

SAYING NO:

*BC Voters and the Canadian Alliance
in the 2000 Federal Election**

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IN THE 2000 FEDERAL ELECTION, the Canadian Alliance Party increased its popular support in British Columbia by just over 6 per cent relative to the Reform party's performance in 1997. The Alliance garnered almost 50 per cent of the popular vote and gained two additional BC members of Parliament (MPs). In this essay, I will address the following question: Why did the Alliance do so well in this province even though it was less directly focused on substantive western regionalist concerns than the Reform Party had been? My answer will suggest that the Canadian Alliance's BC popularity was based primarily on its appeal as a symbolic vehicle for "saying no" to politics as usual, and to party politics in particular, albeit with a characteristic western accent. Alliance popularity was thus based far less than we might think on BC voters' enthusiasm for the substantive changes the Alliance proposed to Canadian social and economic policies.

My argument deals, first, with the matter of widespread alienation among Canadian voters from party-mediated political life and, second, with the perceptions and reality of both Reform and the Alliance parties as "Western parties." Regarding alienation, survey evidence over the last several decades has shown that Canadians have become increasingly disaffected with political processes, politicians, and governments. This disaffection has been demonstrated with regard to legislative structures and processes of representation, parties as representational vehicles, the accountability of legislators and bureaucrats, and the role of expertise in political decision making.¹

* I wish to thank my colleague, Lynda Erickson, for her careful analysis of the 1997 Canadian Election Study data referred to in this article.

¹ For summary accounts of the results of the various public opinion surveys that have confirmed these trends, see Neil Nevitte, Elizabeth Gidendil, André Blais, and Richard Nadeau, *Unsteady State: The 1997 Canadian General Election* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1999); Harold Clarke, Allan Kornberg, and Peter Wearing, *A Polity on the Edge: Canada and the Politics of Fragmentation* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2000); R. Kenneth Carty, William Cross, and Lisa Young, *Rebuilding Canadian Party Politics* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000); and Lisa Young, "Value Clash: Parliament and Citizens after 150 Years of Responsible Government," in *Taking Stock of 150 Years of Responsible Government in Canada*, ed. F. Leslie Seidle and Louis Massicotte (Ottawa: Canadian Study of Parliament Group, 1999).

Perhaps the most striking findings of recent surveys show that, by 1993, over two-thirds of the judgments Canadians made about political parties were negative.²

As Phil Resnick has explained in his recent book, British Columbia has a long tradition with a “politics of resentment,” which incorporates both substantive issue concerns – such as the advantages secured by Quebec within the federal polity – and a sense of isolation and alienation from the power centres of national public life. A recent Ipsos-Reid poll reported that 84 per cent of BC residents believe federal leaders paid them too little attention, while 77 per cent contended that British Columbia is not getting a fair share from Ottawa.³ One would expect, then, to see this resentment reflected in relatively extreme scores on survey questions that tap Canadians’ orientations to the processes and vehicles of representation.

Yet evidence from the 1997 Canadian Election Study presents surprisingly mixed evidence in this regard.⁴ For example, respondents from British Columbia were the least likely of all Canadians to agree with the populist-priming statement, “we could probably solve most of our big national problems if decisions could be brought back to people at the grassroots.” Granted, the 63 per cent of BC respondents that agreed with this claim represent a strong, and perhaps alienated, majority. But even larger majorities agreed in the Atlantic region (74 per cent), the Prairies (72 per cent), and even Ontario (66 per cent).

Similarly, other questions tapping public cynicism about politicians suggest that, while they are alienated from politics as usual, British Columbians are not more alienated than voters in other parts of the country, including Ontario. BC respondents, like those elsewhere, mainly agreed that “elected members soon lose touch with the people” and that “politicians are ready to lie to get elected.” And almost half (47 per cent) of the BC respondents, compared to 50 per cent of those from Ontario, agreed that “quite a few of the people running the government are crooked.”⁵ If British Columbians and westerners

² See Clarke, *A Polity on the Edge*, 124–25.

³ “BC Wants More Attention from Ottawa, Poll Finds,” *Globe and Mail*, 24 February 2001, A5. This poll was limited to British Columbia, so we can’t compare these results to those from other regions.

⁴ Data below come from the 1997 Canadian Election Study and were provided by the Institute for Social Research, York University. The survey was funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada and was completed for the 1997 Canadian Election Study team of Andre Blais, Elisabeth Gidengil, Richard Nadeau, and Neil Nevitte.

⁵ Eighty-five per cent of British Columbians thought that elected members lose touch, compared to 83 per cent of Ontarians; 84 per cent of British Columbians thought that politicians are ready to lie, compared to 83 per cent of Ontarians.

generally are not unique in their populism, as these findings suggest, then explanations of British Columbia's strong support for the Reform and Alliance parties in the last two elections need to do more than point to British Columbia's legendary anti-elitist populism.

The one area where BC residents appear to stand out compared to citizens in other provinces is in their support for the regular use of referenda to decide important policy issues. Forty-two per cent of BC respondents to the 1997 CES survey said that referenda should be held regularly on important questions. By comparison, just 30 per cent of other Canadian respondents supported regular use of referenda.⁶ This populist desire for "end-runs" around a policy process overly dependent on party politicians seems to confirm what we know about political life on the west coast. Still, we need to put these attitudes in context: enthusiasm for referenda, albeit those that would be held only occasionally, is still substantial in all provinces.⁷ Moreover, referenda are not generally seen as full antidotes to the major deficiencies of representative political systems, except by their most committed advocates;⁸ instead, BC residents seem to be attracted to referenda as means of thumbing their noses at party elites. BC voters led the country in this manner in their 1992 referendum rejection of the Charlottetown Accord.

The 1997 survey findings do not tell us that BC residents wish to use referenda to thoroughly revamp the federal government's policies. Prospective delight in the use of referenda as a weapon with which to administer comeuppance to party politicians, especially those from central Canada, is, for me, a more compelling hypothesis regarding BC voters' support for referenda. But, once again, we need to acknowledge that administering comeuppance to politicians is an activity that appeals to a wide swath of citizens outside of British Columbia.

This leads to my second major theme. With BC voters' populism parsed and qualified as above, we can address the regionalist appeal and basis of Reform and Alliance party success in British Columbia. This success is not due to their MPs having focused primarily on representing essentially western issues or interests. This image is primarily an artefact of the early rhetoric of the Reform party and the western Canadian print media's enthusiastic endorsement of

⁶ Among Ontario respondents, it was 33 per cent.

⁷ Fully 74 per cent of respondents outside British Columbia supported the use of referenda at least occasionally.

⁸ For example, in a 1993 survey of 5,000 Reform party members, Harold Clarke discovered that 73 per cent of this sample believed that referenda, rather than federal or provincial governments, should decide "important questions" of public policy. See Clarke, *A Polity on the Edge*, 207.

Reform and the Alliance as parties that push social and economic policies favoured by the Hollinger/Southam Press owners, editors, and columnists. There is little evidence to suggest that BC Reform MPs kept a high profile in Ottawa as dogged defenders of British Columbia against predacious Ontario and Quebec. Indeed, over the past decade, when push has come to shove, the new right, markets-over-politics thrust of Reform and Alliance economic and social policy dominated both the Reform and Alliance party leaderships' attention, and the time spent by Reform MPs on policy questions in Parliament.⁹

So even though new right policy preferences have trumped BC or western regional issue concerns in the policy focus of the Reform and Alliance parties, each secured a dual reputation as a "Western party" and as an "anti-party." Reform did so initially with some serious attention to western issues, then, after 1993, it did so thanks to a combination of the "faux regionalism" of the daily press in British Columbia, and default on these issues within the federal party system. A word on each of these factors is needed before I pull this analysis together.

In the 2000 federal election, the Alliance party rode on the coattails of the Reform party's reputation as *the* western party. Many 1997 Reform voters continued to see the Alliance as the only real western party, in spite of Stockwell Day's spending more than half of his campaign in Ontario and his elimination of any suggestion that the west was systematically taken advantage of by a federal government dominated by central Canada. In the Alliance campaign, defence of western interests against central Canada – not a Liberal Parliament, but central Canada – was a love that dared not speak its name.

Nonetheless, the BC daily media continually editorialized about the need for BC voters to vote for the Alliance in order to defend BC interests. But the Hollinger press chain virtually monopolizes the daily and weekly newspaper media in British Columbia, and its new right political proclivities are well known. So it doesn't take a political scientist to appreciate that this editorial endorsement is best understood as a "faux regionalism," centring on the implicit attribution of economic and social policy preferences to BC and western voters that coincidentally mirror those preferred by the new right. Because Reform was a "Western party," whatever policies it championed were,

⁹ See David Laycock, *The New Right and Democracy in Canada: Understanding Reform and the Canadian Alliance* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2001), chap. 7.

by extension, of and for the West. Since 1993 the Reform and the Alliance parties have been very lucky to have the west's dominant print media reinforcing this questionable equivalence.

What of the "default" that the Alliance benefited from in the party competition? Reform was the "anti-Conservative party" in 1993 and then the "anti-Liberal party" in 1997. Reform's near-monopoly in the "anti-party"¹⁰ and "anti-central Canada party" markets in the west was made possible because the New Democratic Party (NDP) was removed from British Columbia's populist competition well before the 2000 election was called. This removal resulted primarily from the combination of an often scandal-plagued and, under Glen Clark, badly led BC provincial NDP government through the 1990s, and the federal NDP's endorsement of the Charlottetown Accord in 1992. The NDP had attracted many anti-central Canadian and populist votes in British Columbia in the federal elections of 1984 and 1988. But it lost its attraction to voters with "anti-party" sympathies as a result of its position on the Charlottetown Accord, and because an incumbent provincial NDP government could not sustain support from "anti-party" voters. It thus became the obvious target of referendum and recall energies in the late 1990s.

As a result, the Reform and Alliance parties had the populist anti-party vote all to themselves in British Columbia in 1993, 1997, and 2000. The anti-party vote can be potentially attracted by parties of the left and by parties of the right. With the shift to the right in North American political culture over the past two decades, it is much easier for the right to link anti-statism to anti-partyism than it is for the left to link anti-partyism to opposition to corporate power. But the anti-statist component of the Reform and Alliance populist packages is not inherent to populism. Many anti-party voters in British Columbia who supported the Alliance party in 2000 have serious reservations about the specific thrusts of much anti-statist Alliance party policy. The fact that new right strategists and editorial writers use anti-partyism as a "wedge issue" with which to beat back public support for the public goods and services of the welfare state does not mean that their anti-statism is inherently populist.

To conclude, I believe that it would be a mistake to read the almost 50 per cent support of BC voters for Alliance party candidates in the

¹⁰ See Elisabeth Gidengil, André Blais, Neil Nevitte, and Richard Nadeau, "The Correlates and Consequences of Anti-partyism," forthcoming in *Party Politics*, for an insightful discussion of the way that the Reform vote in English Canada was crucially driven by "anti-party" sentiments among its supporters.

2000 federal election as 50 per cent endorsement among BC voters of the Alliance party's policy agenda. The Alliance party had the good fortune to inherit Preston Manning's deftly crafted anti-party bona fides and the Reform Party's reputation as the only serious opponent of "old-line party" complacency, a political order from which many British Columbians – and other Canadians – are understandably alienated.

For many years, BC voters have been inclined to send Ottawa and its political establishment a message in federal elections. To put it simply, they are "saying no." Their message is that they are disaffected from the federal polity and its dominant parties. They overwhelmingly agree that the political machine is broken, but they are nowhere close to agreeing on how to fix it or on what policies the machine should produce.

In this situation, neither sending Alliance MPs to Ottawa, nor hoping for policy referenda, was expected to produce much constructive change. But for many BC voters "saying no" made more sense than voting for parties that appear complacent about an alienated political existence. Stockwell Day's judgment and leadership have been thoroughly discredited over the past year. As a result, the Canadian Alliance has suffered "negative branding" even in Alberta. With the Alliance party bruised and vulnerable to a wide range of critiques, one wonders how British Columbians will choose to "say no" in the next federal election. BC voters will eventually take note of the Alliance party's record-breaking federal campaign expenditure in 2000, much of it financed by Ontario businessmen to win more seats for a party whose "western" character they and their Ontario Tory friends successfully eliminated without eliminating its western image. Day's disarmingly unselfconscious demagoguery, ineptness in Parliament (compared to Joe Clark), and various defamation cases, party-financing, and media interview fiascoes have also revealed the Canadian Alliance to be a party like the others. In short, Day and his Canadian Alliance party have squandered much of the anti-party capital accumulated through the 1990s by the astute and politically talented Preston Manning. It is safe to say that, in the next federal election, voting for the Alliance will be a less popular way for British Columbians to "say no" than it was in November 2000.