

Is Saskatchewan still social democratic?: A research brief

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Saskatchewan Election Study team¹

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Introduction

Since the election of North America's first social democratic government in Saskatchewan in 1944, the province has been considered a bastion of social democratic ideology. Going into the 2011 Saskatchewan provincial election, the NDP (known as the CCF prior to 1961) had held power in our province for 47 out of the last 67 years. However, in the 2011 election, two interesting developments took place that could lead to a questioning of Saskatchewan's status as a beacon for social democrats in Canada and elsewhere. First, although the Saskatchewan NDP had always improved its seat total and popular vote in the election following its removal from power (befitting its status as the natural governing party of the province), in 2011, the party's seat total and popular vote both declined from when it lost power in 2007. Second, the Saskatchewan Party obtained 64% of the popular vote in 2011, which is the highest popular vote attained by any party in the province's history. Given these disappointing electoral results for the NDP in 2011, it seems appropriate to ask: Is Saskatchewan still capable of sustaining a genuinely social democratic party, or is the vote for the Saskatchewan Party a repudiation of social democracy?

To examine this question, the Saskatchewan Election Study team asked Saskatchewan residents five questions concerning social democratic ideology in this province. These questions were intended to probe traditional social democratic themes: corporate taxation, public ownership, reduction of social inequalities and public provision of crucial services such as medical care. The results suggest some of these social democratic elements remain in place, while others have been eroded. Saskatchewan residents remain concerned about reducing the gap between rich and poor and are generally supportive of Crown Corporations and government intervention in the economy.

At the same time, they are split on the prospect of private health delivery in the province and definitely do not want to see natural resource royalties raised. When the data are broken down by demographic groups, it is found that low-income earners, union members and Regina residents are the most likely to have social democratic attitudes while rural residents and non-union members are the least likely to think in a social democratic manner. In terms of the beliefs of the voters of the two main parties, it is not surprising that the findings illustrate NDP voters are considerably more social democratic than the general population, while Saskatchewan Party voters are quite less social democratic.

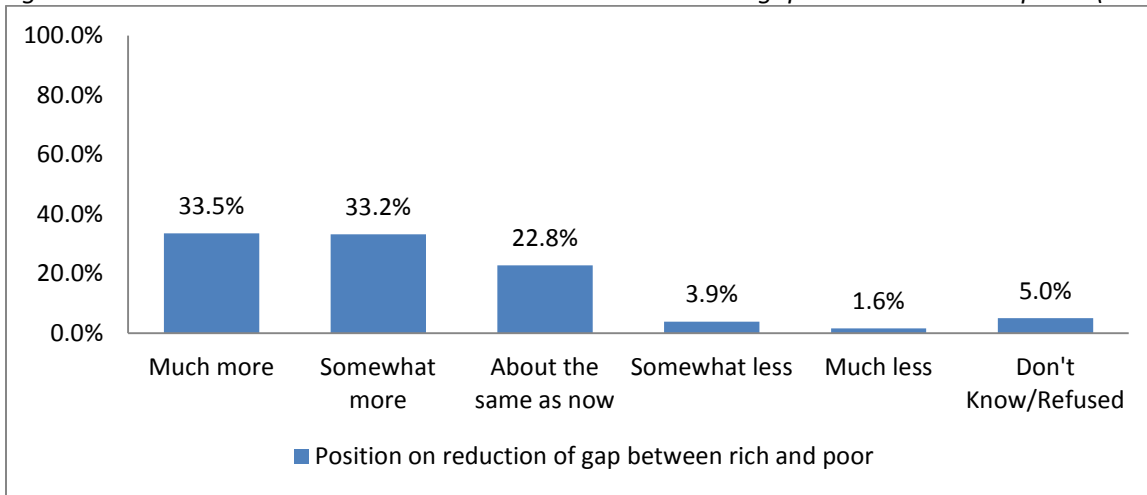
Is Saskatchewan still social democratic? The findings suggest that while support for social democratic ideological positions remains strong with respect to the protection of Crown Corporations and concerns about equality, other aspects of social democratic ideology enjoy less support among the Saskatchewan population.

General social democratic political attitudes

At its most basic, social democratic ideology encompasses the belief in the need for wealth redistribution coupled with a positive feeling towards government intervention in the economy to achieve a greater degree of fairness than the market can be expected to deliver. To test the degree to which Saskatchewan is still social democratic, the Saskatchewan Election Study team devised two questions to test respondents' attitudes on these two fundamental characteristics of social democracy.

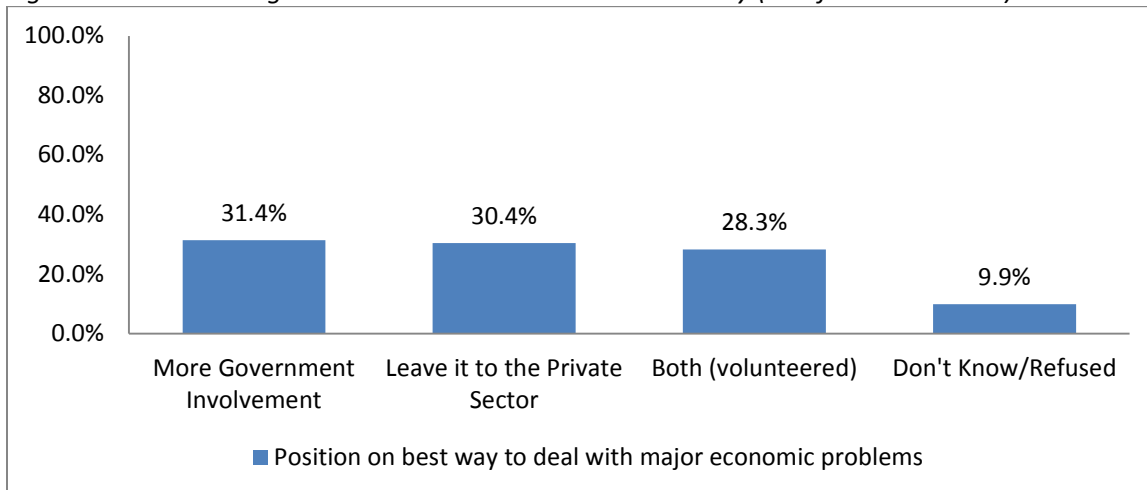
Respondents were asked "How much should be done to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor in Saskatchewan?" The large majority (66.7%) agree that 'much more' or 'somewhat more' should be done in our province to redistribute wealth between rich and poor. Support for this was highest among low-income earners² (74.5%), women (72.2%), union members (71.2%) and residents of Regina (70.7%).

Figure 1: Positions on “How much should be done to reduce the gap between rich and poor” (All of Saskatchewan)



Respondents were asked “In your opinion, what is the best way to deal with major economic problems? Is it ‘More Government Involvement’ or ‘Leave it to the Private Sector’?” Respondents were not given the option of ‘both’, but interviewers recorded this option if it was volunteered by the respondent. Interestingly, 28.3% of respondents volunteered the unstated ‘both’ category – a response that indicates a part of the population is looking beyond a traditional right/left dichotomy on this point. If we combine the responses of ‘more government involvement’ and ‘both’, we see that a majority (59.7%) of the public favours at least some government intervention in the economy. Support for the ‘more government involvement’ position is highest among 18-34 year olds (41.6%), low-income earners (42.6%), females (37.1%), Saskatoon residents (37.4%), Regina residents (36.5%) and union members (35.2%). Rural³ residents (38.2%) and non-union members (35.3%) distinguished themselves as wanting to leave major economic problems to the private sector.

Figure 2: Positions on government intervention in the economy (All of Saskatchewan)

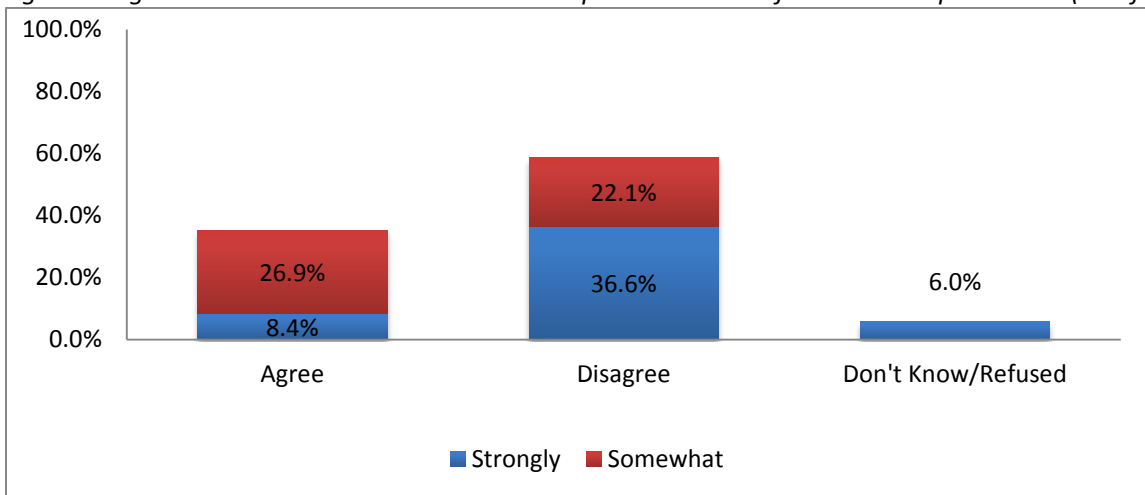


Attitudes towards three social democratic policies

As the natural governing party for most of the 20th century, the NDP has played a significant role in shaping the public policy of Saskatchewan. To test current Saskatchewan social democratic attitudes, the Saskatchewan Election Study team chose to ask respondents about three specific policies that have been heavily associated with the NDP since its first election to power in 1944.

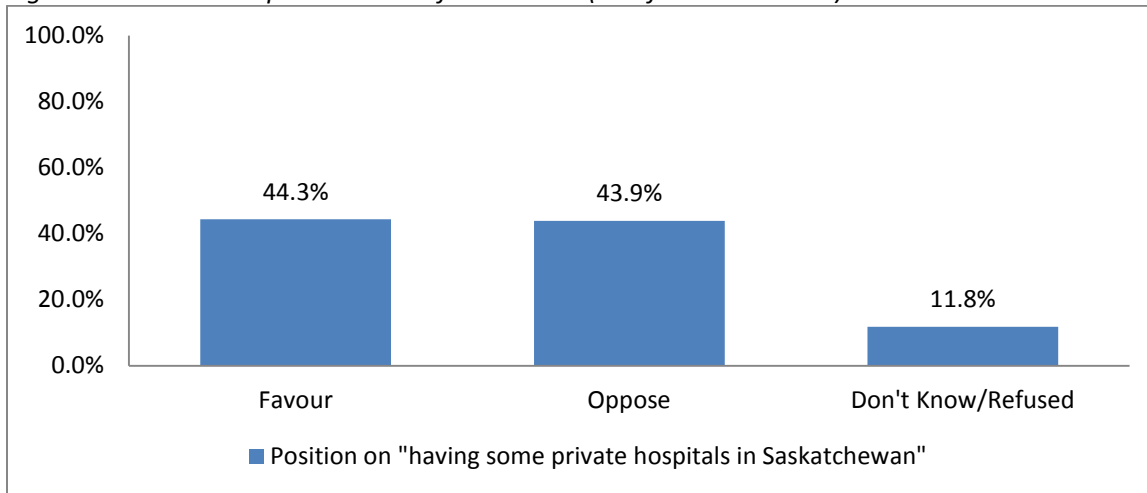
The largest Crown Corporations in Saskatchewan were created by the T.C. Douglas CCF government in the late 1940s. Since that time, the maintenance and growth of Crown Corporations has been a critical component in the NDP's economic model. The NDP has strongly opposed the Saskatchewan Party's efforts to sell out-of-province businesses owned by Crown Corporations. Respondents were asked about their level of agreement with the statement "Saskatchewan should privatize some of its Crown Corporations." A majority of residents (58.7%) either 'strongly disagree' or 'somewhat disagree' with this statement. The highest levels of disagreement with this statement are among Regina residents (69.2%), those over 55 years old (67.7%), low-income earners (65.9%), and union members (68.8%). People aged 18-34 (50.2%) and rural residents (53.2%) are the groups with the least amount of agreement with this statement.

Figure 3: Agreement that "Saskatchewan should privatize some of its Crown Corporations" (All of Saskatchewan)



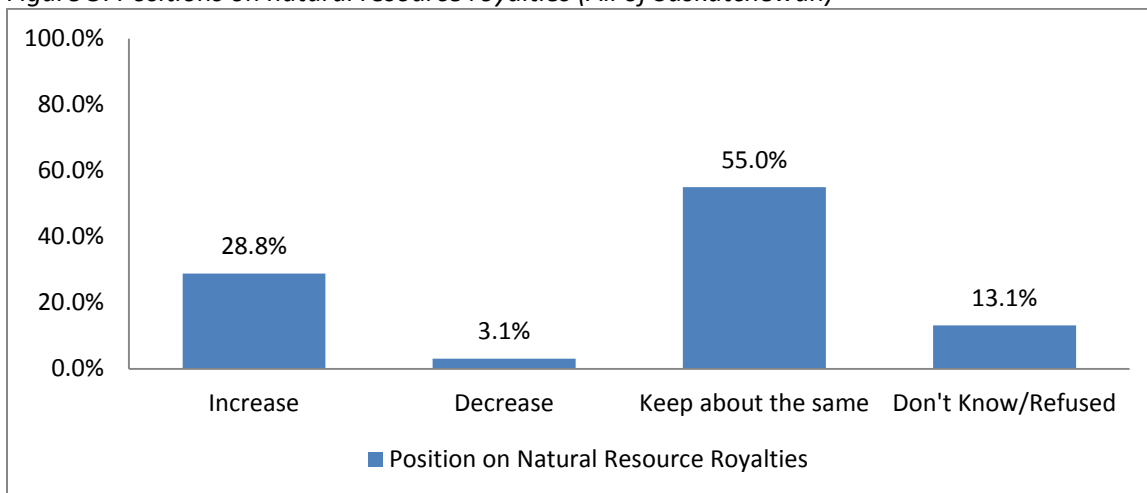
Under the CCF, Saskatchewan was the first province to establish a publicly-funded Medicare system in 1962. More recently, the NDP has opposed the Saskatchewan Party's experimentation with privatized health services. Respondents were asked "Do you favour or oppose having some private hospitals in Saskatchewan?" The public appears very evenly split on this question, with 44.3% in favour of some private hospitals and 43.9% opposing private hospitals in our province. The demographic groups most opposed to private hospitals are low-income earners (51.2%), people over the age of 55 (50%), union members (49.8%) and Regina residents (49.6%). The demographic groups that are most in favour of private hospitals are those earning over \$100,000 (55.5%) and non-union members (52.3%).

Figure 4: Positions on privatization of healthcare (All of Saskatchewan)



While the Romanow and Calvert NDP governments decreased royalties on natural resources, both the Douglas CCF government and the Blakeney NDP government increased royalties. Further, the NDP’s campaign in the 2011 provincial election focused heavily on increasing potash royalties to pay for expanded social programs. Respondents were asked “In your opinion, should natural resource royalties be ‘Increased’, ‘Decreased’, or ‘Kept about the same’ as now?” A clear majority want royalties to remain stable while a sizable minority feel that royalties should be increased. There was very little variation on this question by demographic group. The only notable exception was respondents who had completed university are more likely to be in favour of increased royalties (34.7%).

Figure 5: Positions on natural resource royalties (All of Saskatchewan)



Social democratic attitudes by party

Since the Saskatchewan Election Study also asked respondents which party they voted for, it is possible to examine the social democratic attitudes of the voters for the main parties. The table below explores the percentage of NDP and Saskatchewan Party voters holding a prototypical social democratic attitude compared to all respondents in the sample. Not surprisingly, NDP voters are considerably more social democratic when compared to all respondents (that is, the full sample including voters for all parties as well as non-voters), while Saskatchewan Party voters are much less social democratic in their preferences.

However, a closer look at the data reveals some interesting findings. Despite the NDP's stance in favour of increasing royalties, a sizeable minority of their voters (33.0%) feel resource royalties should be kept at their present levels. Similarly, when faced with a forced choice between more government intervention in the economy and leaving the economy to the private sector to solve major economic problems, 28% of NDP voters volunteered that both the private sector and the government need to play a role in solving economic problems.

At the same time, the Saskatchewan Party's voters display some mild social democratic tendencies. They seem genuinely concerned about reducing the gap between rich and poor in Saskatchewan and generally disagree with the privatization of Crown Corporations.

Figure 6: Social democratic attitudes by political party voted for (All of Saskatchewan)

| Prototypical social democratic position | NDP voters | All respondents | Sask Party voters |
|--|-------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Much/somewhat more should be done to reduce gap between rich and poor | 84.2% | 66.7% | 55.4% |
| Favour more government intervention in the economy | 46.5% | 31.4% | 25.1% |
| Strongly/somewhat disagree with the privatization of some Crown Corporations | 82.5% | 58.7% | 47.2% |
| Oppose privatization of some hospitals | 72.2% | 43.9% | 28.6% |
| Favour increased resource royalties | 54.9% | 28.8% | 18.1% |

Methodology of the Saskatchewan Election Study

The 2011 Saskatchewan Election Study was the first study to use the newly-created survey lab in the Social Sciences Research Laboratories (SSRL) complex at the University of Saskatchewan. Deployed as a telephone survey using WinCATI software, 1,099 Saskatchewan residents, 18 years of age and older, were administered a 15-minute survey on political attitudes and behaviours in the province from November 8, 2011 to November 21, 2011. Results of the survey, which generated a response rate of 23.6%, are generalizable to the Saskatchewan population (18 years of age and older) +/- 2.95% at the 95% confidence interval (19 times out of 20). The Saskatchewan Election Study was funded by the Johnson-Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy, with additional support from LEAD Saskatoon, St. Thomas More College and the College of Arts and Science at the University of Saskatchewan.

¹ Research team members are listed in alphabetical order. The research team would like to thank Kirk Clavelle for his research assistance.

² For purposes of this research brief, 'low-income' denotes a respondent with an annual household income of less than \$50,000.

³ Rural refers to respondent who does not live in the two northern ridings of Athabasca and Cumberland or in a city with a population of over 10,000 which includes Saskatoon, Regina, Estevan, Swift Current, Moose Jaw, Yorkton, Prince Albert, North Battleford and the Saskatchewan portion of Lloydminster.