or policy direction. In other words, they are manifested by internal disagreements over core ideas, and by extension, party policy.²⁵

As a context-dependent amalgam of competing ideas and policies, conservatism eludes any single, boilerplate definition; so too, do conservative parties, even those outside the West, defy any one-size-fits-all categorization. Such ideological discursiveness and policy variety gained a great deal of scholarly attention, especially from the 1970s to the 1990s, with the rise of the 'New Right' or 'neoconservatism' (sometimes 'neoliberalism') in western countries, most notably, the United States, but in Canada as well.

Scholarly assessments of the rise and subsequent ideological variability within the new right are plentiful. From Minkenberg (1993:2-3), we read the following:

[The] New Right is not understood in terms of a single political party or a collection of parties. Rather, it is conceptualized as populist-neoconservative reactions to fundamental change in culture and values in Western societies...as defined here, [it] reflects a new cleavage based on values change. It is not simply the revival of traditional conservatism in the Old Politics sense -- i.e. opposition to the welfare state and to the redistribution of income -- but a new coalition of forces which see their common enemy in the post-materialist New Left and its political agenda...This orientation is expressed by a heightened concern with sociocultural values and issues (nationalism and ethnocentrism, law and order, family, religion and bourgeois morality), by support for basic values of capitalism...Thus, the New Right is not simply the extension of

²⁵ On the singular phenomenon of the merger of the federal PCs and the Canadian Alliance to form the CPC, Bélanger and Godbout (2010) identify three main factors: disproportional representation in parliament via single-member plurality; electoral and financial resources; and political branding.

conservatism towards the extreme right but the product of a restructuring of the political system in which constituencies of established parties tend to realign according to the New Politics cleavage rather than the Old Politics cleavage.

And from Laycock (2002:9):

...[T]he new right's political tent is far bigger than the old right's ever was. Of course we regularly witness internal struggles between libertarians and moral conservatives, or between supporters of direct democracy and those who see such mechanisms as a cynical but effective way of extending popular support for a conservative policy agenda. But the new right's political tent generally remains standing because all the political subgroups within it share a desire to undermine their common enemy that is far more passionate than any desire to undermine one another.

The "common enemy" to which Laycock refers is the political opposition, the rise of so-called 'special interest' groups, the modern welfare state, and the allocation of state resources to marginalized communities. Though it is true that the movement "generally remains standing," the internal disagreements around how to compete against its opponents and secure electoral victories against them have frequently resulted in disruptive patterns of internal fracturing, competition, and discontent, especially in western Canada. While the desire to defeat a common enemy is self-evident, it would be a mistake to ignore the tendency of the right to go after its own with at times near-equal dedication. The possibility of disruption within conservative parties remains potent.

By the time Preston Manning's Reform Party entered the milieu of right-populist politics as an ostensibly bottom-up vehicle reflecting "the common sense of the common people" (Manning, 1992:25),²⁶ the opponents of 'the people' had changed from the Social Credit era.²⁷ Though the corporate elites of Bay Street were still viewed with suspicion as being in the service of central (or 'Laurentian') Canada, capitalism remained valorized as virtuous, valuable, and the *sine qua non* of individual freedom. By the 1980s, the new opponents of the sensible values of the people were the so-called postmaterialist minorities: feminists, anti-poverty and anti-racist activists, non-traditional immigrants, ethnic and linguistic minorities, LGBTQ+ people, First Nations, environmentalists, francophones, and so on – in short, those groups for whom the redistributionist policies of the state to enhance equality were of central importance (see also Snow and Moffitt, 2012:273-74). These 'special interests', as Reformers always called them, were usually dismissed as leftist authoritarian enemies of traditional family values, to democracy, to the economy, to Anglophones, and to freedom, generally.²⁸

²⁶ We examine the rise of the Reform Party in the next section, below.

²⁷ In the early years of Alberta's Social Credit government, the common enemy of the people were the elites – the 'big shots', the 'experts', the bankers of Bay Street, and of course, the Liberal party and PM Mackenzie King.

²⁸ One conservative writer and activist who was especially popular at the time was William Gairdner, a retired professor of literature from Ontario, and, in 1996, the founder of the subtly white-nationalist organization, *Civitas*. Born out of the "Winds of Change" conference held in Calgary in May 1996, the major objective of which was to consider a merger between the Reform Party and the Progressive Conservatives, *Civitas* was an "umbrella discussion group" and a forum (Flanagan and Harper, 1998:170) for writers, intellectuals, and activists of the right. In a series of books lauded by many Reformers, right-wing activists and thinkers (including a few academics), Gairdner's principal argument was that English Canada's 'bottom-up' traditional values and culture were soon to be destroyed by a wave of non-white,

As Flanagan (1995:60) and others have pointed out, Manning's normative objective was to put together a right-populist vehicle that embraced both neo-liberal economic policies and the moral values of social conservatism. Prominent Alberta publisher Ted Byfield, a central figure behind the rise of Reform, argued at the time that such a potentially disruptive coalition could be held together only by allowing populist control of the party's policy agenda, especially on matters of moral concern. Recognizing the fragility of a party attempting to straddle both of these key pillars of conservatism, Byfield, from the editorial pulpit of his *Alberta* and *BC Report* newsmagazines, commented extensively on the vital importance of right-wing unity. He argued that the populist mechanism of the referendum was the only viable means to keep this potentially fractious movement together. If the people are allowed to express their true preferences on moral issues in binding referenda -- rather than having a "novel morality" imposed on them by politicians and the courts -- "[t]he resulting law may not be morally right, but it will represent the views of most people who have to live under it" (Byfield:1999).

Stephen Harper was at that time sceptical of the uniting power of populism and the policy-making effectiveness of mechanisms like citizens' referenda. He was also convinced that the future of conservative parties in Canada would be characterized by factionalism and dealignment. In an opinion piece written for *The National Post* and published on October 8, 1999, Harper made his concerns clear:

With the collapse of ideological socialism...various groups of 'conservatives' have lost the common enemy. They have instead began looking at each and asking "What are *you* doing in *our* party?"

From within the electoral coalitions of the old centre-right, new parties have emerged to appeal to its different elements. In the future, we are going to see two types of 'conservative' party, similar to the alignment that existed before the rise of ideological socialism.

One type of conservative party, mirroring the 'classical liberal' parties of the nineteenth century, will champion the freedom of the individual, laissez-faire and secular values, and globalism. The other type will resemble the old 'classical conservative' parties, championing the integrity of the community, traditional religious values, and nationalism.

In fact, these rival 'conservative' parties will look at each other and they will often say, "We have more in common with our enemy than we do with you" -- in much the way that many PCs and Reformers see the Liberals, not each other, as their second choice.

This is because rivals of the old centre-left have changed their fundamental fiscal and economic policies to attract some traditionally conservative voters. People like Tony Blair, Bill Clinton and Paul Martin have adapted their parties to the new consensus in order to ensure their political survival and success. With centre-left parties sharing such policies, they no longer constitute a sufficient basis to reunite conservative factions...

non-English-speaking immigrants as well as by domestic postmaterialist malcontents, whom Gairdner referred to as disciples of 'top-down' French-style state authoritarians (federal Liberals mostly) doing the bidding of all these special interests. See, for example, William Gairdner, *The Trouble with Canada*. Toronto: Stoddart, 1990, and *The War Against the Family: A Parent Speaks Out*. Toronto: Stoddart, 1992.

The political realignment going throughout the democratic world means that there can be no simple 'reunite the right' strategy -- and there will be no return to a two-party system in Canada.²⁹

Though this article was written a year prior to the dissolution of the RPC and the subsequent emergence of an ostensibly united CPC several years after that (with himself at the helm), Harper's view of the difficulty inherent in any 'unite the right' project was certainly accurate. Notable as well at that time was his assertion that the moral principles and policy demands of social conservatism could likely not stand on their own, at least not as the *raison d'être* of a competitive political party.³⁰ The inclusion of social conservatives into the party fold appears to be a necessary condition for successful realignment. What actual influence they might have on a party's ideological character and its policy-making is not always clear, though we suggest that their inclusion could well contribute to the process of dealignment. This aspect is discussed later in the paper, when we examine the recent electoral success of Alberta's UCP, led by Jason Kenney.

Uniting the federal right: Reform, the Canadian Alliance, and the Conservative Party of Canada

Owing to his time as an MP and Leader of the Official Opposition, his policy proposals, networking, and a host of conservative-focussed populist ideas and events, Preston Manning's influence on the modern conservative scene in Canada remains significant. The inevitable tendency of a conservative party to drift toward a state of dealignment, which is then followed by an energizing realignment – ideally, into a more focused, more assertive *principled coalition* – has been central to his view of politics for most of his adult life. Though the era of the Proposal and his father's subsequent exhortation for political realignment at the national level have long since passed, Manning's hand in the transformation of his original vehicle, the Reform Party, into the Canadian Alliance, and then into the Conservative Party of Canada, afforded him the chance to observe his long-held theory of the inevitability of the dealignment-realignment process on the ground.

But is Manning's argument that conservatism *qua* conservatism is more prone to these forces of fragmentation feasible? Is there *something* about the conservative enterprise in western Canada especially that renders political parties and right-wing politics more susceptible to disruptions than parties elsewhere along the spectrum? We offer an initial 'yes' to both questions, and provide the hypothetical explanations for this below. Before that, we provide a brief overview of the rise and dissolution of the Reform Party.

²⁹ Originally published in *The National Post*, October 8, 1999. Reprinted in The Canadian Conservative Forum. <http://www.conservativeforum.org/Essays>

³⁰ This has not stopped fringe political parties, most notably, the Christian Heritage Party, from contesting elections.

Conservative realignment and dealignment at the federal level

By the summer of 1986, many western conservatives were grumbling that, despite a PC government in Ottawa with a significant number of MPs from the West, they were essentially without credible representation in Parliament. By the start of their third year in power, the federal PCs were regarded by some westerners as Liberals in disguise. With their attentiveness to central Canada, their red tory embrace of Trudeau-era initiatives like bilingualism, mass immigration, the Charter of Rights, multiculturalism, even their apparent sluggishness in dismantling the federal Liberals' much-reviled National Energy Program (NEP), the PCs were unwittingly blazing a trail for a new political challenger from the West, one which would eventually usher in their collapse.

As Preston Manning (1992: 126) put it, "...a political vacuum began to open up, capable of calling into being another populist movement in the western reform tradition." That vacuum, essentially, the opportunity for conservative realignment, would start to expand significantly during the latter half of the 1980s. The first opportunity arrived with considerable controversy on Halloween, 1986. The federal PCs awarded a hotly-contested maintenance contract for its new fleet of CF-18 fighter jets to Canadair of Montreal over a less expensive, and supposedly technologically superior bid by Bristol Aerospace of Winnipeg. The government's justification for awarding the contract to what seemed to westerners as an inferior bid by Canadair was that it served the 'national interest' better to have a Canadian firm do the work, given that Bristol Aerospace was a British company – a subsidiary of Rolls-Royce.

No amount of post-contract rationalizing, or Ottawa's subsequent attempts at fence-mending would alter many westerners' perceptions that even a PC government could not ignore the sheer force of Quebec's demands at the expense of their own. As Manning observed, "[t]he CF-18 decision also showed westerners exactly how much influence their PC members and cabinet ministers had in the new government when push came to shove" (*ibid.*:127).

The second opportunity for strengthening the push toward disruption in the conservative universe concerned the proposed amendments to the Canadian constitution via the Meech Lake Accord of 1987. The accord addressed a number of the West's institutional concerns, such as input into Supreme Court appointments, changes to the amending formulas, and Senate reform. However, Quebec's demands for constitutional recognition as a 'distinct society' (and whatever potential levers of power might accompany that designation) reinforced in the minds of many that even a PC government could not avoid being overly-sensitive to the demands of Quebec, even if it meant alienating the West, its most steadfast and loyal region of electoral support. Manning (*ibid.*:87-88) went on to observe that "[t]he dearth of leadership in western Canada on these constitutional issues in the mid-1980s gave added impetus to my own interest in a new political voice."

While it would be unwise to apply wholesale the operational logic of E.C. Manning's book³¹ to events two decades later, something akin to party system 'inadequacy' pushed Preston Manning and

³¹ *Political Realignment* called for the national Social Credit Party to "...play an active role in encouraging the effective reorientation and reorganization of a larger and more influential political group [the federal PCs] committed to the same fundamental objectives" (1967:76).

others into forging what in time would result in a major political realignment of conservative forces during late 1986 and early 1987. One difference between the father's exhortation for conservative political realignment and the son's exploitation of a conservative political vacuum two decades later was that there was even less of a chance for a fusion of conservative parties in 1987, if one of those parties, in the minds of westerners at any rate, had ceased to be conservative at all. Rather, this was a clear challenge to the ruling PCs to either mend its ways vis-à-vis the West or face a disruption to its status and influence in that region. So, dealignment and disruption to the conservative enterprise if need be; realignment if possible, at some time in the future.

At its inaugural meeting in Vancouver in May 1987, proclaiming the slogan "The West Wants In," the new Reform Association of Canada was not initially dedicated to the formation of a new conservative party to challenge the perceived inadequacies of the Mulroney PCs.³² It was one of two options on the table for the attendees' consideration. The first option, calling for a realignment of party priorities, was to convince federal parties in Ottawa, the PCs especially, to pay closer attention to the West's demands. The second option, assuming the first was not a realistic proposition, was to form a new, western-based, right-populist federal party. In his speech to those in attendance, Manning laid the groundwork for his preferred option, namely, "a new party in the Reform Tradition" (O'Neill, 1991:166).

Manning provided four major reasons for choosing the new party option:

1. Because the West is in deep trouble economically and structurally, yet no federal political party makes western concerns and interests its top priority.
2. Because the federal PCs are in decline all across the West, and this situation is creating a dangerous political vacuum.
3. Because the federal Liberals and NDP as presently constituted are inappropriate vehicles for representing western Canada.
4. Because the federal Parliament, as dominated by the central Canadian parties, is lacking in leaders and vision, and requires an influx of fresh blood and new ideas through a strong new competitor at the polls (*ibid.*:177).

Manning's appeal won the day, and by November of 1987, the Reform Party of Canada was launched in Winnipeg, with Preston Manning acclaimed as its leader.³³

One unusual feature of the new party's constitution was its so-called 'sunset clause'. Reflecting Manning's conviction that parties often outlive their usefulness, either by staying too long in power (rather like Alberta's Social Credit in 1971, and later, the Alberta PCs in 2015), or never having a reasonable chance to achieve it (the Reform Party, eventually), subsection 11 (c) declared:

³² This event was funded through a grant of \$50,000 by Dr. Francis Winspear, OC, of Edmonton. Advertising, publicity, and promotion were managed by the Byfield family of Edmonton's staunchly conservative *Report* newsmagazines.

³³ This would also mark the public debut of Stephen Harper, then a young economist and member of the right-leaning National Citizens' Coalition. His speech to the Winnipeg Assembly established the initial ideological tone for the party, and marked him as a potential Reform candidate for the next federal election.

This Constitution shall become null and void, and the Party shall cease to exist, on November 1st, 2000 A.D., unless this Constitution is re-enacted in its present or amended form by a two-thirds majority of the delegates to a Party Assembly held before that date [*ibid.*]³⁴

Notwithstanding its successes, the most notable of which was to form the Official Opposition in 1997, neither the Reform Party nor leader Manning would be immune to the forces of dealignment and realignment within the conservative movement. In fact, and as mentioned above, the Reform constitution had already anticipated the possibility of both of those forces coming into play by 2000.

Though it did not win a single seat in its inaugural 1988 national election, Reform's performance in a number of western ridings, particularly in Alberta, gave its supporters room for optimism. So too, did winning its first seat in a 1989 Alberta by-election. As Bowler and Lanoue (1996:331) observed,

[i]n 1988...the advent of the Reform Party gave Canadian voters their first major right-wing alternative in some time. Right-wing western voters now had a choice between the Tories, with their moderate policies and eastern leader, and Reform, with a vigorous conservative platform and a leader, Preston Manning, with deep western roots...We would argue that this changed partisan landscape motivated a reassessment of voters' party loyalties.

Reform's presence and subsequent electoral success posed a significant challenge to the prevailing party system, particularly as it cut deeply into the partisan support of the PCs and, in western Canada at any rate, the long-held loyalties of supporters of that party.

Five years hence, and now led by Brian Mulroney's successor Kim Campbell, the PCs were almost wiped out in the 1993 national election.³⁵ The party mounted a minor comeback in 1997 election, winning 20 seats under leader Jean Charest. In the 2000 national election, leader Joe Clark was able to maintain the party's official status in Parliament with 12 seats. By that time however, and notwithstanding a couple of by-election victories two years later, the fractures, both within the party itself and with the recent appearance of the Canadian Alliance, proved too powerful to withstand.

As for Preston Manning and his now-defunct Reform Party, in a cruel twist of political irony, though he had spear-headed the drive to dissolve the Reform Party in 2000, and then led the subsequent effort for a 'united alternative', he would be rejected in his bid to lead the new Canadian Alliance party that year. Former Alberta Treasurer Stockwell Day was chosen party leader over Manning.

The Canadian Alliance would merge with the PCs in late 2003, forming the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC) with Senator John Lynch-Staunton as interim leader. In March 2004, Stephen Harper was elected as the party's leader. The working relationship between the factions of these erstwhile parties –

³⁴ Reform's dissolution in 2000, and its subsequent rebirth as the short-lived Canadian Alliance, reflected the provisions of the sunset clause insisted upon by Manning thirteen years before.

³⁵ Reform elected 52 MPs in 1993. The Progressive Conservatives elected 2 MPs.

not to mention the few MPs who refused to merge at all³⁶ – was not entirely smooth at this time, as both sides of this merger would have to blunt the sharper edges of past disagreement among them. In the eyes of many former PCs, the Alliance harboured right-populist tendencies regarded as beyond the acceptable mainstream. Members of the former Alliance, meanwhile, saw these Red Tories as too far to the left (i.e., too close to the Liberals) on a range of issues, especially on the provision of social services, as well as on immigration and foreign policy issues.

With a national election looming that year, would this rising internal tension turn off potential supporters? As Clarke, Kornberg, et. al (247-48) point out:

Although elite-level ideological divisions between the new CPC and the PCs gave the Liberals cause for optimism, it bears emphasis that ‘left-right’ ideological discourse normally has limited resonance in Canadian federal elections. The major parties typically have competed by downplaying ideological differences, while emphasizing their ability to ‘solve problems’ (e.g., reduce unemployment, fund health care) and provide voters with a broad array of public services...For their part, most voters have eschewed ideological labels and focused heavily on the rival parties’ demonstrated or anticipated performance in office and the character and competence of party leaders.

Clarke, Kornberg, et. al. (248-50) contend that the CPC under Harper was hampered during the election campaign, not so much by internal pressures, but because it could not convince voters that it would grow the economy *and* provide the expected array of social services Canadians had come to expect of a national government. Added to this were such needless jabs as painting the Liberals as ‘soft’ on child pornography. In return, the Liberals portrayed the CPC as ‘right wing nuts’ more suited to American politics. The Liberals obtained a minority government in that election. The CPC won 99 seats and the role of Official Opposition party. Under Harper’s leadership, the CPC would eventually smooth over its internal problems and make headway with the Canadian electorate, winning its first minority government in 2006, another minority in 2008, and a majority government in 2011.

Canada’s governance did take a rightward ideological and policy turn on the domestic and the world stage during the Harper years, especially after the CPC’s election victory of 2011. Though there was no doubting of Stephen Harper’s own social conservative *bona fides*, he was seen as largely unwilling to have those personal views influence the party’s social policies. Multiculturalism, immigration, citizenship, bilingualism, reproductive rights, concerns of First Nations, same-sex equality – none of these traditionally contentious ‘values’ issues for conservatives were challenged significantly. Indeed, some were elevated to shining examples of national pride, none more so than immigration, citizenship, and multiculturalism, under the direction of then-minister Jason Kenney (see also Smith 2012:27).

This does not mean that these policies remained undisturbed as to their original (largely Liberal) form. As Carlaw (2017) points out, one of the Harper government’s most effective ministers, Jason

³⁶ Especially concerned was then-PC leader Joe Clark, who regarded the CPC under Harper as ideologically extreme. See Clarke, Kornberg, et. al., 2005, p. 247.

Kenney, exhibited an unabashed enthusiasm for immigration and multiculturalism while simultaneously remaining true to the CPC's "...form of conservative populism that, while hostile to democratic institutions and [inclusive] social relations, aspires to find sufficient legitimation [for them] in the national imaginary" (*ibid*: 791.). Re-shaping and embracing liberal (and Liberal) policies which might otherwise be seen as antithetical to Conservatives' view of nation-building can be viewed as a double-edged sword reminiscent of the Mulroney era: while it *may* broaden support for the party, it also runs the risk of alienating its traditional base.³⁷

The CPC lost the 2015 national election to the Justin Trudeau Liberals, and were relegated to the role of Official Opposition. The party maintained its electoral strength in Alberta and Saskatchewan, but it experienced less than optimal results elsewhere. In the wake of that defeat, Stephen Harper stepped down as party leader and retired from federal politics. With an interim leader in place to shepherd the party through its opposition role (Alberta MP Rona Ambrose), the CPC prepared to select a permanent leader. As noted earlier, in May 2017 the party membership selected Saskatchewan MP and former House Speaker Andrew Scheer as its new leader. Self-identified as a social conservative, and apparently more willing to express support for social conservative issues than was Stephen Harper,³⁸ Scheer won a narrow final ballot run-off victory over social moderate/libertarian-conservative 'Albertan from Quebec' MP Maxime Bernier.³⁹

Such a slim margin of victory (51 percent for Scheer; 49 percent for Bernier) for a social conservative over a self-identified populist libertarian did provide something of a shake-up in Canada's conservative ranks, as Bernier would go on to establish the People's Party of Canada (PPC) in September 2018. The party has grown its membership to over 33,000, and is organized in all 338 federal ridings.⁴⁰ Drawing much of its energy and platform from right-populist concerns about nationalism, elitism, diversity, multiculturalism, immigration, globalism, and the apparent left-liberal scourge of 'political correctness', it is too early to determine precisely what dealigning pressures – apart from possible vote-splitting come the national election in October, 2019 – the PPC may visit on the conservative movement as a whole, and the CPC in particular, of which Bernier has been especially critical.⁴¹ At the time of this writing, the upstart party's influence is at best minimal, and, given its controversial stand on social issues, mainstream media coverage has not been altogether laudatory.

³⁷ By the time of the 2015 national election campaign, the fear of alienating some of its base forced the CPC to scapegoat visible minorities. The most blatant example was the "Barbaric Cultural Practices" tip line, spear-headed by immigration minister Chris Alexander. See also <https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/chris-alexander-on-barbaric-cultural-practices-it-s-why-we-lost-1.3106488>

³⁸ See <http://nationalpost.com/news/politics/andrew-scheer-announces-support-of-20-members-of-conservative-caucus-as-he-makes-leadership-bid-official/wcm/fb4f552c-5e08-4373-b978-0fa31009ba5b>

³⁹ See <http://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/maxime-bernier-the-albertan-from-quebec-1.3306995>

⁴⁰ "People's Party of Canada set up in all 338 ridings ahead of 2019 federal election, Bernier says." <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/politics/article-peoples-party-of-canada-set-up-in-all-338-ridings-ahead-of-2019/>

⁴¹ See, for example, <https://pressprogress.ca/maxime-bernier-tweets-out-urgent-warning-a-future-world-government-will-destroy-canada/> and <https://www.thestar.com/opinion/star-columnists/2018/11/18/scheer-vs-bernier-unfinished-business-spills-into-2019-election.html>

The four hypotheses considered: identifying and explaining dealignment and realignment

After examining a number of key events and issues that have shaped right-wing parties, it is time to test the hypotheses offered at the start of the paper, and reinforce the proposition that western Canadian conservatism remains more susceptible to the forces of dealignment and realignment than other parties of different ideological perspectives elsewhere in the country. Table one provides a list of conservative party merger attempts. Table two provides a list of conservative party splintering.

Hypothesis 1: Dealignment occurs when one conservative party is in power

In the 1984 election, the federal PCs were unified and won an overwhelming majority government under Brian Mulroney. But within its first term of office, the Reform party broke away from the PCs. It is significant that dealignment did not occur during the long period of Liberal rule (1963-1984), but only when the PCs finally broke through and won a majority government. Similarly, the Wildrose Party broke away from the PCs in Alberta during the latter's forty-four-year dynasty.

Whenever one conservative party is in power, a merger proposal will look like the co-opting of the opposition by offering them cabinet seats and other perks of power. The two failed attempts at conservative party mergers in Alberta provide further evidence that realignment cannot happen unless both parties are out of power. E.C. Manning's 1966 merger proposal between the Social Credit and PCs was rejected by the PCs because they saw it as the means for the Social Credit government to swallow them up *before* they could beat them at the ballot box. Likewise, the Social Credit caucus defeated the merger agreement because they did not feel a need to merge with a party that held no seats, while the Socreds had been in power since 1935 and currently held 55/65 seats.

In December 2014, Alberta PC Premier Jim Prentice convinced WRP Leader Danielle Smith and eight of her colleagues to cross the floor and join the PCs. While this was supposed to have been a full-scale merger, it appeared more like a backroom deal, and outraged the WRP grassroots, as well as five WRP MLAs who refused to join the PCs (Bratt, 2019). As was the case in 1966, this had all the appearances of a governing party trying to swallow up its opponent. And, similarly, the realignment effort was unsuccessful.

TABLE 1
Attempted Mergers of Conservative Parties in Canada

Old Parties	New Party	Jurisdiction	Year	Rationale	Successful	Either Party in Government
Progressive Conservative and Wildrose	United Conservative Party	Alberta	2017	Defeat NDP	Yes	No
Progressive Conservative and Wildrose	n/a	Alberta	2014	Wildrose leader felt that she couldn't beat the PCs	No	Yes
Progressive Conservative and Canadian Alliance	Conservative Party of Canada	Canada	2004	Defeat Liberals	Yes	No
Progressive Conservative and Liberal	Saskatchewan Party	Saskatchewan	1997	Defeat NDP	Yes	No
Social Credit and Progressive Conservative	n/a	Alberta	1966	Co-opt rising PC party	No	Yes
Conservative Party and Action Libérale Nationale	Union Nationale	Quebec	1936	Defeat Liberals	Yes	No

TABLE 2
Splintering of Conservative Parties in Canada

Old Party	New Party	Jurisdiction	Year	Rationale	Old Party in Government
Progressive Conservative	Wildrose	Alberta	2008	Oil & gas royalty review	Yes
Progressive Conservative	Reform	Canada	1987	West wants in	Yes

Hypothesis 2: Realignment occurs when both conservative parties are out of power

Hypothesis 2 is the obverse of Hypothesis 1. The CA merged with the federal PCs only after three straight majority victories for the Liberals. Although the Reform Party won many more seats than the PCs in 1993, 1997, and 2000 (then as the CA), the PCs, though badly wounded, refused to die. While the CA was dominant in western Canada, the PCs still had a presence in Atlantic Canada, and parts of rural Quebec. Meanwhile vote splitting allowed the Liberals to win the vast majority of seats in Ontario. But it was the May 2003 by-election in Perth-Middlesex, Ontario that was a defining moment for realignment. Perth-Middlesex is a rural Ontario riding that should have been ideal for the Canadian Alliance, then led by Stephen Harper; instead, they finished third, behind both the winning PCs, second place Liberals, and barely ahead of the NDP. Harper now realized that a merger was necessary to defeat the Liberals, and when Peter McKay subsequently won the PC leadership, he found a willing dance partner.

As Tom Flanagan, Harper’s chief organizer from 2002-2006, wrote, “the defeat in Perth-Middlesex became the prelude to reuniting the conservative family in Canada” (Flanagan, 2007: 98). Provincially, the merger of Alberta’s PC party and Wildrose party in July 2017, culminating in the formation of the UCP, also occurred when both were out of power.⁴² This occurred just two years after the NDP’s upset victory in 2015. The Saskatchewan Party (created as a result of a 1997 merger between the PCs and Liberals) was done in the midst of an NDP winning streak that saw them form government for sixteen years (1991-2007). The Union Nationale (created in 1936 as a result of a merger between the Conservative Party of Quebec and Action Libérale Nationale) was formed to defeat the Quebec Liberals.

And, as mentioned earlier, at the national level in 2018, the runner-up in the CPC’s 2017 leadership contest, Quebec MP Maxime Bernier, formed his own party, the populist-libertarian People’s Party of Canada (PPC). Though still the party’s only MP, Bernier’s optimism has been bolstered by enthusiastic crowds at his public appearances, principally in the west and in Ontario.⁴³ Though the PPC

⁴² For more information on the process of the UCP’s creation see Bratt (2019) and Sayers and Stewart (2019).

⁴³ See “Maxime Bernier: Why my new political movement? Because Canada has been hijacked.” *National Post*, August 31, 2018. Retrieved as <https://nationalpost.com/opinion/maxime-bernier-why-my-new-political-movement-because-canada-has-been-hijacked>

failed to win a seat in recent by-elections,⁴⁴ Bernier's ostensible objective is to weaken the CPC and then take on the Liberals as the authentic voice of non-elitist politics.

Hypothesis 3: Dealignment occurs for ideological reasons

Hypotheses 1 and 2 focus on the timing for dealignment/realignment; the rationale for dealignment/realignment is found in hypotheses 3 and 4. All political parties combine ideological principles with a pragmatic streak that pressures it to moderate policies in order to achieve electoral success. This tension between principle and pragmatism plays itself out in dealignment/realignment process. Hypothesis 3 states that dealignment occurs for ideological reasons, as principled conservatives break away from the more pragmatic conservatives who had formed government. Federal Progressive Conservatives had been elected for years in Western Canada, and when they finally took power in 1984, the West was hoping for a party that would address the government's growing budgetary deficit/debt, put an end to the social engineering of the Liberal party, and address constitutional issues through a western lens (instead of being Quebec-centric). It turned out that, on all of these grounds, western conservatives felt betrayed by the Mulroney PCs.

The trigger was the decision to award the aforementioned CF-18 maintenance contract to Canadair of Quebec over a much lower bid from Bristol Aerospace in Winnipeg. The disappointment with the Mulroney government, because it was supposed to be 'conservative' (albeit of a Red Tory sort), was even more intense than opposition to Trudeau's Liberal government. PC MPs from Western Canada, even those in senior positions, were mocked with phrases like "Clarkies" (aimed at Joe Clark's Red Tory beliefs, despite the fact that he was a former PC leader and was currently the Secretary of State for External Affairs in the Mulroney government) and "Ottawashed" (how PC MPs were sent to Ottawa ostensibly to represent the West, but instead were socialized to represent Ottawa to their Western ridings).

For these ideological reasons, the Reform Party emerged as a conservative splinter party to the federal PCs in 1987. In Alberta, the Wildrose Alliance Party was created in January 2008 after a merger of two small conservative parties (Alberta Alliance and Wildrose Party). What allowed the WRP to rapidly grow into an electoral contender was when PC Premier Ed Stelmach announced increases to oil and gas royalties.

See also, Chantal Hébert, "Keeping Conservatives united is now Scheer's top challenge." *The Star*, September 14, 2018. Retrieved as <https://www.thestar.com/opinion/star-columnists/2018/09/14/keeping-conservatives-united-is-now-scheers-top-challenge.html>

⁴⁴ In 3 recent federal by-elections, held on February 25, 2019, in Outremont (QC), York-Simcoe (ON), and Burnaby South (BC), the PPC drew less than 1% of the vote in the first two ridings, but 11.5% in Burnaby South.

Hypothesis 4: Realignment occurs for pragmatic reasons, i.e., forming government

The tension between principle and pragmatism works the other way when both conservative parties are out of power. Hypothesis 4 contends that party realignment occurs when the desire to form a government either forces bickering factions to cooperate, or at least to put aside those differences if electoral success appears possible. It is also one of the factors identified by Bélanger and Godbout (2010). Successive electoral defeats was the driver for the formation of the CPC (realignment between Reform-Alliance and PCs), Alberta's UCP (realignment between WRP and PCs), and the Saskatchewan Party (realignment between PCs and Liberals). In fact, the policy differences between these parties, which was sometimes quite substantial, especially in the area of social policy, were papered over by the desire to defeat the Liberals (federally) and NDP (Alberta and Saskatchewan).

In Alberta, the marriage of American style neoliberal and populist values – “a source of energy, not to be denied,” in Preston Manning's words⁴⁵ – with traditional conservative social and moral principles has helped shaped its identity. With regard to the outcome of Alberta's latest and ostensibly most successful conservative ‘big tent’ merger, the Jason Kenney-led UCP, there appears to be at best a weak consensus around social issues – reproductive rights, climate change, LGBTQ2+ equality, public education curricula (including Gay-Straight Alliances). To be fair, fundamental differences over policy direction are to be expected in a realignment such as this. How effectively those differences can be blunted, or at least minimized in the long term, has yet to be determined. The UCP, despite some strains, held together long enough to defeat the NDP in the 2019 election. But, if history repeats itself, the potential of the UCP eventually dealigning while they are in power over these ideological differences is quite possible. Jason Kenney, as the architect of the UCP, is likely to be able to hold the various factions of the UCP together, but what about a future leader? That being said, even Jason Kenney might find the UCP's “unity” being challenged because of serious allegations of unethical, and possibly illegal, behavior by his leadership team in order to win the UCP leadership race in October 2017.⁴⁶

Conclusion

This paper has shown that an inherent feature of conservative party politics in Western Canada is the process of continual dealignment and realignment. This is due to a couple of key conditions. Dealignment occurs when a conservative party is in power and some members break away due to ideological differences. Meanwhile, realignment occurs when both conservative parties are out of power and the desire to form government outweighs any ideological differences.

⁴⁵ Interview conducted May 30, 2017 at the Manning Centre, Calgary.

⁴⁶ The UCP leadership race was itself not untouched by controversy. In March 2019, details emerged of an alleged stalking horse candidate in the race, Jeff Callaway, whose apparent role was to undermine the campaign another leadership candidate, namely, Brian Jean (former leader of the WRP), and then, at the Kenney campaign's urging, to withdraw from the race altogether. The machinations of this so-called “kamikaze campaign” were denied by both Callaway and Kenney. See also <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/kenney-callaway-campaigns-collaborated-against-brian-jean-1.5059899>.

Not only is it typical of western Canadians to keep changing the “container of conservatism,” but some, notably Preston Manning, have argued that it is a positive and rejuvenating feature of conservative parties. There are those who regard such turmoil as a fetter upon conservatism and conservative parties (Perlin 1980; Fotheringham 1983). In Manning’s view, it is a welcome catharsis: a necessary and healthy act of renewal and rejuvenation. In the latest incarnation of the process, namely the merger of the Alberta Progressive Conservatives and Wild Rose Party into the UCP, leader and now Premier Jason Kenney would surely concur. The extent of this internal turmoil may be “painful for those involved,” as Manning put it, but it does allow the conservative movement to regroup, rethink, refresh, and re-emerge as new, and ideally, potent, parties.⁴⁷

This paper is an initial attempt to understand the phenomenon of conservative party dealignment and realignment. There remain related areas for future research. First, the phenomenon of dealignment and realignment examined above appears peculiar, if not unique, to Canada and specifically, to western Canada. In proportional representation systems around the world, we often see a lot of volatility in political party systems. Parties across the political spectrum break away, come together, change names, etc. However, when we focus on other countries with a first past the post electoral system (United Kingdom, United States, Australia, and New Zealand), we do not see this pattern among parties, particularly those of a conservative disposition. The USA is comparatively uncomplicated in this regard, what with a decentralized two-party system that allows different factions within the party to strive for dominance. Still, there is no example of a successful third party emerging there since the 1860s. Why then, have conservative parties in the UK, Australia, or New Zealand not experienced the same volatility as in Canada? This remains to be explored.

A second avenue for future research is to investigate the role of money in this process of dealignment and realignment. Preston Manning highlighted the role of the Mannix family in moving their political donations from Social Credit to the Alberta PCs in the mid-1960s as a reason to pursue a merger agreement.⁴⁸ Similarly, the rise of the Wildrose Party in 2008 was due to increasing donations from small and medium-sized oil and gas companies in response to Premier Ed Stelmach’s royalty review (Bratt 2019). Bélanger and Godbout (2010) that financial resources were a factor in the merger that resulted in the CPC. More recently, the issue of internal party finances was a major factor in the negotiations over the formation of the UCP.

A third aspect to examine is the potentially disruptive threat posed by populist-driven socio-moral and nationalist elements within conservative parties. As practically all conservative parties from the RPC and beyond have experienced, the potential for dealignment on a host of such issues and policies – abortion, euthanasia, LGBTQ+ rights, sex education, feminism, immigration, globalism, diversity and inclusion, immigration, ‘identity’ issues, and so on – appears to be a potential threat to party unity. Both the Kenney-led Alberta UCP and the Scheer-led federal PCs have courted numerous controversies in their

⁴⁷ Interview conducted May 30, 2017 at the Manning Centre, Calgary.

⁴⁸ Interview conducted May 30, 2017 at the Manning Centre, Calgary.

attempts to accommodate caucus colleagues and grassroots members whose stand on these ‘values’ issues is regarded by many as a toxic by many.⁴⁹

A fourth possibility is to investigate why splinter groups opposing the major conservative parties emerge in the first place. After all, conservative parties stay in power when there is no dealignment. What can conservative parties do, if anything, to prevent splinter parties from emerging? Is it a naturally (re-)occurring phenomenon, as Preston Manning suggests, or are there specific tactics and strategies that could be implemented by conservative parties?

The history of organized conservatism in western Canada can be characterized as periods of internal instability and disruption giving way to new vehicles reflecting cohesion and unity. As the movement and its parties continue to experience this phenomenon of dealignment and realignment, as well as the added challenge these days of meeting at least some of the demands of dissatisfied populists and nationalists, the traditional goals of conservative governance – the privileging of the free market, cautious government spending, maintaining social order, embracing moral rectitude, and policy common sense – may prove challenging for conservative parties to sustain. Preston Manning’s long-held objective of achieving “principled coalitions” so as to keep fractious elements within conservative parties satisfied, may not be accomplished easily.

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⁴⁹ This includes some of the positions of the leader themselves: Kenney’s history anti-LGBTQ+ activism, and Scheer’s ostensible toleration of white nationalists, being among the most prominent.

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