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IS THIS THE END OF THE TORY DYNASTY? The Wildrose Alliance in Alberta Politics

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ABSTRACT

The Alberta Tory dynasty begun by Peter Lougheed is now 40 years old. With only four leaders across four decades, the party has managed to maintain its hold on the political imagination of Albertans. It has weathered a number of storms, from minor party assaults during the tumultuous 1980s to the Liberal threat of 1993 and the stresses associated with the global financial crisis. Now it confronts a new challenge in the form of the Wildrose Alliance led by Danielle Smith.

Just as the Tories stole the centre ground from beneath Social Credit in the 1970s, the Wildrose leadership team hopes to take what was a fringe right wing party and turn it into a broad coalition capable of appealing to a large number of Albertans. What challenges do they face in repositioning the party? And how will the Tories protect their home turf?

In brief, the Wildrose Alliance must modify its policies and present them in such a manner as to be able to plausibly claim that it now reflects the core values of Albertans better than the current government.

For its part, the government must select a new leader capable of successfully painting Wildrose as outsiders who cannot be trusted to cleave to the values that Albertans hold dear.

What are these values? Strong support for individualism, a populist view of government – including wariness of the federal government – combined with a deep commitment to a role for government in providing core programs in areas such as health care, the environment, and social welfare.

¹ This paper has benefitted from the comments of an anonymous referee.

INTRODUCTION

Public policy is always and everywhere the product of politics. Competition between political parties—especially but not solely at election time—often gives voice to the competition of ideas. In Alberta, however, the dominance of one political party has meant that elections and politics are often taken for granted (see Bell et al, 2007 and Stewart and Archer, 2000). This paper examines the potential for a relative rarity in Alberta politics, a challenge to the status quo and an enlivened public debate over Albertans' values. It compares and contrasts the positions of the current government and a recent political challenger to the expressed opinions of Albertans. Our goal is to assess the potential for a successful challenge to a political dynasty.

It has been 40 years since Peter Lougheed's Progressive Conservatives ended the last Alberta political dynasty by defeating the Social Credit party. In that election, the Conservatives successfully managed to convince voters that they represented safe, conservative change. In turn, the PCs faced a similar challenge in 1993. Led by former Edmonton mayor Laurence Decore, the Liberals launched a fiscal attack on the Tories, suggesting that they were a safe, conservative alternative (Stewart, 1995). The selection of Ralph Klein as leader reinvigorated the Conservatives who managed to hold off the Liberal challenge, fashioning large majorities at each subsequent election.

It came as something of a shock to many then when, in December 2009, an Angus Reid poll of 1,000 Albertans suggested 39 percent of voters would cast a ballot for the upstart Wildrose Alliance, with just 25 percent indicating they would vote for the Progressive Conservatives, 25 percent for the Liberals and 9 percent for the NDP. As Jason Fekete noted, “[t]he Wildrose Alliance—buoyed by their recent leadership race and by-election win in the Calgary area—is solidly in first place in every region of the province, according to the poll” (Fekete, 2009). When this was repeated in March 2010, Albertans could fairly wonder whether another political dynasty was about to be toppled.

In explaining the results, pundits pointed to the impact of the Alliance's dynamic new leader Danielle Smith, combined with perceptions that the Conservative government of Premier Ed Stelmach had lost its way. Controversy had attended the government's realignment of oil and gas industry royalties while the global economic downturn had seen Alberta's finances drift into the red for the first time in over a decade (Fong, 2009).

Despite its apparent appeal, the new party faces a range of challenges in confronting the Tories' electoral and legislative dominance. It must develop policies that position it to challenge the Tories, attract adequate financial support within a regulatory framework that favours the government and build the organizational components of a viable party. It must organize a competent head office around the new leader and establish and maintain viable constituency associations across the province in order to attract appealing candidates. And finally, it will need to respond to the Tories defensive strategies, as they try to undercut the new party by either stealing its thunder or painting it as a radical, outsider party.

To better understand the Wildrose challenge to the status quo, we explore its emergence from before the last provincial election through the Calgary-Glenmore by-election and the leadership race that selected Smith. We analyze where party policy has been positioned in the recent past in relation to the political preferences of Albertans. We consider the impact of party leaders on voters and policy making and compare the finances of the party with those of other parties in Alberta, notably the Tories.

As with the Tories' own successful defeat of the Social Credit government in 1971, it appears that the Alliance is hoping to colonize the ground now held by the government. Rather than trying to shift political debate toward the right where its own ideological roots lie, it hopes to position itself as the best expression of central Albertan values and make use of arguably its main asset—an articulate and appealing new leader.

While it does pose a threat to the Tories, the party faces major challenges in pursuing this strategy. It will need to manage its links with the energy industry in a way that helps it retain some populist appeal and so as to be able to broaden its appeal beyond the south of the province. It must manage tensions between fiscal and social conservatives in its ranks and balance its focus on libertarian individualism with Albertan's willingness to accept interventionist government in some elements of social, economic and environmental policy.

The Wildrose Alliance is competing against a much wealthier and larger opponent in the Tories within an open party-finance regime that allows the government to raise and spend money in nearly anyway it sees fit. The Tories remain a formidable political machine that may well be revitalized by the selection of a new leader in 2011. Toppling this behemoth will take considerable effort, one that is only likely to succeed if the government is itself internally weakened.

THE RISE OF THE WILDROSE ALLIANCE

Progressive Conservative governments have periodically faced challenges from the right, and in 2004 the Alberta Alliance party carried almost ten percent of the vote and elected a member to the legislature. The Alliance party, then led by former Social Credit leader Randy Thorsteinson, patterned itself on the federal Alliance party and critiqued the Conservatives for being insufficiently conservative.

Before the next election in 2008, the Conservatives changed leaders and the Alberta Alliance merged with another right wing party, the Wildrose Party, forming the Wildrose Alliance. Capitalizing on the government's unpopularity in the Calgary oil and gas industry, the party critiqued the Conservatives' royalty plans and saw funds flow into its coffers. Despite this issue and financial support from independent oil and gas firms, the party lost its only seat and saw a decline in its popular support.

Even with the disappointment of the 2008 provincial election, the Wildrose Alliance did not disappear. During 2009, it continued to stress the need to “defend Alberta against intrusions by the federal government” and to press for Alberta's withdrawal from the Canada Pension Plan and its replacement with an Alberta Pension Plan. This ‘Alberta first’ agenda included opposition to “unfair and industry-specific taxation from the federal government,” demands for “a more equitable distribution of federal transfer payments and contracts” and a requirement that the provincial government “collect the Alberta personal income tax.” It called for fixed election dates, recall legislation based on signatures of 20 percent of the electorate and “binding referenda on matters of significant public concern upon the presentation of a petition signed by at least ten percent of the total voters at the last provincial election in Alberta” (Wildrose Alliance, 2009).

Then in September 2009, Wildrose won a by-election for recently retired deputy premier Ron Stevens' former seat of Calgary-Glenmore. Although the seat had been held by the Tories since 1969, the campaign exposed a number of areas in which the governing Tories were vulnerable. Discontent with the government's management of mining royalties among members of the Calgary-based oil and gas industry was palpable, as was concern with the burgeoning provincial debt (CBC, 2009).

The Alliance focused its campaign on sending "Ed" a message and came from a distant third place position in the 2008 general election to outpoll both the Conservatives and the Liberals (Walton and O'Neill, 2009). Apparently, Calgarians were not ready to use the Liberals to send the Premier such a message. The victory sent former leader and one-time MLA for Cardston-Taber-Warner Paul Hinman back to the provincial legislature.

Hinman had been encouraged to step down during the summer of 2009 in the hope that a leadership race would spark interest in the party and produce a more dynamic spokesperson. The coincidence of the two events may well have sharpened attention on the party and helped it in Calgary-Glenmore. The next month, October 2009, the party selected a dynamic new leader, Danielle Smith, and by December, found itself ahead of the sitting Tories in opinion polls.

THE SELECTION OF A NEW LEADER

Initially three candidates entered the leadership race: Mark Dyrholm, a chiropractor with experience in the Reform Party and Canadian Alliance as well as Alberta's Progressive Conservative Party, Jeff Willerton, a writer and businessman who has worked for the Canadian Taxpayers Federation, and Danielle Smith, a former director with the Canadian Federation of Independent Business who has worked with the Fraser Institute, campaigned for the Tory and Reform parties, been a member of the Calgary Herald editorial board and was once a Global Sunday television host. Smith was widely portrayed as the candidate best able to unsettle Stelmach and defeat the governing Tories (Taube, 2009).

The leadership race highlighted some of the challenges confronting the Wildrose. Willerton hailed from Airdrie, the other two candidates both from Calgary, suggestive of the limited regional appeal of the party (Braid, 2009). As well, there were signs of a struggle for the heart of the fledgling organization. Dyrholm was cast as the candidate with greatest support among social conservatives and Smith as the libertarian candidate. Third-placed Willerton was seen as a long shot and threw his support to Dyrholm in mid-September, leaving the social conservative to battle the libertarian (Taube, 2009).

Social conservatives in Alberta have struggled to find a viable partisan home since at least the Lougheed era, and some saw this as a chance to bring their message to a broader public. Libertarians argued that making social conservatism the core of the party's message limited its potential for growth. Underlying these concerns was a strategic one: the party's central ideological character had direct implications for how it would go about challenging the Tories (D'Aliesio, 2009).

On October 17th, 2009, the party selected Danielle Smith to replace Paul Hinman as leader, with 8,200 party members voting (a 71.5 percent turnout) and 97 spoiled ballots (Sands, 2009). Smith made an immediate impact on provincial politics, with a range of polls suggesting that under her leadership, the Alliance would disrupt if not end the Conservative grip on power.

TABLE 1: Wildrose Alliance 2009 Leadership Ballot

| Candidate | Votes | Vote % |
|----------------|-------|--------|
| Danielle Smith | 6,295 | 76.77 |
| Mark Dyrholm | 1,905 | 23.23 |
| Total | 8,200 | 100 |

In her victory speech, Smith noted with approval the support of members of the oil and gas industry and in particular Dave Jager, who ‘educated me in the nature of the oil and gas industry and introduced me to many influential people...’ (Smith, 2010). While being close to the oil and gas industry may help the Alliance raise money and develop policy in this area, this may come at a cost. Despite its centrality to the economic health of the province, our data indicate that Albertan voters are concerned about its impact on the environment. They also favour many forms of government intervention that may not fit well with Smith’s well-known libertarian predispositions (Flanagan, 2010).

ASSESSING THE WILDROSE PARTY’S ROOM TO GROW

An analysis of the Wildrose platform along with the results of a survey of voters in the 2008 election allow us to understand the party and locate it and its supporters in the Alberta political milieu.² Using this information, we are able to identify the areas in which the party has room to grow. In particular, we are concerned to assess the capacity of the party to attract Conservative voters and non-voters who did not participate in the 2008 election.³ For this initial analysis, we focus on the Wildrose platform at that election and the subsequent Calgary-Glenmore by-election (see in general, Wildrose Alliance, 2008 and Wildrose Alliance, 2009). The analysis indicates that the Wildrose anchors one ideological pole on most of our measures.

In 1971 when the Tories defeated the incumbent Social Credit government and in 1993 when the Decore Liberals threatened the Tories, voter turnout went up by ten and six percent respectively. This suggests that bringing former non-voters back into the electoral process might be an important element of success. Former Tory voters are another source of potential supporters for the Wildrose Alliance. We are interested in seeing the potential for the new party to attract both these groups of Albertans.

² The survey, a phone interview stratified by region and gender, was conducted by NRG Research Group in the week following the March 2008. Funding for the survey was provided by the University of Calgary’s Institute for Advanced Policy Research (which has since become part of The School of Public Policy).

³ Their response rate only allows aggregate analysis of non-voter answers.

Wildrose Alliance policy in 2008 reflected the influence of western alienation and populism, two important elements of Alberta’s political culture (Bell et al, 2007; Stewart and Archer, 2000; Tupper, 1996). Its election platform for that year was by far the most ‘populist,’ committing the party, if elected, to return power to “the hands of Albertans through meaningful electoral reform including MLA recall, fixed election dates and citizen initiated referenda” (Wildrose Alliance, 2008).

FIGURE 1: Populism⁴

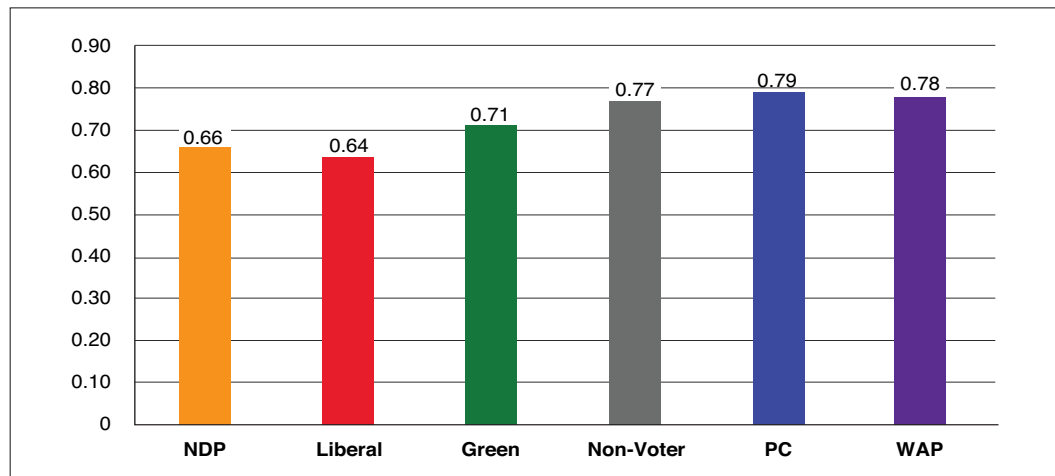
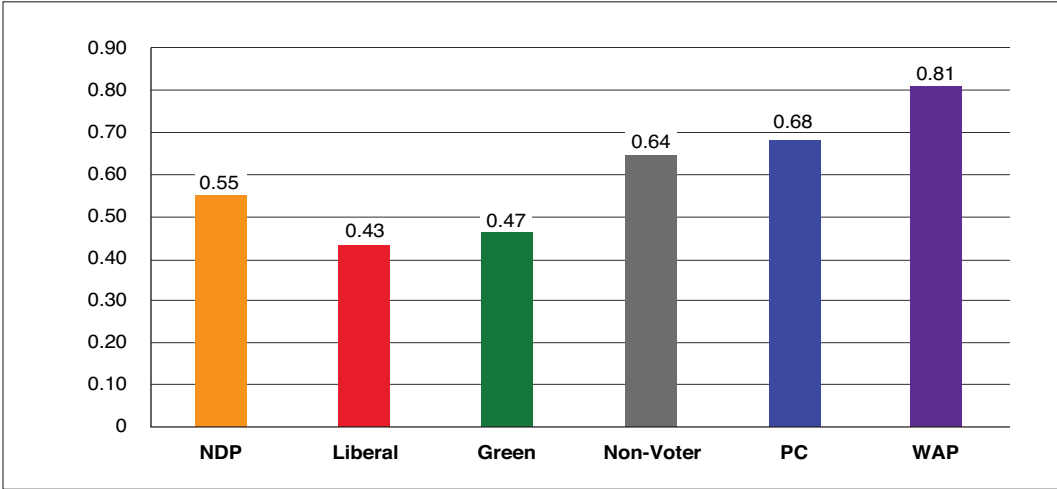


Figure 1 shows that Wildrose supporters are about as populist as Tory voters, and both are close to non-voters. This suggests an area where the Wildrose may compete with the Tories for voters and non-voters. But the party has no basis for claiming that it is more in tune with Albertans in this regard than are the Tories. The outlier character of the Liberal Party helps us to understand its struggle for electoral appeal. Its supporters anchor the ‘least-populist’ end of the spectrum on what is a core element of Alberta’s political culture.

With respect to western alienation, the Wildrose platform called for the creation of an Albertan Pension Plan to replace the Canadian Pension Plan (CPP) and emphasized the value of local control of investment fund decisions (Wildrose Alliance, 2008; Wildrose Alliance, 2009). This sharply alienated position is reflected in the distinctive position of supporters seen in Figure 2. Tory respondents stand between the Wildrose Alliance and non-voters, giving the party a strategic advantage in a potential battle to re-engage these voters; it has a shorter distance to bridge in attracting non-voters.

⁴ The questions on which this and all subsequent tables are based may be found in Appendix A.

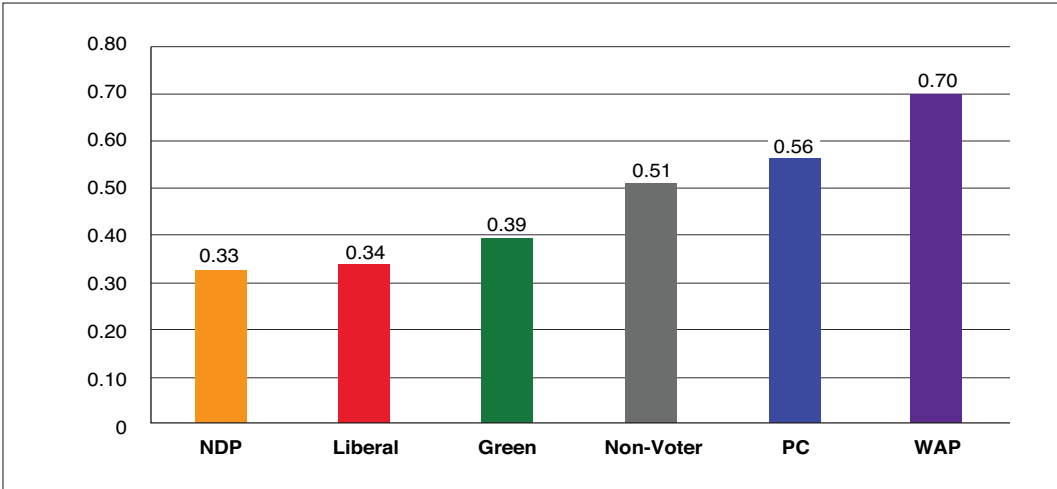
FIGURE 2: Western Alienation



Most discussions of Alberta politics stress the conservative nature of the province, and the policy priorities of the Wildrose Alliance make clear the party’s conservative ideology. In 2008 party policy called for secret ballot votes on labour union certification, school choice legislation and the entrenchment of “individual property rights within an Alberta Bill of Rights.”⁵

Figure 3 displays the level of individualism on our scale by the different party supporters. Supporters of the Wildrose Alliance are easily the most individualistic of our respondents. Conservative voters and non-voters fall closer to the Wildrose Alliance than they do the Liberals, but the Tories are very close to non-voters on this scale. Not surprisingly, NDP voters among our respondents are farthest away from the Alliance in absolute terms, although Liberal supporters are very similar on this measure.

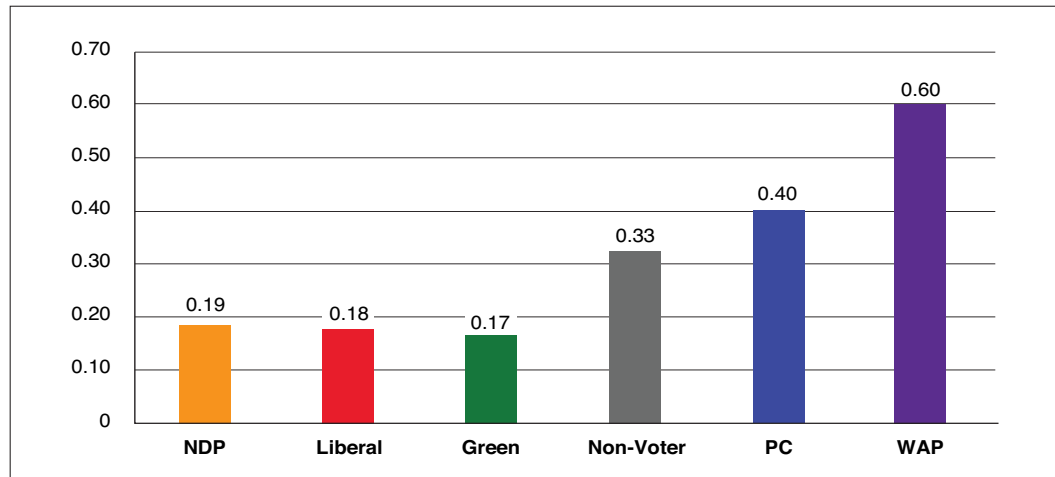
FIGURE 3: Individualism



⁵ Discussion of the Wildrose Alliance party platform throughout this section reflects what is found in Wildrose Alliance, 2008 and Wildrose Alliance, 2009.

Social conservatism is also an important element of the Wildrose platform. With respect to crime and social policy, the party favoured measures to “ensure that the rights of crime victims take precedence over those found guilty of committing crimes” and the implementation of “a timely and effective social assistance-to-work program”. Our social conservatism scale in Figure 4 is based on two measures, attitudes towards abortion and gay marriage, to identify the attitudes of respondents.

FIGURE 4: Social Conservatism

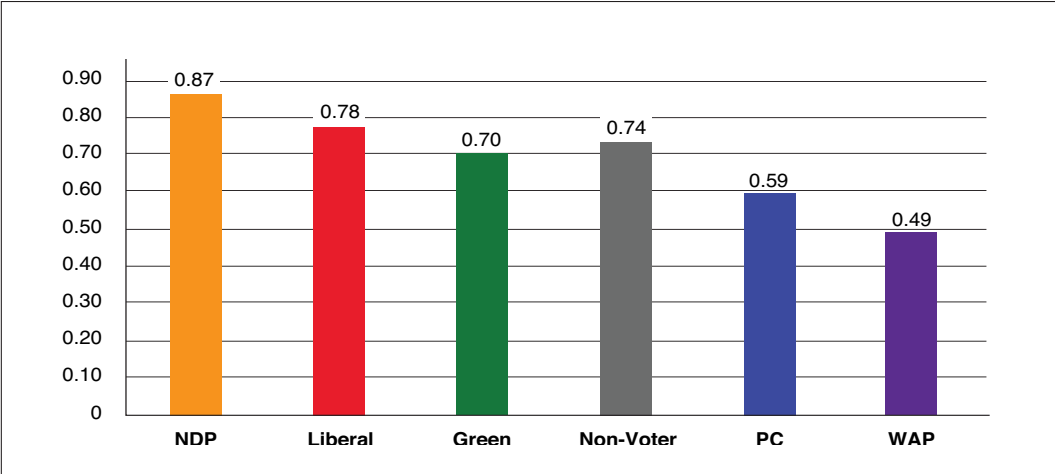


The socially conservative response is to oppose gay marriage and to disagree on the question that abortion is a matter between a woman and her doctor. Wildrose supporters are clearly much more socially conservative than are those of other parties. They are the polar respondents who, with a 30-percentage point spread, are much farther from non-voters than any other group. Conservative voters nearly split the difference between the Wildrose Alliance and supporters of all the other parties and are much closer to non-voters than are Wildrose supporters.

Wildrose policy favours smaller government. Its 2009 platform called for fiscal responsibility, demanding that red tape and regulations be cut by one-third and stressed that “the role of government is not to own and operate businesses when a competitive business market exists,” while extolling the value of “a zero-based budgeting program in all government departments” (Wildrose Alliance, 2009). Given large increases in government spending over recent years, party policy implies that the Conservative government has not managed the provincial economy in an effective and conservative manner.

Figure 5 captures attitudes toward questions of government involvement and spending. This figure displays one of the surprising elements of Alberta politics: Although Albertans elect Conservative governments, they are general positively disposed toward government activity.

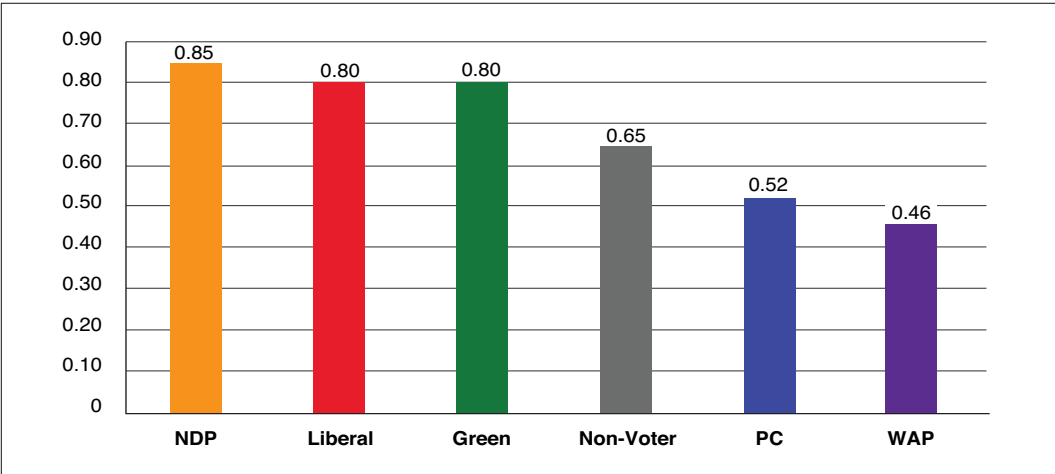
FIGURE 5: Pro-Government



Again, Wildrose Alliance voters take the pole position, being the least pro-government. The Conservatives are between Alliance respondents and non-voters although on this measure, non-voters are generally more like supporters of the other parties than they are like Tory or Wildrose voters.

Deference to the oil and gas industry has also been a core element of Wildrose party policy. The 2008 platform made clear that Albertans should recognize that the “prosperity of Alberta is dependent upon the natural resource and energy industries” and more recent policy noted that the province must “ensure an internationally competitive fiscal regime that attracts investment capital and makes reinvestment attractive” (Wildrose Alliance, 2010a). We asked a number of questions relating to the economy and the environment and used these to develop the scale of attitudes toward the environment in the context of the oil and gas industry.

FIGURE 6: Pro-Environment



As with attitudes toward government spending, Albertans appear to be more open to environmental regulation, despite the centrality of resource extraction to the provincial economy. The least pro-environment groups score around 0.5 on this scale, suggesting that environmental stewardship is very important to Albertans. Figure 6 confirms the pattern of Wildrose Alliance voters occupying the polar position, they being the least likely to be pro-environment. The Conservative voters are closer to the Wildrose Alliance voters than they are to the Liberal voters by a considerable degree. However, the non-voters fall much closer to the Liberals than to Alliance or Conservative voters.

To summarize, the Wildrose Alliance and its supporters at the 2008 provincial election occupied polar positions on each of our scales except for populism, where they and Conservative voters are essentially tied. On each scale Conservative voters fall closer to Wildrose Alliance voters than they do to Liberal voters. If the Wildrose Alliance wishes to maximize its support, it appears it should focus on those who voted Conservative in 2008. If unseating the government requires moving to the centre of politics, absorbing at least some Tory supporters and attracting non-voters on the way, the party has a good deal of work to do to move off its pole position. For their part, Conservatives should find it easier to attract non-voters willing to re-enter the electoral fray and perhaps even Liberal, Green or NDP supporters than will Wildrose. For the Tories, linking the Wildrose to its historically polar position in provincial politics —marginalizing the party—is one obvious defensive strategy.

Non-voters are closer to the Alliance than to the Liberals with respect to western alienation, populism and individualism. If annoyance with the Conservatives on these issues draws non-voters out at the next election, they are more likely to express their displeasure by voting for the Alliance rather than the Liberals. However, non-voters are closer to the Liberals on government programs, social conservatism and the environment. If these are the issues that motivate non-voters, they should find it easier to vote for the Liberals over Wildrose. This suggests that the framing of the agenda on which the next election is fought will be critical to its outcome, an exercise in which party leaders play a key role.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PARTY LEADERS

Much has been made of the importance of party leaders in Canadian politics. Reg Whitaker has written of the “replacement of traditional parties by ‘virtual parties’ brought together around would-be party leaders” (Whitaker, 2001: 16). He makes specific reference to what happened in Alberta in 1992 and 1993, when Ralph Klein became leader and “his chief competitor was blown all the way into the leadership of the Alberta Liberal party” (19). Leadership changes then can have a dramatic impact on party politics. In a similar vein, Grant Amyot points to the “enhanced role of leaders” and notes that “the media have played a role in the increased importance of leaders” (2007, 508-509).

TABLE 2: Party Thermometer Ratings by Party Support (Max 100)

| Vote | PC Rating | Liberal Rating | NDP Rating | WAP Rating |
|---------|-----------|----------------|------------|------------|
| No Vote | 53.2 | 40.0 | 36.9 | 29.5 |
| PC | 76.0 | 26.8 | 20.9 | 31.8 |
| Liberal | 38.5 | 61.9 | 42.1 | 19.0 |
| NDP | 35.5 | 46.6 | 70.1 | 19.4 |
| Green | 35.7 | 38.9 | 35.4 | 23.1 |
| WAP | 56.6 | 26.3 | 16.2 | 66.8 |

Party policy and party organization are now inextricably linked with the leader. Moderating the Wildrose Alliance policy and building a competent organization are central tasks facing Danielle Smith. This challenge is captured in part in Table 2, which makes clear that the Wildrose has the least appeal for all but Tory voters. Fully 84 percent of our respondents held a negative view of the party (a score of 50 or lower) in 2008, something it will have to work on if it is to broaden its appeal.

Again, there is evidence that PC and non-voters are likely the best source of potential Wildrose voters. If we limit our attention to the Conservative voters, we see that they gave higher scores to the Wildrose Alliance than did supporters of other parties, with non-voters being the next most supportive group. Tories also ranked the Wildrose above all other parties, consistent with the party being their second vote choice. However, the gap between non-voters' perceptions of the Tory and Wildrose party suggests the party has much work to do if it is to draw these potential voters into an election.

Leadership evaluations are one area in which Danielle Smith is hoping to do much better than her predecessor. In 2008, Paul Hinman as Wildrose leader struggled to attract support (see Table 3). About 81 percent of voters held a negative view (a score of 50 or lower) of Hinman. Even Wildrose supporters were not particularly strongly attached to Hinman, which might help explain his willingness to step aside in favour of a leadership contest. Hinman was the second most popular leader among Tory voters, ahead of Brian Mason (the NDP leader) and Kevin Taft (the Liberal leader), with Wildrose voters returning the favour with regard to Stelmach. Wildrose looks best placed to capitalize on disaffected Conservatives than are the Liberals, particularly as Smith's accession to the leadership strengthens the party's appeal. The replacement for David Swann, who resigned as Liberal leader on February 1, 2011, will be important in this regard.

TABLE 3: Leader Thermometer Ratings by Party Support (Max. 100)

| Party Support | Stelmach (PC) | Taft (Liberal) | Mason (NDP) | Hinman (WAP) |
|---------------|---------------|----------------|-------------|--------------|
| No vote | 48.0 | 36.4 | 35.4 | 31.6 |
| PC | 70.9 | 28.3 | 30.0 | 36.1 |
| Liberal | 42.6 | 54.8 | 44.2 | 25.9 |
| NDP | 41.8 | 44.5 | 61.0 | 30.2 |
| Green | 39.7 | 37.8 | 38.1 | 30.6 |
| WAP | 44.4 | 26.0 | 25.9 | 52.0 |

Regional variation in support plays an important role in Alberta politics, shaping the selection of leaders, the development of public policy and electoral success. The by-election that inspired much of the discussion surrounding the prospects of political change took place in Calgary. The Wildrose Alliance performed much better in Calgary in the 2008 election than it did in Edmonton or northern Alberta more broadly.

Calgary has been an area of weakness for the Stelmach Conservatives. As Table 4 shows, the Conservatives received their lowest vote share in the city in the 2008 election. Calgary was not particularly supportive of Stelmach even before the election. In the 2006 leadership election, Stelmach did not carry a plurality of support in any Calgary riding and his overall support in the city was a paltry 14 percent (Stewart and Sayers, 2008). But in order to challenge the Conservatives, the Alliance must demonstrate strength elsewhere in the province.

TABLE 4: Regional Variation in Voting at the 2008 Election

| Region | For which party did you vote? | | | | |
|--------------|--------------------------------|---------------|----------------------|-------------|-------------------------|
| | Progressive Conservative Party | Liberal Party | New Democratic Party | Green Party | Wildrose Alliance Party |
| Calgary CMA | 39.4% | 35.0% | 5.9% | 9.1% | 10.6% |
| Edmonton CMA | 45.2% | 32.4% | 17.0% | 3.6% | 1.8% |
| North | 57.8% | 16.7% | 11.1% | 8.9% | 5.6% |
| Central | 53.0% | 23.1% | 9.4% | 6.0% | 8.5% |
| South | 55.6% | 22.2% | 7.1% | 5.6% | 9.5% |

Source: 2008 Survey of Alberta Voters

Even in Calgary, feelings towards the Wildrose Alliance were not particularly high in 2008. Calgaryans were much more warmly disposed towards the Liberals (Table 5). This offers some evidence that the by-election results may well have been aimed at sending a direct message to the Stelmach Tories and may not be a harbinger of wider change. As one voter who supported the Alliance in the Calgary Glenmore by-election explained to CBC: “I’ve been a Conservative all my life like any normal Albertan... But I think that people do need to be put on their toes a little bit and I think that’s the message I would like to see them get at this time” (CBC, 2009).

Table 5: Region and Party Thermometer Rating (Max. 100)

| Region | How do you feel about the | | | |
|--------------|--------------------------------|---------------|----------------------|-------------------------|
| | Progressive Conservative Party | Liberal Party | New Democratic Party | Wildrose Alliance Party |
| Calgary CMA | 53.13 | 40.96 | 31.30 | 29.70 |
| Edmonton CMA | 55.17 | 41.93 | 39.28 | 23.57 |
| North | 60.45 | 38.34 | 33.15 | 32.00 |
| Central | 60.65 | 36.58 | 31.01 | 30.10 |
| South | 57.91 | 35.84 | 29.03 | 35.56 |
| Province | 56.02 | 39.83 | 33.70 | 28.79 |

There is a clear strength to the Conservative brand in Alberta. When we look at party identification, we find a huge advantage for the Conservatives and see that the Wildrose Alliance had a tiny base of identifiers at the time of the 2008 Election. As Table 6 indicates, Tory identifiers were ten times more numerous than Alliance supporters. Even New Democrats and Liberals entered the election with a higher base of identifiers. The Alliance needs to create an electoral coalition from a very low base in an environment where the Conservative brand remains strong. The resilience of existing ties to each party will be critical to vote-changing in the next election.

TABLE 6: Provincial Party Identification 2008

| Party | ID |
|---------|-----|
| PC | 43% |
| Liberal | 17% |
| NDP | 7% |
| Green | 4% |
| WAP | 4% |
| Other | 3% |
| None | 14% |

Given the central role of leaders in Canadian parties, losing the leadership issue to the Alliance could have devastating implications for the long-dominant Conservative party. It might allow Danielle Smith to reposition the Wildrose Alliance for success and to control the political agenda. While it is possible that current excitement over the prospects of the Wildrose Alliance is overblown, the Conservative party needs to react effectively if it is to ward off this challenge. Solidifying caucus support and careful consideration of the policy terrain to both its left and right will be central components of any coherent Tory response. The new Conservative leader will be critical to how such endeavours play out.

A NEW LEADER AND NEW POLICY DIRECTIONS

Danielle Smith understands that successful insurgent parties in Alberta have attacked incumbent parties from the centre (Vivone, 2009). In January 2010 she said as much:

“When you gave me the privilege to lead the Wildrose Alliance, I promised we would build a big-tent, mainstream conservative party that would reflect the common sense values of Albertans and a principled approach to government—a party that would define a new vision for Alberta and focus on several key priorities”
(Wildrose Alliance, 2010a).

Her central task is to indicate through her leadership that the Wildrose Alliance is a moderate, inclusive and therefore electable party. This includes balancing her own libertarian preferences with those of social conservatives in the party and appealing to Albertans who are comfortable with government intervention in a range of economic, social and environmental policy areas. Yet as we have seen, she inherited a party that in policy terms was to the right—on some issues, extremely so—of the governing party and most voters and non-voters.

Smith seems to have been successful at moderating and sidelining a number of potentially damaging policies at the party's June 2010 Annual General Meeting in Red Deer. The party rejected a resolution that would have strengthened the right of citizens to own guns. It removed a previous commitment to designate teachers as essential workers, limiting their capacity to strike and rejected a resolution aimed at introducing nuclear power to the province. As well, it softened language that implied support for private health care.⁶

Despite these moves, the party maintained elements of its conservative, populist approach. It retained support for charter schools, an increased role for private health care, binding referenda on important issues and confirmed an aversion to deficits. It retained its policy of allowing workers to opt out of unions and to require secret certification and decertification votes, while its replacement policy with regard to teachers as essential workers appears to leave open the question of whether they should be allowed to strike. Members voted for whistleblower legislation, an Alberta constitution and to study the practicability of a provincial police force. They passed a policy aimed at limiting access to guns for criminals but not others.

The policy convention made clear the party remains a strong supporter of the oil and gas industry, with members passing a motion emphasizing the need to move cautiously with regard to climate change, aiming to make decisions based on the 'best available scientific data.' Smith, whose leadership campaign relied heavily on funding and advice from leading members of this industry, made public statements in support of this view of climate change science and pointed to the centrality of the industry to the prosperity and future of the Alberta economy (Fekete, 2010; Wildrose Alliance, 2010; Thomson, 2010).

At the end of the conference, Smith claimed, perhaps rhetorically, that the proposals reflected a "...level of maturity I didn't expect to see this early on" (Thomson, 2010). At the same time, she appeared to be prompting any wavering Tory MLAs by noting that the 'door was closing' on members crossing the floor of the legislature to join the Wildrose Party (Fekete, 2010).

Doubts remain as to the success of this moderation strategy. As we have seen, while populism and western alienation remain cornerstones of Alberta's political culture, Albertans are open to attempts to raise levels of taxation on the oil and gas industry, are concerned about the environment and are more supportive of an activist government that is implied by the new Wildrose platform (Stewart and Sayers, 2009). The party's position that it will only pursue "fact-based stewardship of the environment" is consistent with Smith's public statement with regard to climate change that "the science isn't settled" (Fekete, 2010), but may not capture the mood of Albertans with respect to this issue.

Smith continues to use the wide remit of the party leader to develop new policies in preparation for a 2011 or 2012 election. Two themes are evident in these announcements: one is a populist appeal to voters shaped as a rejection of the 'centralizing' approach of the incumbent Tories in favour of local, decentralized decision making. The other, reminiscent of that made by Laurence Decore in 1993, is an attempt to present the party as best placed to offer sensible fiscal management in the face of radical shifts in government revenues associated with swings in oil and gas prices.

⁶ This discussion relies on Fekete, 2010, Wildrose Alliance, 2010, and Thomson, 2010.

In recognition of the importance of the oil and gas industry to her leadership and the provincial economy, Smith launched an 'Energy Task Force' on November 10th to develop party policy in this area. She appointed David Yager, who had helped organize her leadership campaign, and David Gray to head the task force⁷. The task force was asked to develop a policy to "restore investor confidence, streamline the regulatory process, properly reclaim land, manage environmental risks and help communities across the province...." (Wildrose Alliance, 2009). Its report, released in March 2010, quotes Smith as saying "The Wildrose Alliance Caucus will judge the success of the Alberta Competitiveness Review (a promised Tory policy) by increased oil and gas investment and employment" (Wildrose Alliance, 2010).

Smith and the Wildrose played to the populist strand in Alberta politics by attacking the perquisites of politicians through the establishment of a task force into the pay and conditions of Albertan MLAs. This was headed by long-time conservative activist, Senator-Elect, and Chair of the *Citizen's Centre for Freedom and Democracy* Link Byfield (who subsequently became a candidate for the party), who again had supported Smith in the leadership race.

Announcing the party's educational plan on September 9, 2010, Smith blamed bureaucratic centralization for the major problems facing the sector in Alberta. In her subsequent presentation of the policy, she gives credit to the Tories for pursuing a policy that encourages flexibility, where funding 'follows students,' but claims the Tories have strayed from this approach and that the Wildrose strengthen choice and local control.

This was followed by the party's environmental policy on September 15th. The policy avoids detailed discussion of the environmental aspects of the oilsands. In accompanying notes there is criticism of the government for not better managing the image of the oilsands:

Alberta's oilsands have been unfairly portrayed both here and around the world. Images of black open-pit mines and murky tailings ponds are what immediately spring to mind for many people when it comes to Alberta's hydrocarbon economy. These often powerful images create a strong emotional reaction and lead some people to conclude that the best interests of our economy end when the best interests of our environment begin (Smith, 2010a).

Cleaning up tailings ponds does receive attention as a means of reducing their negative impact on the image of the oilsands. But the main focus is on "clear air, clean land and clean water." The policy focuses on reducing pollutants (not CO₂), encouraging greater use of natural gas for transportation and managing water for the energy industry and agriculture. The policy announcement notes the many good things being done now, but that some changes need to be made to continue to allow the exploitation of oil and gas in Alberta.

⁷ Yager was at the time CEO of the oil and gas company HSE Integrated Limited and Chairman of the Petroleum Services Association of Canada; Gray at the time was Executive Director of the Office of the Utilities Consumer Advocate.

On October 4th, Smith returned to education, announcing the party's advanced education policy. The focus was on reducing the cost to students, allowing debt forgiveness, encouraging greater linkages between universities and ensuring yet again that 'money followed students.' October 21st saw her release the party's policies on municipalities, once again emphasizing the importance of local decision-making against the 'centralizing' approach of the current government (Wildrose Alliance, 2010a; Wildrose Alliance, 2010b).

On November 24th, the party announced its 'Democracy and Accountability' policy. This policy included strengthening the offices of the Auditor General and the Ethics Commissioner, whistleblower legislation, a range of measures to enhance government transparency and a new process for dealing with MLA pay increases (the government increased MLA pay by up to 35 percent just after the 2008 election). The party also claims to favour fixed election dates, more free votes in the legislature, recall of provincial MLAs and the election of federal senators.

These policy announcements often recognize the contribution of the incumbent Tories and avoid strident criticism of the government except with respect to the democracy and accountability component. They arguably position the party as representing a 'return' to traditional conservative values and, in particular, the populist roots of conservatism in Alberta. The policies are not in areas that might have been considered 'core' to the pre-2010 Alliance, although they are crafted to be consistent with central principles of the party—such as maximizing individual choice, limiting the state and maintaining the centrality of oil and gas in the province. They are all issues that are of interest to both rural and urban Albertans and recognize the growing importance of the need to balance economic development and environmental protection.

FINANCING AND PARTY ORGANIZATION

In addition to the need to reposition party policy, to be successful the Wildrose needs to build and sustain a party organization of three parts: a legislative branch, broadly representative constituency associations and a head (leader's) office with associated executive and professional services. As well, the party needs to be able to raise funds and build a competent election campaign team to challenge the well-established Tories.

Building the leader's office and party executive has proven to be a challenge for Smith. In the early stages of her leadership, a range of people came and went from the executive and her office, with important functions such as fundraising suffering as a consequence. Her original choice for chief advisor and strategist, Stephen Carter, stepped down after making fun of Stelmach's accent and in the face of the insolvency of his event-organizing company (CBC, 2009a). In February 2010, Carter was replaced with Shannon Stubbs who carried the title Executive Assistant, with Vitor Marciano, a federal Conservative party operative, joining Wildrose as executive director. In October 2010, Stubbs was nominated as the Wildrose candidate in Fort Saskatchewan–Vegreville, the Premier's riding. After helping to organize the successful campaign of Calgary's Mayor Naheed Nenshi, Carter returned briefly as special advisor to Smith, before departing again in February 2011 to run Alison Redford's campaign for leadership of the Tory party.

After some false starts, the Wildrose moved in the spring of 2010 to improve its fundraising efforts in order to give itself a chance of competing with the well-funded Tories. By mid-2010, the party appeared to have settled on an executive, including a number of members with experience in fundraising as well as in establishing new firms. Perhaps most notably, Hal Walker, a former Tory and president of the Calgary Elbow PC Association who helped run election campaigns for former Premier Ralph Klein, joined the party in April 2010 and became party president. Alan Napier was tasked with professionalizing the party's fundraising efforts by building a new firm to run the database and direct-contact process that builds and maintains fundraising links with supporters.

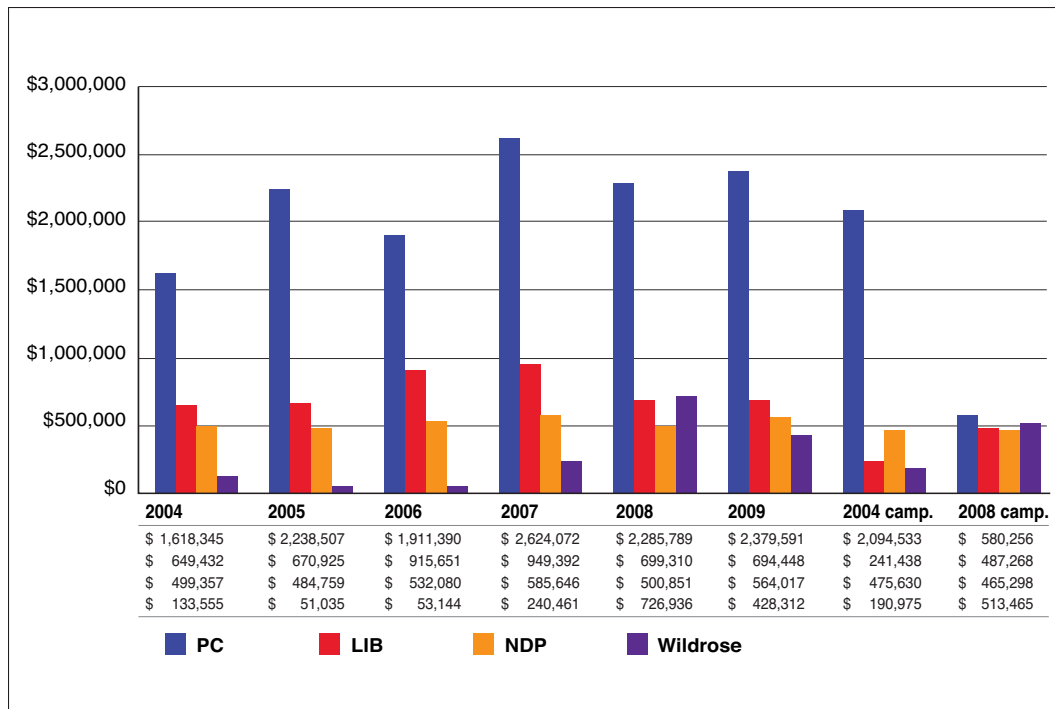
As is evident in Figure 7, 2008 was a banner year for the Wildrose, with its election year fundraising much ahead of its electoral performance. Many attributed the Alliance's success to annoyance with the government's new royalty regime among energy companies (Libin, 2010). Only the Wildrose Alliance came out in opposition to a more aggressive royalty regime. Corporate money flowing to the party in the 2008 campaign was almost ten times as much as the party received in the 2004 election period. It almost matched the Conservatives in campaign revenue and outdistanced both of its major opponents to the left of the Tories.

The Conservative party suffered a major decline in campaign revenue from 2004. It received only \$580,000 in 2008 while during the election campaign of 2004, its coffers overflowed with more than \$2 million. But the huge fundraising advantage enjoyed by the Conservative party throughout the four year fundraising cycle gave it a major advantage in the 2008 election campaign, with the Wildrose Alliance being unable to capitalize on its financial success (Stewart and Sayers, 2009).

The party's weakness was evident at the candidate level as the mean expenditures for Wildrose Alliance party candidates trailed both the NDP and the Liberals and were not even 15 percent of the Conservative candidate mean. The challenge faced by the party in 2008 is further evidenced by the fact that in 62 of the 83 provincial ridings, the Wildrose Alliance candidate spent less than \$5,000. Even in the riding the party won in 2004, they were outspent by the Conservatives in 2008.

The Wildrose also had its best non-campaign fundraising year in 2008, when it raised more than either the Liberals or the New Democrats. However, this ranking displays the gap between the government and the major opposition parties. The Alliance's \$726, 936 was only a third of what the Tories raised that year.

FIGURE 7: Donations to Political Parties in Alberta



The Alliance’s corporate support grew to almost match the individual contributions in 2007. In the 2008 election period, almost 90 percent of the party’s individual donations came in amounts of over \$5,000. In contrast, less than half of the Conservative campaign revenue, and less than 20 percent of the annual revenue came from such large sources. For the 2008 election then, the Wildrose Alliance was heavily dependent on a small number of large donors. The 2008 annual figures did not change this pattern. In 2008, the Wildrose Alliance received just \$23,313 in donations of less than \$375. In contrast the Liberals received \$201,741, the New Democrats, \$270,206 and the PCs \$281,825. (Stewart and Sayers, 2009).

The importance of corporate donations, mainly from the Calgary-based energy sector, highlights the southern character of the party during this time. This is also seen in the pattern of individual donations which in 2008 were overwhelmingly from voters in Calgary and the southern part of the province. However, 2009 was not a successful year for a party hoping to challenge the Tories. The sitting government attracted more than five times as much as the Wildrose party (\$2,379,591 to \$428,312). Moreover, the party ranked behind both the Liberals and NDP in fundraising. The party financing regime in Alberta, which provides for no limitations on the raising and spending of funds, allows the Tories to both raise and spend vast quantities of money as they attempt to snuff out the upstart Wildrose Alliance party.

In terms of party organization, Paul Hinman’s win in Calgary-Glenmore marked a watershed for the Wildrose, providing it with representation in the legislature, resources and a focus for its efforts. In January 2010, Tory backbenchers Heather Forsyth (Calgary-Fish Creek) and newcomer Rob Anderson (Airdrie-Chestermere) left their caucus to sit as Wildrose MLAs. There were rumours at the time that up to ten Tories were considering the move (CBC, 2010), hinting again at a possible threat to the Tory dynasty.

At the June policy convention, Smith announced the addition of independent MLA (and former Tory cabinet minister) Guy Boutilier (Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo) to the party's legislative roster (Boutilier took some time to formally advise the Speaker of his change of status). As well, Smith announced that the party had been successful in building constituency associations in all 83 provincial ridings. It began announcing successful nomination candidates in the fall of 2010 (Fekete, 2010).

While a powerful indicator of the party's appeal, a number of nominations have been controversial (Slade and Fekete, 2010) and will generate other challenges for the party. For example, the nomination of Link Byfield in the riding of Barrhead-Morinville-Westlock in October highlights the continuing challenge facing the party with respect to electoral positioning. The high-profile Byfield is widely known as the strongly conservative publisher of Alberta Reports and as a 'Senator-in-waiting' for Alberta. An early supporter of the Wildrose Alliance and of Smith, the party will have to manage the impression that he may be more conservative than many or most Albertans.

The party faces organizational challenges within the legislature. Despite having two more MLAs than the two-person NDP caucus, the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly Ken Kowalski has denied the party access to leadership funds (around \$230,000) received by all parties in the legislature, citing the fact that Smith does not hold a seat. Such a designation would have strengthened its legislative and organizational presence and given it a more powerful voice in question period. As well, the Speaker's Office has indicated that the party is not to include quotes from Smith in its official caucus news releases (Fekete, 2010a).

The Alliance has made impressive strides in building its own financial and organizational resources, but confronts a party that enjoys vast organizational and financial advantages. While much has been made of the province's slide into deficit, nonetheless it remains the only government in Canada that is not in debt. This, combined with the potential enlivening effect of a leadership race and a new leader, makes unseating the Tories a daunting task.

DISCUSSION

In general, an insurgent party such as the Wildrose may attempt to usurp the position of the current dominant party or reshape the political agenda to its advantage. The matching strategies for the incumbent party are to reassert itself as best placed to defend core values, presenting the newcomer as outside mainstream opinion, or to strike out in a new direction itself (Downs 1957; Stokes 1963; Riker, 1983; Green, 2007: 631; Riker, 2008: 17-19). As in the past (1971, 1993), the current battle appears to revolve around defining and capturing the centre of Alberta politics; the Wildrose attacking the Tories as out of touch with core values, the Tories painting the Wildrose as extreme.

A poll in early 2011 suggested a drop in support for the Wildrose Alliance and has the Tories as the first choice of a plurality of Albertans (Thomson, 2011). The 25-30 percent share enjoyed by the Wildrose Alliance in this opinion poll is much like the level of support captured by the Western Canada Concept party during the recession of the early-to-mid 1980s, support that dried up once the economy recovered. As well, the total Liberal and NDP vote share has remained fairly stable over the last year, suggesting that voters have yet to move en masse from the Tories.

As for the Tories, the Premier's difficulty in projecting a positive media image has been a major problem for the party, despite some notable policy successes. Stelmach's decision to step down, announced on January 25, 2011 but to take effect at an as-yet-unspecified date in late 2011, may relieve the party of this difficulty. Much will depend on his successor; the right new leader may well blunt the impact of Smith and the Wildrose.

Beyond leadership concerns, a series of controversial pieces of government legislation appear to offer the Wildrose opportunities to attack the Tories. Bill 19, The Land Assembly Project Area Act, received Royal Assent on May 26, 2009. The Act empowers the government to purchase land for major infrastructure projects. It allows the government to prevent other uses for land deemed necessary for essential infrastructure development without necessarily purchasing it or compensating current owners. This restriction on use would likely diminish the value of the land. Not surprisingly, large land owners have expressed concern over this legislation (APRI, 2011).

Bill 36, The *Alberta Land Stewardship Act* (ALSA), received Royal Assent on June 4, 2009. It has proven to be a lightning rod for discontent by landowners—particularly rural landowners—with respect to their capacity to control their land and claim compensation for other uses, such as oil and gas exploration and government expropriation. Sections dealing with expropriation, sub-soil rights, and appeals have attracted particular criticism. Ignored is the fact that it is the first serious attempt to deal with uncertainties and to make use of a Land-Use Framework (LUF) that adopts common and transparent standards for the whole province.

Bill 50, the *Electric Statutes Amendment Act*, which received its final reading in the Alberta Legislative Assembly on November 25, 2009 and Royal Assent on the 26th, added to the perception that the government is reshaping property rights in Alberta. This legislation removes the previous requirement for public hearings with respect to the construction of new electrical power lines. It makes the approval process much like that for other infrastructure such as roads and hospitals which do not require public hearings if they are deemed critical. The cost of the expansion of the electricity grid, currently estimated at up to \$15 billion, would be borne by power consumers through their electricity bills.

In 2010, in pursuit of its carbon policy, the government introduced Bill 24, the *Carbon Capture and Storage Statutes Amendment Act*, which received its third reading on December 1st and Royal Assent on December 2nd of that year. Because it provides for potential storage of carbon within the empty spaces below surface, it requires the provincial government to claim these spaces as Crown property. Some have drawn the conclusion that current sub-surface rights are extinguished (APRI, 2010).

Not surprisingly, Smith and the Wildrose Alliance have seized the opportunity to paint the government as beyond the pale, as having abandoned a central tenet of Alberta society—the centrality of property rights. In attacking property rights, according to the Wildrose, the government is violating another important principle, local control, in favour of centralism.

The problem with all three bills is that they represent the biggest property rights grab in Alberta history. We see a pattern in this legislation of centralizing decision-making, of undermining landowner rights and of denying full, fair and timely compensation (Vegreville Observer, 2010).

The evidence presented here suggests the Wildrose Alliance is identifying the central elements of Alberta's political traditions and claiming to be more in tune with these than the government. It is worth keeping in mind that in this regard, its actual policies may be less important than perceptions of its policies.

The Alliance must discredit the Tories' performance on those issues that are seen as central to politics in Alberta and move aggressively into Tory territory by presenting itself as more competent and in tune with Albertans. Its press releases regularly target the Premier as having failed to properly manage core components of government, initially the energy sector so vital to the province's economy, and more recently health care and fiscal policy, all primary concerns for voters in Alberta (Sayers and Stewart, 2009). Recent discussion of education, the environment and the wider economy share a similar tone. The Tories are failing to uphold the traditions that are held to be central to Albertan political culture.

Yet the party faces challenges in moving to the middle of politics in Alberta. The Alliance's non-interventionist, small government approach to regulation is at odds with evidence that voters favour more government regulation and a robust role for government with respect to health care and education. Its unwillingness to accept the need for action on carbon may be at odds with widespread concern for the environment and support for some form of government action on this file.

The party must deal with the north-south divide in the province and the perception that it is a southern party. Oil and gas exploration has been one of the underlying irritants for rural Albertans who are currently upset with Tory land use legislation. The association between Calgary and 'big oil' is not always viewed positively in other parts of the province, and the Wildrose must work to move beyond its southern heartland if it is to be successful. These close links with the oil and gas industry do not sit comfortably with the admittedly modulated populist image the party hopes to project.

Tensions between social and fiscal conservatives, which at times run along rural-urban lines, are also a challenge for the party. There may be advantages using themes such as local control, property rights and prudence rather than smaller government to bridge this divide. These ideas allow moral conservatives to imagine a political space in which they can pursue their preferred social arrangements. The question remains as to whether this strategy is able to bind social and fiscal conservatives—with the former being some of its most passionate members—together. In everything from selecting candidates to the words Smith uses, it would seem there is a need to avoid extremes that play to the Tories' attempts to paint the Wildrose as out of step with Albertans.

CONCLUSION

Our analysis suggests that the next election will be a struggle over the central ground of Alberta politics combined with sharp competition for the mantle of leadership that has been so important in the politics of the province—a province that has had only seven leaders in the last 75 years.

The Wildrose Alliance is attempting to present itself as more moderate than in the past. Advertising its populist and western roots, downplaying its moral conservative elements and rebranding its libertarian impulses are all part of this strategy. The message is to be delivered by an energetic and appealing leader, with the Tories framed as out of touch with core Alberta values.

To do this, the Wildrose Alliance must negotiate traditional tensions in Albertan politics: strong support for individualism yet wide and deep commitment to public health care and robust government, a north-south divide, rural-urban tensions and differences in outlook between social and fiscal conservatives in its ranks and beyond. At the same time, the party must appear to be aligned with the populism and western alienation that run deep in the province.

The Tory response centres on defending what it sees as its traditional ground by claiming to be the quintessential Albertan party while painting the Alliance as outsiders. This strategy is likely to include focusing on the gap between the Alliance and voter expectations of state activity in areas such as health care, the environment and the economy. Regional variation in Alliance support and the foibles of inexperienced candidates will be grist for this mill. The Tories' much larger financial resources will fund this process while a new leader may well sharpen its focus.

Already the Tories are responding to criticisms of recent legislation as well as other areas where the Wildrose might attack them. During the 2011 spring session, the government plans to introduce a number of amendments to the Alberta Land Stewardship Act to soften the perception that it is not a strong supporter of private property rights. As well, it plans to introduce legislation toughening some criminal penalties and providing greater compensation for victims of crime. It will also strengthen securities regulation and release a new education framework (Fekete, 2011).

Stelmach's imminent departure has the potential to remake the political landscape and the character of the battle between the Tories and Wildrose Alliance. The selection of a new leader before the next election may invigorate the Tories as did Ralph Klein's success in 1993. It also offers an opportunity to make a clean break from the Stelmach era and to develop new strategies aimed at blunting the appeal of the Wildrose Alliance. The form of this strategy and the response of the Wildrose may be heavily influenced by just who is successful in that race.

These are rare times in Alberta: the Liberals and Conservatives are seeking new leaders; a Liberal caucus member has mused openly about running for the leadership of the new—and largely unknown—Alberta Party, which now has an MLA in Dave Taylor and the New Democrat caucus is small but effective in the Legislative Assembly. Unpredictability and the possibility of widespread electoral competition promises an exceptionally interesting period in politics as Albertans consider whether another political dynasty is on its last legs.

APPENDIX A: SURVEY QUESTIONS USED TO CONSTRUCT ATTITUDINAL SCALES

Figure 1 Populism

- Trust ordinary people more than experts* 58%
- Solve problems if government brought back to grassroots* 75%
- Need government with less red tape* 86%

Figure 2 Western Alienation

- Alberta is treated unfairly by the federal government: 46%
- Alberta does not have its fair share of political power in Canada: 56%
- The economic policies of the federal government seem to help Quebec and Ontario at the expense of Alberta: 65%
- Because parties depend on Quebec and Ontario, Alberta usually gets ignored in national politics: 70%

Figure 3 Individualism

- Government regulation stifles drive* 48%
- Most unemployed could find jobs* 71%
- Those willing to pay should get medical treatment sooner* 43%
- A lot of welfare and social programs are unnecessary* 30%

Figure 4 Social Conservatism

- Abortion a matter between a woman and her doctor* 76%
- Gays and Lesbians should be allowed to marry* 62%

Figure 5 Pro-Government

- Government should ensure decent living standard* 73%
- Government should ensure adequate housing* 78%
- Government should take over auto insurance* 46%
- Government should limit amount of rent increases* 76%

Figure 6 Pro-Environment

- Oil and gas companies have too much say in provincial politics* 69%
- Alberta should slow pace of oilsands development* 53%
- Tough environmental standards should take precedence over employment* 58%
- Alberta needs to take firm action to combat Global Warming* 82%
- Royalties on natural gas and oil should be increased* 56%

* An asterisk here and in future tables indicates significant at the 0.05 level or better.

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