

CODE POLITICS: PARTY SYSTEM DEVELOPMENT ON THE CANADIAN PRAIRIES

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Abstract

Similar in so many ways, questions persist as to why Canada's three Prairie Provinces have developed such distinct patterns of party competition. Right-wing dynasties thrive in Alberta; Saskatchewan's natural governing party is avowedly social democratic; while party politics in Manitoba remains relatively balanced between the forces of the right and left. This paper supplements conventional solutions to this "prairie paradox" - grounded in political culture and settlement patterns - with an ideational analysis of campaign narratives. This examination reveals that each system is focused around a unique provincial "code." In Alberta, Social Credit and Progressive Conservative leaders have emphasized "freedom" over "security," whereas New Democrats in Saskatchewan have stressed precisely the opposite. Successful politicians in Manitoba have steered a middling course, underscoring the importance of "moderation" in their campaign rhetoric. Cultivated by, and constraining, prominent leaders over time, these dominant discourses help explain the persistent differences between the three worlds of party competition in the region.

Introduction

Considering their many commonalities, the three Prairie Provinces ought to feature similar patterns of party competition. Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta are each separated by essentially artificial boundaries, their borders based on arbitrary longitudinal lines, rather than topographic or ethnic divisions (Elton, 1970). All three are associated with a common iconic landscape: one with vast stretches of prairie, bounded only by mountains to the West and the Canadian Shield to the East. Tied so closely to the land, their populations have been historically small and rural, compared to their neighbours in British Columbia and Ontario. In natural resources and primary industry, the three Prairie provinces share a common economic base, dependent as it is on the unpredictable climates of the international market and the weather, and (according to some) vulnerable as it is to the economic engine of central Canada (Smith, 1976: 47-50). Furthermore, like all provinces, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta operate under the same Westminster style of parliamentary government and plurality-based electoral systems.¹ Thus, at first glance, one might expect the Prairie Provinces to share a common political climate. Closer examination of their provincial party systems reveals that Prairie Canadians live on three, distinct political terrains, however.

Only twice, for a total of nine years, has the same party formed government in all three provinces. Moreover, each province's party system has its own unique 'tilt.' Clear relationships exist between the dominance of conservatism and right-wing parties like Social Credit and the Progressive Conservatives in Alberta, and socialism and the success of the left-wing CCF-NDP in Saskatchewan. The balance between the forces of left and right in Manitoba help to set it apart from its Prairie neighbours in this respect. Aside from the major parties involved, the dynamics of competition between them varies drastically from province to province. Recent contests in Manitoba have involved "three enduring and competitive parties and the periodic experience of minority government" (Carty and Stewart, 1996), whereas Saskatchewan elections have been closer to a "two-plus" party model, and Alberta campaigns, a "one-party, non-competitive" type (McCormick, 1996). Similar in so many ways, Canada's three Prairie Provinces maintain distinct patterns of party competition. This irony constitutes the "paradox on the Prairies," to which the following pages are addressed.

This paper begins by defining the research problem. After relating the details of the prairie paradox, analysis proceeds to a review of the prevailing solution to the dilemma – Nelson Wiseman's "Patterns of Prairie Politics." Having noted the strengths and shortcomings associated with his approach, the paper then outlines an alternative model. As revealed, each of the three Prairie Provinces is characterized by a unique mode of campaign discourse that helps to define its politics and structure its party system. The Alberta code centers on the concept of "freedom," such that successful parties in that province have emphasized themes like individualism, populism, and autonomy. This dominant discourse differs from those found in Saskatchewan and Manitoba, where the most successful parties have stressed "security" and "moderation," respectively. By

¹ The single-transferable vote (STV) system was employed for cities in Manitoba (1920 to 1955) and Alberta (1924-1956); the alternate vote (AV) system was used in rural areas in Manitoba (1924 to 1955) and Alberta (1924-1956) (see: Adams, 2008: 10-18; Flores, 1983; Hasketh, 1987; Jansen, 2004).

crafting these unique “codes,” major party leaders have set the bounds of acceptable debate in their respective provinces, and constrained their opponents by labeling them as outsiders or enemies of the provincial community. In this way, dominant parties have helped perpetuate their own success, shaping the distinct patterns of party competition in the process. Such an emphasis on ideas and agency is missing in conventional accounts of party politics, and brings us one step closer to solving the “paradox” on the Canadian Prairies.

The Prairie Paradox

Considering the topographic, demographic, institutional, and economic parallels between the three provinces, the political diversity found on the Canadian prairies is puzzling. The contrast is starkest in terms of the region’s three provincial party systems.

Only four parties have governed Alberta – a fact that divides the province’s history into four distinct eras. Over sixteen years, the Liberal Party formed the province’s first four majority governments. Their successors, the United Farmers of Alberta (UFA), also enjoyed massive majorities throughout their fourteen years in power. Also true to form, the Farmers were unsurreptitiously removed from power by a new political party, William Aberhart’s Social Credit. The Socreds would win nine successive elections between 1935 and 1967, earning Aberhart (1935-1943) and his protégé, Ernest Manning (1943-1968) majority governments for over three decades. This dynasty came to an end under Social Credit Premier Harry Strom (1963-1971), whose loss of power in 1971 marked the most recent change of government. Since that time, four Progressive Conservative (PC) Premiers – Peter Lougheed (1971-1985), Don Getty (1985-1992), Ralph Klein (1992-2006), and Ed Stelmach (2006 to present) – have presided over a Canadian-record eleven consecutive majority governments. In sum, not once over the province’s first century have Alberta voters elected a minority government, with victorious parties winning an average of 49.9 percent of the popular vote and enjoying an average seat advantage of five to one over the opposition. What is more, no governing party has ever returned to power once ousted. In this, Alberta features the very definition of dynastic party competition (Bell et al., 2007; Thomas, 1959: xi). Most accounts characterize Alberta’s various governments as “right-wing,” reinforcing the province’s image as the bastion of Canadian conservatism.

This conservative, one-party dominant pattern contrasts sharply with Saskatchewan, where, since World War II, the province’s “natural governing party” has been avowedly social democratic (Praud and McQuarrie, 2001; Rasmussen, 2001). Four distinct parties have governed Saskatchewan since its entry to Confederation in 1905.² As a single organization, the Liberal Party has won the most elections, forming a total of ten (10) majority governments over the province’s first seven decades. The Conservatives have led a total of three (3) governments, including the Depression-era Anderson Coalition and Grant Devine’s two consecutive majorities in the 1980s. As heirs to province’s right-wing tradition, the Saskatchewan (Sask) Party formed its first

² In this count, I consider the CCF-NDP to constitute a single party.

government two years prior to writing. With the notable exception of the pre-war Liberals, none of these three parties has enjoyed sustained success, however. Since World War II, each has formed government only once, for a maximum of two terms (the Liberals, 1964 to 1971; the Conservatives, 1982 to 1991; and the Saskatchewan Party, 2007 to present). In this, episodes of right-wing party rule have served as interludes in the recent history of Saskatchewan politics.

The CCF and its successor, the NDP, have won the remaining twelve (12) Saskatchewan elections. Indeed, since running in its first campaign in 1938, the Saskatchewan CCF-NDP has won two of every three elections it has contested. Only one other Canadian party (the Ontario Conservatives, 72.2 percent) has enjoyed a better winning percentage over the same period. In terms of its consistency, the CCF-NDP is the only Saskatchewan party (and one of only a handful in Canadian history) to have governed in every decade since the Second World War. Over this period, every one of its leaders – from Douglas to Calvert – has served as premier; and the party is the only one in post-war Saskatchewan to have won three consecutive elections, performing the feat on three separate occasions (1944 to 1960; 1971 to 1978; and 1991 to 2003). Moreover, of all political parties in Canada, only five have averaged a higher proportion of the popular vote in the post-war period, none east of the Ottawa River. The depth of its dominance may not compare with right-wing dynasties in Alberta. Nonetheless, considering its longevity, the Saskatchewan CCF-NDP ranks as one of Canada's most successful "natural governing parties" (Praud and McQuarrie, 2001: 143; Rasmussen, 2001: 258; Wiseman, 2002: 218). Its ideological identity is what distinguishes the Saskatchewan CCF-NDP most, however. Since inspiring Lipset's *Agrarian Socialism* (1968) over forty years ago, the party remains the most successful social democratic organization in North America.

Further east, party competition in Manitoba has been more evenly balanced between the left and right. As in Alberta, the Progressive era ushered in a new form of party politics in Manitoba. Having pushed the Liberals into a minority position in 1920, the United Farmers of Manitoba (UFM) toppled the government – and the party system – two years later. Under various labels, the Farmers governed Manitoba, uninterrupted, for the next thirty-six years. After fusing with the provincial Grits in 1932, the party settled on the title "Liberal-Progressive" – a moniker that suited the diverse nature of its constituent elements, but is somewhat misleading with regard to the party's ideology. Under Premiers John Bracken, Stuart Garson, and Douglas Campbell, the Liberal-Progressives were as committed as any other Canadian party to the laissez-faire doctrine of classic liberalism. The Liberal-Progressives also preached a distinctive brand of "business-like" politics that was rhetorically "non-partisan," but "semi-partisan" in practice. Based on these principles, Bracken assembled a series of coalition governments throughout the 1930s and 1940s, making his party the only one in Canada to remain in power through both the Great Depression and the Second World War.

The Liberal-Progressives were ousted by a second "Progressive" party in 1958 – Duff Roblin's Progressive Conservatives – whose brand of red and blue toryism marked the beginning of Manitoba's modern province-building era. Roblin's definition of

“progress” differed distinctly from the laissez-faire approach of the Liberals, however, who had begun serving five decades as Manitoba’s marginalized third party.³ The Tory’s promotion of the “active state” provided a rhetorical and institutional foundation for the rise of Edward Schreyer’s New Democrats in 1969 (McAllister, 1984; McCaffrey, 1986; Netherton, 2001). Indeed, the rightward drift of the Conservatives under leader Walter Weir left much of the middle ground to Schreyer’s message of moderate social democracy. This mode of moderate politics shifted dramatically, if briefly, under Conservative Premier Sterling Lyon, whose new right ideology polarized the party system from 1977 through the mid-1980s (Wesley and Stewart, forthcoming). Lyon’s zealous approach to partisanship earned him a single term in office, however, making him the only premier in Manitoba history to win one (and only one) election, without retiring. Since that time, Manitoba politics has settled into its conventional mould, with the New Democrats (under social democrat Howard Pawley and third way democrat Gary Doer) and Conservatives (under tory-turned-new-right-conservative Gary Filmon) trading places in government. Since 1969, neither party has garnered the support of more than half, nor much less than a quarter, of Manitoba voters. The result has seen Manitoba politics develop into a relatively stable two-and-a-half-party system, anchored firmly in the centre of the political spectrum (see also: Adams, 2008; Dyck, 1996: 419; Peterson, 1978; Swainson, 1973; Wiseman, 1983: 147).

Thus, Alberta’s pattern of party competition has been *right-wing dynastic*, involving long-term, one-party dominance by conservative parties. Since 1944, Saskatchewan’s pattern has featured a *left-wing natural governing party*, whose control of the legislature has been less dominant and more frequently overturned. And, since 1958, the pattern of party politics in Manitoba has been the most *balanced and competitive*, both in terms of the electoral strength of its major parties, and in terms of their center-leaning ideologies.

In the end, as Wiseman (1992: 280) puts it, whatever broad similarities there may be among Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta, “Treating them as a single region is akin to trying to tie... watermelons together with a single piece of string” (see also: Gibbins, 1980: 147; Smith, 1981: xvi). Thus, the partisan diversity we find today poses a conundrum: Considering they were divided rather arbitrarily just over a century ago, why have Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta have developed into three worlds “thriving in the bosom of a single region?” (Smith, 1976: 46). The following section reviews one prominent explanation, concluding that – by downplaying the role of agency – the political culture approach offers only a partial solution to this prairie paradox.

Wiseman’s Patterns

An extensive review of the literature reveals only one in depth, comparative analysis of political diversity in the region.⁴ In it, Nelson Wiseman (2001; 2006; 2007:

³ The Liberal-Progressives dropped the term “Progressive” from their party name in 1960..

⁴ While obvious to even casual observers of Canadian politics, the Prairie paradox remains underexamined by the academic community. Although extensive attention has been paid to specific elements of party

211-262) attributes the distinct “Patterns of Prairie Politics” to a combination of structural factors, including, most notably, settlement patterns and political culture.⁵

According to Wiseman’s (2001; 2002; 2006; 2007: 20-34) adaptation of Hartzian fragment theory, the political diversity among the three Prairie provinces may be traced to their early immigration patterns. Beginning with the opening of the West in the late-19th Century, Manitoba drew the vast majority of its settlers from the province of Ontario (Wiseman, 1983: 3-5). These pioneers brought with them a “tory-touched liberalism” (and a corresponding aversion to populist radicalism) not found in other parts of the prairies (see also: Dyck, 1996: 381-382; Morton, 1967a: viii; Peterson, 1972: 71; Rea, 1969; Young, 1978: 5). This tory fragment not only helps to explain the long-term survival of the Conservative Party in Manitoba. It suggests why socialism found a toehold in Manitoba in the form of the Independent Labour Party, CCF and, most recently, the NDP: the organic sense of community embodied in toryism combined with the reform-minded philosophy of liberalism to produce an environment conducive to socialism (see: Hartz, 1964; Horowitz, 1966; McAllister, 1984: 90-93). British labourites, whose brand of Fabian socialism found a sympathetic ear among the province’s working class population, seized this opportunity, establishing the partisan foundations for the modern New Democratic Party (Wiseman, 1983: 4-9).

By contrast, Wiseman attributes the dominance of social democracy in Saskatchewan to the direct immigration of Fabian-influenced British settlers in the first decades of the 20th Century (see also: Archer, 1980: 11; Dyck, 1996: 440; Lipset, 1968: 43-44). These immigrants settled largely in rural areas, providing the basis for what Lipset (1968) once termed “agrarian socialism.” Thus, while both Manitoba and Saskatchewan share a common social democratic impulse – distinguishing the “Midwest” from the “Parvenu Political Culture” of “Far West” – each owes its ideological heritage to a unique set of fragments (Wiseman, 2007).

With a larger proportion of American settlers than Manitoba and Saskatchewan, Alberta developed a greater penchant for laissez-faire liberalism (see also: Flanagan and Lee, 1992; Pickup et al., 2004; Swann, 1971: 57). “North America’s western reaches have always been associated with opportunity and fresh beginnings,” Wiseman (2007: 237) argues, “with potential wealth and upward mobility. ‘Go west young man’ communicates that, in a frontier environment, a lack of qualifications and status is a surmountable barrier in one’s quest for riches or power.” As a result of its American

competition in the region, including the emergence of protest parties like Social Credit and the CCF (e.g., Johnson, 1979; Melnyk, 1992; Morton, 1967b; Naylor and Teeple, 1972; Sinclair, 1979; Smith, 1969) or the decline of the once-dominant Liberal party (e.g., Fischer, 1986; Haverstock, 2001; Lang, 1991; Smith, 1981; Wilson, 1980), most of these studies have been idiosyncratic. That is, they have tended to focus on individual provinces, elections, or parties, dividing Prairie politics into a series of separate “silos” (Wiseman, 2007: 237). Wiseman’s is certainly not the only account of party system diversity on the Prairies. Yet, its seminal nature makes Wiseman’s research the focal point of this literature review.

⁵ Space does not permit a discussion of Wiseman’s entire model. In it, he outlines the importance of formative events and political economy (staples) in helping to explain the divergent patterns of party competition on the Prairies. Wiseman, himself, notes the many shortcomings associated with these approaches, and hinges the bulk of his argument on political culture and settlement patterns.

roots, Alberta has proven fertile ground for right-wing populist parties, and relatively inhospitable to tory-touched liberalism, socialism, and old-line political parties.

In the end, Wiseman argues, these unique immigration patterns have contributed to the development of Manitoba into the “Ontario of the Prairies,” featuring a moderate competition between the forces of left and right; Saskatchewan, with its proclivity toward social democracy, into “The Prairies’ Britain;” and Alberta, the most conservative of Canada’s provinces, into “the Prairies’ Great Plains America.” “There is no single overriding political tradition on the prairies,” he asserts (Wiseman, 2002: 218). There are three.

Wiseman’s account is by far the most in depth and persuasive in the literature on prairie party system development. Yet, while he is not wrong in considering the Prairies’ three patterns of party competition as byproducts of their political cultures, he is only half-right. The foundations of fragment theory have cracked over time (see: Ajzenstat and Smith, 1998; Bell and Tepperman, 1979; Dewar, 1983; Forbes, 1987; Preece, 1977, 1980; Stewart, 1994; Wilton, 2000). Wiseman (2007: 10) recognizes this, qualifying his research as an attempt to “extend but also swerve from the Hartz-Horowitz approach by contextualizing some of its features regionally.” Nonetheless, several gaps remain in his account.

First and foremost, while providing an attractive description of the origins of political culture on the Prairies, Wiseman’s work lacks an explanation of the means through which liberalism, socialism, and the tory touch are transmitted from these early periods to today’s societies. Related to this, fragment theory implies congealment – a vague and often unspecified point at which the province’s political culture ‘freezes’ following decisive waves of immigration. In Wiseman’s analysis, this congealment occurred almost a full century ago, meaning that subsequent decades have been relatively uneventful when it comes to explaining the “Patterns of Prairie Politics.” For instance, his account suggests a group of liberal, early-1900s settlers from the American mid-west have left a more significant impact on Alberta than the original Eastern Canadian pioneers, socialist-inspired progressives, or the thousands of (im)migrants that have moved to the province over the last five decades. By the 1980s, the entire Prairie region had become “increasingly homogeneous and increasingly like the rest of the developing world” in terms of its urban, multi-ethnic character (Friesen, 1984: 2) (see also: Friesen, 1999: 27-31; Gibbins, 1984; Smith, 1984). As Friesen (1999: 26) suggests, “the alternations in western circumstances during the present generation are so profound that Canadians living outside the region might be surprised by the scale of the changes” (see also: Friesen, 1996: 39-41). Overall, Wiseman’s use of fragment theory does not explain why or how each province’s original settlement patterns continued to hold influence despite these tremendous transformations. In short, while he may be accurate in his *description*, Wiseman does not explain *how or why* the realities of the “old prairies” continue to shape the “new prairies” (Gibbins, 1980: 1-2). His account is not inaccurate; it is merely incomplete.

In providing a valuable account of the *origins* of Prairie politics, Wiseman leaves his students without a clear understanding of the *mechanism* through which cultures are transmitted from one generation to the next, or from established residents to newcomers. Examined here, one such mechanism lies in the power of rhetoric and, in particular, the development of party ideologies and provincial codes by political elites. In these ways, the present analysis is intended less to correct, than to supplement, Wiseman's "rumination on Canadian politics" (Wiseman, 2007: 1). The following section outlines this "code politics" model.

The Three Codes of Prairie Politics

While the term may be new to some, the concept of "code politics" is by no means novel. Richard Hofstadter (1957 [1947]: viii, ix) referred to the notion as a community's "political tradition" – "a kind of mute organic consistency" in terms of a society's guiding ethos, as expressed by its elites (see also: Blair and McLeod, 1987, 1993).⁶ Under these circumstances, political systems

do not foster ideas that are hostile to their fundamental working arrangements. Such ideas may appear, but they are slowly and persistently insulated, as an oyster deposits nacre around an irritant. They are confined to small groups of dissenters and alienated intellectuals, and except in revolutionary times they do not circulate among practical politicians. The range of ideas, therefore, which practical politicians can conveniently believe in is normally limited by the climate of opinion that sustains their culture. They differ, sometimes bitterly, over current issues, but they also share a general framework of ideas which makes it possible for them to co-operate when the campaigns are over (Hofstadter, 1957 [1947]: viii-ix).

Samuel Huntington (1981: 32) concurs with Hofstadter, suggesting that most, if not all, political systems feature a distinctive "creed" – a set of "prevailing political values" that forge "consensus" among political actors.

According to this model, parties operate under common "dominant discursive paradigms," which guide their interactions (Berkhofer, 1995: 212; Hall, 1985: 104-105; see also: Hartz, 1955; Pal, 1988: 89). These narrative constructs, or codes, set the "bounds of thinkable thought" (Gerring, 1998: 54), thereby placing borders around "the terrain of common sense" and acceptable rhetoric (Hull and Silver, 1990: 335). Codes are thus a specific type of political *paradigm* – a dominant set of ideas concerning the role of the state (Netherton, 2001: 203). A paradigm, like a code, is a "common understanding of what governments ought to do," or a consensus on "the fundamental roles of governments" (Netherton, 1992: 175, 176).

⁶ For critiques of Hofstadter's work, and the "Consensus School" that it spawned, see Kendall and Carey (1970) and Friesen (2009).

Codes are essentially the products of repetition. Narratives achieve dominance when successful political parties and leaders champion them, thus instilling in partisan debates a popular definition of the proper role of the provincial state. The constant reiteration of these campaign themes by dominant parties serves to define “the normal” and “the acceptable” in a given party system. Dominance begets dominance, in this sense, as successful parties draw strength from the dominant narrative, while, at the same time, their success serves to reinforce their message as the prevailing definition of politics.

Understanding the nature of “code politics” requires an appreciation of the complex relationships between elite-level codes, mass-level cultures and party ideologies. As Friesen (1999: 135) suggests, “there are tendencies – patterns of thought and behaviour in any political system.” At the elite level, these “tendencies” form “codes” of discourse among parties and their leaders, expressed most publicly through party rhetoric during election campaigns. At the mass societal level, the tendencies are embodied in the community’s political culture – its ethos and symbols. Ideologies, on the other hand, are abstract definitions of the ideal society, which, when carried by political parties and their leaders, become weapons in campaign conflict. By its very nature, each code is an elite-level interpretation, or projection, of the society’s overarching values. In crafting their campaign rhetoric, the most successful parties “necessarily build upon a [community’s] history and upon a widely-shared understanding of that history,” and, in effect transport those values across time (Gerring, 1998: 41). As such, codes often contain many of the same values, beliefs, and principles embodied in the broader political culture. However, there is a critical distinction between codes – “formal, explicit, and relatively consistent definitions of political community” among political elites – and cultures – “the informal, implicit, and relatively inconsistent understandings of political community held by people within a given institutional setting” (Hanson, 2003: 356). Codes are, thus, important elements of a supply-side examination of democracy, whereas a demand-side study would be required to uncover the nature of political culture (Damore, 2004). In the end, successful parties are those whose ideologies correspond with both the code and culture; this can be seen in the triumphs of populist, conservative parties in Alberta, collectivist social democrats in Saskatchewan, or centrist progressives in Manitoba. These codes are community-specific, meaning that the nature of discourse often differs starkly from polity to polity.

Each code contains a unique, core symbol that focuses elite-level competition around a different set of expectations about the state’s function in society and the economy, and its role in relation to other states. Discussed in greater detail below, Alberta’s code stresses the importance of “freedom;” in Saskatchewan, “security;” and in Manitoba, “moderation.” The following analysis synthesizes existing literature to provide a coherent account of how dominant parties have crafted their campaign appeals over time. This approach complements a primary content analysis of party manifestos, platforms and campaign literature, which constitutes a major part of the larger study (Wesley, forthcoming).

Freedom in Alberta

Since the Great Depression, Alberta politics has been dominated by freedom-based narrative as defined by Social Credit and, later, the Progressive Conservatives. At the elite level, this code has contained three core elements, each of which has figured more or less prominently at different points in the province's history.

The first component of the Alberta code, *populism*, emphasizes freedom from government overreach, be it from Ottawa, Rome or Edmonton. Through their campaign rhetoric, prominent Alberta party leaders have railed against all forms of external control – from government, banks, monopolies, traditional political parties, churches, or other sources of authority. This anti-establishment sentiment is closely related to the second major facet of the Alberta code: *individualism*. Throughout much of the past seven decades, Social Credit and Conservative party rhetoric has stressed the primacy of the individual as the core unit of society. In their platforms, we find constant reference to individual initiative, free enterprise, hard work, and a general “go-it-alone,” “parvenu” philosophy (Wiseman, 2007). A third and final aspect of the province's code stresses the alienation of Alberta from important centers of decision-making, specifically those in Central Canada. In response, prominent Alberta elites have promoted the *autonomy* (freedom) of the provincial state, with the premier acting as “the societal spokesperson for his province” (Wiseman, 2007: 240) (see also: Gibbins, 1998). Macpherson (1977) and Elton and Goddard (1979) have referred to this as a “quasi-colonial mentality” that disparages outside control over Alberta's economy and society, particularly by the commercial interests of Ontario and Quebec, and the federal government in Ottawa (Dyck, 1996: 509; Engemann, 1989: 111; Lisac, 2004: 2).

Together, these three pillars – populism, individualism, and provincial autonomy – have helped structure Alberta politics around a freedom-based narrative, one that has insulated right-wing parties from attack, and hampered the efforts of those whose ideologies lie outside, or conflict with, the dominant discourse.

Security in Saskatchewan

Leading CCF-NDP politicians have portrayed Saskatchewan as a land of unrealized opportunity, and one under continual threat from both inside and outside its borders (Eisler, 2005). In this sense, the dominant narrative in Saskatchewan orbits around the concept of “security,” with party competition involving the identification of the greatest dangers to the Saskatchewan community, and the definition of how best to protect the people from these pressures. While these threats and solutions have varied over time, three core elements of the Saskatchewan code have persisted.

First and foremost, dominant elites have stressed the importance of *collectivism* in preserving security in Saskatchewan. Party platforms are replete with references to community, co-operation, partnerships, and togetherness. Second, while valuing collectivism at the societal level, the province's narrative also contains a heavy dose of *dirigisme* – a belief in reserving a strong role for the state in directing both society and

the economy. To a greater extent than their Prairie neighbours, Saskatchewan elites have consistently promoted government as a positive instrument in political, social and economic life. In this, they have offered a distinctly “experimental, utilitarian perspective on the role of the state” (Dyck, 1996: 440).

One element is noticeably absent from this aspect of the Saskatchewan code, however: the province’s narrative has lacked the same sense of sectarian solidarity found elsewhere in Western Canada. In contrast with the charged rhetoric found in Alberta, for instance, Saskatchewan elites have tended to treat federalism as a “bureaucratic process instead of an emotionally and historically contested concept” (McGrane, 2005: 26).⁷ This approach has a lot to do with Saskatchewan’s historic position as a ‘have-not’ province in Confederation; under these circumstances, being critical of the federal government has been a luxury few Saskatchewan leaders could afford (Dyck, 1996: 441). Yet, as discussed below, the lack of liberationist rhetoric also has a lot to do with the definition of the Saskatchewan provided by dominant parties. Premiers from Gardiner and Douglas to Romanow and Calvert have portrayed Saskatchewan as an independent, pioneering – but seldom virulently autonomous – province.

Lastly, while the collectivist vision predominates, the Saskatchewan code also contains an element of *polarization*. Through their rhetoric, provincial elites have consistently highlighted the conflict between the prevailing force of social democracy and a traditionally weaker element of free-market liberalism (Andrews, 1982: 58; Dyck, 1996: 442). Leaders on the left depict the latter as a menace, while those on the right champion their cause in the face of an oppressive socialist majority (Wishlow, 2001: 170). This same sense of polarization is present neither in the Alberta code, where conservatism dominates to the virtual exclusion of left-wing influence, nor in Manitoba, where ideological moderation prevails.

This element of polarization has included an acceptance of the party as a legitimate vehicle for political debate, and the party system as an ideal venue for conflict. As a result,

Party politics in Saskatchewan has been active, intense, and for a good part of the province’s history, highly competitive... This is especially striking if one compares the political system of Saskatchewan with the Alberta and Manitoba systems. Partisan politics impregnates, with few exceptions, every issue faced by Saskatchewanians, whether it be the marketing of a particular agricultural commodity or the proposed establishment of a government-operated medical care insurance program (Courtney and Smith, 1972: 317).

⁷ While the province has certainly not been immune to province-first rhetoric – with notable episodes including debates over the original terms of Autonomy, and Blakeney’s combative approach toward Trudeau’s federal government in the late-1970s (Dunn and Laycock, 1992; Dyck, 1996: 475) – McGrane (2005: 26) is correct when he asserts that “if western alienation in Saskatchewan is not dead, it clearly is on its deathbed.”

Combined, these three elements – collectivism, dirigisme, and polarization – constitute the Saskatchewan code of security. It is a narrative in which both dominant parties, from the early Liberals to the CCF and NDP, have shaped their political rhetoric.

Moderation in Manitoba

If party systems in Alberta and Saskatchewan have pivoted on questions of right versus left, politics in Manitoba have been divided between proponents of change versus defenders of the status quo. Rather than accepting dramatic change as a necessary function of politics, and debating its *direction*, to a greater extent conflict in Manitoba has revolved around the *need* for, or speed of, change – with one side arguing in favor of a modest improvements and the other for the preservation of existing order and trajectory. Thus, the overwhelming majority of Manitoba election campaigns have featured a “straightforward competition between those disposed toward reform and equalization and those who expressed the need for restraint and stability” (Peterson, 1972: 115). This tension lies at the heart of the concept of “progress” – a term over which Manitoba parties have struggled throughout the past century.

Indeed, *progressive centrism* constitutes the foremost element of Manitoba campaign discourse. More than in any other Prairie Province, elites in Manitoba have consistently stressed the importance of avoiding extreme ideological positions in favor of pragmatic, “middle-of-the-road,” incremental policies and programs (Lang, 1991: 92). In this endeavour, prominent leaders of the Liberal-Progressives, Progressive Conservatives, and New Democrats have tended to adapt their positions according to the dominant “paradigms” of their time, be they classic liberalism, Keynesianism or, more recently, neo-liberalism (Netherton, 2001). This is not to say that Manitoba parties have been unprincipled, or devoid of ideological commitment. Recounted below and elsewhere, Manitoba parties have taken distinct left-wing and right-wing positions throughout history (Wesley, 2006, 2009). Yet, the differences between them have been much subtler than those found in Saskatchewan and Alberta.

Ultimately, the persistence of this theme of moderation goes some way in explaining why – with the notable exceptions of Ed Schreyer and Sterling Lyon – most of Manitoba’s party leaders have been praised for their competence and congeniality, as opposed to their vision and charisma (see: Dyck, 1996: 385-386). They have been viewed as both reformist – adopting change when necessary and where popular – and conservationist – standing by established ends and means, and relying on compromise and patience. As Morton put it, Manitoba leaders have tended to be “hard-headed, practical men who took life as they found it, were skeptical of reform and... indifferent to idealism” (Morton, 1967a: 335). Again, this places Manitoba in sharp contrast with Alberta and Saskatchewan, where leaders have been prided for their personal magnetism and boldness.

In this sense, the search for the progressive centre is related to the second component of the Manitoba code: *realism*. Since the province lost its status as the

commercial and transportation gateway to the Canadian West with the opening of the Panama Canal at the turn of the last century, its politicians have adopted a modest, cautious view of Manitoba's economic and political future (Morton, 1967a: 308). In the province's dominant political narrative, there is little trace of the utopian visions of an ideal society embedded in the other two prairie codes. This sense of reality underlies the incrementalism that pervades major party platforms in Manitoba, both in terms of their policy pledges and their rhetoric. With few notable exceptions, the focus of party elites has been on convincing voters that they offer a "better administration" of government, rather than a fundamentally "better way" of doing politics. This is not to say Manitoba leaders are pessimistic or defeatist, as others have suggested.⁸ Far from it. The realism found in the Manitoba code merely reflects a belief that, with its stable and diversified economy and society, a "better Manitoba" is more attainable and desirable than an unrealistically "ideal" one.

A final, related element of the Manitoba code is *flexible partisanship*. In their campaign rhetoric, Manitoba elites have tended to promote a more fluid conceptualization of party interaction than their counterparts in Saskatchewan or Alberta. At times, the Manitoba narrative has defined politics as a "non-partisan" affair, as the efforts to create broad, formal coalitions in the early-20th Century attest; or as multi-partisan, as seen in during periods of negotiation over Manitoba's constitutional position in later decades. Some attribute this partisan flexibility to a form of "politicophobia" – a concern over contesting controversial issues in the partisan arena for fear of dividing the province, or losing elections (Taylor and Wiseman, 1977: 176). Others view the approach as placing provincial interests above partisan ones. Either way, this form of "stewardship" has been practiced by Manitoba's most successful premiers, beginning with John Norquay, who "believed that the government should represent not a party but a province, both to conciliate groups within it, and also to strengthen the province in negotiations with Ottawa" (Morton, 1967a: 197).

On the latter point, moderation in Manitoba has also extended to the realm of federal-provincial relations, where links between Winnipeg and Ottawa have been far friendlier than in other Western Canadian capitals (Dyck, 1996: 381; Friesen, 2009). Even prior to achieving provincehood, Manitoba had always held a central place in Canadian nation-building, and its founding settlers, elites and institutions were drawn predominantly from Ontario. As a result of this, and its historic position as a have-not province, Manitoba has been more closely tied to central Canada than either of its Prairie neighbours (Morton, 1967a: 420-421). It has lacked the same "oppositional reflex" as found in Alberta (Friesen, 1999: 9), and, compared with either of its western neighbours, exhibits the lowest level of "parochial boosterism" (Leadbeater, 1984: xi) during its election campaigns.

Friesen's (1999: 184) third prairie myth, that of the "eagle feather," symbolizes (as it does for some First Nations cultures) the elements of honor, friendship, and diversity that are sometimes associated with the settler societies of the Canadian West.

⁸ Friesen (1999: 127) alludes to an "atmosphere of negativism" that has pervaded Manitoba since its gradual decline as the Gateway to the West began in the early-20th century.

All three elements of the Manitoba code speak to this same spirit of conciliation and accommodation that characterizes normal periods in Manitoba politics. Periodic interruptions have occurred, but the dominant narrative, as cultivated by elites bent on stability, mitigates their intensity and duration.

The Mechanics of Code Politics

As the synopses in the preceding section suggest, the most successful parties in each of the three Prairie provinces have spoken with distinct rhetorical “accents” during election campaigns. These political “codes” – “freedom” in Alberta, “security” in Saskatchewan, and “moderation” in Manitoba – have helped divide the region into three very different political worlds. Some may consider these findings merely an *indication*, rather than an *explanation* of why the three party systems differ so greatly. This raises a debate over whether elite discourse, and the ideas that comprise it, actually exert an independent influence on political outcomes. In other words, are the codes discussed in the previous section merely the *symptoms* of long-term dominance by political parties, or are they actually the *source* of these patterns of party competition?

It seems straightforward to draw the causal arrow in the former direction, from patterns to narratives. From this perspective, the fact that the Alberta code is grounded in the right-wing concept of “freedom” is due, quite simply, to the longevity of conservative parties in office. The same is true in Saskatchewan and Manitoba, where left-leaning and centre-straddling parties have prevailed at the polls and in terms of establishing their own ideologies as paramount. Yet, the causal arrow could just as easily point in the opposite direction. Left-wing parties could enjoy natural governing status in Saskatchewan, and moderate parties could thrive in Manitoba, because separate codes of elite discourse help ensure their success. As narrative constructs, these codes could structure the way parties compete, and establish a system of advantages and disadvantages for certain organizations. Hence, rather than *resulting* from party competition, these dominant narratives could actually *shape* or *reinforce* it.

Like most questions of structure versus agency, this dichotomy is largely artificial. As the following discussion reveals, the causal arrow runs in both directions: patterns of party competition and dominant narratives reinforce one another. While the stability of the former contributes to the durability of the latter, at the same time, the persistence of a code makes the continued success of dominant parties more likely. Party dominance begets ideological prominence, and vice versa – a point Duverger (1967 [1951]: 308) made decades ago.⁹

Drawing on these observations, the following pages advance a supplementary solution to the Prairie paradox, in which dominant narratives both reflect and constrain

⁹ More than its electoral superiority, Duverger (1967 [1951]: 308) argues “A party is dominant when it is identified with an epoch; when its doctrines, ideas, methods, its style, so to speak, coincide with those of the epoch... Domination is a question of influence rather than of strength: it is also linked with belief. A dominant party is that which public opinion *believes* to be dominant.”

party behavior. On the latter point, codes help determine patterns of party competition by defining the acceptable role(s) for the provincial government and, just as importantly, identifying key “enemies” of the state. Opposition parties often find it difficult to overcome these constraints, as their own visions typically conflict with, or are marginalized by, the prevailing discourse. As a result, unique patterns of competition develop in each polity, bestowing certain parties with advantages, and penalizing others, depending on the content of the dominant narrative.

Codes shape politics in much the same way as constitutions, laws, and other more conventional institutions. In addition to rules, norms, and customs, codes provide symbols, cognitive scripts and moral templates that shape, consciously or subconsciously, the conduct of political actors, namely parties and their leaders (Steinmo et al., 1992). Through these constraints, “(1) players are identified, (2) prospective outcomes are determined, (3) alternative modes of deliberations are permitted, and (4) the specific manner in which revealed preferences, over allowable alternatives, by eligible participants, occurs” (Shepsle, 1989: 135).

By creating an array of incentives and disincentives, codes create a sense that “there is no alternative” but to abide by the established rules of political competition. This type of “TINA” politics restricts the ability of opposition parties to express opinions that conflict with, or lie outside, the dominant discourse. In this way, codes constrain all parties in a system, whether in terms of their behaviour or their performance. As Berman (2001: 242) notes,

Many scholars have found that ideas can influence political behavior even if political actors have not internalized or do not believe in them. In such cases, ideational variables work indirectly; they influence the translation of interests into outcomes by shaping the incentive structures associated with different courses of action. Even if actors do not believe in particular norms, they might abide by them if non-compliance carries a high cost.

In the case of codes, these “high costs” are often felt at the polls. Parties that do not speak “in code” are often marginalized during political debates, labeled as extremists and outsiders, or, as discussed below, branded as enemies of the polity, itself. These labels often define a party’s legitimacy, both among elites in the party system, and among voters in the electorate.

It is important to note that, while constraining their behaviour, codes are nonetheless constructed by dominant elites, themselves. As products of the dominant parties’ ideologies, these codes effectively silence rhetoric, and close off lines of debate, that threaten the parties’ position of superiority. In this sense, “Politics is not simply a matter of negotiating coalitions of interests within given constraints of rights, rules, preferences, and resources. Politics extend to shaping those constraints, to constructing accounts of politics, history, and self that are not only bases for instrumental action but also central concerns of life” (March and Olsen, 1996: 257). The question becomes,

then: Precisely which rules, norms or expectations do codes establish, and how do these constraints help to determine patterns of party competition?

Defining The Role of the State

Codes impose two sets of constraints on political parties and their leaders, as they (1) establish the “proper” functions of government, while (2) defining which types of opposition are “acceptable” within a given party system.

On the first count, as elsewhere, elites in each Prairie Province have fought over the proper role of government in a variety of different spheres (Brownsey and Howlett, 2001: 14-15). The codes that have evolved from these debates have established three specific roles for the provincial state: one in terms of representing the community’s position in Confederation, a second with regard to the domestic, social needs of society; and a third vis-à-vis the provincial economy (see Table 1).

In Alberta, for instance, the dominant narrative portrays the state as a guardian against outside influence, specifically from the federal government and other Central Canadian elites. In terms of social affairs, the code describes the state’s role as more of an ombudsman – reactively and prudently responding to citizens’ concerns as they arise. Lastly, in their campaign rhetoric, dominant elites in Alberta have defined the state as an economic liberator, preserving the “freedom” of individuals and businesses to compete in open markets.

In Saskatchewan, the state has been defined as a pioneer among Canadian governments – an innovator in developing government programs and approaches. On the domestic front, Saskatchewan elites have touted the state as a provider of key social services, and a director of the provincial economy. In all of these ways, dominant elites have promoted the importance of state-sponsored “security” in Saskatchewan.

By contrast, Manitoba’s dominant elites have portrayed their state a delegate in federal-provincial relations, a moderator of internal social forces, and an active, but not overpowering, participant in the economy. Reflected in their campaign messages, Manitoba Premiers have been among the country’s most conciliatory and diplomatic at the First Ministers’ table, providing both a buffer and a bridge between the interests of east and west, and the haves and have-nots (Dyck, 1996: 381; Friesen, 1999: 9; Morton, 1967a: 420-421; Thomas, 1989). The state has been viewed as having a similar role within Manitoba society, moderating between the varied social, economic, ethnic, geographic and other interests in the province (Friesen, 2009). Befitting the province’s code of “moderation,” elites have also depicted a middling position for the state vis-à-vis the economy, neither as interventionist as its neighbor in Saskatchewan, nor as laissez-faire as its Alberta counterpart.

[Insert Table 1 about here.]

There are obvious disjunctions between what has been *portrayed* by these elites in their campaign rhetoric, and the *actual performance* of these states. At various times, Saskatchewan governments have reduced their state's role as a pioneer, provider and director. Likewise, Manitoba elites have, from time to time, abandoned their code of "moderation" by choosing sides at the federal-provincial table, in debates over private versus public development, or in domestic social disputes.

These disjunctions are clearest in Alberta. For decades, the province has supported one of the lowest rates of voter turnout in the country, for instance, which raises doubts as to the province's populist character (Pickup et al., 2004). By the same token, Alberta maintains one of the highest levels of per capita welfare spending in Canada, contradicting the "individualist" rhetoric of major party leaders (Tupper and Gibbins, 1992: xv). And, while western alienation remains barely below the surface of Alberta's political discourse, by most standards as the wealthiest province in the country, the provincial government faces challenges in portraying itself as a hinterland victim vis-à-vis Eastern Canada (Dyck, 1996: 514; Norrie, 1979). Yet the stereotype of Alberta's "redneck" political culture persists (Pal, 1992: 1-2; Wiseman, 2007: 248). As Gibbins (1979: 143) suggests, "a strong belief in the spirit if not necessarily the practice of free enterprise, [and] a concomitant belief in the desirability if not the actuality of small, fiscally conservative governments..." are both widely acknowledged components of the Alberta political ethos. According to some, part of the reason lies in the success of provincial elites in cultivating a series of "myths" about Alberta in their campaign rhetoric (Barrie, 2006; Lisac, 2004: 2-3). In this sense, as in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, the portrayal and perception of the state's role has been as important as its actual performance.

This is particularly true with regard to party competition, which has been structured by the dominant elites' definition of the "ideal" or "proper" role of the state. Flowing from these definitions, the patterns of party politics we see on the Prairies today are attributable, in large part, to the different ways in which dominant provincial elites in each province have conceptualized and confined conflict. By defining "the normal" or "the acceptable" limits of political debate, these codes have "organized out" certain opposition parties by virtue of their identities or ideologies.

Identifying Enemies

Beyond the definition of the "proper," however, the crux of code politics – and, hence, the mechanism behind its impact on patterns of party competition – lies in the identification of a polity's greatest "enemies." Blondel (1987: 32) discusses how dominant leaders often "close their borders" to competing ideas, "branding foreigners as potential enemies" to the domestic political order. In this way, codes lie at the heart of what some observers label "the politics of fear": they identify the objects in need of protection and single out oppressors to give the public a "clear target for their unrest" (Bell, 1993: 153). During periods of uncertainty, the identification of "enemies" is especially powerful – so much so, that leaders may be tempted to manufacture crises in order to derive the positive benefits of being the community's saviour (Blondel, 1987:

93-97; de Clercy, 2005; Harrison and Laxer, 1995a: 7-8). This strategy amounts to the cultivation of a “wartime psychology,” in which the party is portrayed as society’s defender (Archer and Gibbins, 1997: 466).

In their broadest terms, the “villains” in Alberta have been those forces that impinged on the province’s liberty and autonomy (Wiseman, 2007: 248-250). Throughout the last seven decades, the various threads of the province’s populist, conservative, alienated political culture have been tied together by an underlying theme: “If we pull together we can defeat the ‘enemies’ and return Alberta to prosperity and its natural state of grace” (Harrison and Laxer, 1995b: 5-7). These foes have ranged from the federal government and Eastern Canadian capitalists to atheists and socialists; from individual Prime Ministers and federal parties to abstract concepts like Keynesianism, “big government,” and “the debt.” By invoking these themes, Alberta’s dominant party leaders have proven masterful at *externalizing opposition* (Georgeson, 1974). William Aberhart’s marriage of Evangelism and Social Credit turned any criticism of his government into an attack on God, Himself (Bell, 1993: 153-154; Caldarola, 1979: 40). Ernest Manning’s portrayal of Sacred ideology as the natural antithesis of Soviet-style communism made any opposition seem un-liberal, un-democratic, and un-Canadian. Years later, Peter Lougheed’s promotion of a “quasi-colonial mentality” to link provincial Liberals and New Democrats to their unpopular federal cousins made “enemies” of Alberta’s Official Opposition (Elton and Goddard, 1979: 68). And Ralph Klein’s parochial appeals to the province’s frontier roots made resistance to his party’s ideology “unseemly, anti-Albertan, and, to some extent traitorous” (Trimble, 1997: 488). Indeed, on most occasions, Alberta premiers have refused to engage the provincial opposition, altogether (Tupper, 1991: 459). When they have been forced to do so – as Richard Reid, Harry Strom, and Don Getty have discovered – their fortunes wane.

As Elton and Goddard (1979: 68) described, “In such a milieu, the mass electorate, it would appear, becomes depoliticized, allowing natural intergroup conflicts to be smothered under a screen of consensus of support for the elites in their battle against external threats” (see also: Dyck, 1996: 515). This presents opposition parties, like the Liberals and New Democrats, with the unenviable choice between being anti-Albertan, and tacitly supporting the dominant party. In these ways, the ability of Social Credit and the Progressive Conservatives to externalize opposition, embodied in the provincial code, adds to existing explanations of one-party-dominance in Alberta.

One province to the east, “enemies” of the Saskatchewan state have been defined quite differently. There, the natural governing CCF-NDP has identified the province’s primary threat as a domestic, right-wing challenge to Saskatchewan’s collectivist traditions. By highlighting the polarized, partisan nature of provincial politics throughout their campaigns, leaders from Tommy Douglas to Lorne Calvert have portrayed their party as the dirigiste defenders of the Saskatchewan welfare state, resource sector, and crown corporations. Douglas and Woodrow Lloyd touted their achievements in medicare and public automobile insurance, for instance, warning voters that the Liberal Party may reverse these gains. Years later, Allan Blakeney emerged as the champion of the government’s role as a resource entrepreneur, cautioning voters not to “sell out” their

“birthright” by electing a Conservative government. And Roy Romanow and Calvert persuaded voters, for a time at least, to move “Forward, Not Backward” by electing the New Democrats to protect core social programs and services against the free-enterprise designs of the Saskatchewan Party.

In this way, the Saskatchewan CCF-NDP have not only helped to sustain their own dominance over provincial politics, by presenting themselves as the protectors of Saskatchewan’s “security.” They have also left room – in some ways, even created the space – for a minority right-wing force. Periodically, conservative leaders of various political stripes have exploited this opportunity and risen to power. (Ross Thatcher’s Liberals, Grant Devine’s Conservatives and Brad Wall’s Sask Party have each risen from Opposition to government.) Yet, while being granted legitimacy as domestic opposition, their longevity in office has been limited by the prevailing code established by the natural governing party. Thus, code politics may help us to better understand the unique pattern of party politics in Saskatchewan, where a left-wing party dominates, but right-wing parties play a prominent, if periodic, role.

If dominant parties have helped shape their environments by *externalizing* opposition in Alberta, and *internalizing* conflict in Saskatchewan, elites in Manitoba have established a more balanced pattern of party competition by *minimizing* such partisan, ideological tensions. Indeed, dominant party leaders in Manitoba have identified extremism – in all its forms, from partisanship to dogmatism – as their province’s greatest enemy. John Bracken viewed non-partisanship and “business-like” administration as the best means of securing “good government” for Manitoba. His definition of politics marginalized both Social Credit and the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation – both of who rose to power elsewhere on the prairies, and both of who joined Bracken’s coalition governments, in the 1930s and 1940s. Building on similar premises, Duff Roblin constructed his brand of Progressive Conservatism as a middle-of-the-road alternative to the more “extreme” versions of laissez-faire liberalism and state-first socialism being advocated by the Liberals and CCF in the 1950s and 1960s (see: Roblin, 1999). Upon his departure, Roblin’s cultivation of “progressive centre” provided fertile ground for the more moderate version of social democracy developed by Ed Schreyer and the New Democrats, while continuing to marginalize more doctrinaire conservatives on the right. Following a brief period of polarization – during which neither Sterling Lyon’s new-right Conservatives, nor Howard Pawley’s old-left New Democrats could retain power for more than a single, full-term – the party system once again settled under the code of moderation. After the rightward drift of Gary Filmon’s PC’s, Gary Doer’s moderate, third way approach has kept the New Democrats in power for nearly a decade. Hence, just as in Alberta and Saskatchewan, the nature of the dominant political discourse has played a role in determining the shape of party politics in Canada’s original Prairie Province. There, moderation has bred balance, with the most successful parties trading places in the “progressive centre” and taking turns in office.

Thus, codes in each of the three Prairie Provinces have established unique sets of incentives and disincentives related to party competition. Minor opposition parties have

struggled to gain traction in each of these provinces, thanks in large part to the constraints placed upon them by each of these codes.

In Alberta, for example, the CCF-NDP has enjoyed little success compared to its eastern prairie cousins. Beyond the many economic, cultural and institutional barriers typically cited, the present analysis suggests that the electoral weakness of social democratic parties in Alberta is attributable, in part, to their inability (or unwillingness) to frame their ideology to fit the province's freedom-based political narrative. In this, "the ideology of the NDP appears to be somewhat antithetical to the political culture of Alberta, with its greater emphasis on individualism" (Stewart and Archer, 2000: 172). The Alberta Liberal Party's challenges stem from several additional sources. Of particular interest to the present discussion, the party has suffered from its association with the Federal Liberal brand.¹ Heated battles between Grits in Ottawa and Social Credit and Progressive Conservative governments in Edmonton have only served to bolster the popularity of the latter as the defender of provincial autonomy. Indeed, massive provincial majorities have been built at the expense of the Alberta Liberals, whose perceived ties with the Trudeau and Chretien governments, in particular, have tainted the party with a 'metropolis' image in a 'hinterland' province (Fischer, 1986).

In Saskatchewan, right-wing opposition parties have struggled to displace the CCF-NDP as the province's natural governing party. Some of their leaders have spoken in code, at least early-on in their careers. All three post-war, right-wing premiers entered the office by campaigning on centrist platforms and commitments to uphold the principles and institutions of Saskatchewan "security." Ross Thatcher was fond of mentioning his own, early roots in the CCF movement, for instance, while Grant Devine labeled himself as the true heir to Tommy Douglas's legacy during the 1986 campaign. And Brad Wall's breakthrough with the Sask Party in 2007 may be attributed to his commitments to keep several of the province's key crown corporations in public hands. In the two earlier instances, both the Liberals and Conservatives drifted gradually back to their right-wing roots, however. In Devine's case, second-term attempts to rewrite the Saskatchewan code in the image of 'Alberta freedom' failed to come to fruition (Baron and Jackson, 1991; Pitsula, 2004; Pitsula and Rasmussen, 1990). To this point, none of the CCF-NDP's opponents have managed to crack, let alone destroy, the code of security that has helped keep the party in power for forty-seven of the last sixty-four years.

Challengers to the dominant parties have faced unique obstacles in Manitoba, as well. During the Bracken era, opposition leaders of every label were forced to choose between allying themselves with a very popular premier, and sitting alone on the opposition benches. The former option would grant the leader a position at the Cabinet table while in coalition, whereas the latter would earn him the label of an outsider in the non-partisan environment of Manitoba politics. Recognizing the futility of the latter approach, all major party leaders – from Social Credit on the right, to the CCF on the left – joined Bracken's coalition at one point or another. Following the premier's departure during World War II, both the CCF and the Progressive Conservatives withdrew from the coalition. It would take a decade before either party could formulate an alternative, moderate vision for Manitoba's future. But once Duff Roblin's vision of the "progressive

centre” took hold, it was the Liberal Party that found itself on the wrong side of the provincial code. For decades to come, the Grits were victimized as representatives of an out-dated version of their polity’s creed – as a backward party in a forward-facing world. Despite a minor resurgence in the 1980s, when the party managed to position itself in the “progressive centre” during a brief period of polarization, the Liberals remain outside the province’s mainstream to this day. Instead, the New Democrats and Conservatives now trade turns in office. When either has strayed too far from the “progressive centre,” the other has proven poised to assume its position in government (Wesley, 2006).

Thus, parties run a significant risk, and incur high electoral costs, by defining the Alberta state’s role as anything but a guardian, ombudsman or liberator; criticizing the Saskatchewan state’s position as a pioneer, provider or director; or ignoring the Manitoba state’s function as a delegate, moderator and participant. Parties that become defined as, or associated with, “enemies of the state” face even greater challenges. Meanwhile, as crafters and champions of their state’s role in Confederation, society and the economy, dominant parties enjoy a significant competitive advantage over their opponents. This ideological edge is just as critical to their continued success as any other, formal institutional safeguards they may establish while in office (including electoral systems and other legal barriers).

While not entirely unbreakable, these patterns of party competition, like the codes and cultures that underpin them, are imposing institutions. The norms and expectations they establish force political actors to work within the confines of the existing system in order to gain power. Only then, working from the inside and over a long period of time, can they hope to alter the ‘rules of the game’ in their favour. This is precisely how Tommy Douglas, Ernest Manning, Duff Roblin, Peter Lougheed, and Ralph Klein gained and retained the premiership. Each accepted the principal tenets of the existing code, while reinterpreting it to match his own party’s ideology and changing times.

Conclusion

As institutions, codes establish key rules of the game when it comes to party competition. By definition, as products of dominant party rhetoric, these rules favor players that already enjoy superiority. This helps to explain how, once established, the codes of “freedom,” “security,” and “moderation” have served to reinforce the patterns of competition in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. By translating original differences in political culture into a series of powerful narratives, and by perpetuating these niceties over time, political parties have helped sustain the three different worlds we now see on the Canadian Prairies.

Code politics provides only a partial solution to the Prairie Paradox, designed to complement existing structural explanations based on political culture. Neither of these approaches, alone, is enough to explain why three such different political worlds developed on the Canadian Prairies; together, they still leave many questions unanswered. Future research should, for instance, focus on the links between political

culture and political codes – between norms held at the grassroots level, and those governing elite behaviour. While in demand, this type of research is in short supply, particularly in Canadian provincial politics.

Furthermore, a major obstacle to our understanding of party system diversity and change lies in the fact that, even when the *potential* exists for divergence, analysts are still confronted with fundamentally human sets of behaviours. This means that potentials can be thwarted – openings closed – by political actors capable of reshaping the playing field, itself. After all, parties and their leaders are not simply structured by history – they are agents of it. As a result, the fundamental sources of political ideas, codes and the resulting patterns of party competition are far from parsimonious (Gerring, 1998: 273-275).

Yet, a key starting point must be to recognize the importance of both structure *and* agency, of demand *and* supply, in shaping the different worlds of party competition we find on the Canadian Prairies and elsewhere. Code politics may not be the only solution to the Prairie Paradox, but, in complementing existing explanations, it takes us one step closer to understanding why and how Western Canadians live in such different party worlds.

Table 1: Definitions of the States' Roles by Dominant Elites

<i>State's Role in...</i>	Alberta	Saskatchewan	Manitoba
<i>Confederation</i>	guardian	pioneer	delegate
<i>Society</i>	ombudsman	provider	moderator
<i>Economy</i>	liberator	director	participant

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