

Waning interest in CWB issue sign of new Sask

David McGrane and Murray Fulton, *The Saskatoon StarPhoenix*, December 8, 2011, A10.

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A StarPhoenix story on Dec. 1 reported that the Saskatchewan Election Study found provincial residents to be generally indifferent to the Canadian Wheat Board retaining its single-desk selling powers. Indeed, 47 per cent of all respondents to the study's survey said they had no opinion on the CWB's monopoly, compared to 30 per cent who opposed it and 24 per cent who favoured it.

Over the past few days we have been able to dig deeper into the data to further explore this overall "indifference" to the CWB's monopoly among Saskatchewan residents. A full research brief on the results can be found at www.schoolofpublicpolicy.sk.ca.

When the data were broken down by age group, it was clear that young people were particularly uninterested, with 62 per cent of respondents aged 18-34 saying they had no opinion on the CWB monopoly. Further, support was much stronger in the 55 and older age group than among other groups.

Looking only at rural Saskatchewan, a similar pattern emerged. Fully 42 per cent of young rural residents expressed no opinion on the CWB issue, with this number dropping to 27 per cent for those 55 or older. With 35 per cent support, older rural residents are among those with the highest levels of support for the monopoly. Only 22 per cent of rural residents aged 18-34 years and 19 per cent of those aged 35-54 were in support of the CWB's single desk.

These more detailed findings signal a generational shift in Saskatchewan. Young people are simply not engaged in the CWB debate. They either don't understand the issue, or don't care. For their part, younger rural residents no longer seem to strongly identify with the goals and purpose of singledesk marketing and don't see the debate as important in defining the future of rural Saskatchewan.

At the request of the Saskatchewan Election Study Team, the Spatial Initiative at the University of Saskatchewan's Social Sciences Research Laboratories produced the attached map that illustrates support for the CWB monopoly.

It shows support is strongest on the west side of Saskatchewan, particularly in the extreme southwest. This area is one where wheat, durum, and barley are relatively more important in farmers' crop mix, where grain elevators and rail lines are more sparsely located, and where distances to U.S. markets are much larger.

The data thus suggest more support exists for the CWB in areas that will be most destabilized by eliminating the single desk, and less support for it in areas where farmers have more alternatives in the marketing and growing of wheat, durum and barley.

The map also shows less support for the CWB monopoly within Saskatoon than in the rural area that surrounds the city. In Regina, the situation is reversed: There is more support for the monopoly within Regina than in the surrounding rural areas. This finding suggests that Regina residents could have different political attitudes on state intervention in the economy than those in Saskatoon.

Overall, not everybody in Saskatchewan is indifferent to the debate, and pockets for support still exist for the CWB monopoly. As outlined above, this support is concentrated geographically, as well as among older residents.

Nonetheless, the fact that such a fundamental change to Saskatchewan's farming sector can take place with such a low level of engagement by many residents illustrates that agricultural issues no longer define us as a province.

No other question asked by the Saskatchewan Election Study Team was met with such ambivalence. Residents were much more likely to have opinions on Crown corporations, privatization of hospitals, labour standards, business regulation, and on aboriginal issues.

The roots of the idea of a single-desk marketer for Prairie wheat can be traced back to a paper on the co-operative selling of grain, which was delivered by Sintaluta farmer E.A. Partridge to the 1905 Saskatchewan Grain Grower Association's annual meeting. Since then, impassioned debates about the proper way to market grain and bring it to port have defined Saskatchewan politics.

Despite the historical importance of the CWB's monopoly for the development of our province, it appears that who markets our wheat and how it gets to port no longer will be a burning political issue. Future elections in Saskatchewan will be fought on issues unrelated to agriculture - just one more sign of the new Saskatchewan.