

## Manitoba's Political Party Systems: An Historical Overview

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## Manitoba's Political Party Systems: An Historical Overview

This paper provides an historical overview of Manitoba politics and demonstrates that in conjunction with the changing fortunes of each party, so too has the overall context in which they operated. In other words, the province has operated with a number of distinct political party systems. The term “system” pertains to patterns of interaction between political parties as they compete for voter support and government power.<sup>1</sup> In the case of Manitoba, these can be enumerated as follows: an embryonic formative system (1870 – 1878), a traditional two party system (1879 – 1922), a one party dominant system (1922- 1958), a transitional three party system (1958-1969), and the province's currently operating two-and-a-half party system (1969 onward). Until the 1880s, candidates chiefly aligned themselves both in the Legislature and in elections as either being “Government” (another term used was ‘Ministerial’) or “Opposition”. As in many other pre-twentieth century developing democracies with their own nascent democratic institutions, elected representatives first grouped themselves into loosely structured “factions” before parties entered the scene.<sup>2</sup>

The shift from a non-party system to the two party system occurred between 1878 and 1883. Due to the support John Norquay received from John A. Macdonald's federal Conservatives (operating then under the “Liberal-Conservative” label), the 1878 and 1879 provincial elections are sometimes considered to be the first in which candidates formally battled along party lines.<sup>3</sup> However, aside from having a loose association with

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<sup>1</sup> Usage of the term “system” should not imply that I will be using Giovanni Sartori's Downsian “systems theory” approach to studying party politics (see Giovanni Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis*, Vol. 1, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976). Rather, the term system will be used in a more general manner and similar to that which is used by James Bickerton, Alain Gagnon, and Patrick Smith in *Ties that Bind: Parties and Voters in Canada*, Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 1999. The author has also used their presentation of data as a basis for presenting voter data here. The author would like to thank Kevin McDougald for his editorial assistance on the final draft of this paper. With regard to ministerialism as a predecessor to the rise of Canadian party politics, see Escott Reid, “The Rise of National Parties in Canada,” *Papers and Proceedings of the Canadian Political Science Association*, 1932, reprinted in *Party Politics in Canada*, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition, Hugh Thorburn, ed., Scarborough: Prentice-Hall, 1985.

<sup>2</sup> See William Nisbet Chambers, “Party Development and Party Action: The American Origins,” *History and Theory*, Vol. 3, No. 1, pp. 90-120.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Murray Donnelly refers to the Norquay government of 1878 as “Conservative” and its opposition as being “Liberal”. Murray Donnelly, *The Government of Manitoba*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963, p. 46. Tom Peterson writes that a provincial “Conservative ministry was formed in 1878.” Tom Peterson, “Ethnic and Class Voting in Canada,” *op. cit.*, *Canadian Provincial Politics: The Party Systems in the Ten Provinces*, Martin Robin, ed., Scarborough: Prentice-Hall, 1972, p. 71.

Macdonald, Norquay declared himself non-partisan and candidates continued to position themselves as either being Government or Opposition. This is demonstrated by the *Manitoba Free Press* coverage leading up to the 1879 election:

Winnipeg is the only constituency in which Dominion party lines have been made an issue – either Liberal or Conservative – and we, therefore, hope that the day is yet remote when it shall split our Local House.<sup>4</sup>

Party identities began to be clearer in 1883 when an early version of the Liberal Party (or “Grits”) appeared in the form of a “Provincial Rights” slate of candidates in opposition to Government candidates. Indicative that a new era of partisan politics had arrived is the following report from the *Manitoba Free Press*:

The nomination of candidates in the different constituencies throughout the province takes place at noon today, and a bid fair to be an event of more than ordinary interest. As the day of battle draws near the winnowing process is thinning the number of candidates down, and by the time the contest takes place, there will probably be an average of two candidates in each of the constituencies representing respectively the issues that divide the two great political parties.<sup>5</sup>

Both parties supported policies that would promote investment, transportation, settlement, agriculture, and trade. In other words, they were ideologically indistinguishable and were therefore marked by what Maurice Duverger, in his political science classic *Political Parties*, terms a “technical dualism” rather than a “metaphysical dualism”.<sup>6</sup> That is, the two provincial parties aimed to win control over the administrative levers of government, rather than to radically redistribute social power between social classes.

Bubbling under this two party arrangement, however, were the specific class interests of urban labour and agrarianism. As Winnipeg’s industrial economy quickly

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<sup>4</sup> “The Winnipeg Election,” *Manitoba Daily Free Press*, December 16, 1879. There appears to have been debate at the time on whether or not candidates had been running on party lines during the December election. The *Manitoba Free Press* severely criticized the *Winnipeg Daily Times* for identifying in its December 19<sup>th</sup> edition candidates according to party labels. The *Manitoba Free Press* argued that Manitobans are “a people that has thoroughly identified themselves with the best interests of the country at large, unconstrained and unbiased by party spirit or party bigotry.” “Provincial Politics and Press,” *Manitoba Daily Free Press*, December 29, 1879, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> “The Campaign, Getting Ready for Nomination of Candidates To-day,” *Manitoba Daily Free Press*, January 16, 1883, p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Maurice Duverger, *Political Parties: Their Organization and Activity in the Modern State*, London: Methuen, 1964, p. 214-215.

expanded, labour-based urban parties made some inroads within the urban electorate yet, as was the case in both Alberta and Ontario,<sup>7</sup> it would be farmers who would sweep aside the cozy Liberal-Conservative arrangement and introduced to the province its third political party system in 1922. Once in government, and with John Bracken as their new leader,<sup>8</sup> the United Farmers of Manitoba transformed itself into a solidly based coalition of elected representatives with continual backing from urban business leaders and rural farmers. It would become the Progressive Party (a label already used by farmers at the national level as well as by the UFM's Winnipeg branch<sup>9</sup>) and then the "Liberal-Progressives" upon being merged with the provincial Liberal Party in 1932.<sup>10</sup> Operating with the principle that political parties are repugnant to the democratic workings of an elected assembly of representatives, Bracken led a series of government administrations in which he called on the other parties to shed their factional party-specific identities in the Legislature.<sup>11</sup> By holding government power in this manner from the early 1920s to the 1950s, Manitoba was effectively operating under a one party dominant system, or what others might term a "quasi-party system".<sup>12</sup> In the 1940s, candidates continued to run in elections under distinct party banners yet were also expected to declare whether or

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<sup>7</sup> C.B. Macpherson, *Democracy in Alberta: The Theory and Practice of a Quasi-Party System*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1953; Russell Hann, *The Farmers Confront Industrialism: Some Historical Perspectives on Ontario Agrarian Movements*, Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1975; Kerry Badgely, *Ringling in the Common Love of the Good: The United Farmers of Ontario, 1914-1926*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003..

<sup>8</sup> The UFM was leaderless after the July 1922 election. John Bracken, who was president of the Manitoba Agricultural College and not an MLA, was asked by the United Farmers to serve as their leader and premier. Rand Dyck, *Provincial Politics in Canada*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Scarborough: 1991), p. 384. Bracken was able to successfully run in the sparsely populated northern riding of The Pas where its election had been deferred to October of that year. Bracken obtained 472 votes of the 699 votes cast. Elections Manitoba, "Summary of Election Procedures for Manitoba: 1870 to 1999," *Statement of Votes for the 38<sup>th</sup> Provincial General Election*, 2003, p. 231.

<sup>9</sup> The "Progressive" label was used by UFM candidates in Winnipeg as demonstrated by references to the Winnipeg Progressive Association in "Progressives Accept Challenge to Debate," *Manitoba Free Press*, July 4, 1922, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> This merging, or fusion of the provincial Liberals with Bracken's Progressives is extensively discussed in John Kendle's *John Bracken: A Political Biography*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979.

<sup>11</sup> Gerald Friesen, in his history of the region, links Bracken's personality to his approach to politics: "Bracken was a no-nonsense farm boy from eastern Ontario who had become an agricultural extension officer and eventually a professor of agriculture. He had absorbed the strict teaching of a Methodist household and combined them with an unusual flair for organization and exposition, on the one hand, and for instilling loyalty and a sense of common purpose, on the other." Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (Toronto, 1984), p. 402.

<sup>12</sup> This term is used with regard to Alberta farmer-based parties. See C.B. Macpherson, *op. cit.*

not they were supporting the governing coalition. The effect was that party distinctions became less than clear.

During the 1950s and with the accompanying rise to power of Duff Roblin's Progressive Conservatives (the renamed Conservative Party), Manitoba's one party dominant system dissolved into a three party system. As the Liberals (having lost their "Progressive" moniker after 1959) fell into a long term decline, the system eventually evolved into the province's fifth and current party system: a two and a half party system.<sup>13</sup> However, it was in this new era that the party as a social organization became increasingly valued as a means for involving citizens in the political process. What would be termed in other countries as the post-war rise of the "catch-all party", Manitoba's political parties jockeyed to win government power by recruiting new members from a wide range of social sectors.<sup>14</sup> The Progressive Conservatives expanded their search to include business interests as well as farmers and workers, while the CCF worked to reach out to white collar service sector voters, farmers, and small business owners.

For modern political parties a large membership base signifies a sound financial base for the organization, volunteer armies to operate invigorated campaigns, and increasingly high levels of voter commitment.<sup>15</sup> In Manitoba, as the old Liberal-Progressive one party dominant system declined in the face of the re-introduction of

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<sup>13</sup> This term is borrowed from those who describe the British political system. See, for example, Russell Dalton, *Citizen Politics: Public Opinion and Political Parties in Advanced Industrial Democracies*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., New Jersey: Chatham House, 1996, p. 146.

<sup>14</sup> Across both Western Europe and countries elsewhere in the industrial west in the post war era, political scientists in the post war era observed the increasing predominance of "catch-all" political organizations. Parties that were previously aligned with specific sectors were "turning more fully to the electoral scene, trying to exchange effectiveness in depth for a wider audience and more immediate electoral success." Otto Kirchheimer, "The Transformation of the Western European Party System," *Political Law and Social Change: Selected Essays*, Frederic Burin and Kurt Shell, eds., New York: Columbia University Press, 1969, p. 354.

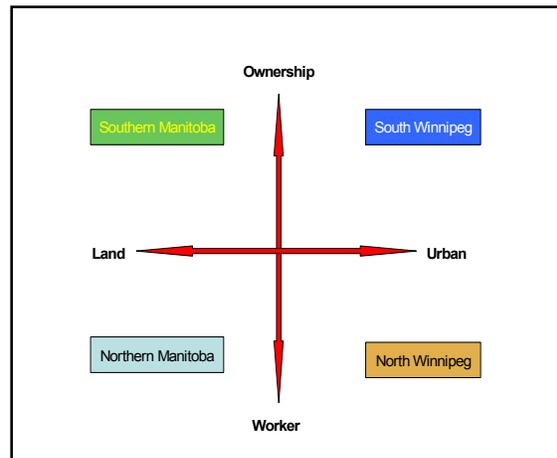
<sup>15</sup> The Liberal Party of Canada is an example of how this was effectively done at the national level. According to Reginald Whitaker, in his thorough examination of the history of the party's history, its success was largely tied to its ability to successfully exploit its business base interests under Mackenzie King from the 1930s to the early 1950s, and then to shift to a more broadly based organizational structure in the 1960s. See Reginald Whitaker, *The Government Party: Organizing and Financing The Liberal Party of Canada 1930-58*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977; Christine McCall-Newman, *Grits: An Intimate Portrait of the Liberal Party*, Toronto: McMillan, 1982; and Joseph Wearing, *The L-Shaped Party: The Liberal Party of Canada, 1958-1980*, Toronto: McGill-Ryerson, 1980. Together these authors forcefully demonstrate that as the party moved further into the 1960s it was able to further cultivate its support among the urban middle class and growing numbers of first generation Canadians.

traditional political parties as identifiable single entities, each contending for government power, party organizations were shifting from being primarily elite-driven to mass-oriented entities.

### Manitoba's Political Geography

A helpful approach for examining Manitoba party politics is to use the historically comparative analysis of Seymour Martin Lipsett and Stein Rokkan who connect together the rise of two major social cleavages and how political parties develop in modernizing societies. In the European-based industrial era political parties and electoral outcomes can be examined along the following axis: 1) the land-industry (rural-urban) cleavage and 2) the ownership-worker (class) divide. That is, with the evolution of party systems, one is able to identify parties along one axis or

both of these axes.<sup>16</sup> As shown in the accompanying chart (Figure 1), this conceptual schema works very well for studying the link between territorial politics, social class, and electoral party support in Manitoba's political history. Leaving aside Winnipeg, the provincial electoral axes generally follow a diagonal northwest-to-southeast line that coincides with the



southern edge of the Canadian Shield. This linking of geography to politics is no coincidence due to the fact that this line distinguishes between fruitful southern farming areas and marginal farmlands (and the northern hinterland). This translates into the longstanding and current pattern in which southern farmers generally elect PC candidates while the NDP draws support from marginal farming communities, northern labourers, and those residing in Aboriginal communities.

A second critical and enduring line in Manitoba politics is that which divides the City of Winnipeg into two territorial halves. With the north and south social and class

<sup>16</sup> Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan, "Cleavage Structures, Party Systems, and Voter Alignments," *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross National Perspectives*, Lipset and Rokkan, eds., New York: The Free Press, 1967.

divisions reaching back to the city's early years, the current manifestation of this pattern is that the PCs draw their support from business and white collar professionals who chiefly reside on the city's south side while the NDP maintains stronger links to the interests of labour and to a lesser extent those who work in the public sector and service sector occupations. Overall, with the two major parties occupying well defined positions along these two axes across the entire province, and with the effects of the first-past-the-post system in which minority voices within specific regions are minimized, the Liberal Party in the current two-and-a-half party system continues in its struggle to spatially locate itself in order to convert popular support into electoral results.

### **Manitoba Early Political Party System**

The first provincial election was held soon after Manitoba entered confederation. In 1870 the vote was restricted to property-owning males. Candidates were elected by those who attended a constituency meeting and by making a public declaration.<sup>17</sup> A total of 1,057 votes were cast in the first provincial election and in all but one riding<sup>18</sup> less than 100 votes needed to be counted. The first government operated under inauspicious conditions: it assembled in a log cabin with a Royal Mace (used to represent the Crown's sovereignty) constructed from a locally obtained ox-cart wheel.<sup>19</sup> Legislative assembly members generally identified themselves not according to parties but as government supporters or opponents. One additional curious feature in this early period was the existence of an appointed seven member provincial upper house. However, this local version of the Canadian Senate was disbanded after six years, mostly due to cost considerations.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> In 1888 the property restriction was removed and voting was conducted via private ballot. In 1916 women were allowed to vote. Elections Manitoba, "Summary of Election Procedures in Manitoba, 1870 to 1999," *Statement of Votes for the 38<sup>th</sup> Provincial General Election*, 2003, p. 194.

<sup>18</sup> The riding of Winnipeg & St. John was won with 70 of the 133 votes cast.

<sup>19</sup> Gordon Mackintosh, "The Parliamentary Tradition in Manitoba," *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, Summer, 1983, p. 2. Cited in Andy Anstett and Paul Thomas, "Manitoba: The Role of the Legislature in a Polarized Political System," *Provincial and Territorial Legislatures in Canada*, Gary Levy and Graham White, eds., Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991, p. 91.

<sup>20</sup> Anstett and Thomas, *Ibid.*, p. 91.

The main catalysts for the growth of parties in Manitoba can be linked to what was occurring throughout other parts of the western world; that is, as the voting franchise expanded to different social classes, political parties were increasingly functioning to link citizens to the electoral process. They helped to inform voters about the candidates and party platforms while encouraging newly enfranchised citizens to cast their ballot on election day.<sup>21</sup> The characteristics of the new parties were, according to Anstett and Thomas, shaped by the arrival of many Ontario settlers who “brought with them attachments to Liberal and Conservative labels.”<sup>22</sup>

Figure 2 shows how the Conservatives and Liberals dominated the provincial electoral landscape from 1879 to 1915 (however, the reader is reminded about using caution with regard to party identities for elections prior to 1883). Figure 3 shows how strong electoral support for the two parties translated also into a dominance in the assembly. Between these two parties, three premiers were prominent during this era: John Norquay (Conservative), Thomas Greenway (Liberal), and Rodmond Roblin (Conservative and the first of the two Roblins to lead the province). The dominance of these individuals is demonstrated by the fact that eleven of the twelve elections held in the province prior to 1915 were won by these three men. It is also worth noting that the two party system was fully functional for the federal parties in Manitoba during the same time period. Prior to 1920, and with only one exception with regard to one seat in 1891, Liberal and Conservative candidates won every federal seat in the province.<sup>23</sup>

### **Winnipeg’s Odd Electoral System**

In 1914 and 1915 a complicated voting system was used that differed from the standard first-past-the-post system used elsewhere across the province. The city was divided into “North”, “South”, and “Centre” areas with voters in each area having two ballots to cast: one for a candidate in an “A” seat and the second for a candidate in a “B”

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<sup>21</sup> In his 1902 published history of the rise modern political parties, Ostrogorski identified two main functions: to register voters and educate citizens. M. Ostrogorski, *Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties, Vol. 1: England*, S. M. Lipset, ed., Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1964, p. 188.

<sup>22</sup> Anstett and Thomas, *op. cit.* There are numerous authors who identify this influence. See, for example, Nelson Wiseman, “The Pattern of Prairie Politics,” *Political Parties in Canada*, 5<sup>th</sup> Ed., High Thorburn, ed., Scarborough: Prentice-Hall, 1985; and Tom Peterson, “Ethnic and Class Voting in Canada,” *op. cit.*

<sup>23</sup> Based on figures as presented in Hugh Thorburn, “Federal Election Results, 1878 – 1984,” in *Party Politics in Canada*, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition, H. Thorburn, ed., Scarborough: Prentice-Hall Canada, 1985, p. 344.

seat.<sup>24</sup> Because it was still a riding-based ballot (rather than city wide) and with candidates prevented from running on both of the two ballots within their respective city region, the process was neither an example of transferable voting (that is, where voters identify a list of preferences by which extra votes can be transferred to the next preferred candidate) nor proportional representation.

The system was replaced in 1920 with city-wide proportional representation. Winnipeg was treated as one large constituency that was represented by ten MLAs. Voters cast their ballots by rating their preferences for all the candidates offered.<sup>25</sup> Counting the ballots proved to be an overwhelming and confusing task for the electoral officers in the first election in which the system was used.<sup>26</sup> However, problems relating to ballot counting were rectified in time for the 1922 election.<sup>27</sup> This system of electing candidates in Winnipeg ridings would survive until 1949. Electoral experimentation had yet to end. The single ten-member constituency system was replaced by three constituencies with four MLAs elected in each and by using the preferential ballot. St. Boniface, which was not part of Winnipeg at the time, had two MLAs representing the riding. This system would be in effect until 1958 when Winnipeg was divided into twenty single member constituencies, and St. Boniface's representation reduced to a single MLA.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The party's took great care to explain to their supporters how the system worked and how they should mark their ballots in order to avoid vote spoilage. See for example the Conservative Party advertisement placed in the *Manitoba Free Press*, July 9, 1914, p. 11 and the pro-Liberal list of candidates provided on pages 1 and 20 in the July 10, 1914, *Manitoba Free Press*.

<sup>25</sup> Elections Manitoba, "Summary of Election Procedures for Manitoba: 1870 to 1999," *Statement of Votes for the 38<sup>th</sup> Provincial General Election*, 2003, pp. 194-195.

<sup>26</sup> "Dixon Heads Polls in City by Thousands," *Manitoba Free Press*, June 30, 1920, p. 6; "P.R. Not Responsible," *Manitoba Free Press*, June 30, 1920, p. 15.

<sup>27</sup> "Tabulating Ballots at Science Building," *Manitoba Free Press*, July 19, 1922, p. 7.

<sup>28</sup> Elections Manitoba, "Summary of Election Procedures in Manitoba, 1870 to 1999," *Statement of Votes for the 38<sup>th</sup> Provincial General Election*, Winnipeg: Elections Manitoba, 2003, p. 195.

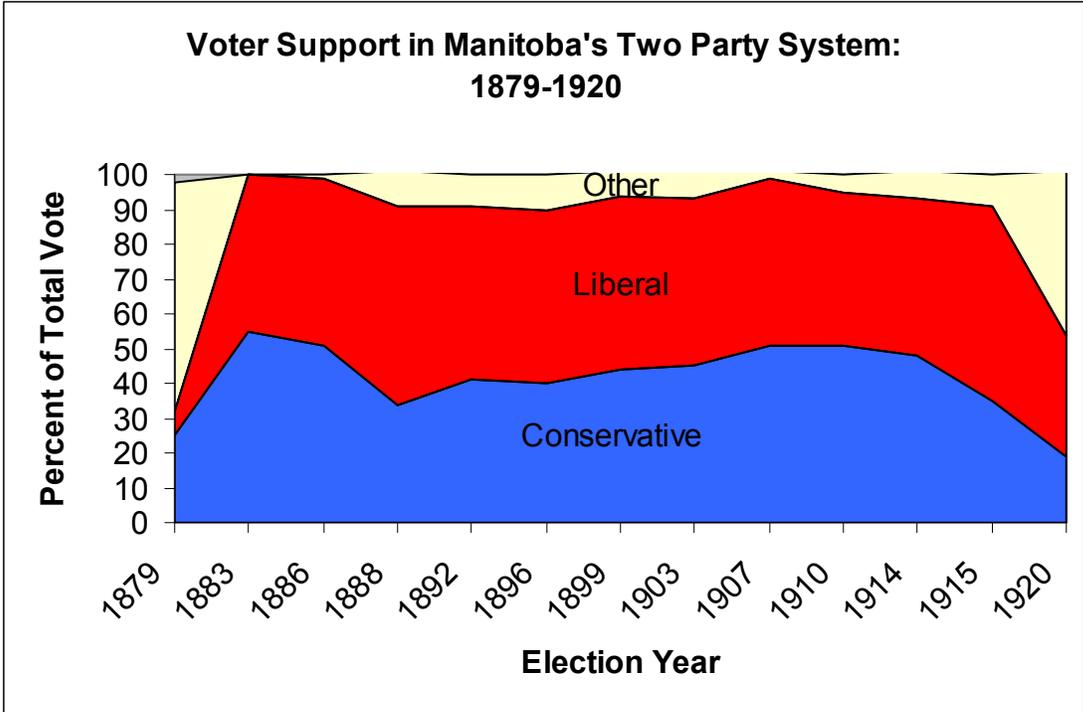


Figure 2: Data calculated from Elections Manitoba Historical Tables

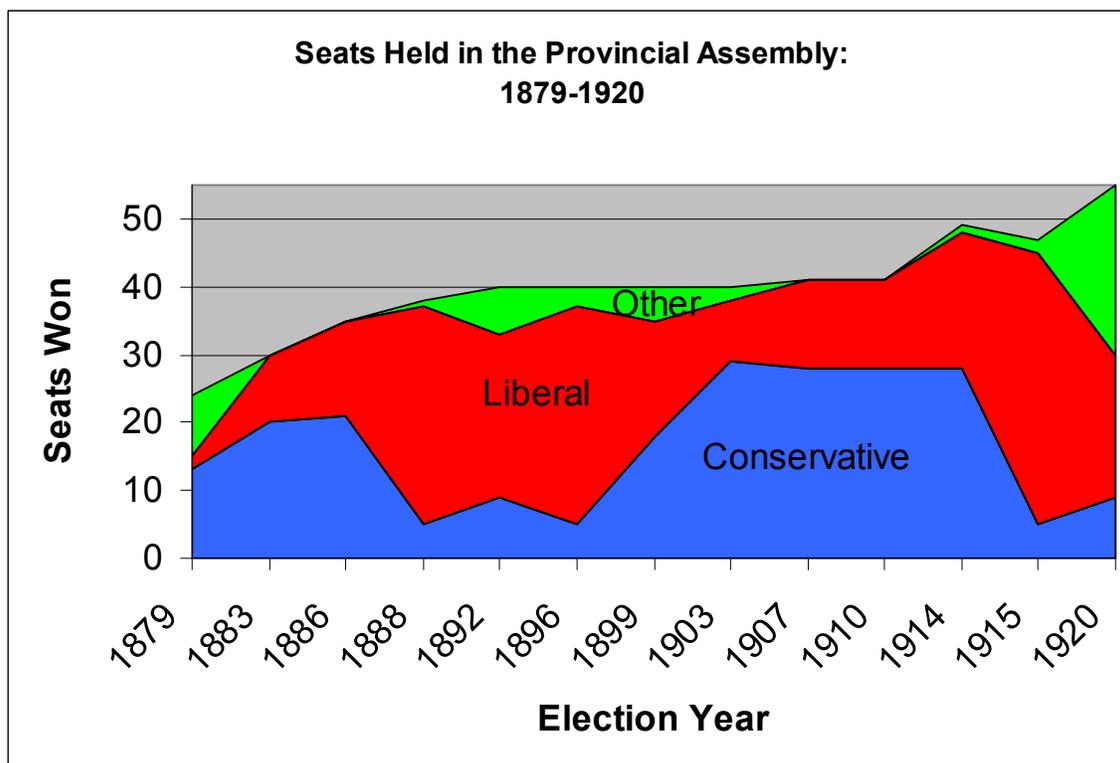


Figure 3: Data calculated from Elections Manitoba Historical Tables

### New Forms of Non-Partisanship

During the 1920s Canada's national two party system was severely challenged by the Progressive Party with its agrarian-based attacks on party politics and party-led governments. It was able to acquire more House of Commons seats than the Conservatives in the 1921 federal election.<sup>29</sup> At the provincial level in Manitoba a new era of anti-partisanship was also occurring. In 1922 the United Farmers of Manitoba (UFM) were elected to power. As was the platform of their federal agrarian counterparts, the UFM maintained that all votes in the assembly should be "free votes" rather than party-defined votes. This allowed for parties to operate as separate entities during each election (as shown in Chart 3), which they did, then behave outside the party system within the assembly. Such practices lead to oddities when parties are in opposition (as

<sup>29</sup> Due to their position that all elected members should vote according the wishes of their constituents rather than their party leaders, the Progressives did not seek out official opposition status. Their inability to maintain party discipline became their undoing as their elected members were wooed by the Liberal Party.

was the case with the Progressives decision to decline official opposition status in spite of having won 65 seats which was sufficient<sup>30</sup>) yet have major consequences in how a country or province, operating with the Westminster model of government, would be ruled. Thomas and Anstett describe this with regard to the UFM:

[T]he UFM group was led by John Bracken, who believed in co-operative group government as a way to ensure honesty and economy. A non-partisan approach would also end cabinet domination of the Assembly. Except for financial measures which would involve the life of the government, all legislative votes would be free votes.<sup>31</sup>

Continuing with this self-proclaimed non-partisan approach, in the subsequent election of 1927, John Bracken's Progressives labeled themselves the "Bracken Party" while running under the following slogan: "A Business (not a party) Government."<sup>32</sup> (This tactic would be implemented a half century later by Premier Gary Filmon, who was operating from a very shaky minority government position by including opposition party leaders in his negotiations over Manitoba's support for the Meech Lake Accord, and afterwards getting his party re-elected under "The Filmon Team" banner.) While the practitioners of Bracken's non-party government claimed that legislative non-partisanship would produce more effective representation by restricting parties in setting the legislative agenda, it effectively reduced democratic elements and the extent to which government decision-makers could be challenged.<sup>33</sup> In many ways non-partisanship served to maintain the south Winnipeg business/southern farmer *status quo* to the detriment of urban labour and socially disadvantaged segments of the population.<sup>34</sup> This condition would last for many years to come.

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<sup>30</sup> Bickerton, *et al*, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

<sup>31</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 93.

<sup>32</sup> Nelson Wiseman, *Social Democracy in Manitoba: A History of the CCF/NDP*, Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1983, p. 12.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Richard Dawson and James Robinson make the case that competitive party systems further the policy needs of the "have less". Non-partisan governments tend to serve the interests of socio-economic elites. See Richard Dawson and James Robinson, "Inter-Party Competition, Economic Variables, and Welfare Policies in the American States," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 25, 1963, pp. 265-289.

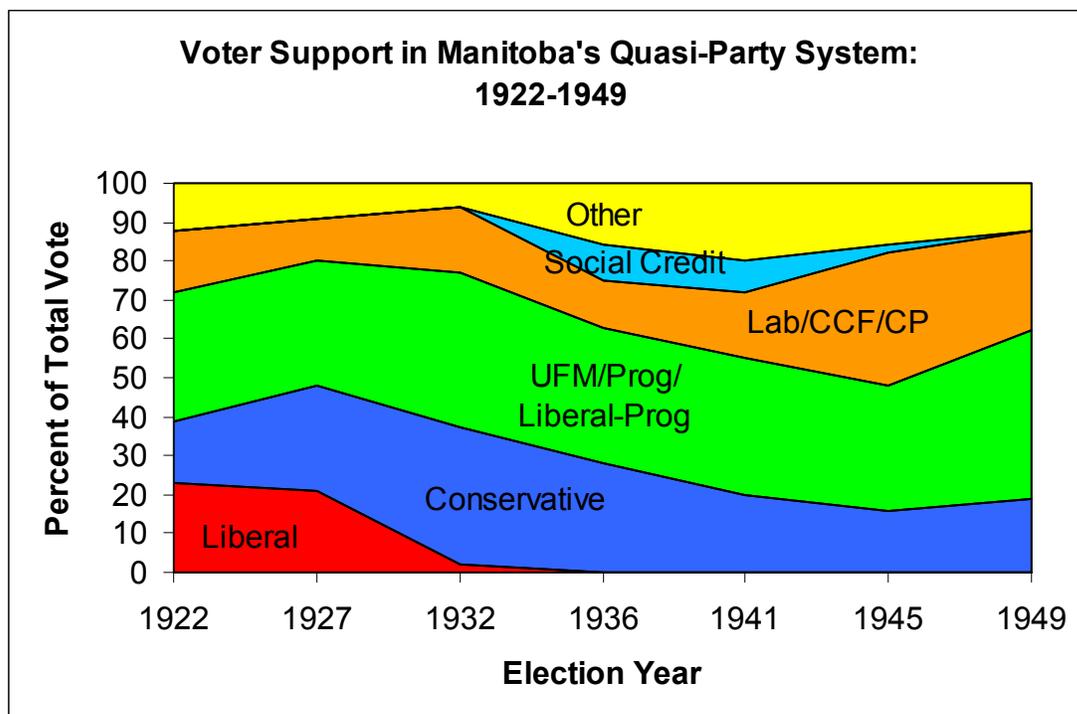


Figure 4: Data calculated from Elections Manitoba Historical Tables

By the 1940s, the competitive party system had almost evaporated, both in the assembly and within the electoral system. Figure 4 is deceptive in that candidates would run under their own party banners yet once elected could opt to support or oppose John Bracken's Liberal-Progressive government. The stultifying impact was evident by the fact that many seats were won through acclamation. Prior to the 1940s, no provincial election in the twentieth century had more than three ridings won through acclamation. Yet in the 1941 election, of the 45 non-Winnipeg ridings, 16 were won without any challengers. In 1945, seven of the 45 ridings were awarded in this fashion and, in 1949, 15 of the 45 ridings in 1949 were won through acclamation. Some years later Duff Roblin would reflect on his experiences as an MLA in the 1940s and the negative consequences of non-partisanship:

When the war ended, drawbacks of the coalition system became clear. It gave a strong tendency to reinforce the status quo in the legislature and in the constituencies. Coalition nominations were seldom contested, and a nomination in that system was the equivalent of election. The Progressive Conservative and Liberal Progressive [sic] party organizations generally co-operated in supporting whoever happened to be in the sitting member of the time, so this was pretty much a closed system. In the legislature, the

government proceeded serenely, not much disturbed by the views of the few members who were in the opposition.<sup>35</sup>

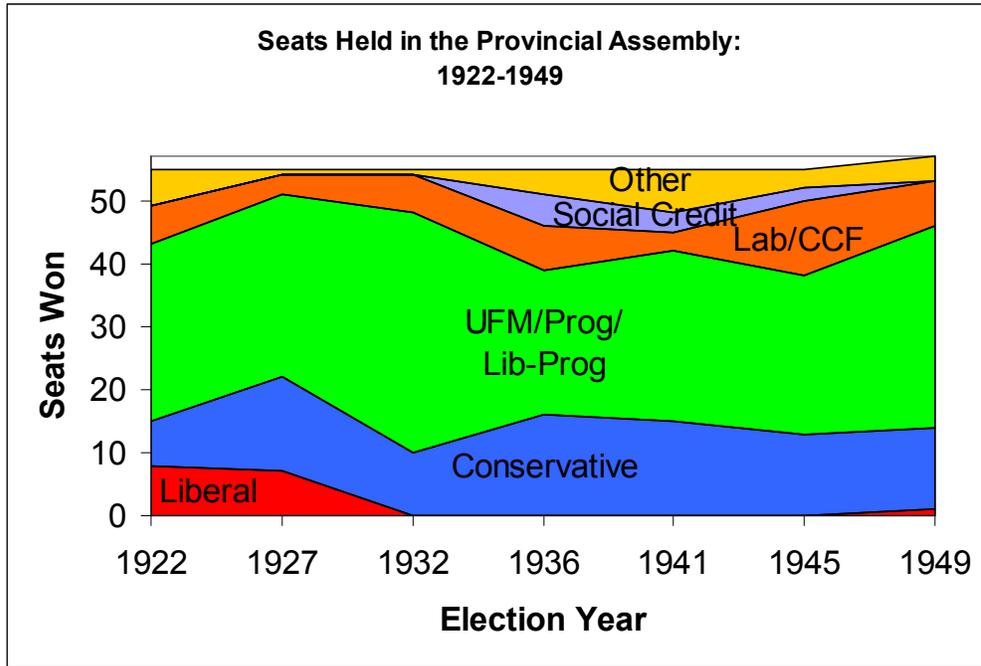
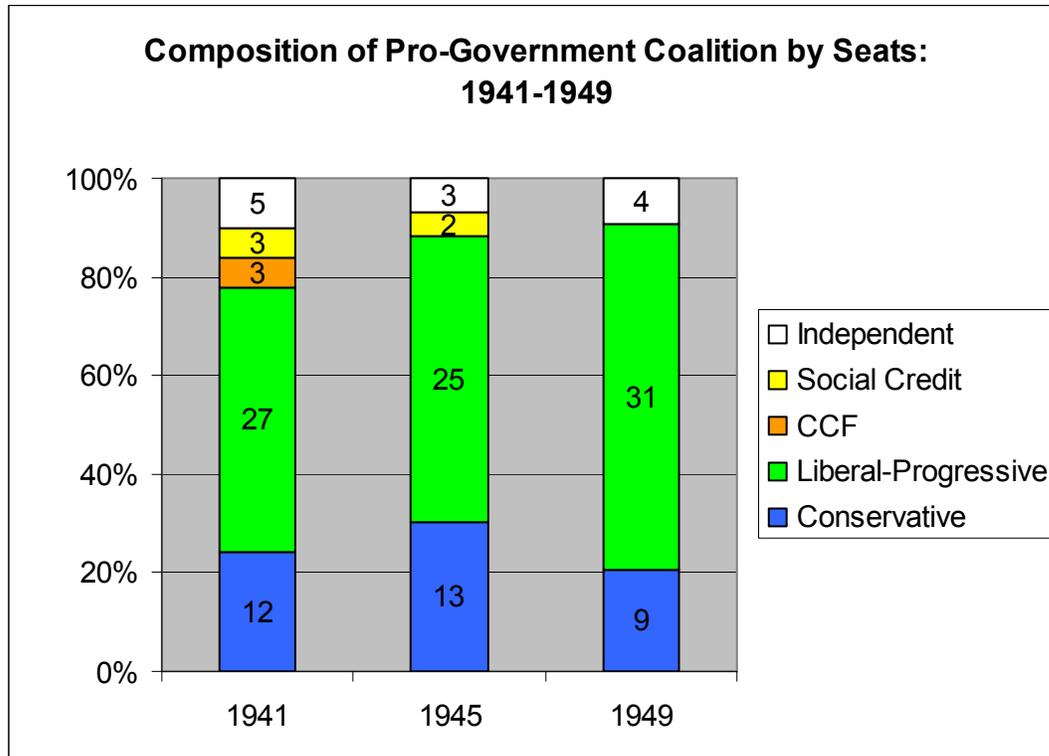


Figure 4: Data calculated from Elections Manitoba Historical Tables

<sup>35</sup> Duff Roblin, *Speaking for Myself: Politics and Other Pursuits*, Winnipeg: Great Plains Publications, 1999, p. 52.



**Figure 6: Data calculated from Elections Manitoba Historical Tables**

### Party System Normalization

Manitoba returned to a more normalized party system during the 1950s. That is, candidates battled against each other according to distinct party platforms, both on election day and in the legislature. The party with the most seats was expected to form the government while those elected to other parties would serve in opposition; there would be no non-partisan coalitions. In this new era, winning by acclamation had become a thing of the past. Only one riding in 1953 was won through acclamation (by Liberal-Progressive William Morton in Gladstone) and with none occurring in any subsequent provincial election. However, while the parties operated differently in this new era, like a New Year's Day hangover, Bracken's old Liberal-Progressive party now under the leadership of Douglas Campbell, continued to hold power until Duff Roblin's Progressive Conservatives were able to form a minority government in 1958.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Apparently, old habits die hard. In light of the 1958 results, the Liberal-Progressives attempted to hammer together a new coalition with the CCF in order to hold power. These talks failed and in discussion with Lieutenant-Governor J.S. McDiarmid, Roblin agreed to form a minority government on condition that McDiarmid grant dissolution if the government failed on a confidence motion, rather allow for renewed

With the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) also in the mix, the regularized party system was essentially a classical three party system, with all three of the major provincial parties jockeying for power. In retrospect, this party system served as a transition towards the current two-and-a-half party system (discussed in the following section) and is marked by the Liberal Party's (which would shed its "progressive" moniker during this period) decline from 39% of the provincial vote in 1953 to 33% in 1966, and then to 24% when the NDP came to power in 1969.

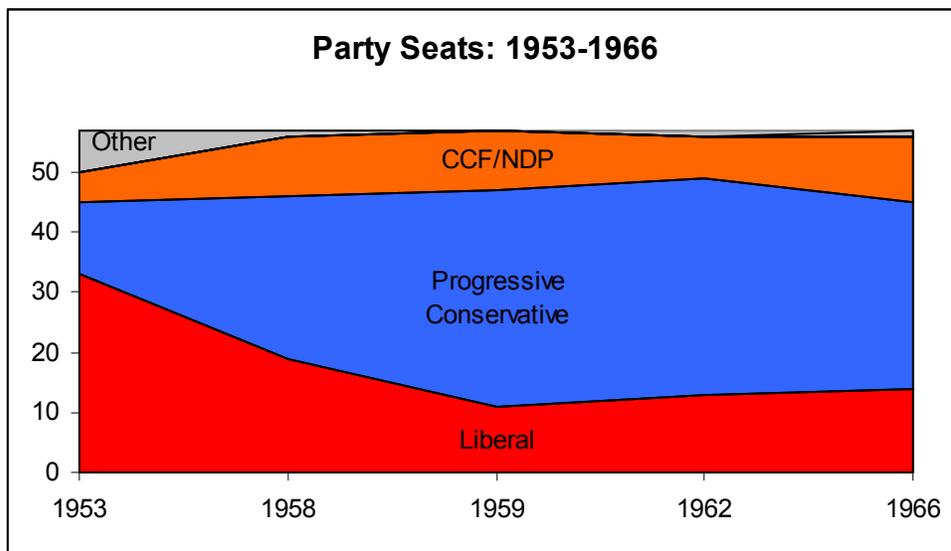


Figure 7: Data calculated from Elections Manitoba Historical Tables

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discussions to occur between the other two parties; a deal of questionable constitutionality. Roblin, *op. cit.*, pp. 89-90.

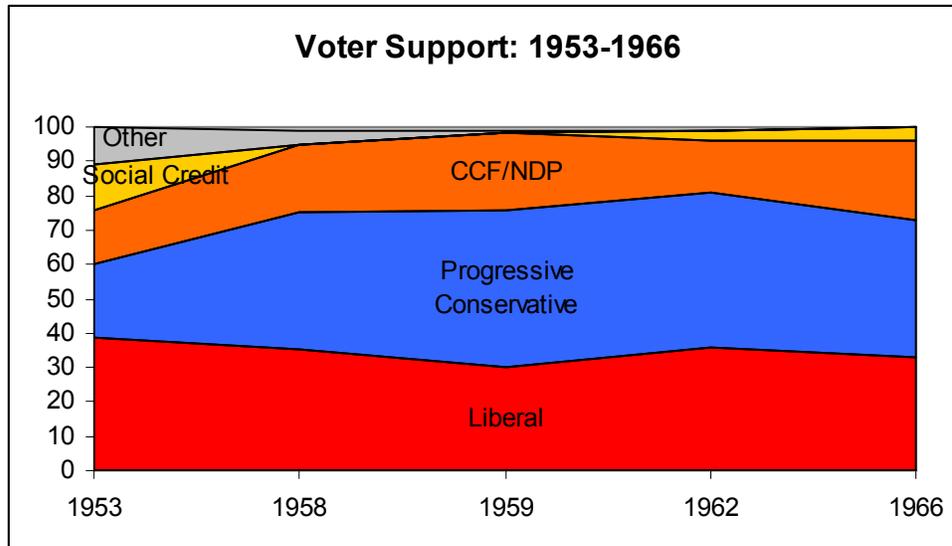


Figure 8: Data calculated from Elections Manitoba Historical Tables

### The Two and a Half Party System: 1969 onward

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s the CCF and its successor, the New Democratic Party (NDP), were a third place party with popular support ranging from 15% to 23%. Little did voters realize when visiting the voting station in 1969 that they were creating something more than just a potential change in government but also a new party system. Once the ballots were counted the effect was far from certain or immediate. The fact was that Ed Schreyer's NDP won less than half the seats with a slight plurality of the electorate (38% of the vote vs the PC's 35%) which was momentarily insufficient to form a new government. It was an inauspicious beginning to a new era in that a number of scenarios were possible from the 1969 outcome. The Liberals and PCs entered into negotiations among themselves in order to form a coalition government (with the possible support of the two lone Social Credit and Independent MLAs) that would have ex-Liberal leader Gildas Molgat serve as Premier. However, the future was sealed when St. Boniface Liberal Larry Desjardins crossed the floor to serve as a "Liberal Democrat" and to

support the new NDP government.<sup>37</sup> Desjardin's support for the minority NDP government cracked the opposition's back with long term consequences.

In what can now be termed a "realigning election",<sup>38</sup> after 1969, and with the exception of the 1988 election in which the Liberals formed the official opposition with 20 candidates elected with 35% of the vote, the battles for provincial government control have primarily occurred between the NDP and the PCs. The Liberals would have trouble breaking the 20% popular vote mark in most elections after 1969. In this sense, the three party system of the 1950s and 1960s had evolved into a two and a half party system. Every subsequent government has been won by either the NDP or the PCs. Under Premier Schreyer, the NDP ruled Manitoba from 1969 to 1977, and then under Howard Pawley from 1981 to 1988. Sterling Lyon led a one term PC government from 1977 to 1981 and, under the leadership of Gary Filmon, the PCs held power through three terms, from 1988 to 1999. In 1999 Gary Doer's NDP was elected to power with 44% of the vote and 32 seats in the assembly. In the 2003 election, Doer was able to further solidify the NDP's base of support by garnering 49% of the vote and 35 seats.

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<sup>37</sup> Source: <www.nationmaster.com> n.a., "Encyclopedia: Manitoba General Election, 1969." By 1973 he ran as a New Democrat and lost by one vote to Paul Marion for the Liberals (and with the PCs not running in order to have a combined anti-NDP vote), Marion's victory was later overturned.

<www.nationmaster.com> n.a., "Encyclopedia: Larry Desjardins".

<sup>38</sup> "A realignment may be defined as a significant shift in the group bases of party coalitions, and usually in the distribution of popular support among the parties as a result." Russell Dalton, *et al*, "Electoral Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies," in *Electoral Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies: Realignment or Dealignment?*, R. Dalton *et al*, eds., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984, p. 13.

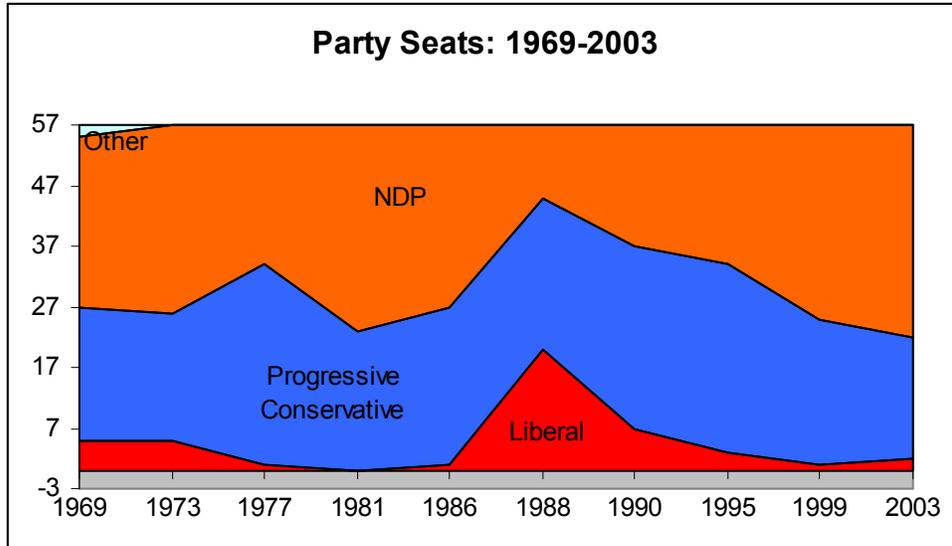


Figure 9: Data calculated from Elections Manitoba Historical Tables

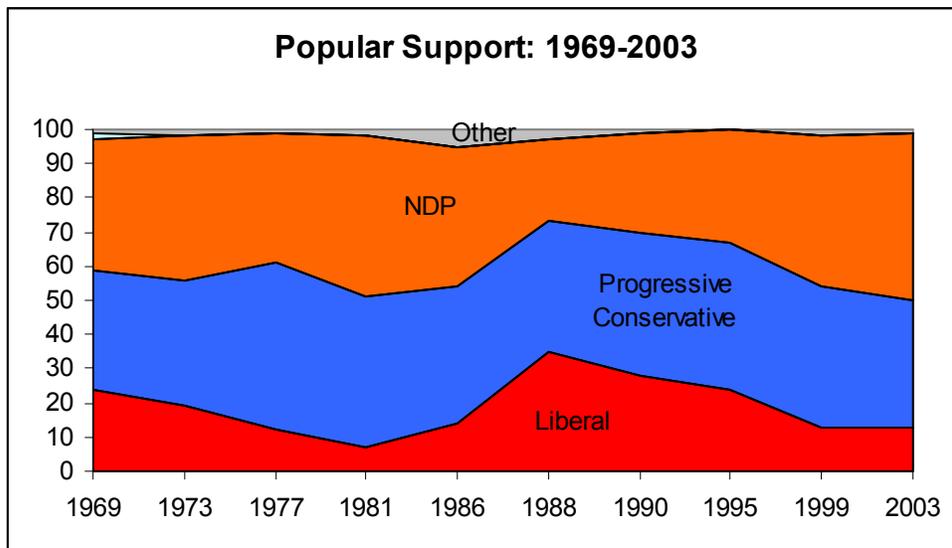


Figure 10: Data calculated from Elections Manitoba Historical Tables

## Conclusion

This paper has shown that Manitoba has operated with a number of party systems since joining Confederation. This includes an early formative system during the province's first decade, a functioning two-party alternating system that reflected the nation's national two-party system of Liberals versus Conservatives, a one-party dominant system led by John Bracken, with similarities to the United Farmer "non-partisan" governments of Ontario and Alberta. Under Bracken the government operated under a number of banners including the United Farmers of Manitoba, Progressive, and Liberal-Progressive. This was followed by a three party system which was marked by Duff Roblin's Progressive Conservatives. The system was transformed by what could be termed the "critical" and "realigning" election of 1969 which produced the basis for a two-and-a-half party system which has remained in place for over three and a half decades.

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