

# CODE POLITICS

Campaigns and Cultures on the Canadian Prairies

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# Foreword

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NELSON WISEMAN

The commonalities and diversities of the Prairie provinces have intrigued historians, sociologists, and political scientists. Modernization theorists expected that technological revolutions in communications, advances in transportation networks, and an increasingly mobile populace would erode the significance of political borders, wear away regional identities, and undermine distinctive provincial discourses. Yet, the remarkably particularistic political cultures within the containerized vertical territorial lines of the Prairie provinces endure and resist corrosion. No unidirectional movement toward an unbounded, regionally integrated, consolidated prairie political ethos is evident. To be sure, horizontally crosscutting cleavages, such as social class, gender, age, and ethnicity exist on the Prairies – the poor in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba face similar issues as do the First Nations, youth, women, and visible minorities of those provinces. However, the distinctive provincial milieus of those groups trump their shared concerns and conditions when one listens to the tone and temper of provincial politics in the three jurisdictions. Provincially idiosyncratic timbres are unmistakable and have become sharpened with time.

Sociologists and anthropologists usually gravitate to thinking about federal states and their sub-national units such as provinces as institutional manifestations of social diversity and cultural heterogeneity. Such a culture-centric orientation highlights social forces and underplays the power that a polity's formal, legally established structures exert in sculpting society. The

causal arrow between institutions and society, of course, points both ways: governments and political parties reflect and shape their societies just as those societies inform the idiomatic language adopted by political parties, leaders, and governments in search of popularity. Ideally positioned for the task, political scientists appreciate how provincial governments and the parties and leaders who command them are not merely epiphenomena of their societies or echoes of their cultures. Once formed, governments use their jurisdictional supremacy and their institutional infrastructures – laws, bureaucracies, cabinets, budgets – to affirm their autonomy, assert their authority, and embed their status in the minds of their populace. At the same time, to be successful, political parties must advantageously lever the distinctive symbols and characteristic vocabularies of their provinces. In tracing the interconnected and interwoven circular relationship between agency – what people and parties say and do – and structure, Jared Wesley underscores agency as his central point.

The literatures on Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta suffer no dearth of treatment of their political personalities, social and economic forces, and the dynamics of election campaigns. Most of the available analyses are specific to a province. Wesley's salutary contribution is to disentangle in a comparative perspective the "Prairie paradox" of the three provinces whose partisan traditions differ so dramatically. He presents leaders and party manifestos as moulders of the "public mood," focusing on party platforms rather than on personalities, social forces, or campaign dynamics. Successful leaders and parties harness, direct, and redirect existing elements in the political culture. Wesley systematically searches out, identifies, and exposes the key values that have driven politics in each of the provinces. No simple enterprise; he brings a nuanced disposition and a sophisticated approach to the undertaking.

To decipher the differences among the structures of competition in the Prairie provincial party systems, Wesley grapples with the ideational environment of politics. His measured and rhythmic analysis coherently and cogently deploys the language of "codes" to highlight the individual provinces' contrasting partisan and ideological traditions. He demonstrates how the lexicon of Prairie politics varies among the three provinces to enrich our understanding of each province's distinctive political discourse. An example is the dissimilarity of the quite different utopian visions of the ideal society that have informed successful parties' campaigns in Alberta and Saskatchewan. Those visions, in turn, are contrasted with a political code that offers relative moderation and temperance – that conveyed by Manitoba's parties.

The broad terms and ideas Wesley spots, such as “freedom,” “security,” and “moderation,” of course, are notoriously elastic, but he deftly traces their deployment over the decades.

Wesley’s survey of the political codes of the Prairies since the 1930s covers substantial ground. It offers some potent comparative insights regarding, for example, the penchant of Alberta’s dominant parties to locate their opposition as outsiders, the tendency of Saskatchewan’s successful regimes to internalize within their province their community’s conflicts, and the ability and preference of Manitoba’s major parties to minimize their ideological tensions.

Wesley illustrates the sustained thrusts of the particular provincial political codes while dissecting the broad rhetorical themes of successful parties’ platforms regardless of their temporal context. The adoption of these codes and their cross-generational transmission has not precluded their adaptation to changing conditions. Weaving together primary and secondary sources, Wesley buttresses his ideational framework with archival materials to explain why parties have won power and lost it. To his credit, he appreciates that alternative explanations are possible and many additional factors in addition to a community’s political norms are at play. He offers readers a suggestive thesis and is not insistent about causality for he understands well that codes are flexible, contingent factors that are always at play, and that any mechanical, path-dependent analysis is limited. Skilfully organized, well-written, and demonstrating scholarly competence and intellectual agility, Wesley’s account marshals the evidence of his research findings clearly, intelligibly, and logically to draw his conclusions.

This book contributes to demystifying the Prairie paradox of geographic-ally adjacent provinces whose residents have such different subjective political proclivities. Those dispositions are yoked to particular worldviews of the nature of society and the proper role of government. The variety and persistence of ideologically distinctive Prairie political creeds has rendered the Prairies as a fertile region of the mind and the launch pad for so many political parties – the Progressives, the CCF, Social Credit, and Reform – that have burst forth from the region onto the broader national stage.

# Introduction

## Cultures, Campaigns, and Codes

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When it comes to their political cultures, residents of the Canadian prairies have long lived in remarkably separate political worlds. Throughout much of its history, Alberta has been considered the bastion of Canadian conservatism. Saskatchewan, to the east, is widely viewed as the cradle of Canadian social democracy, while Manitoba is home to the country's most temperate political climate. Alberta tilts right, Saskatchewan tilts left, and Manitoba maintains a relative balance between these forces. Perceptions of these cultural distinctions have persisted for over a century – despite decades of social, economic, and political change. The question is how? – for by most accounts the three Prairie provinces should not be that different. Random lines of latitude were chosen to divide them, making each province an entirely territorial and political creation (Archer 1980, 21). Across their borders, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba rest on broadly similar geographical, social, economic, and institutional foundations. Stretching from Ontario's Canadian Shield in the east to the Rocky Mountains in the west, the economies of all three provinces are grounded firmly in export-based natural resource industries and, most recently, a burgeoning tertiary sector (Howlett 2006). Moreover, throughout most of their history, the three political systems have rested on common federal, Westminster parliamentary institutions and on plurality-based electoral systems. Considering these many parallels, the political diversity found on the Canadian prairies is vexing.

The persistence of this diversity is equally puzzling. Advances in technology suggest most communication or transportation barriers were lowered long ago. Migration has been made easier not only through enhanced air and ground travel but also through improvements to labour market mobility. All the while, the three provinces continue to draw newcomers from throughout Canada and around the globe. Ultimately, the three cultures are not as isolated, or insulated, as they once might have been.

This puzzle constitutes the Prairie paradox, to which the following chapters are addressed. Considering they were divided rather arbitrarily just over a century ago, and considering they share so many other socio-economic and institutional features in common, how could Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta develop into three worlds “thriving in the bosom of a single region?” (Smith 1976, 46). More specifically, given decades of development, how have the three distinct political cultures that emerged in the early twentieth century survived to this day?

Existing literature offers few solutions to this puzzle. This is not to say scholars have ignored political culture on the Prairies. Students of Canadian politics are indebted to W.L. Morton, Seymour Martin Lipset, C.B. Macpherson, Nelson Wiseman, Doug Francis, Gerald Friesen, and others whose research has revealed the impact of early immigration, historical economic developments, and critical events on the formative years of each province. Precisely *why* these different political cultures have survived – how century-old settlement patterns continue to influence the politics of each province – remains largely unexplained, however. We know how the three Prairie provinces started down separate cultural paths, but we know less about why these routes remained parallel, as opposed to crossing or converging. We know a lot about the origins and diversity of the three Prairie political cultures, but we know precious little about their continuity.

In this sense, *Code Politics* takes a modest, but significant, step toward solving the Prairie paradox. Specifically, this book explores the role that leading parties have played in perpetuating the differences between the political cultures of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. In this study, election campaigns are treated as rituals that offer dominant political actors the opportunity to renew their communities’ core values every four years. By analyzing their campaign literature, the study asks, can an examination of dominant party rhetoric help us to understand how the three Prairie political cultures have persisted over time? That is, can we find evidence of Alberta’s conservative ethos in the campaign themes developed by Social Credit and the Progressive Conservatives? Is the persistence of Saskatchewan’s social

democratic political culture attributable, in any sense, to the discourse cultivated by its natural governing party, the CCF-NDP (Co-operative Commonwealth Federation–New Democratic Party)? And have Manitoba's cultural traditions of temperance and modesty been sustained, in part, by the narrative constructed by the province's various Liberal-Progressive, Progressive Conservative, and New Democratic parties?

Grounded in a systematic analysis of hundreds of campaign artifacts from across the region and throughout the past seven decades, the answer is yes. Through their rhetoric, leading political parties have translated their respective political cultures into a series of unique and persistent campaign themes or codes. In Alberta, this has meant emphasizing notions of freedom, drawing on the American liberal concepts of individualism, populism, and autonomy. By contrast, Saskatchewan's dominant parties have played on the theme of security, including references to the collectivism, dirigisme, and polarization found in the British Labourite tradition. Meanwhile, Manitoba's leading parties have emphasized more moderate notions such as progressive centrism, pragmatism, and transpartisanship, harkening back to the values imported by the province's original Tory-touched liberal fragment. Each of these themes constitutes a unique code of political discourse that has transmitted and reinforced certain core values over time, thus helping to sustain the conservative nature of Alberta politics, Saskatchewan's social democratic ethos, and the *mentalité* of moderation in Manitoba.

While it is by no means a silver-bullet solution, any explanation of the evolution of political culture on the Canadian prairies must take into account the critical role of dominant political parties in sustaining the three different political worlds found within the region. Political cultures are not simply institutionalized into the formal apparatus of the state or automatically socialized into society at the grassroots level, although both of these components are also critical (see Chapter 2). Nor are political cultures mysteriously transmitted over time by some hidden hand. An examination of election platforms and manifestos reveals a primary carrier: political cultures are actively promoted, transmuted, and transmitted by dominant political parties.

Unravelling the evolution of the Prairie paradox requires a firm understanding of the terms *political culture* and *political codes*.

### Political Culture

For decades, scholars have struggled to define *political culture*, a term that has been called popular, seductive, and controversial (Elkins and Simeon



1979, 127-28). The concept itself is by no means novel. In writing about the differences between the customs, mores, and habits of nineteenth-century Americans and Europeans, Alexis de Tocqueville was one of the first modern students of political culture. According to his account of democracy in America (1988 [1848], 434), “for society to exist, and even more, for society to prosper, it is essential that all the minds of the citizens should always be rallied and held together by some leading ideas; and that could never happen unless each of them sometimes came to draw his opinions from the same source and was ready to accept some belief ready made.” Since that time, political culture has come to be associated with a wide range of topics, from political values and ideology to national character or “civic religion.” Indeed, a survey of the literature in anthropology, sociology, history, and political science reveals a bewildering number of definitions (for reviews, see Chilton 1988; Harrison 2000; Formisano 2001; Johnson 2003).

Based on the core conceptualization of the term, however, the present study treats political culture as a set of common political values and assumptions that underpin a given political system.<sup>1</sup> Political culture is a collection of often unspoken assumptions and axioms that remain buried barely below the surface of political life in a given community (Bell and Tepperman 1979, 5). Defining political culture as a series of subjective propensities distinguishes it from the more explicit and contested *ideology* (Almond and Powell 1966, 24). What makes studying political culture so challenging is that there is no single book or tract, author or philosopher to which students may turn to find a definition of a community’s culture. Indeed, a polity’s guiding values are embodied in its shared rituals and symbols, entrenched in its institutions, echoed in the attitudes of its residents, reflected in the behaviour of its political actors, and illustrated in its general style of politics (Elazar 1994, 9; Hofstadter 1966). This fact has challenged analysts to discern ways of measuring a community’s political culture.

To some, political culture is little more than a prevailing political ideology – one shared by, or at least one that governs, the political life of the community (see Kornberg, Mishler, and Clarke 1982, 53-58; Wilson 1992). The relationship between political culture and ideology is more complicated, however. Although there may be parallels between a particular ideology and a given political culture – for instance, Alberta’s political culture is often labelled conservative, Saskatchewan’s, socially democratic – the two concepts are not conceptually synonymous. As Bell suggests, “From the outset, political culture was intended as a broader concept with wider application than ideology. Political culture involves the study of all segments of society,

including members of the general public whose ideas about politics are insufficiently coherent and programmatic to be called ideological. Moreover a single political culture could comprise several ideologies” (Bell 2000, 279). Along these lines, Wiseman (2007, 13-14) captures the primary distinction between cultures and ideologies: “Ideologies or political philosophies may be defined, dissected and debated at a metaphysical level without reference to a specific group, society, or nation. Culture is no less a mental construct than is ideology. It, however, cannot be explored solely on a theoretical plane, for it refers to real and specific groups, societies or nations.”

In addition to being a prism through which outsiders view a given society, political culture is a lens through which a specific community views itself and the world around it (Laitin 1986, 12-17; Merelman 1991, 53). The culture helps to identify problems or challenges, and it defines the limits of acceptability in terms of their solutions (Edelman 1964, 31-41; Wilson 1992, 11). In other words, “If a person acts on the assumptions which are widely shared in his collectivity, he will ‘pass’ as a legitimate political actor. An ‘outsider’ who holds quite different views on the nature of the political game, on proper modes of conduct, and on goals and strategies will be identifiable as a deviant; he will not ‘pass’” (Elkins and Simeon 1979, 127-28).

This holistic definition of political culture varies from several others in the discipline, most notably that of the psycho-cultural or Civic Culture school (for reviews of this distinction, see Stewart 2002; Bell 2000; Merelman 1991, 36-58). Headmasters Almond and Verba (1963, 1980) define a political culture in terms of its residents’ cognitive, affective, and evaluative orientations toward the political system. To them, culture is an aggregation or average of individuals’ beliefs and opinions (Verba 1980, 402). Because different patterns of orientations exist cross-nationally, a particular type of political culture does not coincide strictly with any single, given political system (Almond 1956, 396). (Civic, parochial, participant, and other types of culture exist throughout the world, for instance.)

Despite the popularity of the psycho-cultural understanding of political culture (Stewart 2002, 26), a different theoretical approach is presented in this study for several reasons. First, as Durkheim argues, culture is more than simply the sum of individual predispositions; rather, it lies in the broader social structure – what he terms the *conscience collectif* of a society or the “repository of common sentiments, a well-spring from which individual conscience draws its moral sustenance” (Durkheim 1965 [1897], 16). By the same token, a community’s political culture – by definition, its shared values and norms – is more than a simple aggregation of individuals’ beliefs

or behaviours (Pye 1973, 72; Clark 1962, 214). Many feel Almond and Verba fall victim to false aggregation, reductionism, or the individualistic fallacy (Formisano 2001; Scheuch 1968). Just as researchers cannot use macro-level data (e.g., census statistics) to make valid inferences about micro-level actors (e.g., individual residents of a census district), they cannot do the reverse. In short, as Johnson (2003, 99) argues, analysts “gain little by treating the distribution of ‘orientations’ among a population as ‘political culture’ rather than, for example, simply as a ‘mass belief system’ or, more prosaically still, as ‘public opinion.’”

Second, political culture is less transitory than public opinion (Bell and Tepperman 1979, 4-5). Just as descriptions of the weather offer us only limited glimpses into the climate of a particular community, one-off surveys of individual residents offer us only momentary glimpses of a community’s beliefs and orientations. Wiseman (1986, 31) concurs, noting that the definition of *culture* as an aggregation of individual attitudes misconstrues the term’s true meaning, which is fundamentally cross-generational.

For these reasons, the present study takes a more holistic approach to political culture. This is not to say that Almond and Verba’s approach is entirely invalid. Although it may be misused as an indicator, their methodology is valuable in terms of measuring the reflection of political culture in individual attitudes (Rosenbaum 1975, 121-28). As it is defined in this book, however, political culture has less in common with the social psychology of individuals than the historical analysis of communities (Shiry 1978, 51).

The macroscopic approach used in this study carries with it some disadvantages. Critics have a valid point when they suggest it emphasizes cultural exceptionalism rather than true comparison. By analyzing the unique values and beliefs that distinguish Alberta from Saskatchewan and Manitoba, for instance, analysts may gloss over many important commonalities among its residents, not to mention diversity among them (Ellis and Coyle 1994, 2). Others are correct to note the tautology involved in many studies of political culture *cum* community character. If culture can be found in everything, it explains nothing (Harrison 2000, xv). Given these potential pitfalls, it is tempting to abandon the study of political culture altogether (Stewart 1994a, 5). Yet the persistence of obvious differences in the guiding value systems of different polities raises important questions for social scientific inquiry. “Accordingly,” writes Stewart (*ibid.*), “interpretive caution and methodological pluralism would seem to be the most appropriate ways to cope with the complexities intrinsic to any political culture analysis.”

A comprehensive, primary investigation of the political culture of each province is well beyond the scope of this study. Such a study would require in-depth field research into the symbols that underpin the various provincial communities. This research would likely involve a combination of focus groups, public interviews, direct observation, artifact analysis, examinations of popular culture, and other modes of ethnographic inquiry (Stewart 2002, 31-32; see also Chilton 1988; Merelman 1991). To be thorough, it would also require the examination of a wide variety of sources: “historical accounts, critical interpretations of literature and other creative arts, social scientists’ quantitative analyses and qualitative studies of institutions such as religion, law, and government” (Lipset 1990, xiv; see also Putnam 2000, 26-27). Given the magnitude of this task, such investigations must await further resources. Instead, the present analysis draws on an extensive review of existing literature to define the content of each provincial political culture. Based on a strong consensus among Prairie scholars, it accepts the existence of three distinct cultures in the region as the basis of the research problem under investigation.

Admittedly, there are perils associated with this approach; chief among them, there may be a disjunction between what the three Prairie political cultures actually are and what prevailing academic wisdom reports them to be. If Stewart’s (1994b; 2002, 33-34) examination of contemporary Maritime political culture offers any lessons for Prairie scholars, academic consensus does not necessarily equal truth, regardless of the number or credentials of the authorities involved. For instance, the three Prairie political cultures may be converging (whether into a common regional ethos, a Canadian variant, or a broader global culture) or subdividing into a series of territorially or non-territorially defined cultures (Friesen 1999; Henderson 2004). These trends may be masked by the often stolid nature of academic opinion, which tends to promote continuity over change. Without primary investigation, these arguments cannot be dismissed out of hand.

Nonetheless, the very nature of political culture suggests that prevailing academic wisdom remains a solid, if imperfect, measure of a community’s time-honoured political norms. It is true: many contemporary descriptions of the three Prairie political cultures remain rooted in age-old assumptions about each community, and they are reinforced by generation after generation of scholarly writings (see Chapter 2). As a result, critics may suggest that these images constitute myths – fables or legends about Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta that bear little resemblance to contemporary affairs.

The arguments presented in this study do not dispute this view. In fact, it embraces the notion that political culture is, in many respects, an element of folklore. That Alberta's ethos remains conservative even though the province hosts the country's most expansive welfare state; that, despite the dramatic transformation of the provincial economy and society from its wheat-based heritage, Saskatchewan's style of politics remains rooted in what Lipset once called agrarian socialism; and that Manitoba's self-image of accommodation and conciliation persists in the face of dramatic social inequalities between its Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities – all of these are indisputable (and, in several respects, unfortunate) ironies of political life on the Canadian prairies. Yet they are ironies for a reason. They reveal the true nature of political culture as an abstraction of reality, not a direct reflection.

Thus, to the extent that prevailing academic wisdom reflects (or even reinforces) the dominant conception of a community's ethos, it is actually a useful measure of political culture. Argument by authority may be an imprudent means of establishing empirical facts, but when it comes to defining norms and values, that authority often conveys the very essence of the culture we seek to identify. In the strictest sense, then, the following analysis aims to explain the persistence of the conventionally accepted diversity among the three Prairie political cultures over time. The legitimacy of this prevailing wisdom awaits further study.

### Political Codes

Understanding the nature of code politics requires an appreciation of the complex relationship between elite-level codes, mass-level cultures, and party ideologies. As Friesen (1984a, 32) suggests, “there are tendencies – patterns of thought and behaviour in any political system.” At the mass societal level, the tendencies are embodied in the community's political culture – its overall psyche. At the elite level, these tendencies form codes of discourse among parties and their leaders.<sup>2</sup>

Although the term *code politics* may be new to some, the concept is by no means novel.<sup>3</sup> Richard Hofstadter (1957 [1947], viii, ix) refers to the notion as a community's political tradition – “a kind of mute organic consistency” in terms of a society's elite discourse (see also Friesen 2009; Blair and McLeod 1987, 1993; Wilson 1992; Verney 1978). To him, political systems

do not foster ideas that are hostile to their fundamental working arrangements. Such ideas may appear, but they are slowly and persistently

insulated, as an oyster deposits nacre around an irritant. They are confined to small groups of dissenters and alienated intellectuals, and except in revolutionary times they do not circulate among practical politicians. The range of ideas, therefore, which practical politicians can conveniently believe in is normally limited by the climate of opinion that sustains their culture. They differ, sometimes bitterly, over current issues, but they also share a general framework of ideas which makes it possible for them to co-operate when the campaigns are over. (Hofstadter 1957 [1947], viii-ix)<sup>4</sup>

Samuel Huntington (1981) concurs with Hofstadter, suggesting that most, if not all, political systems feature a distinctive creed – a set of prevailing political values that constitute consensus among political leaders.

Like students of political culture, students of political codes cannot turn to a single source or authority for the ethos guiding a society's elites. This is especially true in Canada, where politicians have often "negotiated their collective identity in a non-declaratory manner. Canada's history is littered with the messy and inarticulate but functional compromises of its elites rather than with ringing proclamations, as in the American Declaration of Independence" (Wiseman 2007, 65). Yet an examination of these functional compromises is long overdue north of the forty-ninth parallel, where "no systematic attempt has been made to study the language and symbols used by Canadian leaders or their operating codes and styles to see whether there is a distinct political creed that is innately a part of Canadian politics" (Taras and Weyant 1988, 11; but also see Verney 1978).

By its very nature, each code is an elite-level interpretation or projection of the society's overarching values. A code, therefore, often resembles its community's mass-level political culture; the two are "bound together in a mutually reinforcing equilibrium" (Putnam 1993, 104). However, there is a critical distinction between codes ("formal, explicit, and relatively consistent definitions of political community" among political elites) and cultures ("the informal, implicit, and relatively inconsistent understandings of political community held by people within a given institutional setting") (Friesen 1999, 135). Codes emerge from a supply-side examination of elite politics, whereas political culture is revealed in a demand-side examination of society in general. The correspondence between the two concepts is not guaranteed; rather, it is an empirical question – indeed, one posed by *Code Politics*.

According to the code politics model, one of the main tasks of political elites is manipulating political discourse to enhance and maintain their authority. In this sense, political culture is a valuable resource for elites, for it

provides them with a set of shared symbols around which to build social cohesion and popular allegiance (Laitin 1986, 15; Cohen 1974). From the demand side of the equation, then, the code politics model holds

that mass publics respond to currently conspicuous political symbols: not to “facts,” and not to moral codes embedded in the character or soul, but to the gestures and speeches that make up the drama of the state. The mass public does not study and analyze detailed data about secondary boycotts, provisions for stock ownership and control in a proposed space communications corporation, or missile installations in Cuba. It ignores these things until political actions and speeches make them symbolically threatening or reassuring, and it then responds to the cues furnished by the actions and the speeches, not to direct knowledge of the facts. (Edelman 1964, 172)

Like cultures, codes are community-specific, meaning that the nature of elite discourse often differs starkly from polity to polity. It is true: the individual components of a given code may exist in other communities. For instance, Huntington (1981, 15) notes that notions of “constitutionalism, individualism, liberalism, democracy, and egalitarianism are no monopoly of Americans. In some societies, some people subscribe to many of these ideas and in other societies many people subscribe to some of these ideas. In no other society, however, are all of these ideas so widely adhered to by so many people as they are in the United States.” The same is true of notions such as progress, alienation, collectivism, and pragmatism on the Canadian plains; all of these currents run through each of the three Prairie provinces. Yet their specific combination and salience help to distinguish the dominant discourses they comprise. Ultimately, each code contains a unique core theme that focuses elite-level competition on a different set of expectations about the state’s function in society and the economy, and on its role in relation to other states.

If Hofstadter, Myrdal, Huntington, and other students of so-called political traditions are correct, codes exist in nearly every democratic system. To these scholars, elites in any stable democracy must share a common set of core values to maintain political stability. Polities without at least some measure of elite-level consensus would be wrought with such intense conflict and volatility as to paralyze their political affairs. By functional necessity, then, Hofstadter and his followers suggest that core sets of values lie at the heart of every stable democracy; the researcher’s task is merely to uncover them.

The present analysis turns these assumptions into a series of hypotheses and tests to see if provincial democracies on the Canadian prairies feature consistent modes of elite discourse (modes that correspond with their underlying political cultures). The results confirm the existence of such codes in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, yet these case studies fall short of establishing these codes as intrinsic elements of all democratic systems. An examination of dominant party platforms in other Canadian provinces may bear less fruit, for instance. Hence, without further investigation, the code politics model must remain confined to the Prairie provinces. For the time being, the methodology and findings provided by this study may serve to generate further hypotheses for testing in other contexts.

To summarize, a code is a unique discursive paradigm that persists among dominant elites in a given community over time. By virtue of the nature of representative democracy in Canada, codes are typically associated closely with the values embedded in the broader political culture; elites who propagate ideas that are incongruent with mass beliefs are unlikely to retain power (Bell 1993b, 153). Moreover, these codes outlive the conditions that contributed to their rise. Once established, codes persist despite exogenous events and endogenous developments and, because they are more than simply party ideologies or individuals' visions, these themes remain relatively constant despite changes in government and party leadership. Lastly, codes are community-specific – each polity has its own exclusive, dominant narrative. Thus, to conclude that a code exists in a given community, we must find evidence that a relatively unique, cohesive, and consistent set of culturally rooted values has been expressed by dominant elites over time (despite possible changes in party leadership, government, and the external environment). By contrast, a code does not exist if research reveals that no consistent, distinct theme has guided political discourse over time. If we found vast differences in rhetoric – from dominant party to dominant party, leader to leader, or decade to decade – or if we found overwhelming similarities between provinces in terms of their political discourses, then we must acknowledge that no code exists.

Where they do exist, codes form the foundation of dominant party rhetoric, which is most widely disseminated during election campaigns. For this reason, the present study makes extensive use of party platforms as its primary source of data. As the Appendix reveals in greater detail, over eight hundred separate pieces of campaign literature have been collected and consulted in this analysis. Summarizing the principal themes identified in dominant parties' platforms from each province, the following section



offers brief introductory synopses of the three codes that have existed on the Canadian prairies over the past seven decades. The parallels between these codes and their underlying political cultures are obvious.

### **The Three Prairie Codes**

Since the Great Depression, Alberta's dominant parties have crafted a freedom-based narrative that contains three core elements, each of which has figured more or less prominently at different points in the province's history. The first component of the Alberta code, populism, emphasizes freedom from government overreach, be it from Ottawa, Rome, or Edmonton. Through their campaign rhetoric, prominent parties have railed against all forms of external control – from government (and taxation), banks, monopolies, traditional political parties, mainline churches, or other sources of authority.

This anti-establishment sentiment is closely related to the second major facet of the Alberta code: individualism. Throughout much of the past seven decades, Social Credit and Conservative Party rhetoric has stressed the primacy of the individual as the core unit of society. In their platforms, we find constant reference to individual initiative, free enterprise, hard work, and a general go-it-alone philosophy – all of which correspond to the conservatism embedded in the province's political culture.

A third and final aspect of the province's code stresses the alienation of Alberta from important centres of decision making, specifically those in central Canada. In response, prominent Alberta parties have promoted the autonomy of the provincial state. In this sense, many argue that “since 1921 and regardless of party, Alberta has been governed by the ‘Provincial Liberation Front’” (Engelmann 1989, 111). More disparagingly, Lisac (2004a, 2) suggests Albertans are “people whose leaders and image makers cast them as the downtrodden galley slaves of Confederation – and repeat the story so often that some of their listeners believe them.” This mood of parochial boosterism (Leadbeater 1984, xi) has a certain sectarian element to it, one that corresponds with the strong sense of western alienation embodied in the province's broader political ethos.

Together, these three pillars – populism, individualism, and provincial autonomy – have helped structure Alberta politics around a freedom-based narrative that, itself, draws on the major aspects of the province's political culture.

If Alberta's dominant parties have advocated freedom in the face of oppression, Saskatchewan's have promoted protection in the face of vulnerability.

Drawing on elements of the province's political culture, leading politicians have portrayed Saskatchewan as a land of unrealized opportunity, one susceptible to threats from both inside and outside its borders. In this sense, the dominant narrative in Saskatchewan centres on the concept of security, three core elements of which constitute the province's political code.

First and foremost, dominant elites have stressed the importance of collectivism in preserving security in Saskatchewan. Matching the communitarian spirit found in the provincial political culture, dominant party platforms are replete with references to community, co-operation, partnerships, and togetherness. Second, while valuing collectivism at the societal level, the province's narrative also contains a heavy dose of dirigisme – the belief that the state should play a guiding role in both society and the economy. To a greater extent than their Prairie neighbours, Saskatchewan elites have consistently promoted government as a positive instrument in political, social, and economic life. Again, this sentiment finds support in the province's broader political culture.

Lastly, while the collectivist vision predominates, the Saskatchewan code also contains an element of polarization. Through their rhetoric, provincial elites have consistently highlighted the conflict between the prevailing force of social democracy and a traditionally weaker element of free-market liberalism. Leaders on the Left depict the latter as a menace, while those on the Right champion their cause in the face of an oppressive socialist majority. This same sense of polarization is present neither in the Alberta code, in which conservatism dominates to the virtual exclusion of left-wing influence, nor in Manitoba, where ideological moderation prevails.

Combined, these three elements – collectivism, dirigisme, and polarization – constitute the Saskatchewan code of security. Like Alberta's, Saskatchewan's code is a narrative with strong ties to the province's own unique political culture.

Whereas party dialogues in Alberta and Saskatchewan have pivoted on questions of Right versus Left, politics in Manitoba have been decidedly more moderate, divided instead between proponents of change and defenders of the status quo. Rather than accepting dramatic change as a necessary function of politics and debating its direction, most conflict in Manitoba has revolved around the need for, or speed of, change – one side has argued in favor of improvement and the other for the preservation of the existing order. This tension lies at the heart of the concept of progress – a concept over which Manitoba parties have struggled for ownership over the past century.

Indeed, progressive centrism constitutes the foremost element of Manitoba campaign discourse. More than in any other Prairie province, elites in Manitoba have consistently stressed the importance of avoiding extreme ideological positions in favour of middle-of-the-road incremental policies and programs. Thus, Manitoba elites have tended to be paradigmatically pragmatic, and the progressive centre itself has been defined both endogenously (from Manitoba's own political history) and exogenously (by global trends). This is not to say that Manitoba parties have been unprincipled or devoid of ideological commitment. As is recounted in Chapter 5 and elsewhere, Manitoba parties have taken distinct left-wing and right-wing positions throughout history (Wesley 2006, 2009d). Yet the differences between them have been much subtler than those found in Saskatchewan and Alberta. The overwhelming majority of Manitoba election campaigns have featured a "straightforward competition between those disposed toward reform and equalization and those who expressed the need for restraint and stability" (Peterson 1972, 115).

In this sense, the search for the progressive centre is related to the second component of the Manitoba code: pragmatism. In the province's dominant political narrative, there is little trace of the utopian visions of an ideal society embedded in the other two Prairie codes. This sense of reality underlies the incrementalism that pervades major party platforms in Manitoba, both in terms of their policy pledges and their rhetoric. With few notable exceptions, the focus of party elites has been on convincing voters that they offer a better administration of government rather than a fundamentally better way of doing politics. This is not to say Manitoba parties are pessimistic or defeatist, as some have suggested (see Friesen 1999, 127). Far from it. The pragmatism found in the Manitoba code merely reflects a belief that, because it has a stable and diversified economy and society, a better Manitoba is more attainable and desirable than an unrealistically ideal one.

A final related element of the Manitoba code is transpartisanship. In their campaign rhetoric, Manitoba elites have tended to promote a more fluid or flexible notion of party interaction than their counterparts in Saskatchewan or Alberta. At times, the Manitoba narrative has defined politics as a non-partisan affair (as the efforts to create broad, formal coalitions in the early twentieth century attest) or as multi-partisan (as seen during periods of negotiation over Manitoba's constitutional position in later decades). Together with progressive centrism and pragmatism, this transpartisanship helps to differentiate the Manitoba code from the more ideological and conflictual discourses that prevail in Alberta and Saskatchewan.

Thus, the values embedded in each Prairie province's political culture are reflected in the dominant discourse of its elites. Alberta's conservative political culture has lived on, in part, through the right-wing rhetoric of the Socreds and Progressive Conservatives, just as Saskatchewan's social democratic ethos persists in the elite code created by the CCF-NDP. By the same token, the modesty and temperance found in Manitoba's political culture resonates in the tenets of moderation promoted by its dominant parties. The theoretical, methodological, and empirical foundations of these findings are explored in greater detail in the following chapters, as are their broader implications for Prairie democracy.

### **Toward Decoding the Prairie Paradox**

As a comparative examination of three provinces over a period of seven decades, the following analysis necessarily takes broad strokes. An entire book could have been written on the role of Social Credit in developing Alberta's political culture, for instance. Indeed, individual leaders, elections, parties, governments, and provinces have received book-length treatments. However, in the interests of comparison – a core element of any study of political culture – the decision was made to examine Prairie politics from a broader perspective. Extensive citations offer more depth than the comparative analysis affords.

For reasons of historical context and data availability, the present study begins in 1932. That year marked the midpoint of the Great Depression and came just months before the publication of the *Regina Manifesto* (Co-operative Commonwealth Federation [CCF] 1933). A landmark document in the history of Canadian party politics – and Prairie politics, in particular – the manifesto launched the country's first competitive socialist-minded party (the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation) and changed the nature and structure of politics across Canada (Whitehorn 1992; Praud and McQuarrie 2001). An even earlier starting point would have been ideal. As Morton (1967b), Engelmann (1989, 111), Courtney and Smith (1972, 311-16), and others convincingly argue, the roots of diversity in Prairie politics stretch back to the pre-war, Progressive era. Unfortunately, reliable data, including party platforms, are available only for the post-Depression period (DeLong 1988).

It bears notice: what follows is not a detailed history of each province, each election, each party, or each leader. Biographies and other accounts exist on these topics, and the following analysis does not restate them. Nor is this a revisionist history. With the benefit of a comparative vantage point

and a century's worth of hindsight, many of the researchers noted would have reached similar conclusions. Hence, I have cited liberally from their work, which offers significant validation of my findings. The main task in preparing this book has been finding the proper frame in which to cast the intersecting and diverging histories of the three Prairie political cultures. With the aid of hundreds of pieces of campaign literature, the search produced a series of stories that, together, help to explain the diversity of politics in the region.

Above all, *Code Politics* is an analysis of so-called high politics on the Prairies, of how dominant political parties have struggled to meld primitive principles with the changing demands of their societies and economies, of how cultures, economies, institutions, and ideologies have interacted to produce three unique political worlds. In the portraits that emerge, there is not one realm of Prairie politics, but three.

# 1

## The Prairie Paradox Explaining Cultural Difference

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By almost any measure, the three Prairie provinces should be more similar than their cultural distinctions suggest. They are separated not by topographic, racial, or other “natural” boundaries, but by artificial borders, drawn arbitrarily along lines of longitude (Archer 1980, 21). Although different in some important respects, the provinces’ economies have historically shared a common reliance on natural resource exports. Moreover, throughout most of their history, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba have all featured Westminster parliamentary traditions, plurality-based electoral systems, and other institutional factors commonly used to explain differences between political communities. Yet, according to common wisdom, Alberta remains Canada’s most conservative political culture, Saskatchewan its most socially democratic, and Manitoba its most temperate.

Any account of political culture on the Canadian prairies must begin with the words of its resident authority, Gerald Friesen. In his classic account of the topic, Friesen uses a series of metaphors to capture the three main images of western Canadian culture: the cowboy hat, the jellied salad, and the eagle feather. Although he applies these descriptions to the region as a whole, they serve as powerful illustrations of the core differences between the three provincial political cultures. For instance, Alberta’s political culture corresponds most closely with what Friesen (1999, 185) has labelled a ten-gallon-hat view of Prairie society – one imbued with notions of liberty and nonconformity often associated with the cowboy culture of the West

(see also Barrie 2006; Denis 1995, 91). As Friesen (1999, 185) puts it, “The ten-gallon hat still represents the freedom of the frontier. Now, however, freedom is defined by its bearers as the absence of government, reduced taxes, fewer regulations and survival of the fittest on the open (both continental and global) range.”

In contrast to Alberta’s cowboy individualism, Saskatchewan’s political culture may be likened to Friesen’s jellied salad, a staple at the potluck dinners and fowl suppers that have characterized rural Prairie life for generations:

The brightly-coloured salads may represent the left. They are not unique to the West but, as the singer Connie Kaldor reminds us, they did travel from thousands of western kitchens to decorate the tables of thousands of community fundraising dinners undertaken by church, school and political party. If the ten-gallon hat speaks of competition and the individual, this humble near-vegetable speaks of co-operation, community and equality. It will never occupy the centre of a national flag, but the jellied salad in church basement and community hall also contributed to the national medicare plan. (Friesen 1999, 185)

In one sense, the dish represents the collectivist ethic that pervades community events at which it is served. In another sense, the recipe for the jellied salad – pieces of fruit and vegetables suspended in a gelatin mould – symbolizes the gelling together of diverse groups and individuals within the broader provincial community.

Finally, Friesen’s (1999, 184) third Prairie image, that of the eagle feather, symbolizes (as it does for some First Nations cultures) the elements of honour, friendship, and diversity that are sometimes associated with the settler societies of the Canadian west. Discussed below, Manitoba’s political culture draws on this same spirit of conciliation and accommodation that characterizes normal periods in the province’s politics. Periodic interruptions have occurred, but the prevailing norms of temperance and tolerance mitigate their intensity and duration.

## **Explaining Political Culture**

### **Political Culture in Alberta**

According to most observers, Alberta’s political culture contains three closely related strains: populism, conservatism, and western alienation (Dyck 1996, 510; see also Harrison and Laxer 1995a, 5-7; Stewart and Archer 2000,

13-15; Pickup et al. 2004, 634; Mann 1955, 3-4; Rennie 2004, xi; Roome 2004, 6; Leadbeater 1984, xi; Pal 1992, 2; Denis 1995, 91; Morton 1967b, 37). On the first measure, Alberta is said to feature a climate of distrust toward elites, a penchant for nonconformity, an aversion to pitched partisanship, and an affinity for the tools of direct democracy (Mann 1955, 3-4; Rennie 2004, xi; Roome 2004, 6; Stewart and Archer 2000, 15). More pejoratively, some consider these characteristics symptomatic of the province's "high-strung, volatile character" (Morton 1967b, 37), or a sign of its redneck (Pal 1992, 2), or roughneck (Denis 1995, 91) heritage. Second, as a community, Albertans are said to favour rugged, right-wing individualism; laissez-faire liberalism; entrepreneurship; and fiscal orthodoxy – all qualities that have contributed to the province's image as the bastion of Canadian conservatism. Third, a deep-seated sense of western alienation remains a defining feature of Alberta's political culture. Nearly all accounts of the province's political culture refer to the Alberta government as a guardian of the provincial state and to the premier as "the societal spokesperson for his province" (Wiseman 2007, 240; see also Gibbins 1998). Macpherson (1977) and Elton and Goddard (1979) refer to this as a quasi-colonial mentality that disparages outside control over Alberta's economy and society, particularly by commercial interests in Ontario and Quebec and the federal government in Ottawa. All told, according to Mansell (1997, 61-62), "these factors have tended to produce a population with values more disposed towards self-reliance, with experience at adjusting to major shifts in external factors, and a perception that the main threats come from the outside than from within the province."

Those familiar with Alberta politics might find inconsistencies between these cultural traits and the realities of political life in the province (Tupper and Gibbins 1992, xv; Pickup et al. 2004; Laxer 1995; Stewart and Archer 2000, 44). Yet the common perception of Alberta's populist, conservative, alienated political culture endures. Chapter 3 explores one source of this persistence: dominant party rhetoric has helped to sustain these values in the face of such dissonance.

### **Political Culture in Saskatchewan**

As Marchildon (2005a, 4) puts it, Alberta and Saskatchewan are "like Siamese twins, separated at birth ... In the typical stereotypes of these contrasting identities, Saskatchewanians are depicted as collectivist-inclined social democrats who emphasize security and egalitarian social development, while Albertans are portrayed as entrepreneurial 'small c' conservatives who



are dedicated to the individualistic pursuit of liberty and prosperity.” This characterization of Saskatchewan as featuring a social democratic political culture figures prominently, if not exclusively, in the existing literature (McGrane 2006, 10; Rasmussen 2001; Wiseman 2007; but see Smith 2009). A closer review suggests this label is supported by four interrelated themes: (1) a spirit of communitarianism and civic engagement, (2) deep ideological and partisan division, (3) a sense of political and geographic isolation, and (4) a positive approach toward government.<sup>1</sup>

Most accounts of Saskatchewan’s political culture make reference to “an ethic of co-operation and collective public action” (Dyck 1996, 441), although some authors suggest this ethos is shifting gradually from a populist mode of agrarian collectivism to a more conservative form of individualism (Leeson 2001; Smith 2009, 40). Either way, the political community in Saskatchewan is often described as the most engaged and active in Canada (Lipset 1968a, chap. 10; Friesen 1999, 110).

The division of the province between the Left and the Right is also a time-honoured tradition of Saskatchewan politics (Wishlow 2001, 170; Dunn and Laycock 1992, 225). Since the early twentieth century, heated debates have pitted “moderate democratic socialism versus a peculiar variety of liberalism” (Courtney and Smith 1972, 314), with democratic socialism and free enterprise constituting the political touchstones of the province (Andrews 1982, 58). This element of polarization has included an acceptance of the party as a legitimate vehicle for political debate and the party system as an ideal venue for conflict. As a result, “party politics in Saskatchewan has been active, intense, and for a good part of the province’s history, highly competitive ... This is especially striking if one compares the political system of Saskatchewan with the Alberta and Manitoba systems. Partisan politics impregnates, with few exceptions, every issue faced by Saskatchewanians, whether it be the marketing of a particular agricultural commodity or the proposed establishment of a government-operated medical care insurance program” (Courtney and Smith 1972, 317).

Many authors also cite a sense of vulnerability and isolation as a third element of Saskatchewan’s political culture (Eisler 2006). Dunn and Laycock (1992, 208) label this sentiment alienation because “the geographic and economic conditions in the province since the beginning of its white settlement history virtually guaranteed that the early numerical majority – farmers – would feel dominated by, and alienated from, distant economic and political elites.” Although some observers agree (e.g., Courtney and Smith 1972, 290; Eisler 2004, 260), the inclusion of western alienation in

a definition of Saskatchewan political culture remains disputed. Others suggest the province's ethos has lacked the same sense of sectarianism found elsewhere in western Canada. In contrast to the charged atmosphere found in Alberta, for instance, the Saskatchewan community tends to consider federalism as a "bureaucratic process instead of an emotionally and historically contested concept" (McGrane 2005, 26). In other words, political culture in Saskatchewan "has exploited the potential of federalism, benefiting from and contributing to national politics on the one hand and experimenting and innovating within its invisible boundaries on the other. In this respect no better example can be cited than Saskatchewan for the creative power of provincial politics" (Smith 2009, 53). This approach has a lot to do with Saskatchewan's historical position as a have-less province in Confederation; under these circumstances, being critical of the federal government has been a luxury few Saskatchewanians have been able to afford. Although the province has certainly not been immune to province-first sentiments – notable episodes include Blakeney's combative approach toward Trudeau's federal government in the late 1970s (Dyck 1996, 475; Dunn and Laycock 1992) and Brad Wall's recent defence of Saskatchewan's potash industry in the face of foreign investment – McGrane (2005, 26) adds much to our understanding when he asserts that "if western alienation in Saskatchewan is not dead, it clearly is on its deathbed." In either case, the notion of being isolated (if not alienated) remains an important element of Saskatchewan's political culture. This distinction is best captured by the common perception that whereas Alberta is a heartland of Confederation, Saskatchewan suffers a hinterland status (Baron and Jackson 1991, 313-24).

This sense of isolation is closely related to a fourth element of Saskatchewan political culture – an emphasis on the importance of the provincial government in both the economy and society (Dyck 1996, 439-40). First and foremost, "the susceptibility of the province to international price fluctuations and to shifts and changes in federal trade policies has resulted in an overriding sense of ... vulnerability on the part of Saskatchewan residents. These feelings, in turn, have led to political demands for a strong provincial government capable of effectively protecting and promoting the welfare of the provincial populace" (Dunn and Laycock 1992, 237). Thus, according to most observers, communitarianism (with oddly deep ideological and partisan divisions) and notions of isolation, vulnerability, and a positive view of the role of the state constitute core elements of Saskatchewan's political culture.

### **Political Culture in Manitoba**

Compared with the popular impression of other Canadian provinces, Manitoba's political culture remains undeveloped in the minds of most observers.<sup>2</sup> Even to the most trained eyes, Manitoba enjoys no comparable political ethos to that of Alberta or Saskatchewan. In the words of Rand Dyck (1996, 381), the author of a leading undergraduate textbook on Canadian provincial politics, "Manitoba is a province without a distinctive political culture. If Manitobans have a self-image, it is probably one of a moderate, medium, diversified, and fairly prosperous but unspectacular province. Many value its ethnic heterogeneity; others, its intermediary position on federal-provincial affairs, interpreting east to east and vice versa."

Dyck is not alone. Many define Manitoba by its ambiguous mediocrity rather than by any unique political personality. This conclusion is drawn quite easily. Manitoba is the "keystone province," after all; it is the geographic centre of North America, the "heart of the continent," and the buffer between the "old" country of the east and Canada's "New West." Its population and economy are among the country's most diverse, and both are of average size. Relative to other major Canadian centres, even Manitoba's capital city, Winnipeg, is viewed as a "balance between exotic and obscure" (Read 2008). In short, Manitoba is Canada's middling province, positioned between prosperous and poor, east and west, old and new, exciting and bland.

Yet this view distorts the notion of political culture and misconceives the precise nature of Manitoba politics. Indeed, the province "is more than a fuzzy middle ground where the East ends and the West begins" (Marshall 1970). It has its own distinctive political ethos, which is grounded in the very concepts of modesty and temperance that make up its popular middleman image.

Manitoba has always been "a land of steady ways" in which "the simple, sturdy virtues of hard work, thrift and neighbourliness have been cherished and transmitted" (Morton 1967a, viii). As Morton (*ibid.*, viii-ix) wrote four decades ago, "if it is too much to assert that a Manitoban can be recognized abroad, it is still true that life in Manitoba forces a common manner, not to say character on all its people. It is the manner, or mannerism of instant understanding and agreeableness at meeting, and rises from the need for harmony in a society of many diverse elements. This superficial friendliness is common to all North Americans, of course, but in Manitoba, a truly plural society, it is a definite and highly conscious art." Reflecting these tendencies, Manitobans, "though driven to strike out in new ways in politics, [have]

remained fast wedded to the old ways in manners and morals” (ibid., 382). In this sense, Manitoba politics have featured a stronger strain of traditionalism than Canada’s other two Prairie provinces (Dyck 1996, 382).

This tendency toward traditionalism is embodied in the province’s political culture of modesty and temperance – a shared sense of identity that has both reflected and shaped the community’s political evolution. Since the province lost its status as the commercial and transportation gateway to the Canadian west with the opening of the Panama Canal at the turn of the last century, Manitobans have adopted a decidedly realistic view of their economic and political future. Some regard this political culture as a form of prudent pragmatism – an unpretentious, unassuming, conciliatory approach to politics that holds as its principal goal the accommodation of diversity, the preservation of order and tradition, and the protection of Manitoba’s median position in Confederation. Others view the province’s culture as a brand of prudish pessimism – a sign of Manitobans’ quiescence on divisive issues or reticence on the national stage. Where some see humility and realism in Manitoba’s political culture, others see meekness and resignation.

The notion of temperance has also extended to the realm of federalism, where links between Winnipeg and Ottawa have been far friendlier than in other western Canadian capitals (Dyck 1996, 381). Even prior to achieving provincehood, Manitoba had held a central place in Canadian nation building, and its founding settlers, elites, and institutions were drawn predominantly from Ontario. As a result of these factors and its historical position as a have-not province, Manitoba has been more closely tied to central Canada than Alberta or Saskatchewan (Morton 1967b, 420-21). It has lacked the oppositional reflex found in the former (Friesen 1999, 9) and, compared with either of its western neighbours, exhibits the lowest level of provincial boosterism (see Thomas 1989, 2008).

In sum, Manitoba’s political culture is characterized by two major themes: modesty and temperance. This conclusion is supported by a recent survey of prominent Manitoba political, governmental, and economic elites. When asked to define Manitoba’s political culture, “the interviewees suggested that Manitoba was a society of conscious conciliation, driven by a keen sense of what was fair and unfair. They saw the community as remarkable and its citizens as committed to collective well-being” (Friesen 2010, 33).

One further caveat is necessary before the differences between these three political cultures can be explored. As in Wilson (1974, 440), this book is based on the assumption “that each province constitutes, in effect, an

independent political system and has on that account a political culture of its own." By presuming the boundaries of a particular society, however, there is a tendency to gloss over the many sub- or supracultures that exist within or transcend the borders of that community (see Stewart 2002, 29-31). After all, there are two ways of defining a culture: from the top down (identifying the polity a priori, calling it a culture, and uncovering its values) or from the bottom up (searching for commonalities before drawing boundaries around a culture) (Chilton 1988, 428). Given the nature of the present study, a focus on the three Prairie political cultures implies a top-down approach. Yet readers should be mindful of the many subcultures within the Prairie region (e.g., farmers, northerners, women, First Nations, Metis, urbanites, seniors, and others) and that each province is part of broader national, continental, and global cultures (see Henderson 2004; O'Neill 2002). As Stewart (1994a, 75) puts it, "Canada has a political culture, as does Manitoba, as does Winnipeg, as does any neighbourhood in Winnipeg, and even does any particular household in Winnipeg."

Moreover, not all Manitobans, Saskatchewanians, or Albertans will feel part of their province's political culture (see Eager 1980; Barrie 2006; Ornstein 1986). In this sense, there are certain provincial countercultures to which many of the groups above subscribe. Deep-rooted feelings of disaffection and discrimination may lie beneath the veneer of commonality, for the very nature of political culture masks these divisions under the guise of uniformity (Verba 1965, 525-26; Rosenbaum 1975, 37-52, 151-59). For instance, the aura of conciliation and accommodation surrounding Manitoba's political culture tends toward complacency when it comes to the decades of inequality that continue to plague its society (Wesley 2010a; Friesen 2010). The same is true of the multicultural veneer that covers Saskatchewan's collectivist ethos; decades of racial tension and discrimination belie this sense of commonality (Waiser 2009). This is the dark side of political culture, one that should not be overlooked (see Myrdal 1969; Pateman 1980).

Yet, as Chilton (1988, 429-30) tells us, the "existence of a political culture is not defined by all people liking the culture, or regarding it as legitimate. Rather, it is defined by the ways of relating that people actually use to coordinate their dealings with one another. Culture is what is publicly expected and subscribed to, not what is individually preferred." Culture endures regardless of – and, in many instances, in spite of – its conformity with reality. One reason, as explored in this study, is the persistence of strong themes embedded in dominant political party rhetoric.

FIGURE 1

**Wiseman's "Pattern of Prairie Politics"**

	Alberta	Saskatchewan	Manitoba
Formative event	"Last best West" (1896)	Riel rebellions and the CPR (1880s)	Riel Rebellion and the CPR (1870s)
Major quake	Leduc oil discovery (1947)	Depression (1930s)	Winnipeg General Strike (1919)
Economic staple(s)	Agriculture (early twentieth century), oil (late twentieth century)	Agriculture, natural resources (late twentieth century)	Agriculture (early twentieth century), diversified economy
Dominant settler group	Great Plains American Liberals	British Labourites	Ontario Tory-touched Liberals

Source: Adapted from Wiseman (2007, Tables 1.2, 1.3, 1.4).

**Wiseman's "Pattern of Prairie Politics"**

An extensive review of the literature reveals only one in-depth, comparative analysis of the diversity of political culture on the Canadian prairies. In this research, Nelson Wiseman (2001; 2006; 2007, 211-62) attributes the distinct pattern of Prairie politics to a combination of structural factors, including formative events, economic staples, and early settlement patterns (see Figure 1).<sup>3</sup> This explanation, although valid, remains incomplete for reasons outlined in the following review. Specifically, by narrowing its focus to the origins of each province's political culture, Wiseman's account downplays the importance of explaining the persistence of these different sets of core values. That is a challenge taken up in this study.

Although by far the most comprehensive and coherent, Wiseman's account is certainly not the only one to make use of these structural variables to explain politics on the Prairies. Although extensive attention has been paid to particular elements of political life in the region – including the emergence of protest parties such as Social Credit and the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) (Melnik 1992; Naylor and Teeple 1972; Morton 1967b; Smith 1969) or the decline of the once-dominant Liberal Party (Wilson 1980; Fischer 1986; Smith 1981) – most of these studies have been case-specific. That is, they have tended to focus on individual provinces, elections, or parties, dividing Prairie politics into a series of separate

“silos” (Wiseman 2007, 237). Thus, its scope and seminal nature make Wiseman’s research the focal point of this literature review. As cited, other analyses have offered many of the same findings and encountered many of the same challenges.

On one level, Wiseman (2006) argues that each Prairie community has experienced its own unique series of formative events and quakes. He borrows this model from Lipset (1968a, 1990), who has compared the political cultures of Canada and the United States and traced their origins to the American Revolutionary War. Like Lipset, Almond and Powell (1966, 65) capture the essence of this approach when they note that “certain events and experiences may leave their mark on a whole society. A great war or a depression can constitute a severe political trauma for millions of individuals who may be involved ... [As a consequence, they may] acquire new conceptions of the role of politics in their lives and new goals for which they may strive.”

Along these lines, Wiseman suggests that whereas both Manitoba and Saskatchewan were born out of the expansion of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) and the resulting conflicts between the federal government and Metis peoples led by Louis Riel, Alberta’s founding moment came amid the land rush of the late nineteenth century. Just as Manitoba once represented Canada’s western frontier during the period of British and Ontario immigration, Alberta became the continent’s “Last Best West,” welcoming settlers from across North America (Wiseman 2007, 214). Decades later, each of the Prairie provinces underwent a series of cultural quakes. In Manitoba, the violent suppression of the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919 constituted a major turning point. The event helped to polarize yet mute the radical elements of the province’s business and labour movements, thus setting the stage for the success of more moderate parties such as the Liberal-Progressives, the Progressive Conservatives, and the New Democratic Party (NDP) (Wiseman 1983, 8-9; Wiseman and Taylor 1979, 62; see also Morton 1967b, 362-72; McAllister 1984, 89-90). For Saskatchewan, the Great Depression provided the impetus for the further development of the continent’s most extensive network of co-operatives, which, in turn, established the ideological and organizational foundation for the success of the CCF-NDP (see also Courtney and Smith 1972, 308-9; Marchildon 2005b; Bilson 2004, 140; Waiser 2009, 68). Wiseman attributes Alberta’s recent development to the discovery of major oil reserves at Leduc in 1947; thereafter, politics in the province assumed their current air of free-enterprise liberalism (see also Barr 1984).

Historical explanations that hinge on formative events are prone to several weaknesses, many of which are shared with the staples and fragment approaches. Aside from those discussed below, the path-dependent nature of formative-events theory invites questions of contingency and infinite regress. How far in the past need we search to find a community's founding moment, and how do we determine when such an episode is truly determinative of future events? For instance, Peterson (1972, 69) suggests the roots of Prairie politics can be traced back to the last ice age, when glaciers blessed certain areas with better soil conditions than others. (As a result, he argues, ethnic settlement patterns were determined as much by geological factors as immigration.) In a similar vein, Stewart (2007) grounds the beginning of politics in Canada in early Aboriginal societies and the first contact between First Nations and Europeans (see also Saul 2008). Should we date the origins of the Prairie paradox to these early events? In short, the subjective, post hoc, and deterministic nature of formative-events explanations leaves the Prairie paradox largely unsolved. Recognizing this, Wiseman supplements this approach with two others.

In his second level of analysis, Wiseman (2006) notes that the economies of the Prairie provinces have also helped determine their separate political cultural trajectories. According to this view, although Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta "once shared a common and dominant agricultural base ... in recent decades, the politics of the three provinces have become increasingly diversified and distinct from each other as new staples have emerged" (Wiseman 1988, 181).

In a loose adaptation of staples theory (see Innis 1956), Wiseman argues that the nature of Alberta's agricultural and petroleum industries have both contributed to the province's right-leaning political climate. The province's farmers and ranchers have been commercially oriented, independent commodity producers whose position within the Canadian economy and global markets has made them as supportive of free markets as their counterparts in the natural resource sector (Thomas 1980, 28).

Conversely, the pre-eminence of wheat in Saskatchewan has tended to isolate its farmers by creating a sense of uncertainty amid unpredictable climatic and international economic forces. Despite diversification in recent decades, Saskatchewan's continued reliance on natural resources has perpetuated the boom-and-bust nature of its political economy (Dunn and Laycock 1992, 212-16; Rasmussen 2001, 241). For these reasons, Saskatchewan's economic environment has been most conducive to the collectivist



thinking and co-operative endeavours at the heart of social democracy (see also Courtney and Smith 1972, 311-13; Fowke 1946; Dunn and Laycock 1992, 208-12; Friesen 1999, 101-5; but see Rasmussen 2001, 257; Eager 1980, 2; Fairbairn 2009).

Lastly, Manitoba's distinctiveness might be attributed to the fact that, in avoiding the boom-and-bust cycles experienced by its western neighbours, the province has not been given to the same type of "utopian sorties," including those led by Social Credit and the CCF (Wiseman 2007, 217). In this sense, Manitoba's stable, diversified economy has contributed to its ideologically balanced political culture (Morton 1967a, 392-96; Dyck 1996, 374; Hum and Simpson 2009).

Wiseman qualifies his use of staples theory, noting its many shortcomings in terms of explaining political diversity on the Prairies. For one, the common predominance of agriculture in each of the three provinces during their formative periods casts serious doubt on the usefulness of the approach (see Smith 1991, 434). For this reason, Wiseman's use of staples theory is almost begrudging. For example, the prominence of left-wing thought in Manitoba and Saskatchewan "seems counterintuitive" to him: "[Why] would social democracy take hold in an agrarian hinterland region where self-employed, independent small farmers dominated? In such a setting, individualist values, petit bourgeois entrepreneurial instincts, and right-wing ideas may be expected to prevail, as they have in Alberta. In contrast, social democracy, with its emphasis on collectivist values, government planning, and the welfare state, is traditionally the clarion of urban groups – industrial wage labourers and those without property" (Wiseman 2007, 212). Because neither Manitoba nor Saskatchewan can be considered especially urban or industrial societies, particularly in the formative years of each province, the paradox remains largely unsolved.

Johnson (1979, 91) approaches the paradox from the opposite angle, noting that Depression-era Saskatchewan and Alberta, "while different in some respects, were similar in terms of the presence of social and economic conditions which would support a *socialist* movement ... Alberta's social conditions were volatile enough, and the depression was severe enough that socialism could have succeeded *if the political circumstances were different*" (emphasis added). These political circumstances are the main focus of the present study.

Furthermore, according to Wiseman, "a closer examination of the past reveals that the politics of the three provinces have *always* been different from one another, and that economic factors do not appear to explain the

difference. The Depression, for example, has been cited to explain the success of Manitoba's Bracken in maintaining power, the success of Alberta's Aberhart in gaining it, and the failure of the Saskatchewan CCF to come by it at all in the 1930s" (Wiseman 1988, 181, emphasis added; see also Morton 1967b, 460-62; Morton 1992b).

Another flaw exists in staples theory: Precisely how different do the economies of the various communities need to be? Up to the Second World War, each Prairie province's economy was heavily reliant on agriculture. Subtle differences existed, of course. Alberta's ranching industry was the most extensive, while Saskatchewan's dependency on wheat ran deepest. Beginning in the late 1940s in Alberta, and two decades later in Saskatchewan, the provinces developed their natural resource sectors. Again, there were disparities: the former was dominated by oil and gas, the latter by potash and uranium. Their neighbour's development of cleaner energy – through Manitoba Hydro – stands apart somewhat (see Hardwick 1984).

Yet whether in agriculture or natural resource development, the differences between the Prairie provinces' economies have always been a matter of degree rather than kind. Throughout much of the region's history, the economies of all three provinces have been primarily export-based, reliant on Canadian, continental, and global markets (Gibbins 2008). More recently, like most developed states, all three provinces have experienced the relative decline and radical transformation of agriculture (Gibbins 1984, 223; Norrie 1984, 63; Friesen 1999, 120), the challenges of economic diversification (Rasmussen 2001), and the concurrent expansion of the new middle class following the exponential growth of the service sector (Howlett 2006).

Thus, even if their economies differed at one point in time (a debatable proposition), the convergence and broad comparability of the three western economies suggests that their political cultures should be (growing) quite similar, according to staples theory. Considering all of these factors, the staples approach offers, at best, only a partial solution to the Prairie paradox.

Synthesizing these formative events and staples approaches, Wiseman rests the bulk of his argument on a third level of analysis. In it, he suggests the political diversity among the three Prairie provinces can be traced to their early immigration patterns. Based loosely on Hartzian fragment theory (see Chapter 2), Wiseman's rich account may be summarized as follows. Beginning with the opening of the West in the late nineteenth century, Manitoba drew the vast majority of its settlers from the Province of Ontario (Wiseman 1983, 3-5). These pioneers brought with them a Tory-touched liberalism (and a corresponding aversion to populist radicalism) not found

in other parts of the Prairies (see also Young 1978, 5; Morton 1967a, viii; Dyck 1996, 381-82; Rea 1970). In partisan terms, this Tory-touched fragment not only helps to explain the long-term survival of the Conservative Party in Manitoba, it also suggests why socialism found a toehold in Manitoba in the form of the Independent Labour Party, the CCF, and, most recently, the NDP: the organic sense of community embodied in Toryism combined with the reform-minded philosophy of liberalism to produce an environment conducive to a moderate, democratic brand of socialism (see Hartz 1964; Horowitz 1966; McAllister 1984, 90-93).<sup>4</sup> British Labourites, whose brand of Fabian socialism found a sympathetic ear among the province's working-class population, seized this opportunity to establish the partisan foundations for the modern NDP (Wiseman 1983, 4-9). All told, this balance between Tory conservatism, liberalism, and social democracy formed the foundation of Manitoba's temperate political culture.

By contrast, Wiseman attributes the dominance of social democracy in Saskatchewan to the direct immigration of Fabian-influenced British settlers in the first decades of the twentieth century (see also Archer 1980, 11; Lipset 1968a, 43-44; Dyck 1996, 440). These immigrants settled largely in rural areas, providing the basis for what Lipset (1968a) termed agrarian socialism. Thus, while both Manitoba and Saskatchewan share a common social democratic impulse – distinguishing the Midwest from the parvenu political culture of the Far West – each owes its ideological heritage to a unique set of fragments (Wiseman 2007).

Meanwhile, with a larger proportion of American settlers than Manitoba and Saskatchewan, Alberta developed a greater penchant for laissez-faire liberalism (see also Flanagan and Lee 1992; Pickup et al. 2004, 634; Swann 1971, 57). “In 1911, American-born Albertans (22 percent of the population) outnumbered the British-born, Ontario-born, and European-born. Almost certainly, this was the largest concentration of Americans in any jurisdiction outside the U.S. Canadian-born Albertans were a minority in their own province” (Wiseman 2007, 244). By contrast, Americans made up 3 percent of the Manitoba population at the time, and 13 percent of Saskatchewan's (ibid., 226). As a result of its American roots, Alberta has proven to be fertile ground for right-wing populism and relatively inhospitable to Tory-touched liberalism and socialism.

In the end, Wiseman argues, these unique immigration patterns have contributed to the development of Manitoba, which features a more moderate mode of competition between the forces of Left and Right, into the Ontario of the Prairies. Saskatchewan, with its proclivity toward social

democracy, has become the Britain of the Prairies, and Alberta, the most conservative of Canada's provinces, is "the Prairies' Great Plains America." Wiseman (2002, 218) asserts that "there is no single overriding political tradition on the prairies": there are three.

Like the formative events and staples approaches discussed above, the foundations of fragment theory have cracked over time. Space does not permit a detailed appraisal of fragment theory, only those critiques most pertinent to the present study, for critical reviews abound elsewhere (Stewart 1994b, 79-85; Forbes 1987; Ajzenstat and Smith 1998; Preece 1977; Wilton 2000). Wiseman (2007, 10) recognizes these criticisms, qualifying his research as an attempt to "extend but also swerve from the Hartz-Horowitz approach by contextualizing some of its features regionally." Nonetheless, several shortcomings remain in his analysis.

First, as with their economies, questions arise as to how different the settlement patterns of the three provinces really were. Consider Courtney and Smith's (1972, 304) description of Saskatchewan political culture as being "influenced by a British colonial heritage, an ethnically diversified population, an agricultural economic base, and a numerically preponderant rural electorate." To a greater or lesser extent, their account could be used to apply to early-twentieth-century Manitoba or Alberta (see Eager 1980, 65-67). As Friesen (1999, 5-6) suggests,

The years from 1867 to 1940 saw the creation of the Prairies, a distinctive region built on wheat. The society was everywhere mixed in race and religion. Because each district seemed to offer a different combination of nationalities, the Prairies could be described as uniform in their diversity ... Whatever the leading ethnic group in a local district, the towns were mainly British Canadian. Some observers thought Manitoba was more Ontarian, Saskatchewan more British, Alberta more American. Nonetheless, the cultural tone of the region was a distinctly Prairie version of English-speaking Canada, one expressed in the imperial views of the history texts, in the Protestant "non-denominational" notes of the schoolroom's daily Bible reading and in the parliamentary rules governing every official local meeting.

Second, although it provides an attractive description of the origins of political culture on the Prairies, Wiseman's work lacks a concrete explanation of the *persistence* of these differences. Wiseman (2007, 221) concedes this point, noting in passing that certain ideas became "rooted, institutionalized and cross-generationally transmitted in the provincial political culture."

Whereas Wiseman's analysis sidesteps this transmission process, this book focuses on it. Specifically, how have liberalism, socialism, and the Tory touch (as well as formative events and staples) been transmitted from these early periods to today's societies?

In response, fragment theory offers only "congealment" – a vague and often unspecified point at which a province's political culture freezes following decisive waves of immigration (see Chapter 2). In Wiseman's analysis, this congealment occurred almost a full century ago; in other words, subsequent decades were relatively uneventful when it comes to explaining the patterns of Prairie politics. For instance, Wiseman's account suggests that a group of liberal, early-nineteenth-century settlers from the American mid-west had a more significant impact on Alberta than the original eastern Canadian pioneers, socialist-inspired Progressives, or the thousands of migrants that moved to the province over the last five decades (Sampert 2008).

At the same time, the effects of the formative events in each province – the Winnipeg General Strike, the Depression, and Leduc – are fading from the collective memory; they are limited in direct terms to the personal experiences of the generation exposed to them (Courtney and Smith 1972; Inglehart 1990). And economic paradigms have shifted from neomercantilism, to Keynesianism, to the present neoliberal consensus (Smith 1992). As Friesen (1999, 26) suggests, "the alternations in western circumstances during the present generation are so profound that Canadians living outside the region might be surprised by the scale of the changes" (see also Friesen 1996, 39-41). Indeed, according to Gibbins, "As the prairie lifestyle comes more and more to resemble that of other metropolitan regions in Canada and indeed North America, the distinguishing features of prairie society are becoming steadily erased. Attitudinal features, however, remain, and we are left with *a region of the mind*, nostalgic image of the beliefs and values of an earlier agrarian society that has been transformed almost beyond recognition" (Gibbins 1979, 164, emphasis added; see also Allen 1973; Friesen 1984a, 2; Gibbins 1984; Smith 1984; Friesen 1999, 27-31; Andrew et al. 2008).

Amid these transformations and convergences, the persistent differences among the three Prairie political cultures remain unexplained by fragment theory. As Stewart (1994a, 156) tells us, "even though political cultures tend to be relatively stable over time, they are certainly not *indefinitely* determined by the attitudinal attributes of the founding fragment." If cultural differences are somehow linked to settlement patterns, the persistence of the three "worlds" on the Prairies needs to be explained in terms of how values

are transmitted not only from generation to generation but also from natives to newcomers. In the end, as Bell and Tepperman (1979, 23) argue, fragment theory “fails to explain how fragment cultures keep themselves alive, by acculturating *new* immigrants and children, thereby surviving, passing the culture form one generation to the next. In this respect, it resembles the theory of genetic transmission before the structure of DNA was discovered. Now we need a theory that explains the learning and modification of culture in simple, unmysterious terms. The ideology of the founding groups may indeed contain the genetic code of political culture, as Hartz suggests. But this insight alone is not enough.”

Borrowing from this approach, Wiseman’s use of fragment theory does not explain why or how each province’s formative events, staples, and settlement patterns continued to hold influence despite these tremendous transformations. In short, although he may well be accurate in his *description*, Wiseman does not explain *how or why* the realities of the “old prairies” continue to shape the “new prairies” (Gibbins 1980, 1-2). He is not wrong in describing the present diversity among the three Prairie provinces as byproducts of their original political cultures. He is merely half-right. His account is not inaccurate: it begs supplementation.

### Moving beyond Structure

Wiseman underestimates the role of agency in the development of Prairie politics. He is not alone in this: by their very definition, political parties and their leaders are assigned passive roles in traditional structural accounts. Wiseman finds company in downplaying the role of parties and leaders in Prairie historiography. As he notes, Friesen makes no reference to Tommy Douglas in his seminal history *The Canadian Prairies* (Wiseman 2007, 11; see also 1988, 178-79). When they are mentioned, political actors are often portrayed as products of social or economic forces.

To be clear, Wiseman does not dismiss the role of agency entirely. He merely reserves it for a secondary, limited role in explaining political outcomes. *Code Politics* turns this assumption on its head, emphasizing the primary role that agents (political parties) play in structuring their environment (political cultures). Just as Wiseman’s recognizes the influence of agency, the following analysis acknowledges the effect of structure. However, rather than presenting them as largely byproducts of their political cultures, this book portrays parties as actively interpreting and propagating those same values.

This difference in emphasis is captured best in the following series of counterfactuals. Whereas Wiseman argues that there would have been no Tommy Douglas without a collectivist political culture, the pages that follow reveal that the persistence of Saskatchewan's social democratic impulse owes as much to Douglas's leadership as vice versa. The same is true of Aberhart, Manning, and Klein in conservative Alberta or Bracken, Roblin, and Doer in Progressive Manitoba. Wiseman (1988, 180) suggests that there can be no ideological leadership without a supportive political culture – that these leaders' successes were “based on their ability to understand and express the sentiments of their followers.” Recognizing the reciprocal relationship between structure and agency, this book grounds political success in the leaders' abilities to define, shape, and cultivate those very same sentiments. For instance, William Aberhart's success among independent commodity producers in Alberta required that he first convince them of their petit bourgeois status (Pal 1992, 3). In other words, structural factors may make a particular province more receptive to a certain set of ideological influences, but this susceptibility must be exploited by a set of active agents. Demand must be met by supply.

In short, although he provides a valuable account of the origins of Prairie politics, Wiseman (2007, 221) leaves his readers without a clear understanding of the mechanism through which events, economic ethos, and cultures are transmitted from one generation to the next or from established residents to new arrivals. One such mechanism lies in the power of rhetoric and, in particular, the development of party ideologies and provincial codes by political elites. As Huntington (1981, 10) argues, “structural paradigms ... are not totally wrong, but they are limited. They omit almost entirely the role [played by] political ideas and idealism, moral causes, and creedal passions.” In these ways, the present analysis is intended less to correct than to supplement Wiseman's “*rumination on Canadian politics*” (Wiseman 2007, 1).

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