

Sask. key to Harper's aim of reshaping politics

David McGrane, *Saskatoon StarPhoenix*, October 9th, 2008, A13

Following is the viewpoint of the writer, assistant professor of political studies at St. Thomas More College at the University of Saskatchewan.

With Conservative support taking a nosedive in Quebec, it seems that the party needs to add a considerable number of seats in English Canada if it is to form a majority government.

All of the sudden, a Conservative sweep of Saskatchewan's seats could be the difference between a majority and minority government for Stephen Harper. While Saskatchewan is an important part of the Conservatives' pursuit of a majority, our province also plays a key role in Harper's quest to reshape Canada's political culture.

On Sept. 13, Harper told the editorial board of the *National Post* that he wants to "make conservatism the natural governing philosophy of our country."

However, he was also clear that the Conservatives not only have to pull Canadians toward conservatism, but they have to "move towards Canadians if they want to continue to govern the country."

Harper's new conservatism places social issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage on the backburner while focusing on blending fiscal responsibility and tax cuts with openness to multiculturalism, increased immigration, bilingualism, and accommodation of Quebecois nationalism.

Harper is hoping that he will find fertile ground in Saskatchewan for his brand of moderate conservatism. This province will be an interesting test of his ability to edge the Canadian political culture to the right.

The eight federal ridings that encompass parts of Regina and Saskatoon are a mix of three distinct zones: rural, suburban, and inner city. A party needs to win two out of these three major geographical zones to win the riding.

The Conservatives' promises in this campaign have been carefully crafted to bring rural and suburban Saskatchewan into an electoral alliance that will ensure the Conservative dominance of our province into the future and bring them closer to their goal of becoming Canada's natural governing party.

Rural Saskatchewan has been a conservative stronghold since the 1993 federal election, when the Reform Party swept Saskatchewan's countryside. The Harper Conservatives' promises to reduce taxes on diesel fuel, eliminate the gun registry, embark on Senate reform, increase

slaughterhouse capacity and provide choice in grain marketing are designed to maintain their supremacy in rural Saskatchewan.

However, they cannot sweep Saskatchewan on the strength of their rural vote alone. The emerging suburban areas around Regina and Saskatoon are akin to what Michael Valpy, a columnist with the Globe and Mail, calls an "ideological no man's land."

These suburban swing voters are a mix and match of liberal and conservative values, and ultimately are most interested in what works and what benefits them. They see themselves as free agents who are not tied to any particular party and generally have no strong ideological leanings.

The Conservatives have been very savvy at targeting suburban Saskatchewan voters in this election. These voters are concerned about crime and may be pleased with the Conservatives' policies to enact stiffer sentences for criminals. These suburban free agents are attracted to the government giving monthly cheques to parents to put towards the daycare option of their choice and the Conservative pledge of tax credits for children to take art and music lessons.

There are also certain Conservative promises that are equally attractive to both rural and suburban voters in Saskatchewan. Considering that Saskatchewan's economic boom is largely based on activities that release a large amount of carbon dioxide, rural and suburban voters in Saskatchewan like the Conservatives' approach to climate change, which balances environmental concerns with the need to maintain a strong economy.

With the recent decline in the price of oil and potash, Saskatchewan rural and suburban voters are sensing that the economic turmoil that has gripped the United States will also affect our current economic boom. Both groups seem to have confidence in the Conservatives' ability to guide the Canadian economy through the troubled waters ahead.

Ultimately, it is this alliance between rural and suburban voters that the Conservatives hope will vault them to a sweep of Saskatchewan. Such a sweep would prove that a significant part of the province's electorate has embraced Harper's moderate conservatism and has rejected Jack Layton's anti-business message of eliminating corporate tax cuts to increase social spending, and Stephane Dion's plan to combat climate change through using taxation to change consumer behaviour.

A Conservative sweep may signal a subtle shift in Saskatchewan political culture that has long been associated with the popularity of social democracy and the electoral dominance of the CCF-NDP.

However, the Conservatives swept Saskatchewan in 1963 and 1965 and these victories did not turn out to be indicators of a long-term shift in this province's political culture. It will be interesting to see in the future if a movement to the right in this federal election is a transient phenomenon or a permanent shift in Saskatchewan politics that contributes to reshaping Canada's political culture in a more conservative mould.