The Politics of Minimum Income Protection in the Canadian Provinces

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Abstract:

This article compares social assistance incomes, or minimum income protection, for four household types in the ten Canadian provinces between 1990 and 2017, and relates these incomes to a number of factors, including partisan dominance over time, trade union density, the presence or absence of poverty reduction strategies, provincial social expenditures, overall redistribution efforts, debt service costs, and social assistance rates. In line with findings for the OECD welfare states, partisan politics does not play a strong role but, as power resources theory predicts, union density and a province's overall redistribution efforts do. Social assistance rates, which capture the salience of social assistance incomes in a province, also have a significant, positive impact on welfare incomes, confirming the "welfare paradox" identified by Lødemel. Poverty reduction strategies, however, do not, and even have a negative influence on welfare incomes.

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Introduction

Minimum income protection determines the disposable income a person obtains when she has no market or social insurance income, few assets, and no family support. This last-recourse income, usually social assistance benefits plus associated transfers, constitutes a significant indicator of a country's commitment to social justice and it is related, in the OECD, to welfare state generosity and to the level of public debt (Noël, 2019). Comparing minimum income protection across countries, however, remains difficult, because social assistance benefits must be estimated for a given family-type, assuming full take-up of benefits, a value for housing and other in-kind benefits, and residency in a given city or region. In a federation like Canada, where provincial governments have full jurisdiction over social assistance, it is possible to circumvent some of these difficulties because systematic data on minimum income benefits are available. The provinces are also similar in many respects, having identical parliamentary institutions, comparable party systems, close standards of living, and fairly uniform political cultures (McGrane and Berdahl, 2013). A most-similar systems comparison is thus possible.

These advantages come with problems of their own. Indeed, the similarity of Canadian provinces, their limited number, and the relative stability of social assistance benefits over time make it difficult to establish the significance of causal factors in multivariate models. We can nevertheless consider four questions of interest:

1) Do political parties matter? Are leftist or centrist parties more likely to improve minimum income protection than parties of the right?
2) Do social actors, and in particular trade unions, contribute to sustain generous benefits for social assistance beneficiaries — the ultimate "outsiders" — or do they concentrate their efforts on their members or, at least, on labour market "insiders" (Rueda, 2007)?
3) Does the adoption of poverty reduction strategies by provincial governments encourage an improvement in social assistance benefits, or do these strategies remain mostly "window dressing" (Plante, 2019)?
4) Is minimum income protection connected to welfare state generosity and redistribution (Noël, 2019) or does it reflect instead the political importance of the program, as measured by the proportion of the population that is dependent on these benefits, following the logic identified by Ivar Lødemel as a "welfare paradox" (1997)?

To answer these questions, this article compares social assistance incomes for four household types, in the ten Canadian provinces between 1990 and 2017, and relates these incomes to a number of factors, including partisan dominance over time, trade union density, the presence or absence of poverty reduction strategies, provincial social expenditures, overall redistribution efforts, and social assistance rates. Descriptive

statistics, bivariate correlations, and a multivariate time-series cross-sectional model are then considered, to establish trends, relationships, and determinants. The final results remain tentative because there are only ten units and minimum income protection varies little across provinces and slowly in time, but they point in the following direction:

1) Parties of the left do not help and parties of the right do not hurt, but centrist, Liberal governments may have an effect over time, at least for the "most deserving" beneficiaries, persons with a disability or families with children. This effect, however, remains limited, in line with the international comparative evidence (Noël, 2019).

2) Everything else being equal, provinces with a stronger labour movement, and presumably more organized social forces, tend to be more generous, as is the case across the OECD (Noël, 2019). This effect is particularly evident for the "least deserving" single, able-to-work persons.

3) Poverty reduction strategies have significant but negative effects. In bivariate correlations, the relationship between the presence of a strategy and welfare income adequacy appears positive, but it becomes negative when we control for other factors. All in all, as the evidence on poverty outcomes suggests, these strategies do little for the income of social assistance recipients (Plante, 2019).

4) A provincial government's propension to redistribute, which is an indirect measure of welfare state generosity, tends to be favorable to social assistance beneficiaries, but so does the number of people claiming benefits. The idea that minimum income protection reflects welfare state development remains plausible, but so does the welfare paradox, whereby governments pay attention to social assistance incomes when they concern more people (Noël, 2019; Lødemel, 1997).

These results, which account for small differences across similar political systems, remain tentative. They fit, nevertheless, with the established representation of social assistance as a low-profile, incremental program that evolves over time with limited political input, except perhaps the diffuse support of what David Brady calls the "latent coalition for egalitarianism" (2009). Without ever producing a strong push, centrist, liberal parties favour generosity over time, whereas parties of the left and of the right hardly leave a mark; strong trade unions also tend to help. Poverty reduction strategies, however, do not make a difference. The overall generosity of the welfare state, as measured by redistribution efforts, and the importance of the population concerned by social assistance matter more than poverty reduction strategies for minimum income protection.

The article starts with a brief review of the literature on minimum income protection in the OECD and in Canada, followed by a theory section, and one on data and methodology. A fourth part presents descriptive statistics and trends, and a fifth considers causal relationships. The last section wraps up and draws the implications.

Literature Review

In comparative studies of minimum income protection, Canada really is Ontario. To establish the generosity of social assistance in this country, the OECD takes the benefits offered by Ontario Works (Immervoll, 2009: 13; Bachelet et al., 2018: 12). In the more reliable Social Assistance and Minimum Income Protection Interim Dataset (SaMip) developed in Stockholm by Kenneth Nelson, data for Canada are also drawn from Ontario (Nelson, 2008: 109, and 2013). Provincial benefits, however, vary significantly. In 2017, for instance, a single person considered employable received $7,433 a year in Nova Scotia, compared to $11,379 in Newfoundland and Labrador. A person with a disability living in Calgary and not eligible to Alberta's special disability program obtained $10,225 a year, compared to $12,741 in Montreal. If we took account of cost of living differences, this gap would be even more pronounced. Income support for this person in Calgary stood at 50% of the Market Basket Measure low-income threshold; in Montreal, it amounted to 71% of this threshold, which now constitutes Canada's official poverty line (Tweddle and Aldridge, 2018: 54).

In Canada, the provinces and territories are responsible for social assistance, and they make their own decisions, with little influence from federal social transfers that are basically unconditional block grants. As Gerard Boychuk notes, the result is not a "single national system" but rather "13 distinct social assistance regimes" that evolve at their own pace, in different socio-political contexts (2015: 35).[1] Many authors expected, following the end in 1995 of the shared-cost arrangements associated with the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP), that benefit levels would decline and that diversity across provinces would increase (Banting and Myles, 2013; Jenson, 2013). Benefits did go down in real terms in the late 1990s, but the trend started before the end of cost-sharing and it was later reversed. Provincial trajectories have their own determinants, and they have always been distinct (Boychuk, 2015).

These social assistance trajectories are likely to be associated with broader characteristics of welfare state institutions. Using various redistribution indicators, Rodney Haddow finds significant differences between provincial welfare states, with Quebec standing out as the most distinct. Inter-provincial differences, argues Haddow, are on par with international ones among advanced welfare states, and they are likewise related to the usual politics of social policy, with left and centre party incumbency and trade union density as good predictors of redistribution efforts (Haddow, 2013, 2014, and 2015).

We know from the comparative literature, however, that the politics of minimum income protection is not a perfect extension of that of the welfare state. In his seminal study of social assistance in Britain and Norway, Lødemel concluded that the overall generosity of the welfare state could even work against minimum income protection, by making social assistance more residual, and less politically visible and relevant. This situation, he argued,

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[1] This article does not consider the three territories, which have much smaller populations, a strong reliance on federal funding, and quite distinct social and political circumstances.

generated a welfare paradox, whereby an encompassing welfare state like Norway ended up being less supportive of persons receiving social assistance than Britain, a more restricted, liberal welfare state (1997). In the following years, scholars reassessed this argument with a larger set of cases, better data, and more formal statistical tests. Kenneth Nelson, in particular, built the best longitudinal and comparative dataset of social assistance incomes in OECD countries, and put to test the power resource theory, which predicted, contrary to Lødemel, that parties of the left, strong trade unions, and a developed welfare state would favour generous minimum incomes. Nelson's findings were not entirely conclusive, however. While his earlier findings, for 18 countries at one point in time, appeared consistent with power resource theory (2003: 125), more elaborate tests with time-series cross-sectional models proved less convincing (2008: 114). The same was true for Natascha Van Mechelen, who did not find a strong connection between the welfare state and social assistance incomes (2009: 164). In recent work on the 1990-2010 period, Alain Noël does find a significant relationship between welfare state and social assistance generosity, as well a negative influence of public debt, with indirect effects from left parties and trade unions, in a pattern akin to that found by Brady for the reduction of poverty (Noël, 2019: 243; Brady, 2009). Overall, however, the comparative literature on social assistance remains limited and descriptive, with little analysis of the causal factors behind income levels (Birnbaum et al., 2017: 61). This literature can help us, nevertheless, to build theoretical expectations for the study of Canadian provincial variations.

Theory

The natural starting point for a comparative investigation of the politics of social assistance generosity is the standard power resources theory, which asserts that social policy is first and foremost a product of class conflicts, as expressed through partisan politics and collective action (Van Kersbergen and Vis, 2014: 48-49). In this perspective, the long-run presence in power of the left, the centre, or the right should make a difference, as should the strength of trade unions. This is the logic used by Haddow to account for differences in redistribution across Canadian provinces (2014). It is also the logic identified in more qualitative studies of Quebec's distinct social model within Canada (Noël, 2013; Van den Berg et al., 2017; Arsenault, 2018).

For minimum income protection, however, the power resources theory may not hold as well. Social assistance is a residual program that concerns a minority of persons, seldom heard in political debates, and often despised. These benefits, observe Pierre-Marc Daigneault and Daniel Béland, have "a bad reputation among the public" and they are rarely an object of electoral competition (2015: 1). Even social-democratic parties tend to see persons receiving social assistance as labour market "outsiders," at a distance from their main working-class or middle-class electorate, who may have little interest in improving the lot of the poor (Rueda, 2007; Iversen and Soskice, 2019: 3 and 21). If the power resources theory works for social assistance, it would be less because the different actors relentlessly pursue their interest, as is assumed in the standard power resources

model, than because parties of the left and trade unions are careful to craft meaningful orientations that can contribute to sustain a "latent coalition for egalitarianism" (Brady, 2009: 103-104). In other words, ideological consistency matters as much, and perhaps more, than the interplay of interests.

In this perspective, we can hypothesize that the incumbency of parties of the left and of the centre should sustain generous welfare incomes, while the dominance of the right should depress them. Likewise, a strong trade unions movement should support minimum income protection, even though it concerns primarily labour market "outsiders:"

H_{1a}: The cumulative presence in power of leftist or centrist parties has a positive impact on minimum income protection adequacy.

H_{1b}: The cumulative presence in power of parties of the right has a negative impact on minimum income protection adequacy.

H_2: Trade union density has a positive impact on minimum income protection adequacy.

If actors, interests and ideology play a role, so should policy ideas and institutions (Daigneault and Béland, 2015). Consider, first, ideas. From the 1990s to the 2010s, social assistance was a recurrent object of reforms, driven by a preoccupation with incentives and the prospect of activation (Cox, 2015). The new orientations, consistent with the notion of social investment, were often suspected of being oblivious to the poor, if not detrimental to their well-being (Banting, 2006; Cantillon, 2011). They could be implemented in various ways, however, and overall the new policy instruments were not introduced at the expense of the poor (Noël, 2018). Among Canadian provinces, it would be difficult to take a systematic measure of such a social investment turn, but there is another reform idea that is easy to track down, the adoption of poverty reduction strategies, in line with a growing concern for poverty in global policy debates (Noël, 2006; Plante, 2019). This type of intervention allows us to consider a simple, almost natural hypothesis about the power of ideas:

H_3: The adoption of a poverty reduction strategy has a positive impact on minimum income protection adequacy.

Finally, concerning institutions, there is the basic power resources expectation of a congruence between welfare state generosity and minimum income protection, in contrast to what could be called the welfare paradox hypothesis, where the adequacy of social assistance incomes evolves less with the welfare state as a whole than with the salience of the issue, indicated by the social assistance rate. We can measure welfare state generosity directly, by the level of social expenditures as a percentage of GDP, or indirectly, through an estimate of a province's redistribution effort. If we keep in mind the welfare paradox argument about the salience of social assistance, we have the following three, somewhat rival, hypotheses:

H_{4a}: The level of social expenditures as a percentage of GDP has a positive impact on minimum income protection adequacy.

H_{4b}: A province's overall redistribution effort has a positive impact on minimum income protection adequacy.

H[4c]: The social assistance rate has a positive impact on minimum income protection adequacy.

Relatedly, because it is a variable identified as significant in the comparative literature (Noël, 2019), we can test whether the level of public debt acts as a constraint on adequacy.

H[5]: The level of public debt as a percentage of GDP has a negative impact on minimum income protection adequacy.

Data and Methodology

Comparing the adequacy of minimum income protection across provinces is relatively straightforward because reliable data are provided by Maytree, a Toronto organization that took over this mission from the Caledon Institute of Social Policy in 2018, which itself undertook this task when the National Council of Welfare was abolished in 2012. In an annual publication entitled *Welfare in Canada*, Maytree collects provincial and territorial welfare incomes for four types of households: a single person considered employable; a single person with a disability; a single parent with one child age 2; and a couple with two children ages 10 and 15. Welfare incomes correspond to what is called minimum income protection in the comparative literature, and include not only social assistance payments but also other transfers such as tax credits, child benefits, or special-purpose payments. In a country where incomes and costs of living vary significantly across provinces, raw annual amounts would not capture perfectly the adequacy of welfare incomes in a given province. To do so, at least four options are available. The first two are computed by Maytree, the third is proposed by Ronald Kneebone and Katherine White (2015), and the fourth is that adopted here.

Maytree provides two measures of adequacy: welfare income as a percentage of the Canada-wide Low-Income Measure threshold (LIM; half the Canadian median income), and welfare income as a percentage of the Market Basket Measure threshold (MBM; a Canadian measure based on the cost of basic necessities in a given region). The LIM option seems to make sense, because it refers to a standard, international measure of poverty. To compare provinces, however, this option is deficient because it relies solely on the overall Canadian median income, and we know that provincial median incomes differ substantially (Noël, 2017). The MBM, Canada's new official poverty measure, is more helpful in this respect. Its only drawback is that it is a purely Canadian measure, unhelpful to place provincial incomes in a broad comparative perspective. A third option, proposed by Kneebone and White, is to use the "basic needs" index developed by Christopher Sarlo (Kneebone and White, 2015: 77). This option is also solely Canadian, and even in this country, it does not appear very legitimate, as Sarlo's index is widely considered too restrictive, and almost punitive (CEPE, 2009). The fourth option, adopted here, consists in creating a provincial Low-Income Measure using half of the provincial median income, adjusted for household size. This option creates an adequacy measure identical to that used

in international comparative work, and it is thus easily readable for non-Canadians. It also allows Canadians to situate provincial welfare incomes in a broader international context.

Concretely, this measure of adequacy defines low income after tax as 50% of the provincial after-tax median income for persons not in an economic family (singles).[2] For households with more than one person, this income is adjusted by multiplying it by the square root of the number of persons in the household.[3] The welfare income of a given household is then estimated as a percentage of provincial median income for this household.

Partisan incumbency is based on the party of the premier in a given year, as established in the Canada Guide (http://www.thecanadaguide.com/data/provincial-premiers/). Each year a party is in power, starting ten years before the period under study, in 1980, an increment of 1 is added. For election years, the increment starts the following year. The left includes the New Democratic Party (NDP) and the Parti Québécois (PQ); the centre designates the Liberal party (except in British Columbia); and the right includes the Conservatives, the Saskatchewan Party, and the Social Credit and Liberals in British Columbia.

Trade union density combines data from two Statistics Canada series, one for 1997 to 2017 and one for earlier years.[4] Adjustments for the two series are made using Haddow's estimations (2015: 43).

The adoption of poverty reduction strategies is operationalized by a dummy variable, according to the list established by Charles Plante (2019).

Social expenditures (health plus social services) and debt service costs are drawn from a dataset compiled by Kneebone and Margarita Wilkins (2016 and 2019). Expenditures are then calculated as a percentage of provincial GDP using Statistics Canada's GDP at market, current prices.[5] Provincial redistribution efforts are estimated using the OECD "standard approach," with Statistics Canada inequality data (Van Lancker et al., 2015): redistribution equals the Gini for market incomes minus the Gini for after-tax incomes, divided by the Gini for market incomes and multiplied by 100.[6]

Social assistance rates represent the number of persons receiving social assistance in proportion of the total of persons eligible, that is individuals between 0 and 64 years of age. The data used here are those compiled by David Deault Picard and Alain Noël for the years 1990-2015, updated with the Maytree *Social Assistance Summaries* and recent Statistics Canada population estimates (Deault Picard and Noël, 2016; Maytree, 2019; Statistics Canada, Table 17-10-0005-01, formerly CANSIM 051-0001).

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[2] Statistics Canada, Table 11-10-0190-01 (formerly CANSIM 206-0011).
[3] https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/ref/dict/tab/t4_2-eng.cfm.
[4] Statistics Canada, Table 14-10-0070-01 (formerly CANSIM 282-0078), and CANSIM 279-0025.
[5] Statistics Canada, Table 36-10-0222-01 (formerly CANSIM 384-0038).
[6] Statistics Canada, Table 11-10-0134-01 (formerly CANSIM 206-0033).

Each variable was assessed to verify the normal distribution assumption and one — debt service expenditures as a percentage of GDP — was transformed using the square root. Independent variables were also checked for collinearity. Interestingly, there were strong correlations between debt service expenditures and redistribution (R = 0.87) and between debt service and social assistance rates (R = 0.77). Not surprisingly, perhaps, redistribution and social assistance rates were also closely related (R = 0.70). Descriptive statistics are presented in the online supplementary material (Table SM1).

Because we have a small number of cases with modest variations, and slowly changing independent and dependent variables, we seek to maintain the statistical analysis simple, theoretically grounded, and transparent, with an emphasis on descriptive statistics, bivariate correlations, and multivariate models including a limited range of independent variables (Achen, 2005). Multivariate tests are made with time-series cross-sectional models for the ten provinces, over the 1990-2017 period. Differences among provinces being of most interest here, the conventional fixed effect approach would not be appropriate, since it controls out variations across cases (Bartels, 2015; Bell and Jones, 2015). Like other studies of social assistance incomes, we opt instead for a random effect approach modelling explicitly the between-cases and within-cases effects (Noël, 2019; Parolin, 2019).

Descriptive Statistics and Trends

Measuring minimum income protection adequacy in relation to the provincial GDP allows us to compare the Canadian provinces to other advanced welfare states. Figure 1 ranks adequacy in the provinces and in a number of OECD countries for a single employable person in 2010, complementing Canadian data with benefits data from the Social Assistance and Minimum Income Protection Interim Dataset (SaMip), available in the Social Policy Indicators (SPIN) database (http://www.sofi.su.se/spin/), adjusted with OECD data for the equivalized median disposable income (OECD, 2016).

Figure 1: Minimum income protection adequacy, employable single person, OECD countries and Canadian provinces, 2010
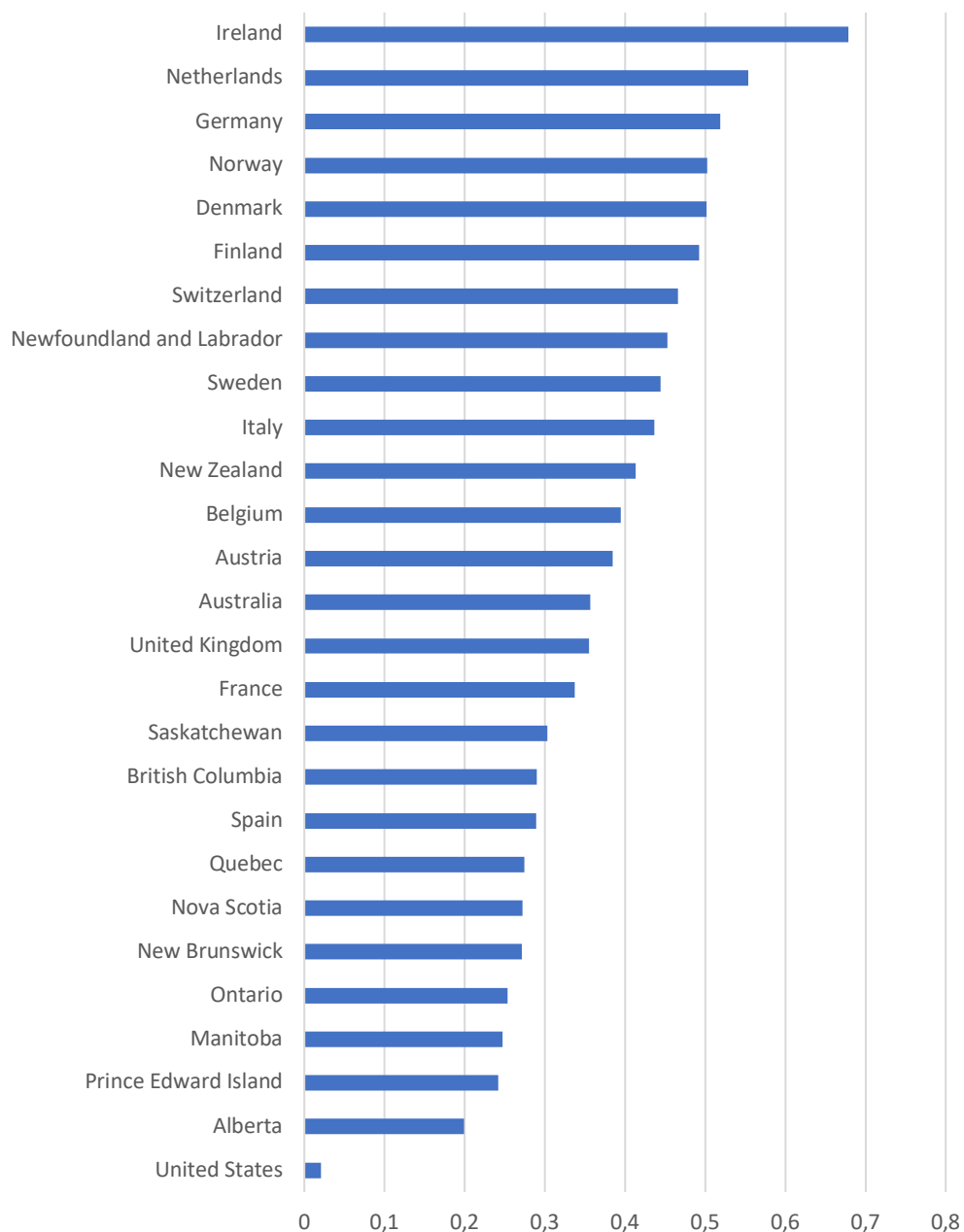

Note: Scores for Austria and Germany are for 2009; the score for Italy is for 2011.

This comparison between OECD countries and Canadian provinces remains imperfect, because it relies on different sources and measurements, but it nevertheless helps us locate Canadian welfare incomes in a global context. With the exception of Newfoundland and Labrador, Canadian provinces all stand at the bottom, near the level of social protection offered in Spain. Only the United States, where there is hardly any income

protection for single employable persons, ranks behind Canadian provinces. One should note, as well, that differences among provinces remain quite small, making it more difficult to draw inferences than it is for OECD countries.

Over time, as Figure 2 indicates, the mean adequacy of welfare incomes did not vary dramatically, and displayed a constant hierarchy between more or less "deserving" households. Incomes nevertheless fluctuated over the years. As Boychuk points out, the decline started in the beginning of the 1990s, before the end of the Canada Assistance Plan (Boychuk, 2015: 45). This drop in welfare incomes, particularly evident for single employable persons, was probably associated with the steep rise in the average social assistance rate, which went from 8 % in 1990 to a peak of 11 % in 1994, as Figure 3 shows. With the 21st century, social assistance rates declined steadily and then levelled off, while adequacy slowly improved, in the 2010s in particular.

Figure 2: Mean adequacy of minimum income protection, four household types, Canadian provinces, 1990-2017
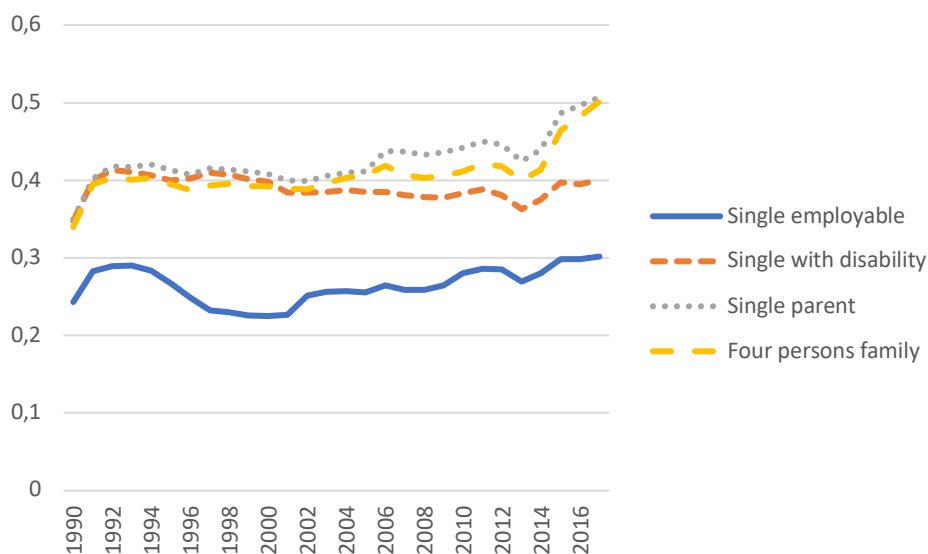
Figure 3: Mean social assistance rate, Canadian provinces, 1990-2017
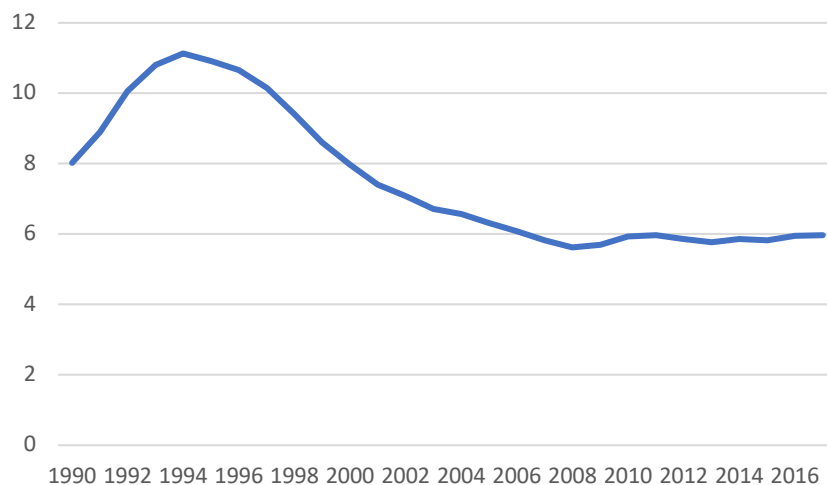
Averages mask relatively distinct provincial trajectories. As can be seen in Figure 4, single employable persons are always the least favored, and overall one finds again the average pattern of retrenchment in the beginning of the 1990s, stability thereafter, and progress in the 2010s. Newfoundland and Labrador stand out with a major upward shift in the beginning of the century. There was also a marked improvement, from a relatively low point, in New Brunswick. Overall, movements remained limited. Social assistance incomes were obviously not an object of much political attention.

Figure 4: Adequacy of minimum income protection, four household types, Canadian provinces, 1990-2017

Graphs by province
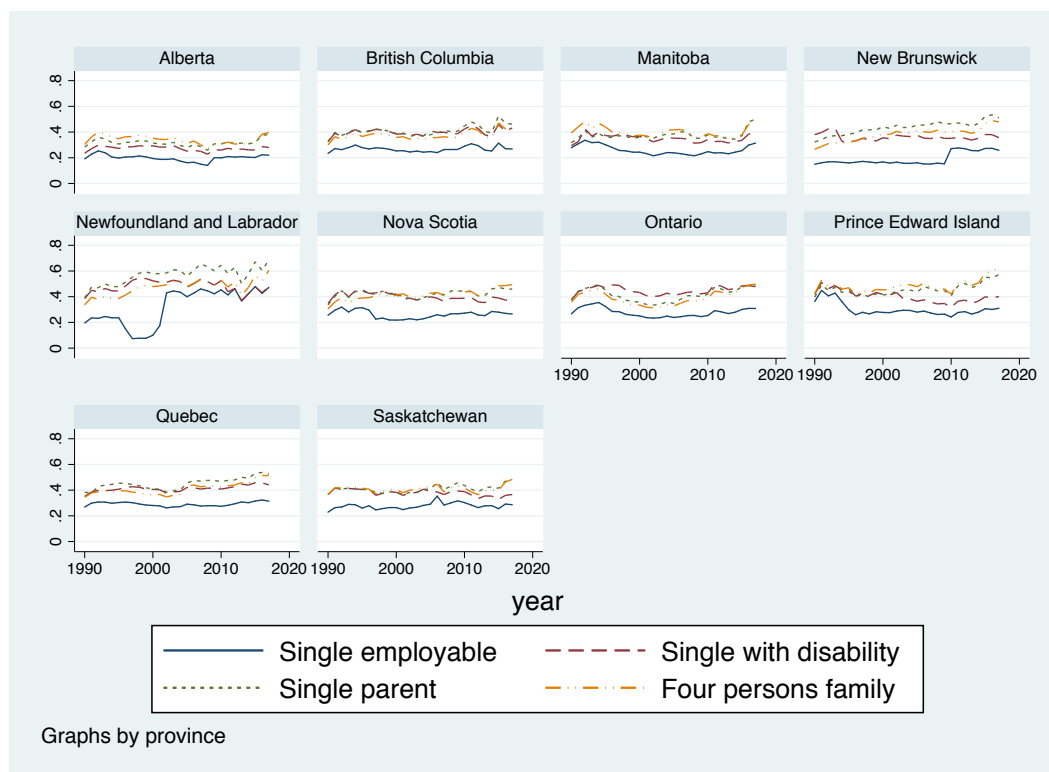
Can we find, nevertheless, social and political correlates of minimum income protection? To this question, we can now turn.

Causal relationships

The literature review and theory sections suggest that a number of factors contribute to define the level of minimum income protection, namely partisan incumbency, trade unions density, the adoption of a poverty reduction strategy, welfare state generosity, redistribution effort, the social assistance rate, and the importance of the public debt. For the sake of simplicity, and because these cases capture the purest implementation of minimum income protection, unrelated to attitudes and policies about disability or children, the following discussion focuses on the welfare incomes of single employable persons. Table 1 reports correlations for ten cases over 28 years (N = 280) and for 2017 only (N = 10).

Table 1: Correlations between the adequacy of minimum income protection for a single employable person and various political and institutional variables, Canadian provinces, 1990-2017

Independent variable	1990-2017	2017
Left cumulative power	0.118*	- 0.06
Centrist cumulative power	0.20***	0.30
Right cumulative power	- 0.10*	- 0.23
Trade union density	0.32***	0.74**
Poverty reduction strategy	0.33***	0.45
Social expenditures	0.13**	0.22
Redistribution	0.21***	0.56*
Social assistance rate	0.17***	0.72**
Public debt	0.13**	0.60*

Note: The variable for public debt is transformed (square root of debt service as a percentage of GDP)

*** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0.1$

Simple correlations allow us to focus on the most plausible explanations before turning to multivariate models. First, come variables that are significant even when we consider only the ten data points for 2017, trade union density and the social assistance rate. The impact of trade union density is consistent with our theory and with the evidence for minimum income protection in OECD countries (Noël, 2019). The positive effect of the social assistance rate is also in line with our expectations, and coherent with Lødemel's view about the political salience of social assistance in societies where more persons are concerned (1997). This finding is particularly important because, for lack of comparable data on social assistance rates, the same hypothesis cannot be tested for OECD welfare states (Noël, 2019). One should note, as well, that when combined in a simple cross-sectional regression for 2017, the two variables remain significant, suggesting that the two factors have independent effects.

Next in term of importance, come institutional variables that point to a province's commitment to redistribution, namely the presence of a poverty reduction strategy (R = 0.33, for the whole period) and that of public policies that favor redistribution (R = 0.21). The presence of the Liberal party in power also contributes to improve welfare incomes (R = 0.20), but the left and the right have no significant impact. Surprisingly, the social expenditures budget has no effect on minimum income protection and the public debt

correlates positively with social assistance, both results being contrary to what is found for the OECD (Noël, 2019). One possible explanation may be that provincial social expenditures, being driven by health care expenditures, reflect less adequately a government's commitment to social justice than does the redistribution index. As for the counter-intuitive results for debt service, one must take into account the unique position of provincial governments as public borrowers. Canadian provinces, explains Kyle Hanniman, are free to borrow on the domestic and international bond markets, and they do so significantly, given their share of public expenditures in the country (2018). As such, they are exposed to market pressures. At the same time, their very weight in terms of spending makes it obvious that the federal government would not let any of them default. Provincial governments are thus sheltered, to some extent, from market constraints. Unlike American states, they borrowed abundantly in recent years to pursue counter-cyclical policies and sustain social spending (Hanniman, 2018). The size of a province's debt service as a percentage of GDP may constitute less a constraint on spending than an indicator of a provincial government's willingness to spend. In this perspective, a positive association between debt service and minimum income protection makes sense. Indeed, as is mentioned above, there is a strong connection between the debt service and the redistribution variables (R = 0.87).

If we drop debt service from our multivariate model, for reasons of collinearity with redistribution, we can consider the significant relationships from Table 1 to identify the following equation, which includes a lagged dependent variable to account for dynamics:

MIP Adequacy = a+ b_1 Lagged Adequacy + b_2 Centrist Cumulative Power + b_3 Union Density + b_4 Poverty Reduction Strategy + b_5 Redistribution + b_6 Social Assistance Rate

When tested with a between-within, random-effect time-series cross-sectional regression model, for four household types, this equation yields the results presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Random-effect model separating between- and within-province effects for the determinants of minimum income protection adequacy, four household types, Canadian provinces, 1990-2017

Variables	Single employable	Single with disability	Single parent	Four persons family
lagadeq1p_wi	0.847***			
	(0.0252)			
centrecum_bw	-2.37e-05	0.00101	0.000704	-0.00153
	(0.00237)	(0.00181)	(0.00119)	(0.00213)
centrecum_wi	0.000168	0.00151**	0.00756***	0.00979***
	(0.000903)	(0.000726)	(0.00123)	(0.00134)
uniond_bw	0.00434***	0.00161	0.00205**	0.000444
	(0.00165)	(0.00118)	(0.000880)	(0.00149)
uniond_wi	0.000655	-0.00431***	-0.00386	-0.00188
	(0.00117)	(0.00138)	(0.00280)	(0.00257)
povredplan_bw	-0.103**	-0.162***	-0.238***	-0.0764*
	(0.0477)	(0.0355)	(0.0292)	(0.0451)
povredplan_wi	0.00966*	0.00318	0.0243***	0.0153
	(0.00559)	(0.00433)	(0.00759)	(0.00985)
redistribution_bw	0.000432	-0.00258	0.00640***	0.00893***
	(0.00351)	(0.00273)	(0.00118)	(0.00331)
redistribution_wi	0.000488	0.00366***	-0.000138	0.00359
	(0.000670)	(0.00122)	(0.00244)	(0.00277)
socassrate_bw	0.0142*	0.0418***	0.0333***	0.00424
	(0.00797)	(0.00663)	(0.00443)	(0.00765)
socassrate_wi	-0.000850*	0.00396**	0.00509	0.00179
	(0.000446)	(0.00163)	(0.00313)	(0.00340)
lagadeq1ph_wi		0.352***		
		(0.0550)		
lagadeqmonop_wi			0.0266**	
			(0.0110)	
lagadeq4p_wi				0.0192
				(0.0137)
Constant	0.0276	0.140**	-0.0359	0.109*
	(0.0649)	(0.0555)	(0.0483)	(0.0641)
Observations	270	270	270	270
Number of provinces	10	10	10	10

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

In these results, "between" relationships capture differences among provinces, and "within" relationships track change over time. Consider, first, income adequacy for single employable persons. The two variables we have identified as most significant in bivariate correlations remain significant, in the expected direction. Provinces that have a strong trade union movement and a high social assistance rate provide more generous incomes to single employable persons. The social assistance rate is significant for other households as well, except for the four persons family; the union effect is also significant for single parents, but not for the other two households. In the latter three types of households, the significant political variable is the presence of the Liberal party in power, which has a positive effect over time (within). When there are children involved, the redistribution variable also makes a difference between cases, provinces more committed to redistribute being more supportive of families.

Intriguingly, the adoption of a poverty reduction strategy has a significant positive effect on welfare incomes within a province, but a negative one between provinces. This is contrary to our expectations, but possibly consistent with Plante's findings that poverty reduction strategies follow rather than precede poverty reduction efforts (2019). More fundamentally, these results reinforce the view that provincial governments are keener to bring persons out of poverty, children in particular, than to alleviate the fate of those who are deep in poverty, such as single persons relying on social assistance, except perhaps by helping them integrate the workforce (Larocque, 2018). Improving welfare incomes would alleviate poverty, but it would not reduce the poverty rate.

To weigh the relative force of each factor, Table SM2, presented in the online supplementary material, displays the same models with standardized coefficients. These results indicate that, for single employable persons, the effects of union density and of the social assistance rate are about equivalent. For persons with a disability, the main determinant is by far the social assistance rate. For single parents, the key is also the social assistance rate, along with provincial redistribution efforts and union density. With four persons families, the most important variable is the redistribution effort. In all four cases, poverty reduction strategies maintain a significant negative influence.

Discussion

Our first hypothesis (H_{1a}) was that parties of the left and of the centre contributed to the adequacy of welfare incomes. This hypothesis is only partly supported. First, parties of the left have no significant impact. Consider, for instance, Manitoba. The NDP was in power for four terms between 1999 and 2016, but nevertheless acted conservatively on social assistance, keeping benefits lower than in most other provinces (Simpson, 2015: 206; see Figure 1 above). In British Columbia in the 1990s, an NDP government also implemented market-oriented, "get tough" social assistance reforms (Boychuk, 2006: 187; Pulkingham, 2015: 144), and so did the Parti Québécois at different occasions (Noël, 2015: 137). Surprisingly, Liberal governments had more of an impact, at least over time (within cases). In Ontario, for instance, adequacy for a single employable was at 24% of median

income in 2003 when Dalton McGuinty was elected, and it had risen to 31% by 2017, after 14 years of Liberal government (Graefe, 2015: 115). Overall, conservative parties also proved prudent, as suggest our non-significant results for the second hypothesis, about the right (H_{1b}).

Findings for trade union density are consistent with the second hypothesis (H_2) and suggest that social actors and the potential for mobilization matter more than political parties for welfare incomes. Trade union density may also be an indirect measure of collective action capacity in a province. Case studies point indeed to the importance of active community and social rights organisations in relatively generous provinces such as Newfoundland and Labrador, Saskatchewan, and Quebec (Mondou, 2015: 241-42; August, 2015: 187-88; Noël, 2015: 136-7).

Significant negative results for poverty reduction strategies seem more problematic (H_3). They may suggest, as mentioned above, that governments care more about the rate than about the depth of poverty. One should keep in mind, though, that some of these strategies remain meagre, relatively shallow documents, designed mostly as public recognitions that poverty remains a problem.

Contrary to the comparative literature, social expenditures do not account for minimum income protection (H_{4a}), probably because spending does not vary all that much between provinces. Redistribution efforts, however, matters, at least for families with children (H_{4b}). Even more important is the salience of the issue. When the social assistance rate is high, income adequacy improves (H_{4c}). Public debt, as mentioned above, does not act as a constraint, on the contrary (H_5).

Overall, these findings make sense, with a weak partisan effect, a strong impact for union density and the social assistance rate, a positive relationship for redistribution, and the unhelpful consequences of poverty reduction strategies. One should keep in mind that the adequacy of social assistance varies little across provinces and over time, as do many of our independent variables. Partisan incumbency variables and trade union density also constitute rough indicators of a province's politics, which leave aside a host of potentially relevant actors, institutions, and ideas.

Consider, for instance, the possibility that welfare incomes embody a sense of solidarity that is more or less pronounced across provinces. There are good theoretical reasons to consider such a relationship, and the link between sub-national identity and social solidarity is documented for different countries (Béland and Lecours, 2008; Singh, 2015). To test summarily this possibility, we can use a survey conducted by the Environics Institute between December 2018 and January 2019, which presents the proportion of Canadians who consider their region or province "very important or somewhat important to their sense of identity" (Environics Institute, 2019: 22). The scores range from 71% in Ontario to 89% in Newfoundland and Labrador. The relationship between these scores for 2018-2019 and adequacy for a single employable person in 2017 is positive and quite strong (R = 0.68), as is the relationship between identity and broader redistribution efforts (R = 0.71). Figure 5 locates the provinces according to the strength of their identity and

welfare incomes adequacy. Newfoundland and Labrador stand out in the upper left corner, as does Ontario at the opposite end.

Figure 5: Relationship between provincial identity as measured in 2018-2019 and the adequacy of minimum income protection for single employable persons in 2017
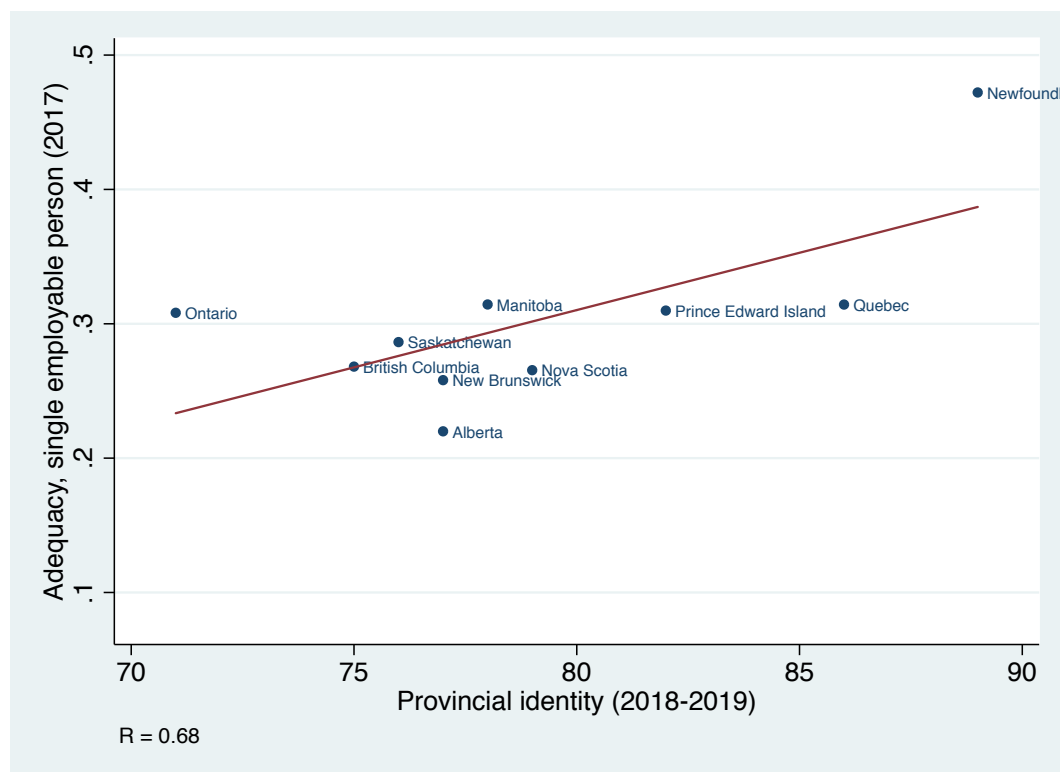
This perspective on sub-national identity, for one time point only, is indicative of the need to know more, with additional concepts and indicators, about the politics of minimum income protection. In a recent article, for instance, Zachary Parolin demonstrates how the presence of black families within an American state influences the distribution of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families funds, racial bias being stronger where blacks are more numerous (2019).

Conclusion

Comparative research on the welfare state has focused largely on programs aimed at workers or the middle class, leaving aside last recourse measures designed for the poorest. Likewise, in Canada, relatively little has been done on the politics of social assistance, besides Boychuk's pioneering comparative book (1998) and a recent collection edited by Béland and Daigneault (Daigneault and Béland, 2015). This article seeks to fill this gap, with a comparative analysis of the determinants of provincial welfare incomes for

the 1990-2017 period. Using descriptive analysis, bivariate correlations, and time-series cross-sectional models, we reach a number of conclusions regarding minimum income protection in Canada.

First, and this is not a surprise, with the exception of Newfoundland and Labrador, Canadian provinces rank at the bottom compared to other advanced welfare states. Only the United States, where there is hardly any minimum income protection, remains behind Canadian provinces. On average, in 2017, single employable Canadians on social assistance received 30% of the provincial median income, well below the standard poverty line of 50%. Still, this meagre level of income security constituted a progress, minimum income protection having increased throughout the 2000s and 2010s.

Second, in Canada as elsewhere in the OECD, social assistance adequacy hardly constitutes a partisan issue dividing the left and the right. Social-democratic and conservative parties have no significant impact on benefit levels, while centrist, Liberal parties have a modest one over time, within provinces. Elections are not won or lost over minimum income protection.

Third, contrary to the view that trade unions benefit exclusively their members — or labour market "insiders" — we find a significant union effect on minimum income protection, for the "least deserving" single employable persons in particular. This result is consistent with power resources theory and with a number of findings on union density and redistribution (Bradley et al., 2003). Trade unions help "outsiders" as well, possibly by reinforcing their members' preferences for equality, or by consolidating the possibilities of collective action in a province (Mosimann and Pontusson, 2017; Brady, Baker, and Finnigan, 2013).

Fourth, poverty reduction strategies do not enhance the revenues of households receiving social assistance. The effect of these strategies is in fact negative. This sobering conclusion is consistent with Plante's conclusions about the lack of incidence of these strategies on the poverty rate (2019). They also underline the fact that improving minimum income protection rarely was the road to poverty reduction favored by governments, who insisted instead on labour market integration. In Quebec, for instance, the first province to adopt a poverty reduction strategy, little was done to improve social assistance benefits for single employable persons (Noël, 2013: 270). Newfoundland and Labrador, the second province with a strategy, was perhaps the only one where improvements in social assistance incomes were explicitly part of the plan (Hudson and Close, 2011: 85). The consequences are manifest in Figures 1, 4, and 5 above.

Fifth, the welfare state matters, not in terms of social expenditures but through two complementary mechanisms: the influence of a province's overall redistribution effort, and the size of the population concerned by social assistance. The first mechanisms is consistent with power resources theory and accounts for the adequacy of minimum income protection for households with children; the second mechanism concerns the political salience of social assistance, and it works for single adults (employable, with a disability, or with a child), in line with Lødemel's welfare paradox. Debt service costs do not seem to act as a constraint for provincial governments.

Among advanced welfare states, Canadian provinces stand near the bottom for minimum income protection. Provinces nevertheless differ, in ways that are basically consistent with the comparative literature. Without ever being at the centre of partisan debates, and hardly an object of poverty reduction strategies, welfare incomes benefit from trade union strength and from provincial redistribution efforts. They also appear more generous in provinces where more households rely on social assistance. The welfare paradox thus meets power resources theory. Provincial identity may sustain, as well, redistribution, for all and for the poorest. In Canada as elsewhere, politics matter for minimum income protection.

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Online Supplementary Material

Table SM1: Descriptive statistics, Canadian Provinces, 1990-2017

Variable	Name	Obser-vations	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Adequacy, employable	*adeq1p*	280	0.26	0.07	0.07	0.48
Adequacy, disability	*adeq1ph*	280	0.39	0.06	o.23	0.55
Adequacy, one parent	*adeqmonop*	280	0.43	0.08	0.26	0.69
Adequacy, four persons	*adeq4p*	280	0.41	0.06	0.27	0.63
Left power	*leftcum*	280	5.32	6.62	0	26
Centrist power	*centrecum*	280	5.93	6.12	0	20
Right power	*rightcum*	280	13.14	7.61	0	36
Union density	*uniond*	280	33.0	5.10	22.1	45.3
Poverty reduction strategy	*povredplan*	280	0.25	0.44	0	1
Social expenditures	*socexgdp*	280	0.09	0.02	0.05	0.13
Redistribution	*redistribution*	280	31.51	5.19	19.04	45.03
Social assistance rate	*socassrate*	280	7.54	2.71	2.7	14.7
Public debt service	*sqrtdebtservgdp*	280	0.14	0.05	0.03	0.29
Provincial identity	*provid*	10	79	5.33	71	89

Table SM2: Standardized random-effect model separating between- and within-province effects for the determinants of minimum income protection adequacy, four household types, Canadian provinces, 1990-2017

Variables	Single employable	Single with disability	Single parent	Four persons family
stdlagadeq1p_wi	0.686***			
	(0.0204)			
stdcentrecum_bw	-0.00185	0.0851	0.0489	-0.132
	(0.184)	(0.153)	(0.0829)	(0.183)
stdcentrecum_wi	0.00785	0.0768**	0.316***	0.505***
	(0.0423)	(0.0369)	(0.0514)	(0.0691)
stduniond_bw	0.311***	0.125	0.131**	0.0350
	(0.118)	(0.0916)	(0.0562)	(0.118)
stduniond_wi	0.0162	-0.116***	-0.0848	-0.0511
	(0.0288)	(0.0370)	(0.0616)	(0.0698)
stdpovredplan_bw	-0.257**	-0.437***	-0.529***	-0.209*
	(0.119)	(0.0958)	(0.0647)	(0.124)
stdpovredplan_wi	0.0578*	0.0207	0.130***	0.101
	(0.0334)	(0.0281)	(0.0405)	(0.0649)
stdredistribution_bw	0.0299	-0.194	0.395***	0.681***
	(0.243)	(0.206)	(0.0726)	(0.253)
stdredistribution_wi	0.0165	0.135***	-0.00415	0.134
	(0.0227)	(0.0450)	(0.0736)	(0.103)
stdsocassrate_bw	0.361*	1.149***	0.751***	0.118
	(0.202)	(0.182)	(0.1000)	(0.213)
stdsocassrate_wi	-0.0267*	0.135**	0.142	0.0617
	(0.0140)	(0.0554)	(0.0874)	(0.117)
stdlagadeq1ph_wi		0.178***		
		(0.0278)		
stdlagadeqmonop_wi			0.0815**	
			(0.0337)	
stdlagadeq4p_wi				0.0636
				(0.0455)
Constant	0.0107	0.0199	0.0173	0.0150
	(0.132)	(0.106)	(0.0513)	(0.125)
Observations	270	270	270	270
Number of prov	10	10	10	10

Robust standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1