

The 2007 Provincial Election in Saskatchewan

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Abstract

The 2007 Saskatchewan provincial election is undoubtedly an important event in the province's history. The Saskatchewan Party has been elected at a time when the economy is booming and the population is starting to grow. It remains to be seen how the Wall government will 'manage' this economic growth and if the Saskatchewan Party is able to put an end the CCF-NDP's status as the province's natural governing party. On the other hand, it will be interesting to see if the NDP can quickly rebuild itself and put forth a social democratic ideology that is relevant for 21st century. Finally, it will be intriguing to see if the Liberals will disappear completely from Saskatchewan provincial politics or if they can find a constructive role befitting a party that has existed since Saskatchewan was created and has governed the province several times. In any event, it is clear that a new chapter is being written in Saskatchewan politics and it is much too early to tell what twists and turns are ahead and how the story will end.

Saskatchewan Politics Before the Election

Having governed for 16 years, the Saskatchewan NDP government entered the election as the second longest serving provincial government in Canada after the Progressive Conservative dynasty in Alberta. Under Roy Romanow's leadership, the NDP had won a landslide victory in 1991 followed by an easy win in the 1995 election. In the 1999 election, the upstart Saskatchewan Party (a coalition of former Progressive Conservative and Liberal MLAs) nearly pulled off an upset victory and the NDP was forced to govern in coalition by bringing two Liberal MLAs into cabinet. The 2003 election was another close election with the NDP, now under the leadership of Lorne Calvert, winning a narrow two seat majority over the Saskatchewan Party and the Liberals taking no seats. The main issue of the 2003 election was the Saskatchewan Party's lack of decisiveness on the question of the privatization of Crown Corporations. The NDP successfully ran a fear campaign on

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this issue by accusing Saskatchewan Party Leader Elwin Hermanson of having a ‘hidden agenda’ around privatization.

After the 2003 election, the Calvert government followed what may be characterized as a slightly left-wing version of Third Way¹ social democracy compared to the Romanow government. The Calvert government’s slight move to the left was much more apparent in its social policy than its economic policy. In terms of economic policy, the Calvert government just extended the policies adopted by the Romanow government by implementing large corporate tax cuts, reducing the PST by 2%, and lowering royalties on oil, potash, and uranium. However, the Calvert government did introduce social policies that were much more generous and universal in nature compared to the previous NDP administration such as a drug plan to ensure that all senior citizens pay no more than \$15 per drug prescription, a tuition freeze, and the indexation of social assistance rates for all categories of recipients. Further, unlike the Romanow government who was considered a close ally of the federal government, the Calvert government adopted a very antagonistic stance with Ottawa over reductions to equalization due to the inclusion of non-renewable natural resource revenues in the formula and the ending of the Canadian Wheat Board’s monopoly on grain and barley.

For their part, the Saskatchewan Party moderated its policies and chose Brad Wall as their new leader who was younger and considered to be more sympathetic than their previous leader. The Saskatchewan Party insisted that they had no plans to sell any of Saskatchewan’s Crown Corporations, would adopt a co-operative approach with labour unions, not privatize health care in any way, and not sign onto TILMA (Trade, Investment, and Labour Mobility Agreement) with British Columbia and Alberta. With no seats in the Legislature, the Liberal Party struggled to gain public attention and present a clear alternative to the two other parties.

Since April 2004, polls had showed the Saskatchewan Party consistently leading the NDP in terms of popular support (Environics Research Group). In the year leading up to the election, polls by both Sigma Analytics and Environics showed the Saskatchewan Party with support ranging from 44% to 55% of the electorate and the NDP languishing at 29% to 34% popular support while the Liberals scored 21% to 25% (with the exception of one poll that put the Liberals 10%) (Nodice.ca). It was in this context, that Premier Calvert called an election on October 10th, 2007 almost exactly four years after the 2003 Saskatchewan general election.

Campaign Dynamics

The first week of the campaign was dominated by surprisingly substantive policy debate on the part of the two leading parties. On the first day of the campaign, Premier Calvert promised a universal drug plan that would ensure that all Saskatchewan residents would pay no more than \$15 per drug prescription. Calvert described this initiative as “the boldest new social program in Canada in a decade or longer” and emphasized that it would come into effect on the 46th anniversary of the introduction of Medicare in Saskatchewan by the Douglas CCF government (Wood and Hall, “Election Day”, A1). The NDP followed up this significant commitment with a promise to cut tuition fees by \$1000 and a 30% income tax credit to reduce the burden of property taxes for both homeowners and renters. In contrast, the Saskatchewan Party introduced targeted programs such as a drug plan that would limit \$15 drug prescriptions to seniors with incomes under \$65,000 but give \$15

drug prescriptions to children under 14, a rebate to graduates of Saskatchewan universities of \$20,000 over the seven years if they stayed in Saskatchewan, and a homeowners property tax rebate that excluded renters.

The two major parties added few dramatic pledges after the first week of the campaign. The NDP promised 2,000 new daycare spaces, 10,000 new training spaces, a raise in the minimum wage, the continuation of moderate increases to social assistance rates, and a green plan which would cut greenhouse gases through investing in renewable energy and creating loans and grants to promote energy efficiency. The Saskatchewan Party repeated its claim that it would maintain public health care and not privatize any of Saskatchewan's Crown Corporations. Further, it promised to recruit more nurses and doctors, eliminate the PST on used vehicles, increase entrepreneurial and business education in schools, provide greater funding to food banks and community-based organizations that combat poverty, and give tax credits for children's sport and cultural activities. The Saskatchewan Party also made sure to emphasize its fiscal conservatism by committing to legislation requiring that the budget be balanced every year instead of over a four year cycle, limiting increases in the size of the civil service to the rate of population growth, and restraining total expenditure increases to 3% over four years. Finally, both parties made promises in the area of democratic reform. While the Saskatchewan Party simply promised fixed election dates and a ban on pre-election government advertising, the NDP went further and pledged to create a randomly selected citizen assembly to consider fixed election dates, methods for increasing voter participation, changes to the electoral system, and lowering voting age.

Strikingly absent from the campaign was any real debate over economic policy. Besides commitments to lower property taxes, neither party discussed changes to personal income taxes, corporate taxation, or changes to natural resource royalties. The Saskatchewan Party did promise not to spend taxpayers' money on direct grants to businesses and make modest changes to the labour laws such as requiring secret ballots on union certification votes and allowing management to more freely communicate with workers during union drives. The only debate in the area of economic policy was over the Saskatchewan Party's vague proposal for 'Enterprise Saskatchewan' which would be a P3 entity made up of various stakeholders (business, labour, First Nations, universities, and municipalities) to direct the economic development of the province. The NDP repeatedly attacked Enterprise Saskatchewan as an unaccountable body of appointed Saskatchewan Party supporters who would be used to privatize the province's Crown Corporations (Wood and Hall, "Sask. Party Plan", A7).

While Liberal Leader David Karwacki did garner daily media coverage, the Liberals did not play a significant role in shaping the discourse or dynamics of the campaign. The party's ideas of completely eliminating the education portion of property taxes, auditing First Nations casinos, increasing social assistance payments for parents whose children have an 85% school attendance record, and creating student housing tax credits did not seem to capture the public's imagination or illicit significant responses from the two major parties. Rather, the main questions surrounding the Liberals were whether they could win any seats at all and whether their leader would be elected.

The first three weeks of the campaign were relatively unaffected by polls. Curiously, no major poll was taken between end of July 2007 and the final week of the campaign. With a week left in the campaign, three separate polls confirmed that the Saskatchewan Party had a commanding lead with

approximately 50%-54% of the decided vote followed by the NDP with 33%-35% and the Liberals trailing badly with only 8%-10% (Wood, A1). One poll placed the undecided vote at 20% while the other two polls showed the undecided vote at 35%. The leaders' debate, which coincided with the release of the polls, did not seem to have a dramatic effect on the campaign. For the most part, Wall was cautious and concentrated on appearing statesmanlike while Calvert struggled with the open format of the debate to put Wall on the defensive and illustrate that he had a hidden agenda to privatize Crown Corporations, gut labour legislation, and privatize health care. Karwacki was the most active participant and attempted to dominant the debate by interrupting the other leaders and going on at length about his party's policies and relevance to Saskatchewan politics.

Results

Table 1: 2003 and 2007 Saskatchewan General Election Results

Party	2003			2007		
	Votes	% of Vote	Seats	Votes	% of Vote	Seats
NDP	190,923	44.68	30	168,701	37.24	20
Saskatchewan Party	168,144	39.35	28	230,669	50.92	38
Liberals	60,601	14.18	0	42,585	9.40	0
Others	7,616	1.78	0	11,049	2.44	0

Between 1967 and 1991, voter turnout in Saskatchewan elections fluctuated between 78% and 83%. Voter turnout dropped to 65% in both 1995 and 1999 provincial elections and then slightly rebounded to 70% in 2003 provincial election. A positive development in the 2007 provincial election was that the voter turnout continued its upward trend to reach 75%. While the closeness of the 2003 contest may have been responsible for the increased turnout in that election, a victory by the Saskatchewan Party was quite evident with a week to go in the 2007 campaign. Perhaps, the high turnout can be attributed to the motivation of voters who wanted to ensure a change of government. However, the ridings with the highest turnouts in 2007 were NDP strongholds in Regina and Saskatoon or ridings where the race was very competitive. This suggests that the high turnout may be attributed to a rush of NDP supporters to the polls in an effort to avoid a Saskatchewan Party government and the existence of several hotly contested swing ridings where voters knew that their votes would be decisive in determining the outcome of the election.

The election did not lead to any increase, or decrease, in the representation of women in the Saskatchewan Legislature. Only 22% of the NDP and the Saskatchewan Party candidates were women and only 26% of the candidates that the Liberals ran were women (Rhodes, A4). Predictably, women make up 22% of the newly elected Saskatchewan Legislature which is very similar to the percentage of female representation in the Saskatchewan Legislature since 1991.

Another important feature to notice about the 2007 election results is the accuracy of polling conducted during the week prior to the election. The polls slightly overestimated the Saskatchewan

Party's lead, barely underestimated the NDP's support, and exactly predicted the Liberals' popular vote. The second important characteristic about these results was that the collapse of the Liberal vote allowed the anti-NDP and anti-government vote to coalesce around the Saskatchewan Party. Historically, the CCF-NDP has been able to dominate Saskatchewan elections because two or more right wing parties have split the anti-social democratic vote. However, when one right-wing party emerges as the standard bearer for anti-CCF-NDP voters, CCF-NDP governments generally fall. Third, what is hidden in the table above is the geographical distribution of the parties' vote. As it did in 1999 and 2003, the Saskatchewan Party swept the rural areas of the province. However, unlike the two previous elections, the Saskatchewan Party was also able to win key seats in the suburban areas of Saskatoon and Regina as well as half of the four seats in the battleground smaller cities of Moose Jaw and Prince Albert. The NDP's 20 seats come from the core areas of the two main cities, the two constituencies of the far north, and one rural seat (The Battlefords) that was won primarily due to the popularity of the local candidate.

While it is difficult to pinpoint a single exact reason for the NDP's defeat, the interplay of a number of different factors can be suggested. Undoubtedly, voters felt that it time for a change in government. Indeed, one poll taken only days before the election found that the most popular reasons to vote for the Saskatchewan Party were: a need for a change in government (37.1%), don't like other choices (10.5%), and a belief the party encourages growth in business and the economy (8.7%) (Insightrix, "Poll Results"). The NDP failed to find quality candidates to replace retiring incumbents and made strategic errors in the campaign such as not emphasizing Saskatchewan's ongoing battle with the Harper government over equalization and running the exact same campaign of fear over the privatization of Crown Corporations as it did in 2003. Further, the universal drug plan did not capture the imagination of Saskatchewan voters. Indeed, it seemed quite unpopular as voters seemed to think that it was too expensive and may even worsen addiction to prescription drugs. On the other hand, the Saskatchewan Party ran a highly centralized and relatively error-free campaign. Brad Wall came across as a much more sympathetic and trustworthy than the previous Saskatchewan Party leader and the party had sufficiently moderated its stances to attract key suburban voters. Finally, the Saskatchewan economy was very robust during the NDP's last term in power due to rising oil, grain, uranium, and potash prices. It seems that in a time of economic prosperity, voters were willing to take a chance on a new, unproven political formation. It should be noted that the Saskatchewan CCF were first elected during a time of prosperity in Saskatchewan's economy stimulated by World War II.

Saskatchewan's New Government and the Future of the Saskatchewan NDP and Liberals

With no Saskatchewan Party candidates having previous cabinet experience and opposition benches full of long-time cabinet ministers, the Wall government will likely get off to a shaky start. As the new cabinet is a mixture of urban and rural, old and new MLAs, moderates and right-wingers, and former Liberals and former Progressive Conservatives, it is difficult to speculate on the new government's future ideological direction. After the requisite warning that the previous government had been financially irresponsible and left the province in danger of going into deficit, the legislative priorities of the new government have been the introduction of legislation to guarantee essential services during strikes, a bill requiring a balanced budget each fiscal year, and the creation of Enterprise Saskatchewan. It seems likely that, if the Saskatchewan Party wants to retain its urban seats, it will run a very moderate conservative government. However, such moderation is not in keeping with its ideological tradition and it may alienate key party supporters if it does not introduce

policies which reflect conservative priorities such as lower taxes and a reduction in the size of government.

The NDP's popular vote in 2007 was just slightly under its previous historical low of 37.64% in 1982 which indicates that its 'bedrock vote' is still intact after 16 years of government. The NDP was back in power nine years after its crushing 1982 defeat to Devine's Conservatives and so there is no reason to start writing its obituary, especially considering it now has 20 seats compared to only 9 seats after the 1982 election. The NDP must find ideas that will attract voters in rural and suburban areas to vote for the party in the future. Further, if we can extrapolate a poll taken in Saskatoon to the entire province, the NDP also must find policies to increase its popularity among middle aged voters (aged 35-44) and male voters (Insightrix "October 12th" & Insightrix, "November 5th"). It should be remembered that when the NDP came into power 16 years ago the province had a huge debt and deficit and the provincial economy was quite weak. The economic boom that the province is now experiencing is testament to the relative success of the NDP in office and is the primary reason why the NDP remains relatively well-liked by a large portion of the population. In addition helping bring economic prosperity to the province, the NDP has forced the Saskatchewan Party to the left since 2000. Indeed, the issues of privatization of Crown Corporations and health care have become the 'third rail' of Saskatchewan politics. The Saskatchewan Party being forced to put out flyers during the election that read "Our Crowns will take a lead role in helping us build an innovative economy" illustrate that Saskatchewan's social democratic political culture remains firmly entrenched (Saskatchewan Party). As such, while the NDP definitely requires a new leader and needs to renew its policies, it is in a good position to take advantage of any missteps made by the Wall government and will be a serious challenger for office in the next election.

The Liberals are in a much more precarious position than the NDP. After the 1995 provincial election, the Liberals were the government in waiting having garnered 35% of the total vote in that election. Now they have been shut out of the legislature for the second election in a row and cannot even manage to break 10% of the popular vote. Further, the Liberals were only able to place second in only one riding in 2007 and in that riding the Saskatchewan Party candidate had been removed from the ballot. At least in the 2003 election, the Liberals placed second in four ridings. Therefore, the Liberals must ask themselves: What do we have to offer to Saskatchewan politics? During the campaign, Liberal leader David Karwacki predicted that the Saskatchewan Party would certainly win the provincial election and that the Liberals would form the official opposition. In the Karwacki scenario, the NDP would be relegated to third party status with few seats and would eventually disappear as the Liberals would become the voice of the "progressive" voters of the province (Burton, A2 & Macgregor, A9). Evidently, Karwacki's strategy failed miserably and the NDP's core vote did not bleed to the Liberals in any significant manner. In the next election, the Liberals would be better off attempting to attract right-wing voters disappointed after four years of Saskatchewan Party government rather than going after the 'progressive' vote in the province which seems to be owned by the NDP.

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Endnotes

- ¹ The term the 'third way' in reference to social democracy's ideological direction was coined by Anthony Giddens in his 1998 book entitled *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy* and the term was later taken on by British Prime Minister Tony Blair to describe the ideology of his 'new' Labour Party. See Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy*, (Cambridge : Polity Press, 1998) and Tony Blair and Gerhard Schroeder, *Europe: The Third Way*, <<http://www.socialdemocrats.org/blairandschroeder6-8-99.html>>, 29 September, 2006.

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