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Party Democracy in Alberta

Political parties occupy an important place in democratic politics, as they, among other things, provide a link between citizens and the state. It is through parties that citizens have opportunities to affect the composition of governmental elites. In the words of the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, "Political parties give voters meaningful choices, both in the direct election of their individual Member of Parliament and in the indirect election of a government" (Volume 1: 207). Parties perform a crucial pre-selection function for the political system, since in most liberal democracies, attaining party office is a necessary and occasionally sufficient condition for obtaining government office.

The internal activities of political parties are thus of interest to those concerned with the health of democracy. As Michael Gallagher explains, "the way in which political parties select their candidates may be used as an acid test of how democratically they conduct their internal affairs" (1988: 1). This issue is of more than just academic significance. Citizens in elections are largely restricted to choosing from among the candidates that parties deign to put before them. This point was demonstrated vividly by Boss Tweed (former Democratic Party boss in New York), who suggested: "I don't care who does the electing, just so I can do the nominating" (as quoted in Courtney 1995: 127).

Possession of the ability to choose their party's standard-bearer in a general election is one of the most jealously guarded prerogatives of local party activists in Canada (see Carty 1991). However, the influence local candidates have on election outcomes is not clear, and the role of back-bench representatives in legislatures is not one to which substantial power inheres. Much of the power and influence in Canada stems directly from the party leader. This is a well-documented phenomenon with deep roots in Canadian history. Hugh Clokie, writing in 1945, noted that "the dominant position of the party leader in Canadian politics has often been commented on

by foreign observers. It is far greater than in Great Britain, where the allegiance to party principles or programs competes with loyalty as a bond of partisanship. It is also far greater than in the US, where party candidates are nominated locally without any obligation to support the national leader of the party. In Canada, more than anywhere else, it is possible to define a party as being a body of supporters following a given leader" (1945: 91).

Selecting party leaders is therefore one of the most important functions performed by parties, and as Courtney (1973) has shown, the mechanisms that parties utilize to choose leaders carry consequences in terms of who will be selected. In recent years, the selection of leaders in Canada has undergone a shift. For most of the twentieth century, Canadian parties chose leaders in conventions representing both the party elite and delegates elected by the various groupings that comprised the party. This system has recently been challenged as insufficiently democratic, and a number of provincial parties have used, for the first time, a system of universal balloting to choose their leaders. In such a system, every member of the party is eligible to vote directly for the party's leader. The aim of such elections is to move beyond conventions and improve the state of party democracy.

This book examines alternative methods of leadership selection to better understand the implications for democratic governance. The purpose is to identify and assess the various claims for representativeness advanced by proponents for direct and indirect methods of leadership selection. Data drawn from detailed analyses of three leadership selection events in Alberta in the 1990s provides the empirical backdrop for this assessment.

Direct and Indirect Leadership Selection: Alternative Perspectives

As the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing summarizes, "Advocates of direct election argue this approach is more democratic because it limits the influence of the party establishment over the selection of leaders and gives more influence to rank-and-file members. Direct election of party leaders may also reduce the opportunities for abuse of membership rules. It is seen as a credible mechanism for rebuilding public confidence in the leadership selection process" (Volume 1: 280). Criticism of conventions on the basis of an alleged democratic deficit is not new; Duverger noted in his seminal study of parties that "indirect election is a way of banishing democracy while pretending to apply it" (1978 [1954]: 140).

The shift to a more universal system for choosing leaders has attracted considerable criticism. Courtney, for instance, ominously concluded a mammoth study of leadership selection in Canada by writing "the alleged benefits of universal voting may in the long run be more ephemeral than its proponents claim. The switch could ultimately prove problematic for the

health of local political organizations and the larger political community in Canada" (1995: 293).

Courtney's point about the negative impact of universal balloting on political parties and the wider political community captures well the generally negative tone of academic assessments of universal ballots. Critics have argued that this leadership selection method will change the nature of leadership campaigns and weaken parties by placing the power to choose leaders in the hands of uninformed voters who may possess only a limited party background.

The move away from caucus selection to conventions in the early part of the twentieth century clearly diminished the role of parliamentarians in the process (Courtney 1973). Leaders were less likely to possess an extensive parliamentary background, and parliamentarians could not determine who would become their leader. Some maintain that the universal ballot will exacerbate this trend. Preyra (1995), for instance, argues that party outsiders will become even more competitive than they were with conventions in part because parties will lose the valuable counsel of party elites in making leadership choices. This point is echoed by Courtney who argues that "a direct universal vote would reduce even further the role that MPs and provincial legislators play in the selection of their leader" (1995: 251). Parliamentarians and other party officials will have no more voice than someone who purchased his or her party membership only minutes before the deadline for registering.

The implication of this change is that it is no longer possible to describe leadership selection as the deliberative choice of a group well-grounded in the party. As Perlin explains, conventions that have been celebrated "as a deliberative body in which the opinions of the party elite can be heard and in which participants have close contact with representatives of every element of the party, [are] better equipped than a mass based election to make informed and wise judgements about the competence of leadership candidates" (1991a: 66).

The consequence of rejecting conventions and allowing ordinary members to vote directly for the leader might be the election of less capable leaders. As Courtney warns, "because the votes of all members are counted equally, parties both forfeit and fail to reward the wisdom, experience and political savvy of their most established and dedicated activists" (1995: 245).

Conventions not only provided a forum for well-informed party activists to deliberate, they also offered a privileged role for constituencies. Most delegates represented constituency associations, and viable candidates needed a presence at the constituency level throughout the country or province. In many universal ballots this will no longer be necessary. Preyra (1994; 1995) suggests that candidates will be able to downplay constituency-level

activities because the constituency will no longer be the basis of representation. Presumably, this will lessen the importance of constituency organizations and make potential activists less likely to pursue activities at this level.

The change in the nature of leadership campaigns is also seen as a problem with universal ballots. Critics argue compellingly that universal ballots will cost more, candidates will make more use of the media in trying to reach voters, and face-to-face campaigning will become less important. The cost of conducting a leadership campaign grew dramatically throughout the convention period (see Courtney 1995; Carty 1994). In recent federal conventions, prominent potential candidates have refused to run because they could not raise the required level of funding (Perlin 1991b). It is unlikely that costs would be reduced by a universal ballot, which would require candidates to reach voters throughout the country or province. Moreover, the increased number of voters involved in a universal ballot would make it difficult for candidates to meet voters in a face-to-face fashion. Candidates would be forced to conduct general election-style media campaigns, and voters would become dependent on the media for much of their information. Leadership campaigns with a universal ballot would therefore be accompanied by a substantial growth in the role of money and the media.

Acknowledged in the above critique is the fact that universal ballots will involve a greater number of people and that ordinary party members will not have their preferences mediated by delegates or decisions made for them by the party elite. The direct preferences of a much larger group of party members will determine the party's leadership.

It is likely that the universal ballot electorate will not only be substantially larger than that of a leadership convention, but that those who vote in a universal ballot will present a different demographic profile. The costs involved in attending a leadership convention ensured that most Canadians were unable to participate. This meant that delegates to leadership conventions were predominantly affluent, university-educated males. As well, those under thirty made up a disproportionate share of the convention electorate. Since there are no registration fees and there is no need to travel some distance to a central location, universal ballots should be much more accessible to less-affluent voters as well as to those who might be older or physically challenged. Women were not proportionately represented at conventions, in part because of their relative absence from ex-officio positions (Brodie 1988; Perlin 1991a). Without special representation for the party elite, the leadership selection process should increase the proportion of women in the electorate. Since previous research on women in politics has demonstrated gender gaps in voting and attitudes, the possibility of women comprising a greater proportion of the electorate has profound implications for parties.

Parties deliberately manipulated the convention electorate. In the Liberal and Conservative parties, each constituency was represented equally whether it had ten members or ten thousand. As well, each constituency was required to have a certain percentage of women and youth as part of its delegation. This manipulation worked better for youth than it did for women who never achieved equality at a federal leadership convention (see Courtney 1995). Universal ballots remove barriers to participation, but they simultaneously eliminate the representational guarantees provided by conventions. No longer will constituencies be guaranteed an equal voice in the leadership choice, nor will women and youth be guaranteed representation.

The absence of equal regional representation means, as Courtney explains, that "systems of pure universal suffrage do not ensure equitable regional representation. The potential exists for one or more regions to dominate the selection of leader" (1995: 245). It is not clear whether that is an advantage or disadvantage of universal balloting. Admittedly, the regional guarantees afforded by Liberal and Conservative conventions provided a convention electorate that was regionally representative. Given the importance of regional issues in Canadian politics, equitable representation of the regions was probably beneficial. However, it must be acknowledged that regional representation constructed an electorate that was not representative of the party membership, since "it is an incontestable fact that members and active supporters of any party are more concentrated in some regions, provinces and language groups than others" (Courtney 1995: 281). Regional representation may assist parties in performing a brokerage role, but it clearly diminishes the role of members who come from areas where the party is disproportionately strong. Individual equality is sacrificed for regional equity.

The absence of a certain level of guaranteed representation for women and youth is controversial. Preyra, in his reflection on the 1992 Nova Scotia Liberal tele-vote, reflects this controversy. While that universal ballot left it "to the invisible hand of the marketplace to resolve questions of equity, representativeness, or responsiveness to the needs of differently abled social interests ... senior citizens, people with financial or physical disabilities, parents with young children, geographically isolated constituencies ... who were effectively disenfranchised because they were often unable to attend or get selected as delegates were suddenly empowered" (1994: 5-7). Similarly, Perlin indicated that the representation of women and youth (and the more affluent) would be dramatically affected by the universal ballot. In his words, "the people choosing leaders will no longer be predominantly from higher status groups, women are likely to have a more equitable role and the representation of young people is likely to be reduced" (1991a: 87). The reduced role for youth is likely positive since "interviews with student activists who participated in the 1983 and 1984 conventions and data from

the surveys of delegates to those conventions, indicate that young party members see politics primarily as a means to personal ends and that they take little opportunity to involve themselves in discussions regarding public policy" (1991b: 201).

As discussed previously, scholarly opinion is less positive about the impact of the composition of the universal ballot electorate with respect to party background. Despite a dramatic increase in contests for delegate spaces (see Hanson 1992; Carty 1988a), convention delegates were generally well grounded in their party. As Courtney explains, "the vast majority of those who served as delegates to political leadership conventions overwhelmingly have had several years of experience in the party" (1995: 287). This is unlikely to be the case with universal ballots.

The ability of voters in universal ballots to select themselves, and the need for competitive candidates to recruit new voters, virtually ensures that many will have only a limited background in the party. As well, since many of the voters may be inspired by, or recruited by, a particular candidate, they "could prove to be short lived in their enthusiasm for the party" (Malcolmson 1992: 24).

This point brings us almost full circle in the discussion of universal balloting. A large electorate with limited background in the party will not have the opportunity for interaction with candidates and "would be far less likely to be as informed as the party members who are usually convention delegates" (Malcolmson 1992: 25). Moreover, this electorate will be more dependent on the media for information. Thus, the changed political background of voters has implications for the quality of decision making, the nature of the campaign, and the profile of the party.

In general, then, comparisons of conventions with universal ballots find the latter wanting. However, William Cross (1996) provides a more positive assessment of universal ballots. In his discussion of the twelve universal ballots held between 1985 and 1995, he found that the parties using this mechanism experienced "a significant increase in membership" (303) and that "the experience thus far with direct election does not appear to indicate a significant increase in the cost of running for provincial party leadership" (307). Similarly, Stewart, in an earlier discussion of universal balloting, argued that in "evaluating the universal ballot it is important to avoid comparing it to an idealized convention model" (1997: 127). The invasion of delegate selection meetings by candidates and their organizations has made it virtually impossible for activists on the wrong slate to become delegates (Schumacher 1993: 8), and this trench warfare "has also devalued the deliberative nature of conventions" (Stewart 1997: 128; see also Carty 1994). Moreover, in recent conventions, delegates have become increasingly dependent on the media for information and have focused on choosing a leader based on assessments of "electablility" (Perlin 1991b). It seems

appropriate to conclude, therefore, that many of the "deficiencies" of universal ballots are also associated with recent manifestations of conventions.

The Trend to Direct Election

Regardless of the merits or demerits of universal ballots, it appears that universal ballots are becoming the new norm for the selection of party leaders in Canada. As Perlin acknowledges, "there is good reason to expect that direct election of leaders will be widely adopted. Once one party uses this method, its more democratic aura will put pressure on other parties to use it as well" (1991a: 86). All of the parties represented in the federal House of Commons have put in place some sort of universal ballot for selecting their next leader, and, at the provincial level, most Canadians are governed by someone chosen through a universal ballot process. There is, however, a wide variation in the kinds of universal ballots that have been used to date. Some provide for a form of mediation, some allow for restrictions on who is eligible to vote, and "there is no consensus across or within the parties on what this new institution should look like" (Carty and Blake 1999: 221).

Analysis of universal ballots in operation is crucial to understanding the impact of this evolution on parties and politics in Canada and in forging a consensus on what mechanisms work best, particularly given the centrality of leaders in election campaigns and legislatures. As well, in the light of the Canadian reality we think it best to parallel the ideas of Gallagher: "The way in which political parties select their [leaders] may be used as an acid test of how democratically they conduct their internal affairs" (1988: 1).

Leadership Selection in Alberta

We pursue this analysis by examining universal balloting in the context of Alberta politics. Between 5 December 1992 and 14 November 1994, the three major parties in Alberta all chose new leaders, and each of these parties utilized a different selection method. The governing Progressive Conservatives used an open primary system in which all party members could vote directly for the leader by attending a polling station in their riding. The official opposition Liberal Party used a tele-vote in which each member who purchased a personal identification number (PIN) by a specific deadline could make their leadership choice over the telephone. Aside from the use of technology, this system in many ways resembles a closed primary.[1] And the smallest party, the New Democratic Party (NDP), used a traditional convention that we are able to use as a control in our study. We present case studies of each of these processes in the hope that they will further our understanding of the implications of different mechanisms of leadership selection and the state of internal democracy in Alberta's political parties. Given the centrality of leaders to politics in Canada, our study should also provide further insight into the major parties in Alberta. Carty notes that

leadership elections provide a window into parties (1988a: 84). We shall use this window to examine each of these parties with respect to the characteristics and views of their "activists." The views of these activists will enable us to assess the degree to which each party reflects Alberta's political culture and to enhance our understanding of the nature of politics in Alberta.

Outline of the Argument

The book is structured in the following manner. We provide a brief overview of party politics and political culture in Alberta and describe each of the leadership selection methods as well as our data-collection method. We then present a case study of the Alberta Conservative Party. This analysis focuses on two areas. First, we examine the degree to which the Conservative leadership election involved voters who were not members of the federal Conservative Party. In this context, we focus both on voters who supported the federal Reform Party and those who were not members of any federal party, and contrast these individuals with those who were members of both the provincial and federal Conservatives. Next, material is presented that describes the participants and analyzes voting by looking at socio-demographic characteristics, attitudes, and factors peculiar to the 1992 race as well as information on the degree of attitudinal consensus among voters.

We then present similar material on the Liberal and NDP leadership elections. As we noted above, one of the more positive predictions for universal ballots was its potential for involving more women. We therefore examine each of the parties and processes in order to assess the degree to which the representation increased and how the increased presence of women in the electorate relates to participation and political opinions. We look at the degree to which women and men in each process differed with respect to voting choice, demographic characteristics, and attitudes, and probe for gender differences that cross party lines. The presence of such differences will provide further insight into the implications of using a leadership selection process that enfranchises a larger (and more representative) proportion of women. We present conclusions regarding the relation of party and leadership selection process to this issue. We conclude our analysis by explicitly comparing the three leadership election systems and the three parties and by presenting our overall assessments of the processes and their implications for leaders and parties both in Alberta and more generally. Before moving to our examination of the leadership elections, we will provide a context for this analysis by considering party politics and the political culture in Alberta.

Party Politics in Alberta

Although the political science literature on provincial politics in Canada is generally limited, in relative terms, much has been written about party

politics in Canada's fourth-largest province. Party politics in Alberta seem different from those in neighbouring provinces. For instance, throughout Alberta's history as a province, only three changes of government have occurred. In 1921, the United Farmers of Alberta (UFA) defeated the Liberals, who had governed the province since its creation in 1905. In turn, the UFA lost every seat it held in the legislature in 1935 as the Social Credit party, aided by the Great Depression, swept into office under the leadership of the controversial William "Bible Bill" Aberhart. Following Aberhart's death, Ernest Manning assumed the leadership and led both the party and the province until 1968. His successor, Harry Strom, promptly led the party to defeat in the 1971 election. The 1971 election brought into office the Progressive Conservative Party under the leadership of Peter Lougheed. Lougheed served as premier until 1985, when he was replaced by Don Getty. Getty's decision to resign in 1992 ushered in the leadership election that provides the point of departure for this study.

Alberta's electoral history demonstrates a provincial tendency to keep governments in office for long periods of time. In the broader Canadian context, Alberta is notable but not exceptional on this measure. Electoral politics in Alberta appear more distinctive with respect to the paucity of seats won by opposition parties. Indeed, a party history of Alberta that focuses on electoral success needs to devote very little space to chronicling opposition parties. Their history chronicles the struggle for survival rather than for victory.

Throughout virtually all of the Social Credit's tenure in office, as well as the Lougheed Conservative era, opposition parties comprised only a corporal's guard in the legislature. Much has been written about this phenomenon. Perhaps the most famous study was C.B. Macpherson's *Democracy in Alberta*. Macpherson claimed that Alberta possessed a "quasi-party system" based on two characteristics: "One was [their relatively] homogeneous class composition, the other was their quasi-colonial status. The former seemed to make a party system unnecessary, the latter led to a positive aversion to party. The absence of any serious opposition of class interests within the province meant that alternate parties were not needed either to express or to moderate a perennial conflict of interests. There was apparently, therefore, no positive basis for an alternate party system" (1962: 21). More recently, Gurston Dacks has presented a similar analysis outlining what he calls an Alberta consensus based on "the alienation Albertans have felt towards national political institutions ... and the inclination of Albertans to relate to provincial politics in terms of the interest they share in a single dominant commodity" (1986: 187).

Macpherson's analysis has been challenged in recent years on a number of fronts. Some suggest that while his observations may have once been true of Alberta, the province has changed. Dacks makes the point that the

decline in natural resource revenue in the province in the late 1980s carries with it a "loss of confidence in one or two commodities which integrated Alberta society for so many decades" (1986: 192). Albertans therefore might well begin to support other parties, ushering in an era of stronger oppositions and more competitive politics. A more direct assault by Edward Bell (1993) suggests that Macpherson was in fact inaccurate in his description of the class composition of Alberta and that the province was never as homogeneous as he implied. Finally, critics have suggested that Alberta's uniqueness in terms of weak oppositions is created by the electoral system as much as by the class structure and political culture. As Peter McCormick explains, Albertans "scatter opposition votes in such a fashion that each opposition party suffers heavily from the punitive effects of the single member plurality system ... Some 80% of the anti-government vote seems able to wander without much hesitation from one party to another" (1980: 91, 95).

From each of these perspectives, an appreciation of a partisan diversity greater than generally attributed to Alberta politics is gained, along with a sense that the province's unique patterns of small oppositions are not inevitable. Indeed, the period of 1986 to 1993 was marked by ever-increasing opposition representation in the legislature, as the number of opposition MLAs increased from four in 1982 to twenty-two in 1986, twenty-four in 1989, and thirty-two in 1993 (see Table 1.1). The size of the opposition in Alberta was thus coming more and more to resemble opposition sizes in the rest of the country.

One of the reasons offered for the change in opposition size is germane to this study: leadership. Archer has suggested that the pattern of Conservative dominance from 1971 to 1985 was based to a significant degree on Lougheed, and when he was no longer the Conservative leader, many questioned "their continuing support for the party" (1992: 124-5). This emphasis on leadership recurs in Alberta politics. The Conservative victory in 1971 is partially credited to leadership. As Archer suggests, "this change occurred for several reasons. Most important was the effect of leadership ... Positive

Table 1.1

Alberta election results, 1979-97: Seats and vote percentage*

	PC		Liberal		NDP		Other		Total seats
1979	74	(57%)	–	(6%)	1	(16%)	4	(21%)	79
1982	75	(63%)	–	(2%)	2	(19%)	2	(16%)	79
1986	61	(51%)	4	(12%)	16	(29%)	2	(8%)	83
1989	59	(44%)	8	(29%)	16	(26%)	–	(1%)	83
1993	51	(44%)	32	(40%)	–	(11%)	–	(5%)	83
1997	63	(51%)	18	(33%)	2	(9%)	–	(7%)	83

* Vote percentages are shown in parentheses.

attitudes towards Lougheed far outstripped those for any other party leader" (1992: 117). Similarly, the massive Social Credit victory in 1935 must be attributed at least in part to the charisma of Aberhart and his ability to inspire faith on the part of ordinary Albertans. Subsequently, Ernest Manning became so widely respected in Alberta that the Conservatives under Lougheed were very reluctant to attack him, and some have questioned whether the Conservative breakthrough would have been possible had Manning held on to the reins of the Social Credit party. Finally, much of the Conservative misfortune from 1985 to 1993 has been laid at the feet of Don Getty, who in the words of *Edmonton Journal* columnist Mark Lisac, "had come to symbolize ineffectiveness" (1995: 30).

The importance of leadership is also indicated by Les Pal who speaks of the "strategic intervention of such leaders as Aberhart, Manning and Lougheed, who reshaped the political culture to meet new circumstances" (1992: 3-4). More recently, the perpetuation of the Conservative Party in power in 1993 is laid largely at the feet of Ralph Klein, the party's current leader, whose "personal popularity had much to do with the Tories' election victory" (Tupper and Taras 1994: 68). Alberta politics has been dominated by a few strong leaders to a degree that exceeds even the federal experience. Given the appropriate set of circumstances, leaders seem able to transform the fortunes of the province's political parties. This ability is facilitated by Alberta's political culture.

Alberta's Political Culture: Alienated, Conservative, and Populist

Identification of the three key elements in Alberta's political culture is uncontroversial. The province's political culture can be described as alienated, conservative, and populist. We will briefly discuss each of these features.

Provincial party politics is not carried out in a vacuum. Relations with the federal government and the province's political culture help establish the framework in which party politics takes place. Indeed, Alberta's political culture has in part been shaped by the province's relationship with the federal government. Perhaps the most obvious manifestation of Alberta political culture is alienation from the federal government. As Gibbins notes, "distrust of the federal government has been a prominent feature of western alienation, and a sense of powerlessness vis-à-vis that same government has been a constant source of antagonism and concern" (1979: 144). Certainly few would dispute that Albertans feel they are not treated fairly by the federal government, and, with the exception of the Mulroney era, the majority of Albertan MPs have consistently sat on the opposition benches. The litany of issues that fuel the perceptions of alienation includes the delay in granting provincial control over natural resources, transportation policy, tariff policy, low levels of transfer payments, disallowance, and energy policy (including the controversial National Energy Program

implemented by the Trudeau government in 1980). It is important to note that this alienation is of a particular kind. As Gibbins explains, "western alienation in Alberta is not symptomatic of political disengagement or apathy. To the contrary, it has been the source of a good deal of political energy." Furthermore, "western alienation is also central to the political culture which both shapes and reflects political behaviour in the province" (Gibbins 1992: 71; 70-1).

Another key element in the Alberta political culture is its relative "conservatism."[2] Gibbins describes this as "a strong belief in the spirit if not necessarily the practice of free enterprise, a concomitant belief in the desirability if not the actuality of small fiscally conservative governments, a tolerance if not affection for one party governments" (1979: 143). With respect to electoral politics, this conservatism was reflected in Alberta's consistent election of Conservative MPs to the federal House of Commons in an era when the Liberals were consistently forming federal governments. In 1993 and 1997, the election of mainly Reform MPs again symbolizes this "conservative" streak.

At the provincial level, only the Social Credit and Conservative parties have been able to form governments since 1935. Indeed, Alberta is the only western province in which neither the NDP nor its CCF predecessor have ever formed a government. In 1971 when the Conservatives ended the Socred hold on power, the Conservative Party succeeded by neutralizing ideology and focusing on "safe change," that is, a change of faces but not policies (Elton and Goddard 1979: 52). In the early 1990s when the Liberals began to threaten the Conservative hold on power, it was a result of Liberal Party actions to position itself in a similar manner. Their emphasis was on the fiscal and managerial incompetence of the government, and, in the 1993 election, the Liberal leader travelled the province with a "debt clock" and promised "brutal" cuts in spending if his party was elected (Stewart 1995).

Finally, the Conservative victory in 1993 followed an election campaign in which they promised (and subsequently delivered) "massive cuts" in provincial spending. In 1993, more than four in five Albertans supported parties promising radical changes in government spending of a neo-liberal variety. The introduction and implementation of these changes, while met with some criticism, was largely supported by Albertans. As Archer and Gibbins note, "most Albertans are neo-conservatives who find themselves in agreement with the broad outlines of the Klein government" (1997: 470). In 1997, the Klein government was re-elected with an increased majority in the legislature and a majority of the popular vote. The Liberal Party, as we shall see in Chapter 4, made a conscious decision to present a more left-wing focus. Following this repositioning, the party saw its seat total cut almost in half and its share of the popular vote fall by almost seven percentage points.

In short, the four-year record of a government described as engaged in the "large-scale social reengineering of a province's political culture to conform with the demands of moral conservatism and the neo-liberal agenda of the global corporations" (Harrison and Laxer 1995: 3) was overwhelmingly endorsed by the Albertan electorate. Given this evidence, the description of Alberta's political culture as "conservative" is unlikely to generate much controversy.

The final element of Alberta's political culture that we wish to highlight is populism. A populist element has extensive roots in Alberta's history. Macpherson refers to a general aversion for parties (1962: 21) and this is manifested in the UFA's advocacy of direct democracy and relaxing the bonds of party discipline. Additionally, Social Credit launched attacks on many elites of the day. A desire for the wider involvement of ordinary citizens in politics and a distrust of experts have been recurring themes in Alberta's public opinion. It is no accident that Reform, a party that celebrates the "Common Sense of the Common People" and advocates the introduction of recall, initiative, and the wider use of referenda, has had its greatest success in Alberta. And the current premier's success owes partially to his populist image. As Gillian Steward explains, "the image of Ralph Klein as 'ordinary' is deeply embedded in the minds of Albertans, and is one of his greatest assets. Almost everyone refers to him as Ralph rather than Klein, or The Premier. He revels in the role of the ordinary man who has managed to capture one of the highest political offices in the land" (Steward 1995: 23). Tupper and Taras explain that in 1993 "the Conservative campaign was based almost entirely on packaging his folksy charm and everyman image and in presenting the Conservatives as 'Ralph's Team.' The strategy was to deflect attention away from the legacy of the Getty government and make the election into a personality contest" (1994: 68). This desire for the election to turn on personality again points out the importance of leadership in Alberta. We now briefly outline the campaigns that preceded our leadership elections.

The Leadership Contests

Despite the propinquity of the leadership selections studied in this book, the three parties chose leaders in rather different circumstances. However, a characteristic all of the parties shared was that they chose their leader in a period of some turmoil. The Alberta Conservatives were the first to choose a new leader in December 1992. That party, which had governed Alberta for more than twenty years, seemed in desperate shape. It trailed in the polls, and some pundits were suggesting that the Tory dynasty was over. The selection of Ralph Klein and the leadership election itself have been credited with the change in fortune for the party (Schumacher 1993: 8). In 1985, when Don Getty was chosen as leader, the Conservatives used a traditional

convention. This particular convention was marred by negative publicity and criticism. Indeed, one analysis of that election suggested that "Don Getty … never fully recovered from the damage done by the leadership contest. Alberta Tories may provide important lessons to all Canadian parties on how not to select leaders" (Archer and Hunziker 1992: 81). The party was determined not to repeat this experience and decided to organize an election in which every party member could vote directly for the premier. Using a universal balloting system that permitted all members who were able to visit a polling station to cast a vote, the race attracted a record nine candidates and was extended to a second ballot a week later. Even more importantly, the party's membership soared as more than 80,000 Albertans cast a ballot on one of the two weeks of the balloting. Building on the momentum of his leadership race, Klein went on to score a victory in the June 1993 provincial election.

The first casualty of the Klein victory was the New Democratic Party. It went from the official opposition to virtual annihilation as it was unable to elect anyone to the legislature in 1993. The party's leader resigned and a traditional leadership convention was scheduled for February 1994. The leadership election attracted only one major candidate, former federal MP Ross Harvey, and three candidates who had never held public office. The race and convention attracted little in the way of public or media attention, and in virtual obscurity a surprisingly large convention of more than 400 gave Harvey an easy victory.

The Liberal Party chose their new leader in the context of disappointment. The party expected to win the 1993 election, and their failure to do so spelled the end for Laurence Decore as leader. Despite leading the party to a sixty-year high in terms of the popular vote and forming the largest opposition the legislature had seen in decades, Decore stepped down. In a decision apparently much regretted, the party used a tele-vote to choose Decore's successor. In order to participate in the tele-vote, party members had to pay a ten-dollar registration fee one week before the vote. A PIN was sent to each person registered, and on voting day, individuals with access to a touch-tone phone could dial in and, after entering a valid PIN, cast an electronic vote. The tele-vote proved less attractive to Albertans than the Tory direct vote; only 19,030 people registered to vote and just over 11,000 voted on the first ballot. Unlike the Conservatives, the Liberals used an immediate re-vote with the trailing candidates removed. The number of people voting on the second ballot declined to 9,065.

Five candidates, including four sitting MLAs, sought the Liberal leadership, and it became clear that the selling of PINs would be crucial for winning. In moves reminiscent of the 1985 PC leadership convention (see Archer and Hunziker 1992), some of the candidates were rumoured to be engaging in "dirty tricks" and mobilizing ethnic communities in their support. In the

end, Sine Chadi, the candidate who had sold the most registrations, did not win, but apparently only because a significant number of the proxy votes he submitted were not voted. This, combined with a number of technical problems, led to the process being described as a "fiasco" (Martin 1994: D1), the runner-up threatening to sue, the party being forced to hold an inquiry, and the winner, Edmonton MLA Grant Mitchell, leaving with a somewhat dubious prize. It is apparent that the three leadership elections were each different from one another as well as interesting in other ways. Before further examining these contests in detail, it remains for us to outline the manner in which we obtained our data.

Data Collection Method

Our analysis of the three parties and the three leadership elections is based largely on surveys administered to samples of the participants in each of the leadership election processes shortly after the voting concluded. Data on the Conservative election were obtained from a survey of voters who participated in the second, run-off election in December 1992, between the two front-runners, Ralph Klein and Nancy Betkowski. Using lists provided by the party, second-ballot voters were identified and surveys were sent to 2,728 of the 78,251 voters (see Table 1.2). A systematic sample stratified by constituency was drawn from party lists. Beginning with the fourth name on each constituency list, surveys were sent to every twenty-seventh second-ballot voter. Due to list problems, two constituencies were not surveyed. Nine hundred forty-three usable responses were obtained, and these respondents proved quite representative both in terms of reported vote and region of residence. In addition to the survey data, voting results supplied by the party provided the actual vote totals for each riding on both ballots. This data will be presented along with the survey data in an effort to illustrate the geographic nature of candidate support coalitions.

Unfortunately, a survey based on second-ballot voters cannot provide an accurate depiction of first-ballot voters. This was demonstrated by the fact that more respondents claimed to have voted for the eventual winner Ralph Klein than for runner-up Nancy Betkowski, although Betkowski actually had a one-vote lead after the first ballot. As well, more than three-quarters

Table 1.2

Survey return rates

	Number of voters	Voters surveyed	Responses	Response rate
1992 PC	78,251	2,728	943	35%
1994 NDP	422	422	220	52%
1994 Liberal	11,004	2,500	586	23%

of the respondents who indicated they had voted on the first ballot claimed to have voted for Klein or Betkowski, while the overall support for those candidates was around 63%. Consequently, support for the minor candidates is underestimated.[3] These results suggest that many of those who voted for the minor candidates on the first ballot (particularly those who voted for the third- and fourth-place finishers) did not make the effort to turn out to vote again. It is thus impossible to claim that the respondents provide an accurate sample of the first-ballot voters. Nonetheless, since no other avenue for examining first-ballot behaviour exists, the chapters on the Conservatives will also explore the first-ballot results, albeit more tentatively.

A randomly distributed survey was used to collect data on participants in the 1994 Alberta Liberal tele-vote. Surveys were sent to 2,500 of the 19,030 people who registered for the Liberal tele-vote, and almost 600 replies were received. The replies proved unrepresentative with respect to reported vote, as the proportion of respondents who admitted to voting for the runner-up, Sine Chadi, was substantially smaller than the actual proportion of the vote he received. We were not surprised by the relatively low number of responses received from Chadi supporters. The Liberal Party's registration forms allowed registrants to indicate that they would prefer that their names not be released to academics for a survey.[4] The Chadi campaign advised their voters to respond in this manner. Moreover, as Chapter 4 will reveal, many of Chadi's supporters had difficulty in communicating in English, and some of the people whose names were registered by the Chadi camp professed ignorance of their voting eligibility. "Partisans" of this nature are unlikely to respond to mail surveys.

Although the paucity of responses from Chadi voters is disappointing, we remain confident in the importance of the data set. Those Chadi supporters who did respond provide a fascinating portrait of the kind of voters who can be enfranchised with a tele-vote. And we are confident in the representativeness of respondents from the other candidates. When we eliminate Chadi voters from consideration, the reported votes of respondents is closer to the actual proportion of the vote those candidates received.

We received the highest response rate from the survey of NDP delegates. Given the relatively small number of people who attended the February 1994 NDP convention, we were able to send surveys to each of the 422 delegates. Two hundred and twenty responded, and an analysis of reported votes indicates that the respondents are representative of the convention at large.

Initial Conclusions

The three data sets provide the only comparative data on party activists in Alberta. The richness of these data allows us to draw conclusions about the parties, partisans, and leadership elections that would not otherwise have been possible. Analysis of the three parties and their leadership elections

reveals a surprising degree of diversity in the opinions expressed by party activists. Alberta, despite a tradition of one-party dominance, possesses active parties with activists whose beliefs resemble partisan differences found elsewhere in the country (see Archer and Whitehorn 1996: 154). Moreover, in each party women and men hold divergent political views, suggesting that the involvement of more women in political parties has implications far beyond simple mathematical equality.

The opinions of the activists suggest one reason why the Conservatives have dominated politics in Alberta for such an extended period. The views of their activists are consistently the most "conservative" and "populist," and thus tap into a very important part of the province's political culture. As well, the Conservative voters resemble the broader Alberta electorate much more closely than the participants in the Liberal and NDP leadership elections. The Conservative Party's dominance of Alberta politics is certainly not accidental.

Earlier in this chapter we discussed some of the issues involved in allowing ordinary members a greater voice in the selection of party leaders. Perlin succinctly summarized the question for debate as follows: "Is it better to follow the prescriptions of the elite theory of democracy and leave the choice of party leaders to an informed elite who will make 'more competent' judgements, or is it better to continue the process of democratization that has led the parties along the path of a progressive broadening of participation in this critical decision?" (1988: 313). The case studies we present on Alberta leave us uniquely positioned to comment on the different methods of choosing leaders.

Our examination of leadership elections includes the NDP convention, and we find that there was much to recommend that mechanism. For instance, voters were more informed about the candidates and had increased opportunities to interact with them. As well, the convention delegates were much more deeply rooted in the party than were Liberal and Conservative voters. The NDP convention went smoothly and efficiently, but as Chapter 5 indicates, that convention was not typical of most leadership conventions and, even at that atypical gathering, most of the delegates wanted to see a more inclusive form of leadership selection. We accept their judgment and weigh the relative merits of the Conservative Party's open primary and the Liberal tele-vote. In this competition, as in the province more generally, the Conservatives win easily.

In a recent discussion of universal ballots, Carty and Blake note "a trend towards the 'enhanced democratization' of parties which involves them giving members a greater say in parties" (1999: 211). The universal ballots in Alberta undoubtedly gave party members a greater voice and involved more people in the selection of leaders thereby contributing to the "democratization" of the parties involved. Nonetheless, as Michels (1962) demonstrated

in his work on parties, it is difficult to describe any party as fully democratic. For virtually all political parties, the best description they could wish for their internal activities is "quasi-democratic."

Our analysis of the Liberal tele-vote suggests that "quasi-democratic" is actually a somewhat flattering description. Many voters did not know if they had voted, the majority of votes for one candidate arrived in the trunk of the car, controversy surrounded decisions about which votes counted, and the outcome was threatened by lawsuits. As we demonstrate in Chapter 4, the Liberals' problems were partially self-inflicted. However, our examination of universal balloting indicates that tele-voting is much more susceptible to abuse than voting by paper ballot.

With tele-voting, control over many aspects of the process is ceded by the party to outside experts – a loss of control that carries risks for parties. As well, the use of this technology has yet to evolve to a stage where parties can expect flawless execution. And even if the technology works perfectly, other concerns remain. In an earlier examination of tele-voting, Carty found that "the principal reservation televoters are left with is a concern that the technology cannot guarantee that only properly qualified electors cast ballots. As this is a version of the problem of equality (allowing only one vote per elector), and thus the integrity of the democratic process, it is not an insignificant issue" (1996: 20). This is an understatement. The inability to ensure "one person one vote" or to be certain that the vote is cast by the registered voter should lead parties to reconsider the alleged benefits of voting by phone.

This is not to say that the paper ballot utilized by the Conservative Party provides a perfect example of democracy in practice. As Cross pointed out, "direct election processes come with their own shortcomings" (1996: 314), and this was certainly true of the 1992 PC election. Membership in the Conservative Party possessed little cachet – it was simply a ticket required to vote for the premier and no ongoing commitment to the party or its "ideals" was required of the ticket holder. Indeed, many such tickets were purchased after the first ballot was over and thus many voters may have had little familiarity with the discussions that transpired during the three-month campaign. For most democratic theorists, democracy implies more than just the number of people voting. Ideally, there should be an engaged nature to the participation. It would be erroneous to describe the Conservative voters as "engaged." As mentioned above, many members joined only after the first ballot, and only a small minority of voters attended all candidate forums or candidate meetings. This is not to say that they missed much in terms of policy debate since, as with many conventions, there was little discussion of political issues.

That the Conservative election must also be described as "quasi-democratic" is not an indictment of universal balloting. Few would describe the actual

operation of leadership conventions as democratic, and the development of universal ballots was driven in part by the problems associated with conventions (MacIvor 1994). With the packing of delegate selection meetings and the courting of ethnic blocs, conventions were far from textbook examples of "democracy." At recent federal conventions, policy debate has been limited, and delegates seem to have focused on choosing leaders for their "electability" (see Perlin 1991b; Carty 1994; Stewart 1997). Regardless of whether leaders are chosen in conventions or universal ballots, intra-party democracy is an ideal that has not been realized.

The Conservative universal ballot constituted an advance with respect to "descriptive representation." While Tory voters did not provide a miniature replica of the wider Alberta electorate; women, the elderly, and those without university degrees were more equitably represented than they had been at leadership conventions. As critics predicted, Conservative voters possessed only a limited party background. However, fears that their uninformed decisions would weaken the party were not borne out. To the contrary, the Conservative election energized the party, and although it was expected to lose the ensuing election, it secured another majority government in 1993.

Although we conclude that from an ideal perspective there were a number of shortcomings in the process, it has more to recommend it than the tele-vote utilized by the Liberals. The tele-vote was such a disaster that the Liberals abandoned it when they chose a new leader in 1998. Despite their disappointing 1994 experience with universal balloting, the party did not revert to a convention process. Instead, they utilized a paper ballot that was in many ways similar to that used by the Tories in 1992. The Liberal choice provides strong evidence in support for our contention that the universal ballot adopted by parties should be one that involves physical attendance at the polls and the presence of scrutineers for each candidate. Those who believe that "the citizen's role in politics should be limited to participation in periodic elections to choose among elites seeking office through the mechanism of competitive party politics" (Perlin 1991b: 197) will never be satisfied with universal ballots. However, while "it now appears that universal voting, in one form or another is going to be adopted by most Canadian parties, it is not clear whether traditional paper ballots cast in public polling places or televoting from home will be the method of choice" (Carty 1996: 18). Careful examination of the actual use of these universal ballots will help to identify the measures that might diminish the significance of "quasi" as a prefix for intra-party democracy.