
Legislators and their World

A Survey of Alberta MLAs

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For most of its history, the government of the province of Alberta has been dominated by a single party – the United Farmers from 1921 to 1935, Social Credit from 1935 to 1971 and the Progressive Conservatives since 1971. Indeed, the present distribution of seats in the legislature, in which the government outnumbers the combined opposition by approximately 3 to 1 represents, by Alberta standards, a relatively strong opposition. Unlike general elections in many provinces, in which there is much speculation on who will form the government, most speculation surrounding recent general elections has concerned the probable magnitude of the Conservative victory. In the context of a one party dominant political environment, this article examines the attitudes of Alberta's legislators on a number of non-policy related matters. In particular, it seeks to uncover legislators' perceptions of the degree of ideological division within Alberta and the legislature, their perception of the adequacy of the functioning of the legislature, their role orientation and their career paths. The survey was designed and administered as a class project by students enrolled in Political Science 433, Canadian Legislative Behaviour, at the University of Calgary during the Winter 1987 semester.

Following the 1986 provincial general election Albertans returned 61 Progressive Conservatives, 16 New Democrats, 4 Liberals and 2 Representatives to the Legislative Assembly. A questionnaire was mailed to all 83 members of the Alberta Legislative Assembly in February 1987, and was followed in March by a reminder notice and a second copy of the questionnaire. Of these, 36 were completed and returned, resulting in a response rate of 43 percent. The responses to the survey provide us with an unusually intimate look at the orientations, outlook, career paths and characteristics of Alberta's 21st legislature.

Among other things it revealed that Alberta's legislators perceive politics in ideological terms, often viewing themselves as relatively moderate and their political opponents as ideological extremists. Much of the rhetoric of politics is owing to these (mis)perceptions. In addition, the data suggest that our MLAs identify a clear distinction between the federal and provincial political realms, and see themselves as the champions of provincial interests.

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Although legislators feel the pressures imposed by party discipline, they tend not to view this as a hindrance to representing their constituents – indeed, many view the latter function as their single most important task as legislators. Perceptions of the need for legislative reform is, not surprisingly, strongly related to the partisanship of the MLA, with opposition members demanding a greater role in the policymaking process. And finally, we will see that many legislators, especially government members, view their political activity as an obligation or duty, with opposition members more likely to cite change in government as a factor of primary importance. In both cases, however, we find that legislators are likely to have come from highly politicized households, in which parents or other significant family members took an active interest, if not involvement, in partisan politics.

The Sample

With respect to most items our sample reflects reasonably accurately the characteristics of legislators. The most important exception is regarding the distribution of party support. We received completed questionnaires from 19 Conservatives, 14 New Democrats, 2 Liberals and 1 Representative, providing a response rate of 31%, 88%, 50%,

and 50% for the four parties, respectively. To avoid a distorted view of the legislators, all analyses will be conducted controlling for the party of the respondent, with some distinguishing between the government and opposition.

Alberta's legislators (like most) tend to be highly educated middle age males. According to *A Guide to Alberta's Twenty-First Legislature* over 90 percent of all legislators on the government side were male, half of them had a university degree and their average age was almost 50 years. Among opposition MLAs, approximately 4 out of 5 were men, almost 9 of 10 had a university degree and their average age was 43 years. Thus the opposition tends, on average, to be more highly educated, younger, and somewhat more likely to be female than are members of the government party.

A similar pattern can be seen in the characteristics of our sample. Among the respondents from the government side of the House, all were male, approximately 6 out of 10 graduated from university and their age averaged 48 years. For the opposition respondents, almost 9 and 10 were male, 82 percent had received a university degree and their age averaged 46 years. The close correspondence between the characteristics of the sample and the overall population of MLAs leads us to conclude that, controlling for party, the sample accurately represents the characteristics of Alberta's legislators.

Ideology

It is conventional wisdom that Canadians tend not to order their political attitudes and beliefs within a consistent ideological framework¹. Although one can generally ascribe an ideological position (as in liberal versus conservative, or left versus right) to most issues, the political attitudes of the mass public tend to be neither stable across time nor consistent across issues. In contrast, studies have shown a considerable degree of ideological stability and consistency among political elites, including members of legislative assemblies.² Political debate, therefore, is often more ideological within than outside legislatures.

We were interested in examining the ideological perceptions of Alberta's legislators and asked them to rank various items on a seven-point scale ranging from (1)extremely liberal to (7) extremely conservative, with (4) clearly marked as neutral. We found legislators in the various parties have very different perceptions of their own and others' ideological positions. For example, members of the Conservative party rated themselves 5.4, approximately the midpoint between the "somewhat conservative" and "conservative" categories. Both the New Democrats and Liberals rated themselves precisely at 2, the "liberal" category.

Perceptions of personal ideology can be contrasted with that ascribed to others. MLAs perceive at least a modest

similarity between their position and that of their constituents. Progressive Conservatives perceive their constituents as being almost identical to them, and towards the right, whereas New Democrats see theirs as being some distance from themselves and left of centre. Liberals are the exception, viewing their constituents somewhat right of centre and themselves considerably to the left. Aside from themselves and their constituents, MLAs have a remarkable consistency in their perception of the ideological position of other groups in the mass public. There is a general uniformity in perceptions of Albertans as a whole with members of each party seeing Albertans as somewhat right of centre whereas Canadians as a whole are seen as being somewhat left of centre by Conservatives, New Democrats and Liberals. It also is interesting to note that MLAs see Albertans as occupying an ideological middle ground between Canadians and Americans, with the latter receiving rankings farther toward the conservative end.

MLAs were asked to rank the ideological position of the political parties at the provincial and federal levels. Interestingly, and perhaps not surprisingly, MLAs view their personal position and that of their party as coinciding almost perfectly. The difference between position of self and party is 0.2 among Conservatives, 0.1 among New Democrats and 0.0 among Liberals. However, members of opposing parties tend to view each other as more extreme. Whereas Conservatives rated their party 5.2, according to New Democrats and Liberals its position was 6.4 and 6.5, respectively, well to the conservative end of the ideological spectrum. Conversely, whereas New Democrats saw their party as taking liberal positions, Conservatives and Liberals saw the party as being considerably more extreme (1.3 and 1.5, respectively). The greatest disagreement was over the placement of the provincial Liberal party, with Liberals and Conservatives seeing the party as located toward the left (2.0 and 2.5, respectively) and New Democrats viewing the Liberals as neutral or leaning toward the right (4.1). These general trends are repeated at the federal level, with the exception that the federal Conservative party is seen as less conservative than its provincial counterpart by all groups, especially by the Conservative MLAs.

Respondents also were asked to state their views on the ideological position of Canadian business and labour unions. Although there was general agreement that business is towards the conservative and labour the liberal ends of the spectrum, interesting partisan differences again emerge. New Democrats and Liberals are likely to view Canadian business toward the conservative extreme, and Conservatives to see labour as occupying a position toward the liberal extreme of the ideological continuum.

This data suggests that Alberta politics may be much more ideological in rhetoric than in reality. Alberta's MLAs tend to view their constituents and Albertans as relatively close to

the ideological centre and themselves as distinctly although moderately ideological. However, focusing in particular on the Conservatives and New Democrats, MLAs tend to view their opponents almost as close as possible to the ideological extremes (1.3 versus 6.4). When using the generic terms of business or labour, the perception also is one of ideological extremities. If we adopt the reasonable assumption that an MLA understands his own position better than does his political opponent, then the political disagreement among MLAs reflects the thrust and parry of adversarial parliamentary politics as much as it reflects profound differences over policy choices. Although disagreements over policy exist, they are amplified and distorted by political rhetoric. Put another way, measured against their self perceptions, neither the Conservatives nor the New Democrats are as profoundly ideological as their political opponents would have us believe. Whether those self perceptions constitute the appropriate comparative framework will be a matter of continuing partisan disagreement.

The Policy Process

Although in theory the parliamentary system of government need not be highly centralized, in practice the Canadian version has developed in a highly centralized fashion at both the federal and provincial levels.³ At the federal level, the paucity of power among backbench and opposition members of parliament has led to repeated calls at various times for parliamentary reform. The most recent of these resulted in the creation of the McGrath committee in 1985 and the adoption of some of its recommendations in 1986 (such as the election of the Speaker and the restructuring of parliamentary committees, among others). Is there a similar level of dissatisfaction or frustration at the provincial level, and if so, what are the prospects for parliamentary reform?

To answer these questions, we first wanted to determine the extent to which the decision-making process is perceived as highly centralized. To that end, we developed a measure of political efficacy – that is, a measure of the degree to which the MLA feels capable of affecting the policy process. Political efficacy is measured by a scale which sums responses to six statements regarding the individual's role in the policy process. The following questions for the basis of the scale:

(1) With the progressive exclusion of the average MLA from any meaningful participation in the policy initiation process, his/her role is reduced either to intermittently attacking or to defending policies that have been predetermined by party leaders.

(2) The legislature (excluding the cabinet) plays a minor role at best in the formulation of legislation.

(3) The legislative assembly has neither the power nor the authority to oversee effectively the bureaucracy.

(4) Sometimes I think I would get more of my ideas implemented if I were a senior civil servant instead of a legislator.

(5) Issues that confront me as an MLA are often so specialized, and there is so little time to study them, that I often vote without the benefit of a detailed understanding of the issues.

(6) When you first come to Edmonton, you have all sorts of great ideas about what should be done. Then reality sets in. There is nothing, absolutely nothing, an individual MLA can do about getting his or her ideas accepted in the form of legislation unless he or she is a member of cabinet.

A point was added for each “disagree” or “strongly disagree” response, resulting in a scale ranging from 0 to 6. The results indicate that feelings of political efficacy are strongly related to position in the legislature, with cabinet members the most, government backbenchers moderately and opposition members least efficacious. These findings are consistent with our expectations that those with the most power feel the most efficacious.

A more detailed examination of responses to these separate items is instructive. We found that virtually all cabinet members and a vast majority of government backbenchers (82%) think the legislature plays more than a minor role in the policy process. This contrasts with the view of an equally high percentage of opposition members who believe the legislature play only a minor role. Similar patterns of opinion are observed when queried on the importance of cabinet position in getting one's ideas implemented; government members thought being in cabinet had little effect whereas opposition members thought it extremely beneficial. In addition, whereas cabinet members thought the procedural rules of the legislature hampered it, the opposition felt the government benefits from house rules.

In addition to the widespread perception of executive dominance, many legislators think the bureaucracy also is biased in favour of the government.⁴ Every one of the opposition members surveyed agreed that the provincial bureaucracy in Alberta is not neutral. In addition, almost half the backbenchers and a third of the cabinet members who responded share that opinion. There is, however, a widespread belief among MLAs that the bureaucracy remains accountable. Only 17% think that representatives do not have enough control over the bureaucracy and only 26% think they would get more of their ideas implemented if they were a senior civil servant. In both cases, opposition members are slightly more likely to hold such views.

There are at least two potential implications that can be derived from our findings of differential levels of political efficacy – variations in the degree of political power can be seen as legitimate and justifiable, implying no prescribed

change, or it can be seen as problematic, requiring redress through parliamentary reform. Our data suggest the implication drawn by the legislator is influenced strongly by his parliamentary position. To illustrate, MLAs were presented with the following statement:

“To improve the operations of the legislative assembly, the _____ should have a greater role than they currently have.”

They then were given a series of items to fill in the blank, the results of which appear in the following table.

**Proportion Thinking Group Should have more Power
By Position in Legislature**

		Government		
		Cabinet	Backbencher	Opposition
1. Backbenchers	Agree	0%	50	56
2. Opposition	Agree	0%	0	69
3. Premier	Agree	0%	20	6
4. Bureaucracy	Agree	0%	0	13
5. Legislative Committees	Agree	17%	60	73

Note that in general cabinet members are least likely to favour changing the status quo, and opposition members most likely, with government backbenchers also interested in certain types of change. The greatest support for institutional change concerns legislative committees. Almost three of every four opposition members and three of five government backbenchers favour an expansion in the role of legislative committees, although members of cabinet are almost unanimous in their opposition to reform of that type. In addition, many government backbenchers and opposition members favour increasing the role of backbenchers and many in the opposition favour strengthening the opposition's power. Enhancing the power of the premier or the bureaucracy received almost no support. Although there appears to be considerable support for an enlarged role for legislative committees among the government's backbenches and in the opposition, unless and until the case can be made more convincingly to cabinet, such reform will not be forthcoming.

Related to the issue of centralization of power within the legislative assembly is the representational orientation of legislators. Analysts often distinguish between “delegate” and “trustee” orientations. A delegate is a representative whom remains particularly attuned to and responsive to the concerns of his or her constituents whereas a trustee is more likely to distance himself from the concern of constituents, and to base his decision on other criteria, including personal beliefs. Starting with Edmund Burke many have argued that the trustee style is best suited for a parliamentary system with its emphasis on party solidarity and party discipline whereas the delegate type is most suitable in a system with a fragmentation of power, such as the American Congress.⁵

To examine the representational orientation of Alberta MLAs we constructed an index based on seven questions dealing with the most important factors involved in the voting decision.

The statements are:

(1) The job of an MLA entails being a sounding board for constituency opinion and then acting on it. I always attempt to find out what my constituents feel and make my decision accordingly.

(2) I cannot see why there is any incompatibility between serving my constituency and the province.

(3) My first duty is to the people of my constituency; they are the ones who elected me.

(4) The most important part of an MLAs job, that is if he/she is interested in coming back to the legislature, is to go to bat for his/her constituents in their dealing with the government. Even statesmen have to be re-elected and for that you have to look after your constituents.

(5) An MLA seldom has to sound out his/her constituents because he/she knows how they would react to almost any proposal.

(6) If anyone tells you he makes his decisions here in the legislature on the basis of what his constituents want, assuming he knew what they want, he is either kidding himself or you.

(7) In a parliamentary system, your party and your party's record are all-important, so it is necessary to vote with your party even if it costs you support in your riding.

One point was awarded for each response indicating a concern for constituent's opinions, providing a scale which ranged from 0 to 7. The results show a strong overall norm among the MLAs to express the view that the concerns of constituents are important and well-represented. Not a single respondent scored less than 3 on the scale, and the mean scores ranged from 6.0 among cabinet members to 5.7 among government backbenchers to 4.9 among the opposition. Several explanations can be provided to explain the reported greater concern for constituents view by Conservatives. First, we have already seen that members of the Conservative party were more likely than New Democrats or Liberals to view their ideological position and that of their constituents as identical. Given the perception that one's views are the same as one's constituents, then it becomes virtually impossible not to legislate in a manner consistent with the wishes of constituents – any legislation which you favour is, by definition, favoured by constituents.

This greater concern for constituents opinions may also be explained by a greater national perspective adopted by members of the opposition, especially by New Democrats. Respondents were asked what percentage of their provincial and federal party's platform they agreed with. Among Conservatives, the mean level of agreement was 84% for the provincial and 64% for the national party. Among New

Democrats, on the other hand, the corresponding figures were 89% and 83% for the provincial and federal wings, respectively. Furthermore, provincial MLAs claim to be more active in their party's federal wing, and were more likely to have campaigned for the federal party and to have had federal members campaign on their behalf than is the case for Conservatives.

Perhaps more directly relevant to our discussion, Conservative MLAs were far more likely than New Democrats to agree with the statement: "I consider it my role to defend the interests of Alberta against those of the federal government", and were less likely to be concerned about the impact their legislation would have on the rest of Canada than were NDP MLAs.

Recruitment

Legislators in Alberta and elsewhere tend to have higher levels of social status, as measured by levels of education, income and occupation, than does the population as a whole. The 83 seat legislature contains 8 lawyers, 3 doctors or dentists, 13 educators and 22 independent businesspersons, proportions that far exceed those in the general population.⁶ Equally striking is that over the entire population, there is only a modest relationship between social status and level of political participation – although a positive relationship exists, it tends to be weak. This apparent paradox is owing in part to the low aggregate levels of participation among the Canadian electorate.⁷

In explaining why MLAs choose to contest a seat in the legislature, it is necessary to go beyond simple descriptions of their sociodemographic characteristics. The research that has been done to date suggests that childhood socialization plays a large role in later political activity.⁸ To examine this thesis, respondents were asked about their parents' political interest and activity. That data illustrate that Alberta's MLAs tended to come from highly politicized environments. Approximately one out of three Conservatives and opposition members recalled that their parents were very or fairly active politically, while 10.5 percent of conservatives and 17.6 percent of opposition members said their parents held political office. It should be noted that these levels of parental political activity far exceed those in the general population. Although parental political socialization is not the only reason MLAs decided to contest politics, it remains an important determinant among the Alberta legislators.

We asked the MLAs to tell us in their own words why they chose to become politically active. A majority of respondents (57.6%) said that the desire to perform a service or fulfill a duty lay behind their decision. Of lesser importance was the wish to pursue an interest in politics (24.2%), to bring about a change or a more just political system (21.2%), to influence growth in the province (15.2%) and to bring personal skills to bear on the problems of politics (12.1%). Members of the government party were most likely to mention political activity as a duty whereas opposition members tended to be influenced more by their political interest and to bring about a change in government. Notably absent were ideological and issue responses; the MLAs appeared not to be extraordinarily issue oriented.■

Notes

1. Research in this area is quite extensive. See, among others, Harold Clarke, Jane Jenson, Lawrence LeDuc and Jon Pammett, *Political Choice in Canada*, McGraw-Hill Ryerson, Toronto, 1979; Harold Clark, Jane Jenson, Lawrence LeDuc and Jon Pammett, *Absent Mandate*, Gage, Toronto, 1984.
2. The classic statement is in Converse, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics" in David Apter, ed. *Ideology and Discontent*, Wiley, New York, 1963. For Canadian data see Allan Kornberg, William Mishler and Joel Smith "Political Elite and Mass Perceptions of Party Locations in Issue Space: Some Tests of Two Positions," *British Journal of Political Science*, 5, 1975, 161-185; Roger Gibbins and Neil Nevitte, "Canadian Political Ideology: A Comparative Analysis," *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 18, 1985, 577-598.
3. See, among many others, Donald V. Smiley, *The Federal Condition in Canada*, McGraw-Hill Ryerson, Toronto, 1987; and Garth Stevenson, *Unfulfilled Union*, Gage, Toronto, 1982.
4. The susceptibility of unelected officials to adopt views consistent with the government during periods of one party dominance has been documented lucidly and convincingly at the federal level in Reg Whitaker, *The Government Party*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1977.
5. See, for example, Richard Fenno, *Homestyle: House Members in Their District*, Little Bown, Boston, 1978.
6. Alberta Teachers' Association, *Alberta's Twenty-First Legislature*, p. 45.
7. For further elaboration on this theme, see William Mishler, *Political Participation in Canada*, Macmillan, Toronto, 1977.
8. See, for example, Allan Kornberg, Joel Smith and Harold Clarke, *Citizen Politicians – Canada*, Carolina Academic Press, Durham, NC, 1979. For an elaboration of his argument with a focus on adult socialization see Keith Archer, "The Failure of the New Democratic Party: Unionists and Politics in Canada," *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 19, 1985, 352-366.