▸▸ THE SASKATCHEWAN ELECTION:
A 2020 PERSPECTIVE

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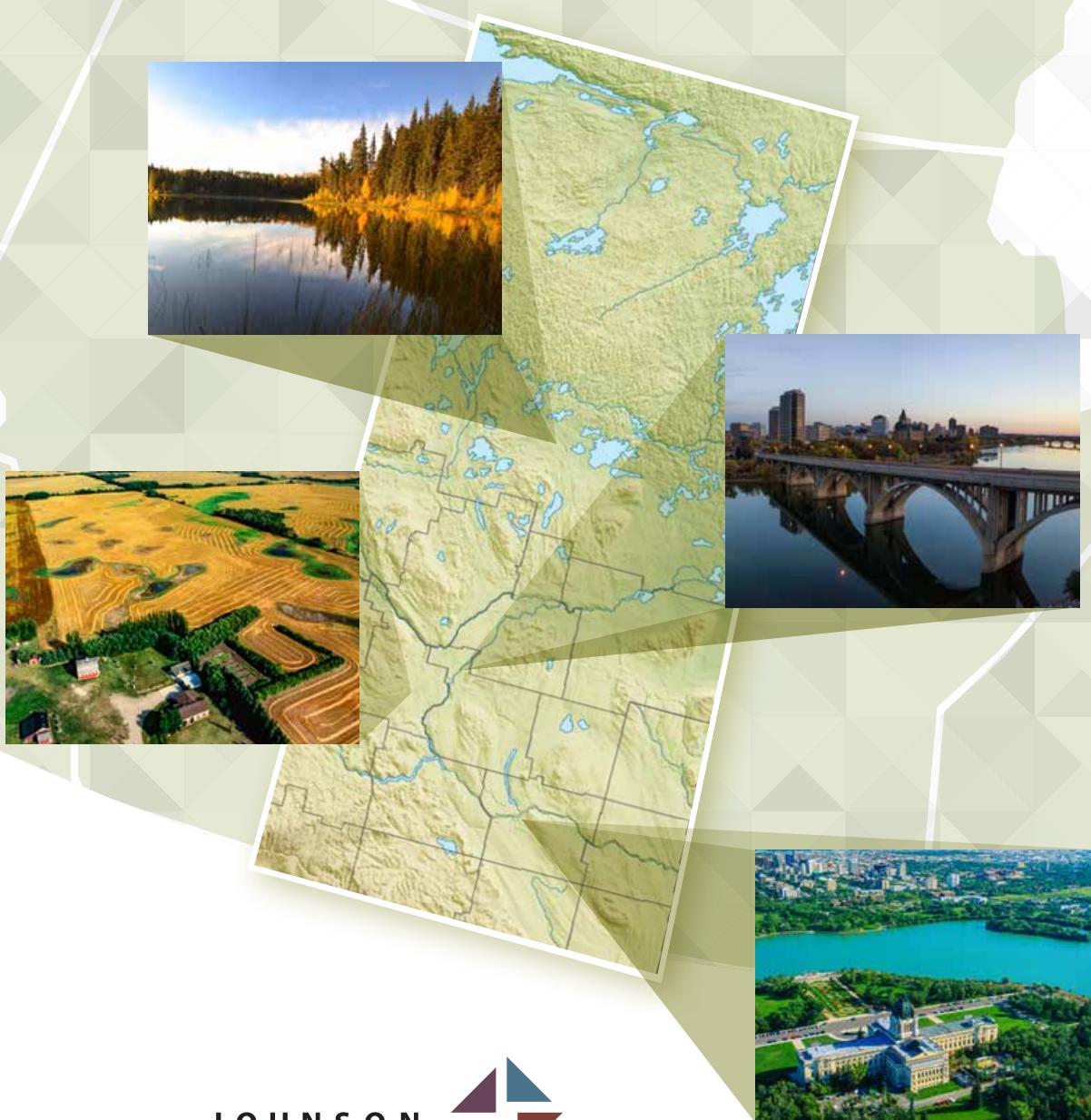
Dedicated to our colleague, Joe Garcea, whose contribution to our understanding
of local, provincial and federal politics has been outstanding.

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MANDATES AND THE EIGHT MOST POWERFUL WORDS IN POLITICS
By Brad Wall, former Premier of Saskatchewan

They did what they said they would do.' I am not sure there is any statement more salutary for a political party.

Those who voted for that party have their bias confirmed by each promise kept, and even many of those who voted another way will give credit, if not for the promise itself, then for the integrity and the earnestness. For a political party or leader to earn that brand is an achievement that invariably widens the base of support; it also has staying power.

This is not to suggest that mandates are the same as or constituted only of the platforms and promises made by parties in election campaigns. Considering that voters often make that conflation, however, it must be considered here first.

It is my view that the public, as a general rule, would see the platform presented by a successful party in an election campaign as the party's mandate. I think that most of the venerated authors of this compendium would agree that this is not at all unreasonable. It is equally true that the platform and promises presented during the election would also be viewed by their authors and presenters as the essential core of the party's mandate.

That is certainly how I and my colleagues felt about our platform and our promises made in the run up to the Saskatchewan general election of November 7, 2007; we considered them our mandate.

Indeed, we decided to convene a media scrum the day after the election to announce our first promise kept—a pre-set

Election Day. A few days later, we held the first caucus meeting of the new government, and I distributed again our platform document to each MLA. I offered something like "some people in Saskatchewan will be wondering … well, what now? What are they going to do now? Well, let me be clear (as I brandished our platform). We are going to do this!"

We did consider the election results—38 of 58 seats and 51 per cent of the popular vote—to be a mandate to implement that platform. In fact, we fully expected to be judged against its timely fulfillment.

There were elements of the mandate that came from beyond that platform, as there are for every newly elected or re-elected government. External events, such as an attempted potash takeover, for example, or some development in federal provincial relations, or a pandemic, can never be anticipated by a platform.

That mandate to meet those unanticipated challenges, to make those decisions, stems from the publicly communicated principles of the party, policy statements and resolutions, and yes, the actual election result itself.

When it was all said and done and the first four years had flown by, we still talked about that platform, those promises, and the mandate. And hoped, as every government hopes, it could be at least said of us that 'they did what they said they would do.'

1. The 2020 Saskatchewan Election in Context

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The 2020 provincial election resulted in the continued dominance of the Saskatchewan Party (Sask Party), which won a fourth consecutive majority government, further solidifying long-term changes taking place in Saskatchewan's political culture. With a solid majority of seats and over 60 per cent of the popular vote, the election has provided more evidence that the old era of deeply divisive ideological-focused elections is over, and instead, what matters to voters are leadership and the perceived ability to manage the province's volatile resource economy. This is not an uncommon trend across Canada, but in Saskatchewan it is a noteworthy development. Saskatchewan has moved away from a history of polarized elections that were fought between the "socialist" NDP on the left and a changing assortment of bearers of the banner of the "free market" party. This election result confirmed that a new context has emerged involving two dominant parties that focus on who will be better able to manage the status quo. The path to victory is achieved by gaining the support of enough swing voters who are found in Saskatchewan's suburbs and smaller cities and who are concerned with very middle-class issues such as taxes, property values, health care, and schools. Clearly, the Sask Party has been much more effective at this than the NDP.

This trend towards less ideologically driven elections first appeared in 1991 when the NDP came to power offering a return to good government and managerial competence after a decade of contentious politics and a succession of massive deficits from Grant Devine's Progressive Conservative Party (PC). Keeping things afloat was the only option for the NDP that, from 1991–2007, came to embody the third way style of managerial government

associated with Tony Blair, Bill Clinton, and Jean Chrétien. This period of NDP government came to an end in 2007, but it was not replaced by an updated version of the old divisive Progressive Conservative government. Rather, the NDP were defeated by the upstart Sask Party led by the young and charismatic Brad Wall who, having absorbed the lessons of the party's earlier defeat in 2003 and fiascos of the 1980s, crafted a centrist platform with no social conservativism and a pledge not to engage in any privatization of the province's remaining Crown corporations. This proved to be a winning formula in 2007, and the 2020 election confirmed that remains true today—just govern from the centre and leave the free market fundamentalism and social conservatism off the table.

The fact that there was little of substance that separated the two parties in this election proved that they both understood this new context. Of course, the impact of the pandemic certainly made it a very low-key election, but the biggest issues appeared to be the lingering hope that the resource boom might make a comeback. The earlier resource boom, which came between 2007 and 2015, strengthened the appearance of the Sask Party as successful managers by providing the government with healthy revenues and the opportunity to spend via tax cuts and new programs. At the same time, the province developed a more comprehensive suburban political ethic, with political parties appealing directly to this group of voters in a number of swing ridings. These suburban voters are keenly aware of how the resource economy fuels the province and the economic prospects for them and their families. The Sask Party has effectively branded themselves as the authors of this: the "New Saskatchewan". Even the

fact that the old Saskatchewan is now back economically speaking and Premier Moe has not delivered a balanced budget since taking over from Brad Wall in 2017 did not alienate voters, who appeared hopeful that the Sask Party might conjure up a return to prosperity.

The 2020 Saskatchewan election took place in a province that has changed in both demographic terms and in its political culture. No longer a rural province, and also no longer a have-not province, Saskatchewan seems to be moving beyond the politics and battles of the past, and

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indeed, during the election, the name Justin Trudeau rarely came up. While much of this change is no doubt contingent on high provincial resource revenues, it appears nevertheless that a new political culture has emerged and that it is unlikely to change; or if it does change, it is not likely to return to something from the 1970s. This shift began in the 1980s with the Devine government and the spectacular failure of a brand of right-wing populism that never really took hold in Saskatchewan. At the same time, Regina's and Saskatoon's suburbs both were getting new political constituencies, and other cities in Saskatchewan continued to expand as they absorbed the new waves of immigrants from abroad and internal migration from the shrinking rural communities. With this growth has come a new dominant suburban demographic that is interested in tax relief, home ownership, education, and health care, and both parties are struggling to manage the expectations of these voters.

Saskatchewan has seen a convergence in the values and economic interests of both urban and rural voters and likewise a convergence between the behaviours and preferences of voters throughout the province. In Saskatchewan, some class-based voting remains in that much of the NDP core support, confirmed again in this election, comes from the poorer urban areas of Saskatoon and Regina, but this too is also changing. But any party that wins a majority needs to cobble together support from rural and urban Saskatchewan. The fear, however, that Saskatchewan was becoming a province irrevocably divided by rural and urban patterns of voting has not been realized. Indeed, the election of 2020 proved in fact that the reverse was true and that rather than a divided province, there was an increasing common suburban culture emerging that pushed both parties to offer modest reforms and not worry about the deficit.

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When we examine the 2020 election, it is clear that both parties clearly identified this trend. The political parties recognize that the median voter is essentially a middle class "suburbanite" in terms of values and preferences, and these are the classic swing voters that parties targeted in the 2020 election— but it is a wide and growing group of voters including most new immigrants, and this trend shows no signs of slowing its growth or its influence in the future. Certainly, the 2020 election has proven again that there is a greater increase in voters who identify as middle class, with each election resulting in a greater convergence in the policy position of the two main parties. Saskatchewan has been transformed into a suburban province, and this will dictate both the politics and the public policy program for the province in the years to come.

2. Saskatchewan's Political Parties in the 2020 Election

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Saskatchewan's 2020 election saw six registered political parties compete: the Buffalo Party, the New Democratic Party (NDP), the Progressive Conservative Party, the Green Party, the Liberal Party, and the Saskatchewan Party (Sask Party). The organizational dominance of the Sask Party and the continuing status of the NDP as the only other party with a reasonable chance of winning seats in the legislature suggest a fundamental continuity with previous elections.

The Sask Party has formed government and dominated Saskatchewan opinion polls since 2007. Formed as a coalition between Liberal and Progressive Conservative MLAs in 1997, it was led by Brad Wall between 2004 and 2018. Wall was a dominant figure in provincial politics, so the transition of the leadership to Scott Moe in 2018 was an important moment for the party. Moe, who has served as MLA for Rosthern-Shellbrook since 2011, was selected as leader in January 2018 after a leadership race with five candidates. Moe was widely seen as a consensus candidate for the party and had the support of the largest block of caucus members of any of the candidates.

The party began the campaign holding 46 seats in the legislature. Thirty-eight of its candidates were incumbents (some of whom had faced contested nomination races), 12 were women, and nine were visible minority or Indigenous. Its candidate in Saskatoon Eastview, Daryl Cooper, had to step down after social media posts sharing QAnon conspiracies surfaced, and he was replaced by Chris Guérette. Financial information for 2020 and the campaign period were not available at the time this was written, but the party reported $3.4M in contributions in 2019.[1] This fundraising advantage was reinforced by a comparatively strong party organization at the constituency level. The Sask Party's "Plan for a Strong Saskatchewan" was built around the broad themes of a strong recovery, making life more affordable, growing Saskatchewan, strong fiscal management, and the party's record in government. Most policies were incremental, with promises of modest tax credits, a return to a balanced budget in four years, and a range of actions to grow the province's population and economy being the focus.

The NDP has struggled to find a way to challenge the Sask Party in the province's suburbs and rural seats since its loss in 2007. It, too, was led by a new leader. Ryan Meili won a March 2018 leadership race, after coming second in 2009's and 2013's leadership races, drawing on support from the left wing of the party. The party began the campaign holding 13 seats (two were vacant). Emphasizing equity in its candidate selection, the NDP ran 28 women and 18 visible minority or Indigenous candidates. Nine incumbents ran for the party. It reported $1.4M in contributions in 2019.[2] Controversy around the nomination of Sandra Morin (who ultimately ran as an independent) in Regina Walsh Acres hinted at divisions between at least one constituency association and the central party.

The NDP platform "People First" called for investment in public education, health care and long-term care, and a promise to halt cuts that the party argued would be coming under a Saskatchewan Party government. Its platform was a definite move to the left from recent NDP campaigns: it called for a Saskatchewan-First approach to infrastructure contracts, a $15/hr. minimum wage, a wealth tax, and a clean energy plan. Unlike the Saskatchewan Party, it made

no commitment as to when the provincial budget would be balanced. Instead, it promised an expert panel to examine the province's fiscal situation and sought to expand the language of deficits to include program deficits in "schools, hospitals, and the bank accounts of ordinary families."

There's no doubt that most commentary and attention in the campaign went to the two major parties. But brief consideration of the minor parties is worthwhile as they each highlight spaces on the political spectrum where the inhabitants feel underserved by the two major parties.

Both the Buffalo Party and the Progressive Conservative Party of Saskatchewan are to the right of the governing Sask Party. What is now the Buffalo Party initially registered in March 2020 as Wexit Saskatchewan. In June 2020, it rebranded itself as the Buffalo Party. It ran 17 candidates, all in rural areas. Winning three per cent of the vote and coming second in four ridings, its relative success raises important questions about alienation in rural Saskatchewan. The Progressive Conservative Party of Saskatchewan has a long history and was led in the 2020 election by Ken Grey. It ran 31 candidates in both urban and rural ridings and won two per cent of the vote. Its presence, together with that of the Green Party, may have caused enough vote splitting to tip a handful of battleground urban ridings. Led by Naomi Hunter, the Saskatchewan Green Party ran candidates in all 61 ridings and won two per cent of the vote. Finally, 2020 was a very difficult year for the Saskatchewan Liberal Party. After the party had run a full slate of candidates in the 2016 election, the party acclaimed Naveed Anwar as leader in May of 2018. Anwar stepped down as leader in September 2020, and his place was taken as interim leader by Robert Rudachyk. It nominated only three candidates promoting and received only 370 votes.

Though delayed counting of mail-in ballots provided some drama to the final results, little changed in the legislature or in the popular vote as a result of the campaign. The Sask Party won 62 per cent of the vote and 48 seats, and the NDP won 31 per cent of the vote and 13 seats. Prince Albert Northcote, Saskatoon Riversdale, and Regina Northeast moved from NDP to Sask Party while the Sask Party also won the vacant seat of Regina Walsh Acres.

The NDP won Regina University and Saskatoon University from the Sask Party while also winning the vacant seat of Saskatoon Eastview. This is the Sask Party's fourth majority government and the third election in a row where the party won more than 60 per cent of the vote. It cements Saskatchewan's status as Canada's most consistently conservative province and marks a smooth leadership transition for the province's new natural governing party. By (narrowly) winning his own seat, Ryan Meili has avoided the fate of the NDP's previous two leaders. But he, and the NDP, will face the same challenges they have for the past decade: maintaining party unity, providing an effective opposition, and finding ways to build a broader electoral coalition.

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3. A Campaign over Before It Began

MURRAY MANDRYK

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The 2020 Saskatchewan campaign — or at least any suspenseful elements—was over long before the Oct. 26 vote count. In fact, the story of Saskatchewan Party's historic fourth consecutive large majority —48 seats compared with 13 for the New Democratic Party was likely written four years ago. As of three days after the election, there was a declared winner in all 61 ridings, even though an estimated 17,000 of 61,255 mail-in ballots were unreturned or unaccounted.

The night of the last general election, the Sask Party won 51 seats —31 of them by 2,500 votes or more. Only six times in the 115-year history of the province has a party lost a seat that it had won previously by 2,500 votes. Any remaining intrigue in the 2020 campaign was likely drained with the Oct. 15 release of a Postmedia/Angus Reid Institute poll conducted between Oct. 8 and 13 that revealed a commanding 27-percentage-point Sask Party lead. Notwithstanding late polls from Research Co. and Mainstreet Research suggesting that gap had closed to 18 percentage points in the waning days, the yet-to-finalize popular vote numbers revealed about a 30 percentage point difference—60 per cent for the Sask Party versus 30 per cent for the NDP. The left-of-centre alternative in Saskatchewan had not done this badly since 1938 when that party was the NDP's forerunner Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) still awaiting the leadership of Tommy Douglas.

The 2020 campaign again demonstrated the Sask Party has clearly supplanted the NDP as the province's natural governing party. It won big by running a more relatable and effective campaign during a pandemic. Incumbent

Premier Scott Moe framed the Sask Party's campaign around this question: "Who do you trust?" That particular message especially resonated outside of the cities in the province's 29 "rural seats" that the Sask Party again swept.

The Sask Party political advertisements accentuated that message by drawing attention to schools and hospitals closed during the last NDP administration from 1991 to 2007. So effective was this messaging that Sask Party Moe's Chevy Tahoe campaign vehicle seldom ventured into the countryside.

New Democrat leader Ryan Meili also stuck to the perceived battleground city seats in Regina, Saskatoon, Prince Albert, and Moose Jaw. All eight of the seats were too close to call on election night because the margins were less than the uncounted mail-in votes were in these cities.

One of the more memorable Sask Party advertisements focused on Meili speaking at a 2017 anti-pipeline rally and refusing to speak at a March 2019 "rally against the carbon tax." Defining Meili's image before the NDP proved to be a critical strategy for the Sask Party. It forced the NDP to dedicate scarce campaign-funding dollars on advertising introducing Meili to the voters as a family doctor raised on a farm near Moose Jaw.

The NDP's campaign theme was "Putting People First," and Meili repeatedly suggested on the campaign trail that "there's got to be a better way." But such NDP themes had to compete with two years of Moe's messages that only he and the Sask Party could be trusted to take on federal Prime Minister "Justin Trudeau's carbon tax." So engrained

was Moe's anti-carbon tax message that he didn't feel it necessary to raise it during the October 14 leaders' debate broadcast provincewide.

The debate was a comparatively tame affair. However, Moe may have scored points when he suggested the $2.7B in NDP spending promises in its platform released on Oct 9 was more likely $4B. Moe's own platform—released at the same time in Saskatchewan mere metres away from the NPD platform launch—called for an additional $849M in spending and acknowledged it wouldn't balance the province's annual until 2024–25. Saskatchewan New Democrats have feasted on their past record of balanced budgets while in government. Saskatchewan public debt has doubled to $24B under 13 years of the Sask Party government. But with a far more costly 2020 campaign platform to pay for a wide array of social concerns, Meili lost the NDP's traditional high ground on fiscal responsibility issues.

The NDP campaign did raise mismanagement issues such as the Global Transportation Hub (GTH) that haunted the Sask Party government's past term; there were allegations of friends of the party and former economy minister Bill Boyd making millions of dollars on land flips on highway interchange property eventually purchased by government for five times the appraised costs.
But Meili—who generally took a non-combative approach—didn't even raise the GTH during the debate.

The NDP leader did seem to score during debate on Moe's refusal to personally meet with Tristen Durocher, the young Métis man who set up a teepee on legislative ground green space to raise awareness of northern and Indigenous suicides. However, there didn't seem to be too many defining moments for the family doctor, who even struggled to make an issue out of the government's handling of the coronavirus pandemic. In a campaign in which large rallies were prohibited and mask-wearing candidates had to keep the prerequisite six-metre distance while on doorsteps, connecting with voters was an inevitable challenge.

The Sask Party may have risen to that challenge with "Kate from the Sask Party"—an automatic texting app employed before and during the campaign that allowed the governing party to identify supporters, connect with them, and encourage them to get to the polls.

But Moe and the Sask Party did not emerge from this campaign unscathed. Moe lost almost the entire first week of campaigning while having to explain previously unrevealed 1994 stayed charges for driving while under the influence and leaving the scene of an accident. Also, anonymous social media posts about Moe's 1997 car crash that killed driver Joanne Balog resulted in the dead woman's sons demanding to meet with and talk to the Premier. He vowed to do so after the campaign.

Finally, in a campaign where other parties were not considered a factor, the independence-promoting Buffalo Party came out of nowhere to finish third in popular vote with only 17 candidates. Perhaps Moe's first campaign as Premier seemed easy, but it may have produced a few lasting problems.

4. The Players, the Game, and Election Narratives: Media and the 2020 SK Election

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It's become the norm to blame "The Media" for society's problems and people's inability to understand them. Sometimes this is attributed to a single journalist or media outlet. But more often, "The Media" is a nameless, faceless, entity; it's a catch-all for everything from mainstream radio, television, and print outlets, to websites, social media channels, and all manner of blogs and podcasts. Elections exacerbate this. Controversial issues, scandals, and tight races occupy headlines, while complex public policy discussions that affect every aspect of our daily lives are relegated to long-format, magazine-style pieces. As budgets and newsrooms shrink, these long-format spaces have largely vanished. This leaves voters with big picture stories about the game and its players, which seem to differ very little from outlet to outlet.

This election, it was almost a herculean effort for journalists to get political leaders off message tracks. Everyone knew Ryan Meili and the NDP were going to put "People First" and Scott Moe and the Saskatchewan Party wanted "Strong Communities." A daily breakdown of the travels and promises of both leaders appeared on all platforms. Early in the campaign, Scott Moe's driving record made headlines. A previous drunk-driving conviction, a collision that left a woman dead, and additional charges of drunk driving and leaving the scene (which were later withdrawn) all dominated headlines. Many stories then featured Scott Moe asking, "Who do you trust?" It was confusing given the context. But, it was a subtle message many journalists seemed to think made good clips, and voters answered by electing Scott Moe. Not long after, masking replaced driving records after photos of Scott Moe shopping without a mask were shared by journalists. Pro- and anti-maskers

took to social channels to debate whether he should wear a mask, and that then became a story. Meili also suffered a blow when he replaced long-time veteran politician Sandra Morin as the NDP candidate in Regina Walsh Acres. It's a bit of drama that, even though it was never fully explained, cost the NDP a seat. Daily stories of sparring leaders arguing who would create the most debt, who might increase taxes, and who really cared about Saskatchewan people filled in the space between the usual policy trackers, informal polls, and stories about parties without seats in the legislature. Finally, and quite predictably, almost every outlet ran a story listing close races. But, in-depth analysis of why these races were so tight was generally lacking.

The pursuit to cover the race is fraught with challenges. I know; I've been there. Journalists are trained to look for original stories, points of tension, and seek out good talkers. But overworked journalists rarely have time to dissect complex public policies, place them in historical context, and then challenge candidates effectively. As a result, media reward fast thinkers—people who can hear a question and start to speak immediately. Then, there is the pressure to be first. At each press conference, reporters need to throw out one or two questions, get a sense of areas other journalists are tackling, and then quickly run off to file. One reporter can be filing several stories for television, online services, doing live hits on radio, going live on social channels, and being asked to sit as an analyst on a panel. At the same time, we expect the leaders of political parties to also effectively answer myriad of questions from dozens of reporters without taking the time to look at statistics or reference current government policy— policy that is generally constructed

by civil servants. Only the most seasoned journalists, and politicians for that matter, can do this effectively. Truly understanding these policies honestly requires one to stop, think, research, and then respond.

Media analyst Pierre Bourdieu questions the real ability of fast thinkers. Very few of us have photographic, computer-like minds, capable of inputting and assessing dozens of policies on the spot. Bourdieu argues this means journalists often share 'received ideas', things people already know, understand, and believe to be true. In each story, the ideas are uncomplicated, the problem is simple, and one or more potential solutions are presented. Then, a little scene-setting colour is added along with a variety of reactions. The viewer can agree or disagree and share the reporter's story (with their own position) on social media where the viewer will mostly speak to others who agree with them. Focusing on the game, the players, and easily found opinions, leaves the audience starved for one piece that truly matters at election time—a deeper understanding of the public policies that impact every aspect of our daily lives and should affect how we vote.

But this is where my critique of "The Media" ends. In this election, perhaps moreso than any I've seen, journalists and outlets expanded the conversation and created new long-format spaces. Regina *Leader-Post* columnist Murray Mandryk, with an institutional memory many politicians may not appreciate, really put claims and platforms into context in his column and podcast *Campaigniacs*. Others, such as CBC's Provincial Affairs Reporter Adam Hunter and Global TV's Allison Bamford, fought every day to have leaders answer tough questions and get around the rhetoric and message tracks. I had the honour of joining CTV W5's Molly Thomas, as well as Murray, Adam, and Allison, for a debate night panel that began with a land acknowledgement and forced a tough conversation with leaders about Indigenous issues, with questions posed by an Indigenous person. This was possible, because the media consortium, the leaders of Saskatchewan's major outlets, decided it was important to include more women and more diverse journalists. At the same time, I heard from many on my social channels about their desire to hear more about policies and how it will affect them, and less about party antics and perceived conflicts. As media consumers,

we bear some responsibility here. If we want more than a description of the game and its players, with discussions that include diverse groups and ideas and analysis that really informs us about public policy, we must be willing to invest our time, energy, and money. Democracies need strong and independent media. To do what we are asking, journalists need many colleagues from many backgrounds, some new and some with institutional memory, because election journalism is neither a young person's game nor a seasoned veteran's position alone. Election journalism, like all journalism, requires thoughtful, dedicated, people with different worldviews AND time to tell important stories. It also requires all of us to support it by consuming and sharing it. This is how journalism can set the agenda and shape the political landscape people claim they want.

5. Social Media and the 2020 Saskatchewan Election

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Twitter plays an important role in politics: it was a key component of the Trump campaign's electoral strategy in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, and it is widely used by political activists and civil society to organize and mobilize. What role does Twitter play in Saskatchewan politics? In addressing this question, we examine which political parties use Twitter, who the most 'prolific' Tweeters are among party candidates, and the effects of the pandemic on how MLAs use Twitter.

Table 1 shows the number of candidates per political party with active Twitter accounts as of October 24, 2020. In total, 39.41 per cent of all candidates (93 of 236) who ran in the 2020 provincial election had an active Twitter account. The vast majority of candidate Twitter users came from the Saskatchewan Party (35) and the Saskatchewan New Democratic Party (40). Overall, 61.5 per cent (75 of 122) of candidates running for Saskatchewan's two major political parties had active Twitter accounts. By contrast, only 15.8 per cent of candidates (18 of 114) for all other parties had an active Twitter account.

Table 1. Political Parties and Number of Twitter Users

Political Party	# of Twitter Users / # of Candidates Running	Percentage of Twitter Users in Party
Buffalo Party	3/17	17.65
Independents	1/3	33.33
Progressive Conservative Party of Saskatchewan	3/31	9.68
Saskatchewan Green Party	9/60	15
Saskatchewan Liberal Party	2/3	66.67
Saskatchewan New Democratic Party	40/61	65.57
Saskatchewan Party	35/61	57.38

Table 2 highlights the 10 most 'prolific' candidate Twitter users; the list was compiled by ranking all 93 candidate Twitter users by the total number of Tweets that they have made. Most of the 'prolific' candidate Twitter users were relatively early adopters of the technology (Twitter launched in 2006); however, only two of them— Saskatchewan New Democrats Trent Wotherspoon and Ryan Meili—fall very close to or pass the 10,000 "follower" threshold and can therefore be considered "widely-connected Twitterians".[1] None of the four 'prolific' challengers—Victor Lau, Larry Neufeld, Jared Clarke, and Brett Estey—were able to unseat incumbents in their respective ridings. **Table 2** also shows that there are more than twice as many 'prolific' Twitter users from urban ridings (7) than there are from rural ridings (3).

Table 2. Ten Most Prolific Tweeters

Candidate	# of Tweets	# of Followers	Joined Twitter (year)	Incumbent or Challenger[2]	Party	Riding	Urban or Rural[3]
Victor Lau	76.3K	3198	2010	Challenger	Saskatchewan Green Party	Regina Douglas Park	Urban
Greg Ottenbreit	22.7K	2185	2011	Incumbent	Saskatchewan Party	Yorkton	Mixed
Trent Wotherspoon	17.5K	9941	2010	Incumbent	Saskatchewan New Democratic Party	Regina Rosemont	Urban
Derek Meyers	15.5K	3362	2009	N/A	Saskatchewan Party	Regina Walsh Acres	Urban
Larry Neufeld	14.3K	1004	2014	Challenger	Saskatchewan Green Party	Rosthern-Shellbrook	Rural
Ryan Meili	13.2K	12.1K	2009	Incumbent	Saskatchewan New Democratic Party	Saskatoon Meewasin	Urban
Tina Beaudry-Mellor	13.1K	3785	2009	Incumbent	Saskatchewan Party	Regina University	Urban
Jared Clarke	9624	1585	2009	Challenger	Saskatchewan New Democratic Party	Indian Head-Milestone	Rural
Jeremy Cockrill	8684	1488	2009	N/A	Saskatchewan Party	The Battlefords	Urban
Brett Estey	7979	639	2009	Challenger	Saskatchewan New Democratic Party	Regina Rochdale	Urban

Table 3 explores MLAs' adoption of Twitter prior to and following the declaration of a provincial State of Emergency on March 18, 2020. In light of restrictions on public gatherings, the adoption of work-from-home policies and other measures, we might have expected to see MLAs, who had not yet adopted Twitter, sign up for Twitter to remain connected with constituents. This is not what happened. In fact, no MLA signed up for Twitter during the time period beginning with the State of Emergency declaration on March 18, 2020 and ending on October 24, 2020.

Table 3. Twitter Users and the State of Emergency: Before and After

Political Party	# of Twitter users <u>before</u> State of Emergency declared on March 18, 2020	# of Twitter users <u>after</u> State of Emergency declared on March 18, 2020
Saskatchewan Party	30/46 (65.22 per cent)	30/46 (65.22 per cent)
Saskatchewan New Democratic Party	9/13 (69.23 per cent)	9/13 (69.23 per cent)

The evidence presented in **Table 1**, above, raises an important question about electoral politics in Saskatchewan: why do small parties use Twitter far less than the two major political parties? Twitter is a free social media, which should increase its appeal as a communication tool to smaller parties, particularly those without access to the electoral and promotional resources of larger parties. Perhaps one of the reasons why smaller parties shy away from Twitter is because they already have a presence on other free social media, such as Facebook; for example, the Buffalo Party of Saskatchewan's Facebook page has 27,018 followers.[4] But this would still not explain why candidates for larger parties have signed up for Twitter at a much higher rate. What we could be seeing here is an attempt by larger parties to keep their base engaged and to prevent party-switching among voters.

Evidence presented in **Tables 2** and **3** provides preliminary insight into features of Saskatchewan's social and political landscape. **Table 2** points to a possible 'digital divide' between urban and rural candidates in their use of Internet-dependent communication tools. This suggests that the use of Twitter by party candidates in Saskatchewan is likely contingent on availability and accessibility of Internet services for constituents in their riding. And, in **Table 3**, evidence that the State of Emergency has had no influence on MLAs adopting Twitter suggests that, in Saskatchewan, there is a reliance on tried and true methods of governing and political campaigning despite changing circumstances. Scott Moe made this exact point in his victory speech when, in thanking campaign volunteers, he declared, "you are the people that understand that elections are not decided on Twitter."[5]

6. COVID-19 and the Saskatchewan Election

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Natural disasters, including public health crises, can be relevant to elections. In parliamentary systems with flexible election timing, they can influence whether an election is called. Natural disasters can impact election administration, as processes must adapt to address any practical impediments. And such crises can influence electoral outcomes as voters evaluate the incumbent government's response and, if the crisis remains unresolved, the best option for stability moving forward. In the Saskatchewan 2020 election, COVID-19 influenced all of these dimensions but ultimately played a lesser role than one might expect.

COVID-19 and the Saskatchewan Election Call

The Saskatchewan 2020 election was Canada's third provincial election after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Unlike the government-triggered elections in New Brunswick (September 14, 2020) and British Columbia (October 24, 2020), Saskatchewan's October 26, 2020 election date was established in the *Legislative Assembly Act*. While the election date issue seems relatively straightforward, it appears that COVID-19 influenced election timing by motivating the Saskatchewan Party government to respect its legislated election date.

On March 7, 2020 Premier Scott Moe reminded the media that he had a right to call a snap election. While Moe initially identified coronavirus as a reason to justify an early election call, he later retracted that comment. Opposition NDP leader Ryan Meili was critical of Moe's refusal to rule out a snap election in the face of growing COVID-19 concerns. Premier Moe continued election speculation until March 12 when he tweeted this statement: "We will remain focused on providing a strong, stable government and addressing the health and economic challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. I will not be calling a provincial election this spring."[1]

COVID-19 and Saskatchewan Election Administration

Given the public health concerns associated with coronavirus transmission in public spaces, COVID-19 necessitated changes for election practices and administration. On May 13, the government approved changes to *The Elections Act*, authorizing the Chief Electoral Officer to adapt any provision of *The Elections Act* in the pursuit of reducing public health risks.[2]

Guidelines for door-to-door canvassing were fairly minimal: canvassers were expected to maintain physical distance; frequently practice hand hygiene; refrain from sharing common materials, such as pens; and leave pamphlets, traditionally handed directly to residents, in mailboxes. To protect voters and workers on Election Day, Elections Saskatchewan sourced approximately $425,000 worth of personal protective equipment (PPE), including 400,000 masks, 8,500 litres of disinfectant, and 8,750 litres of hand sanitizer.[3] Since many of the 2,000 polling locations across the province were located in schools, Elections Saskatchewan, in conjunction with the Government of Saskatchewan, mandated school closures on Election Day.

Further, Elections Saskatchewan introduced a Vote by Mail initiative for any individual who wished to avoid polling stations. While Chief Electoral Officer Michael Boda noted that there was "not enough time in order to build

an all-postal election,"[4] 64,412 Saskatchewan residents applied to vote via mail. The popularity of Vote by Mail meant that approximately eight constituencies were waiting for results several days after Election Day.[5] Residents diagnosed with COVID-19 and those ordered to self-isolate who had not applied to Vote by Mail by the October 15 deadline were unable to vote.

With additional safety precautions, Elections Saskatchewan needed 4,000 more workers than required in previous years. Election Saskatchewan's calls for volunteers and workers appealed to democratic principles, asking for new election workers to replace regulars who were immunocompromised and unable to work this election.[6]

Elections Saskatchewan handled the 2020 election with considerable success. With the exception of failing to provide voting alternatives for those ordered to self-isolate after October 15, Elections Saskatchewan met the task of holding an election during a pandemic with careful planning and thoughtful execution.

COVID-19 and the Election Dynamics

Political science research suggests that voters aren't shy about assigning blame (fairly or not) to governments when times are bad. Voter perceptions of government preparedness and response can make the difference between the disaster being politically relevant or politically inconsequential.

Prior to the election, survey data from the University of Saskatchewan's Canadian Hub for Applied and Social Research (CHASR) suggested COVID-19 would be an important issue for voters,[7] as more than six in ten respondents stated that COVID-19 and related issues would be important in determining their vote. The three top issues among respondents—health care, the economy, and education—were all clearly impacted by COVID-19. At the same time, the majority of respondents felt the economy was stable or improving and were not particularly concerned with the government's back-to-school plans.

The pandemic received curiously little public or media attention during the election itself. On October 3, Moe

and three other Saskatchewan Party candidates were potentially exposed to coronavirus at a campaign event, leading them to self-monitor for 14 days; this occurrence did not generate considerable notice. The pandemic was acknowledged in party platforms, with the Saskatchewan Party mentioning it primarily with respect to its economic recovery plan and the NDP mentioning it to frame what it saw as the incumbent party's failures. At the leaders' debate, COVID-19 was an underlying theme. Throughout the campaign, visual cues to remind voters of the ongoing pandemic were inconsistent, as neither party relied on complete inclusion or exclusion of masks and PPE in its advertisements and photos. Discussion about whether or not party leaders should wear masks increased near the end of the election when Premier Scott Moe tweeted an image of himself shopping without a mask (At this time, there were over 500 active cases of COVID-19 in the province: the highest number of active cases since the pandemic began). The general limited attention to COVID-19 reflected public comfort with the pandemic response; indeed, survey data from Leger released just days before the election[8] found that 79 per cent of Saskatchewan respondents were satisfied with the government's COVID-19 mitigation measures.

Overall, COVID-19 served more as the context than as a focal point for the election campaign, and the Saskatchewan Party did not suffer electorally due to the crisis.

Conclusion

Does an ongoing natural disaster like a pandemic create an advantage for incumbent governments? Both the New Brunswick and British Columbia elections returned their minority governments with strong majority statuses, and the Saskatchewan election returned the majority government with a strong majority. However, the Saskatchewan Party was victory-bound long before the COVID-19 pandemic, and the pandemic played little role in the dominant narratives of the election. While COVID-19 clearly impacted election administration, and appears to have impacted the election timing, its impact upon the election dynamics was minimal.

7. Elections in the Time of COVID: The Economic Effects of COVID-19 on the 2020 Saskatchewan Election

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How did the unprecedented negative economic effects of COVID-19 impact the 2020 Saskatchewan election results? It's not the economy, Stupid.[1]

> *How did the unprecedented negative economic effects of COVID-19 impact the 2020 Saskatchewan election results? It's not the economy, Stupid*

An important question in the democratic politics literature is whether economic conditions have a major influence on voter behaviour. Is an incumbent government more likely to be re-elected if the economy is doing well or kicked out if the economy is struggling?[2][3]

The question is interesting because of how little influence elected officials, particularly in small, commodity-dependent provinces such as Saskatchewan, have on the economy. I have always thought (perhaps naively so) that Saskatchewan voters understood that, absent egregious mismanagement of the economy, the incumbent political party should be neither rewarded for a boom, nor punished for a bust, and that other important issues drove their voting behaviour. Indeed, studies exploring economic perceptions and voter choices in the 2011 Saskatchewan election highlighted that while voters care about the economy, other factors such as party leadership evaluations were more important in determining vote choice.

While we should never confidently predict anything based on limited data points, the 2020 Saskatchewan election outcome provides more support for the idea that the economy is not the primary driver of electoral outcomes in the province. On October 26, 2020, the Saskatchewan Party was re-elected for their fourth term, retaining a resounding majority in seats and popular vote, notwithstanding that the government is projecting to run deficits until at least 2024.[4]

Moreover, in 2020 the Saskatchewan economy will see one of the worst contractions in its history, thanks to COVID-19. The World Health Organization (WHO) classified COVID-19 a global health pandemic on March 11, 2020. The early impacts of the virus in China and Italy generated major concern among policymakers in Canada. To 'flatten the curve,' protect vulnerable populations, and avoid overwhelming health care systems, federal and provincial governments enacted extensive public health restrictions. Saskatchewan declared a State of Emergency on March 18, 2020, limiting gatherings and shutting down many non-essential businesses.

COVID-19 and the associated economic shutdowns led to a major shock to Saskatchewan's GDP. According to projections, the combination of weak commodity prices and the pandemic could result in a decline in GDP for 2020 of 7.7 per cent in Saskatoon[5] and 8.2 per cent provincewide.[6] While 2019 was also not a strong year (Saskatchewan experienced a decline in GDP of almost 1 per cent, the worst performance of all the provinces)[7], the 2020 contraction is almost unprecedented. For perspective, during the 2009 global recession, the city of Saskatoon only

had a 2.1 per cent contraction in GDP,[8] and the province experienced a 5.3 per cent decline.[9]

Some reasons the economy had so little impact on the Saskatchewan election are obvious. For instance, no rational person can blame the Saskatchewan government for the COVID-19 pandemic. And while COVID-19's negative economic effects could theoretically be linked to the Sask Party's decision to shut down large swaths of the economy, voters realize that the Sask Party was following suit with the rest of the country and public health guidance, and that the NDP would have done the same. Voters probably also realize that even if Saskatchewan had kept businesses open, its economy would have still taken a hit, as the federal government closed the borders in March and other countries were also struggling to contain the virus.

Moreover, Saskatchewan's closures were less widespread than most other provinces and were lifted more quickly, leading to a V-shaped recovery of its labour market. The province's monthly unemployment rate hit a high of 12.5 per cent in May, almost fully recovering since to its pre-pandemic rate (the unemployment rate was 6.2 per cent in February and 6.8 per cent in September); Saskatchewan's September 2020 unemployment rate was the lowest among the Canadian provinces.[10] Focusing on who the voters could trust to lead an economic recovery was a key message in Sask Party campaign ads—these pre-election numbers might have convinced some voters that the Sask Party was indeed able to most effectively oversee the recovery. While legitimate concerns are being raised about how elected officials across the country handled the pandemic—including in Saskatchewan where the province had relatively low case numbers in the early days but was fighting rising case numbers in recent months leading up to the election—Saskatchewan's COVID-19 death rate is still among the lowest in the country, at 2 per 100,000 population.[11]

Other reasons why the economy had so little impact on the Saskatchewan election might be less obvious. One is that the economic effects of COVID-19 were less personally salient for influential voting blocks. For instance, older voters did not feel the negative economic effects of the COVID-19 shutdown the same way that younger people

did.[12] Older voters were also more susceptible to mortality from the virus and so were likely more supportive of the province's public health restrictions and shutdown and were willing to bear (and could better weather) the short-term economic cost. The COVID-19 shutdowns also had a more negative economic impact on low-income workers than the middle class,[13] as middle class workers and high-earners were much more likely to be able to perform their jobs from home.[14]

And, while they may loathe admitting it, the Sask Party should thank the federal Liberal government for Saskatchewan voters not feeling the economic effects of the COVID-19 shutdown as much as they could have. The suite of federal support programs for individuals and businesses attenuated the negative economic effects of the massive job, hours, and business revenue losses on Saskatchewan voters and removed the potential fiscal burden on a province with rising debt levels and limited capacity to provide such widespread and generous income support for workers, households, and businesses.

It's unclear how long the Saskatchewan economy will take to completely recover from the COVID-19 shock, or when the province will see another commodity boom. If the provincial recovery is sluggish, federal support dries up, and provincial debt skyrockets, the economy may be a more serious obstacle for the incumbent Saskatchewan Party in the next election. Then again, maybe it won't. After all, it's not always about the economy, Stupid. At least not in Saskatchewan.

8. Fiscal Anchors Aweigh

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Government spending and taxation feature heavily in election campaigns. For much of Saskatchewan's political history, balancing the budget has been central in the campaigns of both left-winged and right-winged parties. The challenges of COVID-19 and shifts in political ideology have weakened this consensus on deficits and debt. The change in the willingness of political parties to campaign without strongly committing to the idea of a balanced budget highlights a major shift occurring not just in Saskatchewan but nationally and internationally.

The change in the willingness of political parties to campaign without strongly committing to the idea of a balanced budget highlights a major shift occurring not just in Saskatchewan but nationally and internationally.

Budget deficits (as projected from campaign platforms) are an indication of a potential government's willingness to enact policies that generate benefits now while deferring costs and risks to the future. Sustained budget deficits can require the type of austerity (large reductions in service provision and/or large increases in taxation), seen provincially under Premier Romanow, or federally under Prime Minister Chrétien in the 1990s, that aim to avoid devoting an ever increasing share of government revenue to debt service costs or being shut out of debt markets entirely.

The incumbent Saskatchewan Party (Sask Party) pledged as part of their campaign to eliminate the deficit by the 2024–25 fiscal year. At the same time, it promised several tax breaks and new spending. The most expensive items in its platform, a home renovation tax credit ($124M), a reduction in the small business tax rate ($189M), and a rebate on power bills ($261.6M), have end dates. Their platform costing projects added $4.6B to Saskatchewan debt before generating a surplus of $43.4M in 2014/15. The total platform was costed at $848.8M, the bulk coming between 2021 and 2023 from temporary measures aimed at stimulating demand. Overall, the Sask Party plans to see the gross debt of the province rise from 25.5 per cent of GDP in 2019–20 to 35.9 per cent in 2024–25, adding approximately $45.5M per year in debt service costs to the 2024–25 budget.

The NDP promised to eliminate the deficit "as quickly as possible," focusing instead on social spending priorities and introducing a wealth tax rather than building on the deficit. The proposed wealth tax was not projected to generate sufficient revenue to cover the additional spending promised in the NDP platform. The NDP platform predicted a deficit of $562.9M for the 2024–25 fiscal year. The NDP platform was costed at $2.7B, with a roughly even distribution of costs over the next provincial mandate, as the changes were intended to be permanent. The most expensive items in the mandate were removing the PST from construction labour ($800M), increasing funding to public education ($535.3M), increasing funding to long-term and acute care ($432M), and reducing SGI rates ($280M). This was to be partially offset by a wealth tax projected to bring in $120M a year. The NDP platform

would see the province's debt rise by more than $7.2B, increasing gross debt from 25.5 per cent to 36.5 per cent of GDP, and increasing debt service costs by $72.9M per year by 2025.

The remaining parties did not produce costed platforms nor commit to a timeline for eliminating the provincial deficit. The Progressive Conservative Party of Saskatchewan (Progressive Conservative Party), the Saskatchewan Liberal Party (Liberal Party), and the Buffalo Party of Saskatchewan (Buffalo Party) platforms were all sufficiently vague in their promises to make detailed platform costing ill-advised. However, the platforms of the Progressive Conservative Party and the Liberal Party suggest a fiscal position closer to the Sask Party. The Green Party of Saskatchewan's (Green Party) statement of policies and principles (not a platform in the same sense as those produced by other parties) suggested a deficit in excess of the NDP's. The Buffalo Party's platform involved a complex interaction of enhanced provincial responsibility and the federal government ceding fiscal space to the province, making the impact on the province's fiscal position highly uncertain.

Given the vagueness of other parties' positions, we focused on the costed platforms of the Sask Party and the NDP.

Both parties relied on optimistic but plausible projections of revenue. In both baseline cases, revenue was projected to grow by 20.8 per cent over the next term of government, far exceeding the 5.2 per cent growth in revenue between 2015–16 and 2019–20 budgets. Both platforms did take the impact of COVID-19 on government revenue into account, showing a drop of 6.5 per cent between the 2019–20 budget and the projections used in party platforms. Revenue was projected to grow a more modest 12.9 per cent over pre-COVID-19 levels.

Despite both parties projecting significant budget deficits over the next term and relying on revenue growth to reduce or eliminate those deficits, there were significant differences in the approaches being taken. The incumbent Sask Party platform was built around the status quo level of government involvement in the economy and citizens' lives. Rather than pursuing drastic changes in the size and scope

of government, the party's platform focused on temporary measures described as "Keynesian pump priming"— temporary increases in government spending and tax cuts to offset the impact of recessionary forces. The largest items in the Sask Party costed platform are all temporary, ending by the 2022–23 budget year.

The NDP platform offered no temporary changes that could be described as a traditionally Keynesian stabilization policy. The platform proposed a permanent increase in government spending and a net reduction in tax revenue, despite introducing a wealth tax. While the increased spending and tax cuts may have offered short-term stimulus similar to the temporary measures proposed by the Sask Party, the NDP platform could only be sustained over an extended period by revenue growth without additional increases in government spending.

Both platforms added significantly to provincial debt and debt service costs, reducing funds available for future program delivery. Similarly, both relied on revenues quickly returning to and surpassing pre-COVID-19 levels. A second COVID-19 wave, new lockdowns at home and among our trading partners will likely undermine these revenue projections. Both platforms involved increased fiscal risk due to increased provincial debt but differ in the magnitude of this risk.

> *Both platforms involved increased fiscal risk due to increased provincial debt but differ in the magnitude of this risk.*

In their platforms, the two main parties provided different approaches to governance. The Sask Party's costed platform can be described as applying traditional Keynesian economic stimulus in the wake of the COVID-19 recession. The NDP's platform offered an increased government provision of goods and services financed by increased debt.

9. A Predictable Fiscal Path during a Turbulent Time

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The fiscal plans of the Saskatchewan Party and the New Democratic Party (NDP) could not be more different. The Saskatchewan Party followed its conventional path and offered tax cuts and restrained spending. The NDP proposed large spending programs and envisioned major changes to various current policies. The election outcome offered the Saskatchewan Party another four years of power. For the Saskatchewan people, this election outcome means a predictable fiscal course. On the other hand, the election outcome also means a missed opportunity for change.

> *For the Saskatchewan people, this election outcome means a predictable fiscal course. On the other hand, the election outcome also means a missed opportunity for change.*

Since the 2008 financial crisis, expenditure growth has slightly outpaced revenue growth most of the time in Saskatchewan. As a result, Saskatchewan's taxation and expenditure have not been structurally balanced.[1] When the pandemic hit early this year, the estimated budget balance for fiscal year 2019–20 was a deficit at about 0.4 per cent of the GDP. This means there was no fiscal slack that would permit the province to absorb the additional cost due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The province had three options: raise taxes, cut spending, or borrow to close the gap.

Riding on its popularity, garnered over the past 13 years, the Saskatchewan Party led by Premier Scott Moe chose not to change fiscal course. The main promises of the Saskatchewan Party in its election platform included a reduction in the small business tax, a home renovation tax credit, and a 10 per cent rebate on power bills. The party plans to build hospitals, schools, and highways, and offer some financial assistance to seniors, students, and families. This fiscal plan is premised on providing short-term relief and waiting for the economy to heal itself. Under this plan, the government will run four consecutive years of deficits and will then return to a balanced budget in 2024–25.

The familiar approach of the Saskatchewan Party to fiscal policy resonated well with voters, who welcomed the financial relief but did not want the government to break the bank. This reassuring approach was premised on the assumption that nothing in the economy had fundamentally changed, and the pandemic's impact was limited to reduced economic activity.

The NDP offered a different interpretation, one which treated the pandemic as an opportunity to rethink some fundamentals. Rather than reining in labour costs, the NDP's plan included hiring hundreds of teachers, doctors, and nurses. The plan also proposed to revive public services in rural communities that the Saskatchewan Party had cancelled. Rather than fighting the carbon tax, the NDP premised its relationship with the federal government on the development of a national PharmaCare program. The NDP's environmental plan included a goal of 50 per cent

renewable energy by the year 2030 and installation of supercharging stations for electronic vehicles along major routes. All of these programs cost money. The only tax increase that the NDP proposed was a one per cent wealth tax on people with a net worth higher than $15M. In the end, the NDP promised to balance the budget "as quickly as possible."

The fiscal plan laid out by the NDP was consistent with what many other leaders of the world were contemplating—increasing government spending, investing in people, reducing income inequality, and "greening" the economy. Unfortunately for those on the political left, it seemed the majority in Saskatchewan were not ready for dramatic changes. The programs proposed by the NDP would cost millions of dollars with uncertain payoffs. More importantly, the NDP's spending proposals made people nervous about the future of Saskatchewan. At what was a particularly stressful moment, voters evidently preferred predictability and stability over innovation and policy adventures.

So, what is ahead for the economy and the fiscal house of Saskatchewan after the victory of the Saskatchewan Party? We can safely expect tax cuts and restrained government expenditures. Balancing the budget by 2024–25? It is entirely possible, if the pandemic is controlled in time and the global economic environment is favourable.

With the generous spending from the federal government, the provincial government's fiscal situation is relatively healthy. So far it used only $40M of the $200M contingency fund that it set aside to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. Its net debt-to-GDP ratio in 2021–22, predicted to be around 20 per cent, is among one of the lowest of the ten provinces. Saskatchewan is at an enviable position compared with its neighbour Alberta, which is facing a depressed and uncertain economy. In contrast to Alberta, which is still reluctant to introduce a Provincial Sales Tax (PST), the access to PST revenue and the PST rate increase in 2017 offered Saskatchewan an important revenue buffer.

More importantly, the foundation of the economy has been so far rather unscathed, and market trends favour the province. The economy of Saskatchewan is positioned to

rebound quickly, as soon as the world economy recovers. With a dominant share of uranium and potash in the world, and a large stock of arable land, the future of Saskatchewan is bright. The world's demand for food and minerals will only increase. An RBC report projected that the revenue of the province will grow at about 5 per cent per year over the next three years, while total expenses will grow at a much slower pace (-0.4 per cent in 2021-22 and 1.5 per cent in 2022–24).[2] This leaves Saskatchewan on a plausible path to balancing the budget by 2024–25.

However, the recent spike in coronavirus cases and possible new lockdown measures throw these projections into doubt. If the economic recovery is scaled back, the Saskatchewan Party will have to revisit its assumptions and adjust its taxation and spending programs accordingly. Of course, the government can always push the date of balancing the budget beyond 2024–25. The only certain thing is that the NDP missed a historical opportunity rendered by the pandemic. If the unsettling circumstances of the pandemic did not shake Saskatchewan's commitment to a conservative fiscal approach, it will be even harder for the NDP to challenge and alter the current fiscal course in the coming years.

10. Federal-Provincial Issues: The Politics of Discontent

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In a province such as Saskatchewan, with its politics deeply rooted in the sentiment of alienation, running a provincial election campaign against the federal government has been a longstanding tradition. It has to do with feeling economically and politically vulnerable, which always lurks below the surface of Saskatchewan politics.

It makes perfect sense in a federation such as Canada, where divisions are drawn on regional, economic, and political lines. With a small population, Saskatchewan often feels it lacks clout with the federal government in far-off Ottawa. So blaming the federal government for at least some of your troubles is considered good politics. It becomes especially enticing during a provincial election campaign when you rally voters to a common distant foe that, conveniently, is neither part of the election, nor likely to engage in debate during the campaign.

One of the most significant eras pitting the interests of Saskatchewan against the federal government was the 1970s. It was a time when the Allan Blakeney NDP government spent much of the decade battling Ottawa over control of natural resources. The Blakeney government used the battle with Ottawa to advance its own ideological agenda. It was evident in the creation of provincial resource Crown corporations to fend off intrusions by Ottawa.

In this election, the Ottawa factor was again evident. Days before the campaign began, Premier Scott Moe sent a letter to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau noting the fact that Saskatchewan has no elected members in the federal Liberal caucus. The Premier took it upon himself to outline what he wanted the upcoming federal Speech from the Throne to address. It was a long list. He said Saskatchewan continues to be "inequitably impacted by hundreds of millions of dollars in added costs from the federal carbon tax." He said the federal government "must take action to address the inequities that exist with federal transfers," that the Fiscal Stabilization Program is "broken," and that western Canadians have "legitimate, long-standing" issues regarding the federal equalization formula. The Premier concluded by saying "it is irresponsible for the federal government to continue to ignore these long-standing concerns."[1]

Needless to say, when the throne speech failed to specifically mention his list of grievances, Moe went to the media to express his dissatisfaction. "The only time in this speech from the throne that Saskatchewan was essentially mentioned was in the phase-out of our energy industry workers," Moe said. "That's not something I could support. That's not something I would expect that any Canadian MP could support."

Then, using guilt by association, he took it once step further to heighten the provincial political stakes. With a confidence vote on the throne speech looming for the minority Liberal government, Moe said the provincial NDP and its leader Ryan Meili can't be separated from the federal party if the NDP in Ottawa votes to support the government. "I would be laying the blame where it squarely should lie and that is within the NDP party in Canada, which includes the NDP party in our provinces," he said.[2]

There was good reason for Moe and the Sask Party to drag Trudeau's federal Liberal government into the provincial campaign. It's smart politics. Public opinion research has consistently shown weak support for the Trudeau Liberals in Saskatchewan. In September, according to the Angus Reid Institute, Trudeau had a 25 per cent approval rating in Saskatchewan, tied with Alberta as the lowest rating for Trudeau among the provinces.[3] In case anyone doubts that polling, there is the hard evidence of the October 2019 federal election when all 14 seats were won by the Conservative Party. Among the casualties was Liberal Ralph Goodale, the lone Liberal MP who was an MP for more than 25 consecutive years.

Then there is the federal price on carbon, which is a key part of the Trudeau government's national climate change policy. Or, as the Moe government prefers to call it, "a job-killing carbon tax." For the better part of two years, the Moe government has been fighting the federal government's imposition of a carbon tax. By coincidence, a week before the campaign started on Sept. 29, two days of legal arguments began in the Supreme Court of Canada over the constitutionality of the Trudeau government's carbon price. The decision is likely to take several months.

The timing could hardly have been better for the Sask Party. Opposing a tax is usually a good thing in a campaign and even better when it's being forced on the province by a federal government that is widely disapproved of in the province. It's better still when that same minority government depends on the support of the federal NDP caucus in Ottawa to survive non-confidence votes, and the Saskatchewan New Democrats can be lumped in with their federal brethren as supporters of Trudeau.

The Saskatchewan government's argument before the court is that the imposition of a federal carbon price is "overreach" by Ottawa and unconstitutional. It maintains that it is an intrusion on the autonomy of the province.

The Saskatchewan Court of Appeal ruled that the federal action is constitutional, as did the Ontario Court of Appeal. The Alberta Court of Appeal ruled against Ottawa. The Sask Party campaign tried to use the carbon tax issue to associate NDP leader Meili with the federal Trudeau Liberals, noting "the NDP leader supports a carbon tax".[4]

For his part, Meili did not engage in any significant way on federal-provincial issues. His critique was consistently aimed at the Saskatchewan Party and its record in government, seeking to make the focus on the different priorities separating the NDP and the Sask Party.

Lurking on the margins of the campaign was the newly created Buffalo Party. Seeking to tap into the anti-Ottawa mood, the party espoused a platform that called for greater independence for the province. Its platform included calls for Saskatchewan "to manage all tax structure including national tax," create a provincial police force to replace the RCMP, "control its own immigration," create its own pension plan to replace the Canada Pension Plan, and take control of international trade of Saskatchewan resources.

While the Buffalo Party does not explicitly advocate provincial succession from Canada, it harbours many of the sentiments of those who advocate western separation.

In a very real, albeit marginal way, the Buffalo Party reflected a longstanding current of dissatisfaction in Saskatchewan politics with the federal government. For a brief period in the early 1980s, there was even the Unionest Party in the Saskatchewan legislature, founded by Dick Collver after he resigned as leader of the provincial Progressive Conservatives. For a fleeting moment, the Unionest Party advocated that western Canada join the United States. Although it proved to be more of a bizarre aberration, it reflected a very real current of disaffection with Ottawa that exists in Saskatchewan to this day.

11. Leadership: Signs of the Times

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Amazing what you can learn from a billboard. If it wasn't already clear, it became abundantly obvious in early 2020 what the Saskatchewan Party wanted the ballot question to be in the upcoming provincial election. As the party began to set the stage for the election, it invested heavily in billboards around the province. They featured a large picture of smiling party leader Scott Moe next to the words "Strong Leadership, Strong Saskatchewan." The message was simple. All you had to do was connect the dots.

The fact that leadership would be a central theme in the campaign was hardly unique, or surprising. Party leaders have always played a dominant role in Saskatchewan politics, and the 2020 campaign was no different. It is a tradition that reaches back to Tommy Douglas and was subsequently personified through the years by the likes of Ross Thatcher, Allan Blakeney, Grant Devine, Roy Romanow, Lorne Calbert, and Brad Wall. So, you might say that history had already set the stage for leadership being the key to the 2020 election.

In a parliamentary system, party leaders play an outsized role. The reason is simple. As leaders, they are running to be elected to head a government, whether as prime minister or Premier. They are seen to embody all the qualities, policies, and flaws of the party they lead. In the public mind, they are being judged within that exclusive context, unlike other local candidates who do not face the same broadly based scrutiny. Effective leaders in electoral terms are those who reflect and can communicate the core values, attributes, and priorities of the party they lead. It's a reality that also forces to the sidelines the leaders of other parties that have no

realistic hope of winning government. The result was that Green Party leader, Naomi Hunter; Progressive Conservative leader, Ken Grey; Buffalo Party leader, Wade Sira; and Liberal leader, Robert Rudachyk, were effectively relegated to irrelevance, with the one televised leader debate showcasing Moe and NDP leader Ryan Meili, who, based on public polling, were duelling for power.

Ultimately, the key ingredient to successful leadership is trust. It is the foundation for a leader's integrity and credibility, without which all is lost. Trust is where leadership begins and ends. If voters trust a leader to do the right thing, or at least live up to his or her word, then a leader has passed the most critical test of character in politics.

> *Ultimately, the key ingredient to successful leadership is trust. It is the foundation for a leader's integrity and credibility, without which all is lost.*

In that leader-to-leader frame for the campaign, Moe had an advantage over Meili because, as Premier, Moe was better known and had a much higher profile than Meili. Both were running in their first election as leader, but Moe had the benefit of almost three years of profile as Premier after winning the Saskatchewan Party leadership in 2018. In that sense, Moe had a record that he could be measured against,

both good and bad. Moe talked about the Sask Party's plan for economic recovery and used its record during 13 years in office, when the province went through a period of sustained growth, as reason to trust his leadership in the coming years. A record of nine deficit budgets, including six consecutive operating deficits since 2014, seemed not to undermine Moe's message of economic and fiscal management.[1] It was unstated, but the leadership message drew no small amount of its meaning from the person Moe replaced, Brad Wall, who spent much of his decade in office as the most popular Premier in the nation.

There were no similar yardsticks for Meili. As leader of the opposition, Meili had a record that was rhetorical and based on impressions rather than actual outcomes. Recognizing that disadvantage, the NDP campaign was purposefully far less leader oriented than the Saskatchewan Party's emphasis. The NDP's strategy was to differentiate itself from the Saskatchewan Party by focusing on policy priorities that would "put people first," rather than the image or personality of its leader. So just as the Sask Party wanted the campaign to pivot on leadership, the NDP sought the opposite; it wanted attention to be on specific policies that distinguished it from the alternative, specifically more funding for education, health care, expanded home care, and a 'Saskatchewan First' procurement policy. But the NDP could also not escape the long shadow of almost three decades ago when the NDP government of the day closed 52 hospitals—a fact Moe reminded voters of at every opportunity.

The focus on leadership in this election was also different. Unfolding in the midst of a COVID-19 pandemic, it was a campaign unlike any other. The underlying sense of personal vulnerability due to the public health crisis changed not only the terms of engagement in the campaign but also the lens through which voters viewed the leadership issue. If ever there was a need for public trust in leaders doing the right thing, it was this election when people couldn't help but think their lives might depend on it.

Curiously though, issues around the pandemic itself were never a central focus of the campaign. In the months leading up to the election, there was little in the way of partisan debate over the government's management of

the pandemic. With the public health response shaped by health experts and epidemiologists, politics was largely kept out of it. To try and take advantage of a serious public health issue would be considered unseemly. Other than questions in the lead up to the campaign about the government's plans for the safe re-opening of schools, there was never any evidence of significant unease with Moe's leadership in handling the pandemic. Not even the fact that Meili is a medical doctor was enough for the New Democrats to seize on the issue.

Briefly in this campaign, the issue of trust became front and centre. It emerged when reports surfaced that Moe had been involved in what had been an unreported driving incident in 1994 when he was charged with impaired driving and leaving the scene of an accident. This new revelation was in addition to two previously known driving mishaps from his youth, one in 1997 involving an accident when a young mother was killed and the other an impaired driving charge. Moe had never revealed the earlier incident, he said, because the charges were stayed.

It became a pivotal moment, one that could erode the public trust and subsequent credibility of the Saskatchewan Party leader. The fact that the information had been kept from the public, when the Premier had spoken about the earlier driving convictions, became a matter of trust. But a week later, an Angus Reid poll done in the wake of the revelations indicated the public's political judgment had not been affected in any significant way by the revelation. The Saskatchewan Party maintained an overwhelming 27-percentage-point lead over Meili and the NDP.

The resilience of public opinion support for the Saskatchewan Party and its leader in the wake of the revelations demonstrated that Moe still held the trust of the electorate. For a campaign explicitly designed around the issue of leadership, it was a telling moment.

12. Indigenous Issues and Governance Inclusion

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The Indigenous people make up 16.3 per cent of Saskatchewan's population,[1] a considerable voting contingent for many regions. The issues Indigenous people have are social in nature, crossing federal and provincial lines of jurisdiction, making it hard to determine how these issues get addressed. However, Indigenous people play a huge role in the social, economic, and cultural fabric of Saskatchewan and would like their concerns to play a bigger role in provincial politics; it is unclear, from past elections, to what degree of inclusion Indigenous people are receiving.

The key concern for Indigenous people is simple: 'are their voices being heard?' The statistics appear to answer that question.

Stats Canada shows that 50 per cent of Indigenous people in urban areas were living in rental dwellings, as compared to 29 per cent for non-Indigenous people. Additionally, 24 per cent of Indigenous people in urban areas were living in low-income housing options: "Indigenous people living in neighbourhoods in which the Indigenous population made up a larger share of the total population were more likely to live in a dwelling that was in need of major repairs, a crowded dwelling, and a low-income household."[2] This is an issue in Saskatchewan cities such as Regina and Saskatoon.

The unemployment rate in Saskatchewan for Indigenous people in 2018 was 14.9 per cent; that is almost triple the rate for non-Indigenous citizens, which was 5.2 per cent.[3] Stats Canada notes a few key issues for Saskatchewan Indigenous people: (a) no means of transportation—51

per cent that were unemployed noted this concern; (b) less access to Internet—87 per cent had moderate access for job searching. The other issues noted by Stats Canada were lack of jobs, deficiency in education and work experience, and not knowing where to search for work options.[4]

Health concerns for Indigenous people, nationally and locally, are distressing: "Among the First Nations household population, the probability of living to age 75 was 53[per cent] for males and 66 [per cent] for females—22 and 18 percentage points lower than for the non-Indigenous household population".[5] Jane Philpott notes, to the Canadian Press, the life expectancy for Indigenous people is 15 years less, with infant mortality rates being 2–3 times higher.[6]

Reporting on the Children's Advocate Report from 2018 concerning mental health and youth care in Saskatchewan, Kendall Latimer notes, "80 per cent of children and youth in care in Saskatchewan are Indigenous —well above the national average." Latimer also points out, "(there were) 45 occurrences of critical injury involving 41 youth. Of those 41 children, only one was non-Indigenous."[7] To add to the list of concerns, Indhu Rammohan remarks that the suicide rate is three times higher for the Indigenous population.[8]

The justice system is systemically broken: "85 per cent of female prisoners admitted to custody in 2016/17 were Indigenous, according to the Statistics Canada data". Furthermore, "According to Statistics Canada data for 2016/17…76 per cent of admissions to Saskatchewan jails were Indigenous people."[9]

The issues at hand are complex but can be boiled down to one topic: devolution and the management of resources for Indigenous peoples.

Devolution is the process whereby a government passes some of its responsibility to another level of government; in this example, it goes from federal to provincial to municipal in handoffs. The idea behind devolution is that the more local the government to the problems the better equipped it is to handle those concerns since it is involved in the consequences of said issues. Also, it can be noted, the resources, which are a federal responsibility, should be spent more closely to where the issues are—in this case, at the provincial level, as it concerns Indigenous people groups living in Saskatchewan.

One huge problem is that Indigenous people signed treaties as nations with the Crown, now the federal responsibility, and not as provincial bodies. The process of devolution is not one that is shared ideologically by any First Nation in Saskatchewan, at least not in the sense of having their rights and roles relegated to dealing only with provincial bodies. That was not the interpretation Indigenous communities understood of how the treaties work, and that's an obvious disconnect in communication.

Even if the problem is not outright defined as devolution, the problem is the handoffs of governing responsibilities from federal to provincial are real. These handoffs create constant issues for Indigenous communities: the big one being a problem of governance and who is responsible for what and when? This also means Indigenous leaders have three hands in the pot every time they want to make meaningful change for their communities; there are too many governing bodies involved to know which one is slowing down advancement, or, at the very least, the administration of resources and services are being hindered through handoffs.

No matter the statistic you want to review on Indigenous well-being in Saskatchewan—including those related to education, housing, health, employment, or justice—you will find Indigenous people fall behind on all meaningful indicators for success. This is not because of a problem with the Indigenous nations; this is a problem with governance structures. This is the reason Indigenous voices are lost in the shuffle between federal and provincial systems.

The Indigenous population has numerous issues the Province of Saskatchewan needs to address. Regardless of federal or provincial jurisdictional lines, solutions need to happen locally through a tripartite governance structure: federal, provincial, and Indigenous nations working together, solving these problems. It is not enough to allow these handoffs of governing responsibilities to slow resources and services to Indigenous nations and act as though it is standard procedure. To not fix the problem is to take an action even it is just to deny the authenticity of the Indigenous voices, which are pushed aside and relegated to a lesser power. When it comes to governance, and elections, Indigenous governance needs a real spot at the table about how resources and services are administered to their citizens. Anything less than that and we have the status quo, and that, statistically, is untenable.

13. Saskatchewan: the "Wild West" of Party and Election Finance

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Party and election finance laws are designed to (a) add transparency to how parties raise and spend money both before and during election campaigns and (b) impose limits on fundraising and party spending in order to reduce the political influence of those with deep pockets. Saskatchewan's party and election finance laws are comparably lax within Canada, as they do not impose limits on monetary contributions, allow for both corporate and union contributions, and allow out-of-province contributions. A lack of contribution limits has led to accusations that Saskatchewan is the "Wild West" when it comes to party and election finance laws.[1]

> *A lack of contribution limits has led to accusations that Saskatchewan is the "Wild West" when it comes to party and election finance laws.*

In the 2020 provincial election campaign, Saskatchewan's election and party finance laws governed how the parties conducted themselves during the campaign. But these rules were themselves contested by the parties, with the incumbent Saskatchewan Party defending them and the opposition NDP promising to introduce tougher restrictions in order to level the playing field.

Saskatchewan's *Election Act, 1996* requires that election expenses—including both money spent and in-kind donations accepted—must be both tracked and declared. The Act also imposes election expense limits on both parties and candidates. These limits are adjusted each year; in the 2020 election, parties could spend to a maximum of $1,070,281.[2] The Act also allows for reimbursement of election expenses for both parties and candidates. Parties that receive at least 15 per cent of the vote are eligible to have up to half their eligible expenses reimbursed. Individual candidates must also receive 15 per cent of the local vote to be eligible for reimbursement of up to 60 per cent of their expenses.

The *Political Contributions Tax Credit Act, 2000* provides for tax credits in return for monetary contributions to parties or candidates. The credit amounts are 75 per cent for the first $400 contributed, 50 per cent for the next $350, and 33.3 per cent for the next $525. The maximum eligible tax credit is $650.[3]

Saskatchewan's party and election finance laws are notable for their lack of limits on contributions. There are no limits on contributions, including on corporate and union contributions. While finance laws can be used to level the playing field by limiting the influence of both corporations and unions, Saskatchewan's laws do not do so. Furthermore, Saskatchewan is notable for allowing contributions—including from both corporations and unions—from outside the province.

This lack of limits has led to attention paid to the influence of corporations and outside interests on the Saskatchewan Party in particular. In 2020, *Press Progress* analyzed contribution records and concluded that, since

2006, almost half (46 per cent) of all contributions to the Saskatchewan Party have been from corporate donors. In 2019, roughly one-fifth of corporate contributions to the Saskatchewan Party were from out-of-province corporations, particularly from Alberta.[4]

While the NDP benefits from a lack of limits on union contributions, this does not effectively balance the playing field between the parties. In 2019, for example, the Saskatchewan Party raised $1.2M in corporate contributions while the NDP received just $202,397 from trade unions. However, the Saskatchewan Party also led the NDP in both the number of contributions received (15,300 to 9,421) and the amount raised from individual contributions.[5]

Differences in fundraising capacity between the two parties, which resulted in part from the Saskatchewan Party's access to corporate contributions, helped to set the stage for the 2020 election campaign. Journalist Arthur White-Crummey notes that the Saskatchewan Party's deep pockets allowed it to stage an expansive pre-election advertising campaign. In 2018, for example, the Saskatchewan Party spent $223,358 on broadcast advertising compared to the meagre $3,341 spent by the NDP. The Saskatchewan Party's pre-campaign spending included advertisements attacking NDP leader Ryan Meili by portraying him as "out of touch with Saskatchewan." The Saskatchewan Party was also able to transfer a comparably large sum to its local constituency associations in the lead up to the 2020 campaign.[6]

This uneven playing field has long been a bone of contention for the NDP, with the party caucus supporting abolition of both corporate and union contributions as well as the banning of out-of-province contributions. The party regularly raised the issue in Question Period and had previously introduced a private member's bill in the legislature that would have banned all contributions besides those from individuals, but the bill did not pass. While trade unions opposed the abolition of union contributions, arguing that these are not equivalent to corporate donations, this view did not prevail in the NDP.[7]

Leader Ryan Meili, therefore, entered the 2020 election with abolition of corporate, union, and out-of-province

contributions as a central plank in his campaign platform. Meili came out swinging, arguing that corporate donations constituted a "corrupting influence" on Saskatchewan politics. "We still have the worst election finance laws in the entire country," Meili claimed. "We need to level the playing field and make sure it's the people of this province that are making decisions, not companies from out of province."

But Saskatchewan Party leader Scott Moe defended corporate contributions, arguing that "people who are involved in employing people across this province should have a say in some of the policies that we have that impact their industry, given that they employ a number of people in communities right across Saskatchewan." Moe rejected the view that the Saskatchewan Party was beholden to its corporate donors, arguing that the same argument could be made with respect to the NDP and its union contributors.

Moe's convincing victory in the 2020 election campaign all but ensured that any potential reforms to Saskatchewan's controversial party and election financing regime will be

Moe's convincing victory in the 2020 election campaign all but ensured that any potential reforms to Saskatchewan's controversial party and election financing regime will be shelved.

shelved. Saskatchewan will continue, for the time being, to be Canada's "Wild West" when it comes to the funding of political parties.

14. Rural/Urban Dimensions in the 2020 Saskatchewan Election

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There was no doubt that rural Saskatchewan would deliver for incumbent Premier Scott Moe and his Saskatchewan Party government in the 2020 election.

Although results in some urban ridings were still unclear at the time of this writing, the 29 of 61 seats considered rural—everything outside of Regina, Saskatoon, Moose Jaw, Prince Albert, and the two northern seats—have been the Sask Party's stronghold since its formation, and they provided that support again Oct. 26.

That the leaders of the two contenders focused their campaigns in the urban centres isn't unusual for recent elections. Rural support is so strong for the Sask Party that Moe could safely leave campaigning to the local candidates. Voters like that the Sask Party allows them to operate their businesses and farms with little interference. They see a party fighting the hated carbon tax. They see opportunity in the message delivered by Moe and others that the province is strong and that its future lies in its economic engines of mining, energy, and agriculture, which all take place in rural regions. And they may have been placated by numerous infrastructure announcements before the writ was dropped. The Sask Party government had announced a $7.5B two-year infrastructure program in its 2020–21 budget, which included a Municipal Economic Enhancement Program, highway construction and rural highway upgrades, new schools, and health care infrastructure.

Rural Saskatchewan may be solidly Sask Party now but wasn't always. The Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, precursor to the New Democratic Party

(NDP), had tremendous support from farmers and rural residents in its time. Its message that it would fight for them against big bad Ottawa resonated strongly with what was largely an agriculture-based economy. But as the NDP morphed into a party representing largely the impoverished at one end of the spectrum and the elite at the other it left rural people behind.

Through the last 40 years or so, NDP policies regarding rural life have worked largely against it. From a fuel tax placed on tandem axle farm trucks (which then-Premier Allen Blakeney promised to remove in the budget prior to losing office) to its support for the Canadian Wheat Board, the Roy Romanow government's attempt to amalgamate rural municipalities, hospital closures, and school closures, the list of rural grievances grew. The party that once promised to fight against the federal government became the target instead. The NDP hasn't won a rural seat since the 1995 election. Some pundits suggest the party has done little to correct that since then.

In 2020, the Sask Party made no specific promises to rural Saskatchewan. It ran largely on its record and pledges for a strong economic recovery from the pandemic-induced downturn. Its platform of home renovation tax credits, a 10-per cent rebate for a year on SaskPower bills, temporary small business tax reduction, and more would appeal provincewide. The NDP included more particular promises, although they failed to resonate with voters. Its platform contained loans for rural small businesses, lower crop insurance rates for new farmers, and a Rural Reconnect program to expand

high-speed Internet and cellular service throughout the province.

That last point was what most rural residents wanted to hear about. The lack of adequate, quality broadband was made more evident through this year's pandemic as farmers tried to run businesses while their kids needed to be online for school. The Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities (SARM) and the Agricultural Producers Association of Saskatchewan both identified improved service as a key request to a new government. SARM and others have called for broadband to be declared an essential service.

"(Broadband) is fundamental to the economic and social wellbeing [sic] of our rural municipalities and critical in the delivery of health care and education," the organization representing the 296 RMs said in a news release outlining its election priorities.

While rural voters may have raised this issue with their local candidates, it wasn't a headline on the leaders' tours, possibly because Internet service in urban areas is not an issue at all.

Rural crime is another issue that failed to gain much attention, despite it being on SARM's list of priorities. Statistics indicate that crime is falling in rural Saskatchewan, but farmers and rural residents who have been victimized find little comfort in that and continue to call for better RCMP service and more prevention initiatives.

One rural outcome that bears watching is the showing of the Buffalo Party of Saskatchewan, even in safe Sask Party seats. The party, which grew from the most recent western independence movement, ran 17 candidates, 16 of them in rural constituencies. Candidates finished second in four of those and earned a larger percentage of the popular vote than the more well-established Green Party of Saskatchewan. Separatist sentiments and parties have long been around in rural Saskatchewan, and it will be interesting to see if this movement gains ground over the next four years.

COVID-19 affected the campaign in urban areas more

than in rural. Public health orders restricting gathering numbers prohibited the large rallies typically held in Regina and Saskatoon, although the Sask Party held a "Big Honkin' Rally" in both cities where people remained in their vehicles. Candidates limited public events in most cases, focusing on small groups and knocking on doors. For example, the re-election team for Wood River incumbent MLA and agriculture minister David Marit organized gatherings of less than 30 people in farm shops and small local businesses. All-candidates debates were held online or in physically distanced settings without crowds.

Rural ridings were once critical stops for party leaders during campaigns, but with most seats located in cities and an urban population that continues to increase, it seems likely their efforts will continue to be focused in the cities.

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15. Role of Agriculture in the Saskatchewan General Election 2020

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Saskatchewan is home to more than 40 per cent of Canada's cultivated agricultural farmland and is the second largest cattle-producing province in Canada. The province is the largest exporter of agri-food products in Canada, with exports worth over $12B in 2019. Along with value-added agri-food processing, agricultural research and development, equipment manufacturing, and related supportive industries such as policy, agronomy, market development, irrigation, the grain trade, crop nutrition and crop protection, agriculture writ large is one of Saskatchewan's largest businesses.[1] About 50,000 people are directly employed in Saskatchewan's agriculture community, with others employed in secondary or tertiary businesses serving agriculture.[2] Provincial governments recognize the central place of agriculture in the provincial economy and have a role in producing and directing policy and incentives to help this sector thrive and grow. Agriculture is not just the view from the farm gate; it is embedded across Saskatchewan, urban and rural.

Despite its importance, agriculture played little role in the debates or media specifically related to the 2020 Saskatchewan general election. Prior to the election call, there were two significant agricultural policy announcements of 2020. The first was the $4B irrigation expansion project near Outlook, to use water from Lake Diefenbaker.[3] The second was the $15M leverage investment from Innovation Saskatchewan for venture capital support to develop new technology in agriculture. This investment was complemented by startup incentives and the AgTech Growth fund.[4] Both of these initiatives showcase a strong connection between the Sask Party and the agricultural sector.

The Saskatchewan Party 2019 Growing Saskatchewan plan, which was included in the party election platform, outlined 20 actions for 2020—eight of the actions directly or indirectly related to agriculture.[5] Of the specific 2020 election promises, reducing all SaskPower customer bills by 10 per cent for one year would provide significant savings for farms and agriculture-related businesses.[6]

The only other contender party, the Saskatchewan New Democrats, had a few party platform promises specific to agriculture: Rural Reconnect for rural and remote broadband access; lower crop insurance rates for new farmers; and lower SGI rates (which would make a difference at the farm gate, where farms often own multiple vehicles).[7]

However, election rhetoric, debate, and conversation, for the most part, did not engage in agricultural issues. As a result, two provincial agricultural entities—the Agricultural Producers Association of Saskatchewan and the Saskatchewan Farm Stewardship Association—organized "Growing Agriculture: 2020 Saskatchewan Provincial Election Forum."

This online forum, with panelists and a moderator, invited all Saskatchewan-registered political parties to participate. Three attended: candidates David Marit (Sask Party), who was the Minister of Agriculture before dissolution of the legislature; Yens Pedersen (NDP), who was the opposition Agriculture critic; and Robert Rudachyk, leader (Liberal Party). The forum was aired on Access Communications, RealAgriculture, and uploaded to YouTube for wider distribution.[8]

The parties were asked for their views and policies on a number of agricultural issues, including rural Internet and cell connectivity, intergenerational transfer of business, business risk management (BRM) policies, agricultural drainage, carbon offset policies, and agricultural research. Questions were submitted by farmers, and the three political parties were invited to comment. Then, each panelist—agricultural producers Todd Lewis (APAS president), Myles Thorpe (SaskFSA president), and Ian Boxall (APAS vice-president)—responded and discussed the policy proposals.

Of the three, Liberal leader Rudachyk showcased the least understanding of agricultural issues, retreating to tropes such as dismissing corporate farms as not really farms. Pedersen and Marit offered more clear policy discussion, with Marit showcasing the Sask Party's past record and close connection to the agricultural community, and Pedersen showcasing future potential policies, while reiterating leader Ryan Meili's farm roots.

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Why were agricultural issues not significant during the election campaign? In part, the forum responses given by Marit and Pedersen showcase the divide. Marit was able to reinforce Sask Party connections to and record of achievement in agriculture. Given agriculture's position of growth and relative stability in the last number of years, there were few points of contention, disapproval, or wedge issues where Pedersen could intervene.

Likewise, few of the issues Pedersen brought forward,

including Rural Reconnect, were novel ideas. For the most part, the NDP-proposed policies were adjustments or changes to the existing system—hardly enough to win an electorate. The NDP was also consistently hampered by its own record of rural hospital and school closures of the 1990s era—a point repeatedly brought up by the Sask Party with good effect. The Sask Party was also able to capitalize on rural disdain for the federal carbon tax, a policy which disproportionally affects farm costs.

The election win by the Sask Party—its fourth majority mandate—is built largely on the back of what is often considered the rural-urban divide. However, it's important to recognize that in Saskatchewan, agriculture is much more than a rural business. Those connected to agriculture (rural and urban) were happy to continue supporting the Sask Party and its agricultural success, rather than vote for the NDP.

Issues within the agricultural community find a larger space within political debate during an election only if negative or divisive issues happen to coincide with an election period. If the farm community is not in crisis, agricultural issues do not hit the radar.

If the farm community is not in crisis, agricultural issues do not hit the radar.

During Saskatchewan election 2020, agricultural issues did not play a key role. The Sask Party capitalized on a comparatively good record of growth and stability and handily took the majority of the agricultural vote. Even when the agricultural community itself tried to insert agricultural issues into the larger election conversation, the initiative did not have a major impact. In the end, agriculture voted for the party that has supported its success.

16. Health Care: A Key Issue That Didn't Move the Needle

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Health Care as an Election Issue

Both during and between elections, health care remains one of the top political concerns for Canadians, and residents of Saskatchewan were no different.[1] Some issues, such as wait times or the inability to find and keep a family physician, seem to be issues that reappear in jurisdiction after jurisdiction. Others, such as access to rural emergency rooms, will have more salience in a province where 35 per cent of the population still lives in rural areas.

As Saskatchewan headed into the 2020 provincial election, there was no shortage of health care issues facing the province: wait times, for most procedures for which there are benchmarks, were up;[2] the opioid crisis in the province showed no signs of abating;[3] and the pandemic continued to be an overarching concern as one poll found that "[n]early 63 per cent of respondents said issues relating to the COVID-19 pandemic [would] be important in helping determine their vote."[4]

The Party Platforms on Health and Health Care

The Saskatchewan Party's platform did not include a specific section for health care. However, in a section titled "Making Life More Affordable," the party included promises targeting specific populations such as eliminating inter-hospital ambulance transfer charges for seniors and reducing ambulance fees generally by 50 per cent at a cost of $8.4M; coverage for medical supplies for diabetics at a cost of $4.6M; and increased funding for Deafblind services at a cost of $1M per year.[5] The party also promised $18.4M in new staffing for long-term care facilities and

homecare services. In addition, included in the party's "30 Goals for 2030," there was a promise to reduce surgical wait times to a target of three months by 2030.[6]

The major health-related promises of the Saskatchewan New Democratic Party (NDP) platform included $100M to hire 100 doctors, 150 registered nurses, 300 licensed practical nurses, and 500 continuing care nurses; $50M in long-term care staffing increases; the creation of "mental health emergency rooms"; and a $60M surgical facility in Regina. The platform also included a guarantee to cover costs related to diabetes, similar to the Saskatchewan Party's promise. Additionally, there were assurances made relating to health care under other headings, including funding for school-based mental health and addictions nurses and the development of a disabilities strategy.[7]

The Saskatchewan Green Party platform contained 17 health care promises, including substance-abuse supports, incentivizing healthy lifestyles, and the expansion of public health coverage.[8] The Buffalo Party's approach was based primarily on reducing inequities in rural health care and ending the federal transfer programs, including the *Canada Health Transfer*.[9] The Progressive Conservative Party platform addressed staffing and infrastructure concerns in hospitals, long-term care, and rural and Northern health care.[10] Lastly, the Liberal Party of Saskatchewan focused on seniors' health care, including a drug plan and the expansion of homecare services.[11]

The Campaign and Aftermath

With polls indicating a massive lead for the Saskatchewan

Party going into the campaign, there was little doubt that Premier Scott Moe would secure another majority government. Yet despite this, Ryan Meili insisted the NDP was running for government and not just to increase opposition seats in the legislature.[12] But even with the NDP's extensive commitments to increases in health

> *But even with the NDP's extensive commitments to increases in health care spending, new facilities and new health care personnel were not enough to turn the tide against overwhelming odds.*

care spending, new facilities and new health care personnel were not enough to turn the tide against overwhelming odds.

But this is not to say that health care did not receive attention in the media during the campaign itself. In a campaign that can be fairly said to lack a major driving issue that focused public attention, health care itself received its fair share of the news cycle. In particular, the NDP's promise to hire additional doctors, nurses, and other allied health professionals garnered significant attention. In the first half of the campaign, four of the seven articles on the NDP's health care platform published by the *Regina Leader-Post* focused on this promise.[13] In the same period of time, the *Regina Leader-Post* published pieces on four of the Saskatchewan Party's health care promises, with the exception of reducing surgical wait times and hiring additional continuing care aides.[14] Subsequent media coverage on health care issues, including mental health, addictions, and safe consumption sites, continued through the campaign.

During the leadership debate, Moe consistently raised concerns that the NDP promises were unaffordable. Meili countered with reference to a proposed NDP wealth tax as a source of new revenue and the need to invest in health care in order to sustain it. Interestingly, the one unexpected

health issue that raised its head during that debate was the question of support for safe consumption sites. Meili expressed full support for "harm reduction" strategies but was unclear about funding safe consumption sites (He was clearer in his support later in an appearance on CBC BlueSky). Moe said he would "consider funding" safe consumption sites, despite turning down a request for similar funding in the current provincial budget.

In the final analysis, health care may be a key issue for Saskatchewan voters, but the various promises made by the two major parties did little to shake up the campaign or change the political fortunes of either of the province's

> *In the final analysis, health care may be a key issue for Saskatchewan voters, but the various promises made by the two major parties did little to shake up the campaign or change the political fortunes of either of the province's major parties.*

major parties. The Saskatchewan Party handily won its fourth majority, the NDP remains in opposition, and no doubt, provincial residents remain concerned about the future of their health care system.

17. Climate Change and Energy

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These days many people talk about the climate "crisis." There are even those who refer to climate change as an "existential threat" to our way of life. Judging by what happened, or rather didn't happen in the Saskatchewan election campaign, one can only conclude that if there is a crisis, it's not enough of one to warrant any significant attention of voters.

When it comes to climate change, two things set Saskatchewan apart. One is that the province has the highest per capita GHG emission rates in Canada. The other is that polls show Saskatchewan people are skeptical about the whole global warming thing.[1] It is an opinion that stands in contrast to other provinces and territories, which, before the COVID-19 pandemic, ranked climate change as the top global threat.[2] Not surprisingly, the absence of climate change as an issue in the 2020 Saskatchewan election and Sask Party election landslide corresponds with a North American trend wherein conservative provinces and states coincide with reduced acceptance of climate change and its impacts.[3] Other than the Green Party, this provincial mood was reflected in other parties' platforms that predominantly focused on technology to fix climate change while simultaneously supporting Saskatchewan's economy.

Scott Moe, Saskatchewan Party leader and the incumbent Premier, started his 2020 campaign standing in front of a massive Chevy Tahoe. Capitalizing on the recent 2019 federal election, when not a single Saskatchewan Liberal candidate was elected to Parliament, Moe continued to oppose the federal Liberal carbon tax. To effectively 'undo' the carbon tax, Moe promised a one-year, 10 per cent rebate on SaskPower bills. It would funnel $215 per household to rate payers and, in economic terms, effectively support the current carbon-intense power production regime.

The Saskatchewan Party outlined no new environmental commitments during the campaign, with its climate change plan appearing on page 43 of its 50-page "Plan for a Strong Saskatchewan." The platform reaffirmed the "Prairie Resilience" plan as the "Made-in-Saskatchewan Climate Change Strategy," which heavily relies on technology to reduce GHG emissions. The plan points to the Memorandum of Understanding the Moe government signed with governments of Ontario, New Brunswick, and Alberta that commits the provinces to collaborate on the development of small modular reactors (SMRs). It is clearly a long-term commitment as SMRs are not expected to be available until 2030, the year that the Moe government has committed to reducing GHG emissions by 12 million tonnes. Recently, the Sask Party government formed a nuclear secretariat it tasked with securing funding and engaging with communities, Indigenous groups, industry and labour, and educational institutions.

Moe's support for the oil and gas industry was evident in the campaign. At one point he assailed an NDP candidate for her two-and-a-half-year-old expletive included statement opposing the oil sands and the Trans Mountain pipeline expansion project. Moe accused the provincial NDP leader Ryan Meili of not denouncing the comments, which for Moe, were akin to supporting "the elimination of a strong Saskatchewan economy." In response, Meili accused Moe of lacking imagination on what a strong Saskatchewan economy might look like.

The NDP platform referenced taking ambitious action on climate change under the nomenclature of 'Renew Saskatchewan', a position that, based on results, did not resonate with Saskatchewan voters. This could be due to the

> *The NDP platform referenced taking ambitious action on climate change under the nomenclature of 'Renew Saskatchewan', a position that, based on results, did not resonate with Saskatchewan voters.*

fact that much of the vision was yet to be developed, as the NDP sought to strike the right balance between resource development and the need to fight climate change. Arguing that the Sask Party killed the solar industry, the NDP plan envisioned adapting new technology to address climate change, while maintaining its support for the oil industry.

The NDP's five priorities were 50 per cent renewable and non-emitting electricity by 2030, legislating a target of 100 per cent by 2050. It would be achieved by investing in ambitious energy efficiencies, protecting wetlands and grasslands, empowering distributed energy grids, and working with SaskPower to make Saskatchewan a leader in geothermal power production (also identified as a bridge for oil sector workers in relation to drilling and pipelines). The NDP argued that its plan would create jobs in renewables and support a minimum wage of $15. Meili wouldn't give a number for geothermal, and he didn't rule out nuclear options, which he didn't feel would be economical for 15 to 20 years.

On the climate change and energy front, the Buffalo Party, Saskatchewan Liberals, and Green Party only received a smattering of support. The Saskatchewan Liberal Party's mandate strongly reflected the federal Liberal platform. The Green Party platform, which arguably was the most pro-environmental and aggressive in relation to climate change, was equally unsupported by voters.

Green Party leader Naomi Hunter's agenda was 100 per cent clean electricity generation in four years, paid for through a wealth tax. She also called for the immediate reduction of reliance on coal and the end of all exploration of oil and gas. Conversely, the Buffalo Party promised to maintain three coal-fired power plants and become a global leader in carbon capture and storage. The new Liberal leader Robert Rudachyk's green agenda relied on distributed energy production, infrastructure for electric cars, and carbon pricing similar to British Columbia's.

Ultimately, the NDP's and Sask Party's positions on climate change were not significantly different. Both parties expressed support for the oil and gas industry and did not identify any needed changes in the industry given the climate change crises.

The NDP commitment to 50 per cent renewables by 2050 is already part of the Sask Party's "Prairie Resilience" plan, and the remainder of the NDP's commitments was not significantly new, different, or groundbreaking in relation to the Saskatchewan Party's position.

Voters in Saskatchewan largely reflected the interests of Saskatchewan's energy base of oil, gas, and high greenhouse gas emitting industry, which was reflected in the weak support for the Saskatchewan Liberals and Green Party—both of which had aggressive climate change strategies. Reflecting pre-election public opinion research that indicated climate change policy was a lower priority, Saskatchewan voters opted to stay the course, opposing the federal government's carbon pricing plan and supporting the Saskatchewan oil and gas economy.

This mood was reflected in the winning Sask Party's platform on climate change, which contained no new policies or commitments, and endorsed the government's "Prairie Resilience" plan. Meanwhile, the NDP failed to develop a credible plan that differentiated it from the Sask Party.

18. Environment: The Issue that Failed to Bark in the Night

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In the Sherlock Holmes story about the disappearance of race horse "Silver Blaze", the great detective concludes that he is dealing with an inside job by observing that while he was greeted by a furiously barking dog on his own visit to the horse's stable no one heard anything on the night in question although the dog was at his usual post. What Holmes called "the curious incident of the dog in the night" serves as a metaphor for the role of the environment as an issue in the 2020 Saskatchewan election. While the CBC reported that the environment came second only to the economy as top of mind for those who completed its Vote Compass survey[1], the two main contenders had clearly decided there was nothing in this issue for them and largely ignored it during the campaign. How can we explain this apparent disconnect between voters and parties?

First, of course, visitors to the Vote Compass page are a self-selected group for whom the CBC is an authoritative source of news or at least a website worth visiting. The fact that they are concerned about the environment as an issue tells us more about them than it does about the broader electorate. The Angus Reid survey of public opinion in Saskatchewan, released on October 15, paints a different picture.[2] While this poll reported that respondents were overwhelmingly making their voting decisions based on the policy choices of the parties, "climate change/environment" (an unfortunate description of the issue area) barely scraped into the top ten, tying for ninth spot with "unemployment/jobs" as the top-of-mind issue for just 17 per cent of those polled. This was an election about health care and the economy, and how other issues played out during the campaign tended to reflect the connection that voters made between them and their two top concerns. Thus, to the extent that there was any mention of environmental issues in party platforms or the debate, it concerned climate change and energy, the topic of a separate chapter in this collection. Broader questions of sustainability, environmental justice, land use, and even pollution were edited out of the campaign by mutual consent of the two major parties. It was an inside job.

It need not have been this way. While health was certainly a key issue in this election, the close connection between environmental health and human health was certainly not. It is especially surprising that NDP Leader Ryan Meili did not make the environment a key focus of his campaign considering that the link between human health and the health of the environment inspired his 2018 book *A Healthy Society*. Meili writes, "No serious discussion about how we view our society can ignore the growing concerns about human damage to the ecosystems that support all life." Nor is broader interest in these issues lacking. For example, the non-governmental organization (NGO) Public Pastures - Public Interest (PPPI) works to raise awareness that less than 10 per cent of Saskatchewan's native grasslands remain. In this election, PPPI called on candidates to keep Crown grasslands publicly owned and to conduct an inventory of the province's remaining native prairie—a call that went unheard.

And what of the Green Party? While the Green Party included in their campaign a focus on protecting wetlands and grasslands along with forests, water, land, clean air, and waste reduction, it was unable to draw the attention of either the two main parties or, more importantly, the electorate itself, to environmental issues beyond climate

change and the federal carbon tax. The Leader of the Green Party of Saskatchewan, Naomi Hunter, was excluded from the televised leaders' debate, which left Hunter unable to directly question either Moe or Meili on the environment.

Provincial Green Parties have elected representatives in British Columbia (where they substantially improved their vote share in a provincial election held just two days ahead of this Saskatchewan vote), Ontario, New Brunswick, and P.E.I., where the Green Party formed the province's Official Opposition in 2019. The Saskatchewan Green Party placed their focus in this election on reaching the entire province by running a full slate of candidates, but they failed to make a significant breakthrough. The newly formed Buffalo Party received more total preliminary votes in this election (2.9 per cent) than the Green Party (2.4 per cent) even though the Buffalo Party only ran 17 candidates compared with the Green Party's near full slate.

What of the future? The Green Party's electoral irrelevance combined with the first-past-the-post electoral system seems to rule out co-operative efforts between the Green Party and the NDP, despite the fact that members of Saskatchewan's tight-knit environmental community include supporters of both parties. The Green Party performed so poorly that it is hard to see how their intervention affected even the closest of races between the Saskatchewan Party and the NDP, creating little incentive for an electoral pact, even assuming that the Green Party could deliver its voters to the NDP on the day. Barring a catastrophic focusing event that draws attention to the environment, environmental politics in Saskatchewan will continue to take place mostly outside of electoral politics. The newly formed non-profit EnviroCollective aims to unite and co-ordinate efforts among those who want to see environmental issues taken more seriously in the province, with partisan politics not being the focus. EnviroCollective has been offering lawn signs to the public during the election that do not align with any party but rather are black and white. The signs represent the sentiment of the group that the issue of the environment is not 'left' or 'right' but is black or white. Either we act to protect the environment on behalf of all species, or we all face the consequences.

19. Diversity Profiles and Issues in the 2020 Saskatchewan Provincial Election

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Diversity has been a salient value in Canadian political discourse for much of recent history. Over time, its prominence has increased but the increase particularly in recent years is due to a variety of factors rooted in global, continental, national, and sub-national levels. What is significant and clear is that diversity has become an increasingly multifaceted rainbow-like and chameleon-like phenomenon, composed of a multiplicity of dynamic elements that have the capacity to change their forms, colours, temperature, and temperament for a variety of reasons. Diversity manifests itself frequently in many forms and many fora, ranging from mundane uneventful aspects of life to the highly dynamic and significant eventful historical events.

The purpose of this chapter is primarily to examine and analyze the following aspects of the 2020 Saskatchewan provincial election:
1. The stances on diversity adopted by the six competing provincial parties during the campaign based on their platforms on their respective websites;
2. The diversity among candidates running in the election; and
3. The diversity among winning candidates in the election.

Party Stances on Diversity

Across the platforms of the six parties in contention, immigration and diversity were generally described as desirable and valuable for the community. The principal differences among the parties were their beliefs in the kind of value that immigration brings. Broadly speaking, parties on the left-of-centre tended to frame immigration as an intrinsic good, meaning that they believe the primary benefit of immigration is the advancement of pluralism that it brings to communities. Parties on the right-of-centre, the Saskatchewan Party being the dominant representative, tended to frame immigration as an instrumental good, highlighting the economic benefits of attracting highly skilled workers and professionals.

Throughout their campaign, the Saskatchewan Party focused primarily on the fiscal incentives of immigration, while paying comparatively less attention to its social benefits. Although the party voiced its support for attracting more immigrants to Saskatchewan, its reasons for doing so were invariably framed in economic terms. Diversity as a social value, and the intrinsic benefits of immigration, was hardly discussed in the party's official platform, or in its statements to the press.[1] Indigenous issues, in contrast, occupied more of the party's attention during the campaign. According to its official platform, the Sask Party has committed to continue providing financial support and to introduce new investments in the areas of health care, skills development, access to education, and suicide prevention programs.

In contrast to the incumbent party, the Saskatchewan New Democratic Party (NDP) campaign focused principally on the intrinsic social benefits of diversity, while paying comparatively less attention to its material dimensions. The NDP has been active in advocacy efforts to promote tolerance of diversity in various communities, establishing bodies such as its Cultural Diversity Committee to further such ends. Although its platform promised to enact policies to support the growth of diversity in the province—such as making it easier for newcomers to immigrate with more family members or to have their foreign credentials recognized—the NDP

noticeably lacked any proposals to enact broader change in the province's approach to immigration. Interestingly, the approach of the NDP to Indigenous issues bears great similarity to the Sask Party plan: both parties affirmed the importance of continued reconciliation, and both stressed the need for increased funding and better service provision for Indigenous communities.

However, the party that demonstrated the most nuanced and attentive approach to diversity this campaign season was the Green Party. Although the other smaller parties in the race – namely, the Buffalo Party, the Liberals, and the Progressive Conservatives – paid little to no attention to issues of diversity throughout their campaign, the Green Party indicated the most progressive stance in terms of diversity issues over all other parties. In its platform, the party asserted that human diversity and ecological biodiversity are both essential in creating a society that works in harmony with nature. It should also be noted that the Green Party is the only party in this election to have had a female leader.

Table 1. Candidates

Party	Number of Candidates	Female	Indigenous / Metis	Non-Indigenous Minorities	% Female	% Indigenous/ Metis	% Non-Indigenous Minorities
Saskatchewan Party	61	12	3	6	19.7	4.9	9.8
New Democratic Party, Sask. Section	61	30	12	6	49.2	19.7	9.8
Saskatchewan Green Party		30	15	4	50	25	6.7
Progressive Conservative Party of Saskatchewan	31	7	1	0	22.6	3.2	0
Saskatchewan Liberal Association	3	0	0	0	0	0	0
Buffalo Party of Saskatchewan	17	2	0	0	11.8	0	0

Table 1 illustrates the degree of diversity in each party's cohort of candidates, in terms of gender and ethnicity.[2] The Green Party and the NDP paid the most attention to issues of social inequality throughout the campaign, and this is reflected in the even balance of men and women among their candidates.

Table 2. Winners

Party	Number of Winning Candidates	Female	Indigenous Minorities	Non-Indigenous Minorities	% Female	% Indigenous/ Metis	% Non-Indigenous Minorities
Saskatchewan Party	47	8	2	2	17	4.3	4.3
New Democratic Party, Sask. Section	9	6	3	0	66.6	33.3	0

Table 2 provides a breakdown of the diversity profiles of the elected candidates, excluding the five ridings that have yet to be called at the time of writing.[3] Of the 56 winning candidates, 14 were women, and seven were Indigenous or a visible minority. Surprisingly, however, women accounted for the majority of elected NDP MLAs.

Conclusion

The results of the 2020 provincial election indicated that diversity in Saskatchewan has been flourishing in recent decades, albeit mostly within urban areas. In 2001, only 26 per cent of the 21 ridings in Saskatoon and Regina had a female representative, and all were occupied by persons of Caucasian heritage. After the present election, 45 per cent of the ridings are now led by a female MLA, and four ridings have elected an Indigenous or visible minority representative. However, diversity was much less apparent in the 35 rural ridings, 77 per cent of which elected a white male MLA. These signs seem to indicate that more attention needs to be paid to the rural-urban divide when discussing how diversity can be promoted in the province.

20. Gender Issues in the 2020 Saskatchewan Election

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Even in 2020, gender equality remains on the agenda of many Saskatchewan people. Women in Saskatchewan experience economic, social, and political inequality in many forms, from the persistent wage gap[1] to some of the highest rates of intimate partner violence in the country.[2] Inequality and exclusion also persist for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and Two-Spirit people (LGBTQ2+) and others whose identities do not conform to heteronormativity or a binary model of gender. In the months leading up to the 2020 provincial election, individuals and groups worked to get gender and sexuality issues into the party platforms and the public discourse.

Which particular gender issues were raised in the media during the pre-election period? Which issues actually appeared in the official party platforms, and to what extent? To answer these questions, we conducted a content analysis of gender issues during the three-month period preceding the election, with particular attention to those framed as election issues. News articles were collected from CBC National, CBC Saskatchewan, CTV National, CTV Saskatoon and Regina, Global National, Global Saskatchewan, *Globe & Mail, National Post*, and *Prairie Dog* from the period of July 26, 2020 to October 25, 2020. These online news sites were systematically searched with these keywords: "gender," "women," "woman," "female," "LGBT," "lesbian," "gay," and "queer." A total of 24 news articles were found and entered into a database.

Findings

The key gender issues covered in media articles included women's entrepreneurship (in general and in agriculture), human trafficking / missing and murdered Indigenous women, childcare, pay equity, gendered unemployment trends during the COVID-19 pandemic, women's underrepresentation in politics, sexual harassment, LGBTQ2 issues, heteronormativity, and sex education curricula. Several articles discussed candidate diversity in each party, and some addressed the NDP's promise of a gender-equal cabinet. The LGBTQ2 articles revolved mostly around a particular report card initiative, in which two equality-seeking organizations evaluated each party's plans on LGBTQ2 issues. In some cases (e.g., women's entrepreneurship and gendered unemployment), news articles were prompted by the release of new reports or data, such as a Statistics Canada report showing disproportionate unemployment for women during the pandemic.

As shown in **Table 1**, gender issues were explicitly framed as election issues in 41 per cent of cases. The NDP was referenced the most on such issues, at 87 total mentions compared to 21 for the Saskatchewan Party, eight for the Green Party, and four for the Liberals or Progressive Conservative Party. One article discussed gender issues pertaining to female candidates from both the Saskatchewan Party and NDP.

Table 1. Summary of Content Analysis Results, by Keyword and Source

Keywords	Not framed as an election issue	Framed as election issue but not by specific parties	Talked about by parties					Media sources
			Sask Party	NDP	Sask Party & NDP	Green Party	Liberal/PC	
Woman	3							CBC
				3				CTV
			2					Global National
								Prairie Dog
				1				Party Platforms
Women	48	26						CBC
	13	1	2	27	7			CTV
	11	4	1	7				Global National
	4							Prairie Dog
			1	14			2	Party Platforms
Gender	10	7	1			3		CBC
		1	1	5				CTV
	2	6	2	3		1		Global National
	1							Prairie Dog
				4			1	Party Platforms
Female	5	8	1					CBC
	2		3	3	4			CTV
	2		5					Global National
								Prairie Dog
								Party Platforms
LGBT	7	9						CBC
		6	1	1		1		CTV
		3	1	1			4	Global National
								Prairie Dog
				6				Party Platforms
Queer		3						CBC
		1						CTV
								Global National
								Prairie Dog
				5				Party Platforms
Lesbian	1	1						CBC
								CTV
								Global National
								Prairie Dog
				3				Party Platforms
Gay	2	1						CBC
								CTV
				1				Global National
								Prairie Dog
				3				Party Platforms

In addition to media stories, we also searched election platforms, press releases, and other official election statements found on the websites of the Saskatchewan Party, NDP, Green Party, Liberal Party, Progressive Conservative Party, and Buffalo Party for references to gender and sexuality issues. Although some platforms included issues with a clear gender dimension—such as childcare, intimate partner violence, or pay equity—we only included cases where parties themselves explicitly linked the issue to gender in the documents, thus demonstrating their awareness and acknowledgement of the gender dimensions.

The results showed significant differences among the parties. The Buffalo Party, Progressive Conservative Party, and Liberal Party platforms and press releases contained no references to gender or sexuality issues. The Saskatchewan Party platform contained one usage of the word "women," but this was only in relation to "men and women" working in the energy sector, and not to gender issues. In contrast, the Green Party of Saskatchewan platform featured commitments to reproductive freedom, gender equality, and anti-discrimination policies, while the NDP website contained mandates from its Pride Committee and the Saskatchewan NDP Women group, along with one reference each to "gender" and "women" in the platform. **Table 1** provides a summary of the data from press releases, platforms, and other election documents.

Discussion

Despite strong attention to gender and sexual equality in the public media discourse, such issues did not manifest across all party platforms. Only two of six parties displayed meaningful attention to gender issues in their formal written documents. Although each party's approach to gender issues will necessarily be shaped by its political ideology, the "gender gap" between public discourse and platform issues also raises questions about party responsiveness to public concerns.

Consideration of gender issues seems to correlate with the gender diversity of party candidates themselves.[3] As five of the 24 media articles in the pre-election period aptly noted, several parties did not have equal representation of female

Despite strong attention to gender and sexual equality in the public media discourse, such issues did not manifest across all party platforms. Only two of six parties displayed meaningful attention to gender issues in their formal written documents. Although each party's approach to gender issues will necessarily be shaped by its political ideology, the "gender gap" between public discourse and platform issues also raises questions about party responsiveness to public concerns.

candidates. One article noted that "the NDP has 28 female candidates out of 61, compared to the 12 of 61 running for the Sask. Party."[4] Those with equitable representation of women (i.e., NDP and Green Party) tended to show more attention to gender issues in their platforms and documents.

Of all gender issues identified in the pre-election media discourse, the issue of women's representation in politics was most prominently featured in the actual election discourse (e.g., press releases). Although childcare was mentioned by both the Saskatchewan Party and NDP platforms, it was not explicitly framed as a gender issue in either platform. Other issues that were identified in the platforms (and linked explicitly to women, gender, or sexuality) included elimination of sexist dress codes in the workplace (NDP), control over fertility (Green Party),

and respect for sexual minorities (Green Party). Although LGBTQ2 issues were discussed in the media, such issues were not strongly evident across most platforms. Overall, our research identified a significant difference among the various parties' attention to gender, with some parties integrating specific gender concerns into their platforms and others not mentioning gender at all. The results also suggest a gap between public discourse on gender equality (as illustrated in media stories) and party priorities in the 2020 Saskatchewan election.

The results also suggest a gap between public discourse on gender equality (as illustrated in media stories) and party priorities in the 2020 Saskatchewan election.

21. Northern Saskatchewan and the Provincial Election of 2020

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Decades have passed since the last time that northern Saskatchewan figured prominently in political affairs in Saskatchewan. The provincial election of 2020 did not change this pattern. Northern issues did not feature in the political campaigns, and the North felt, understandably, that the province as a whole was not much interested in the region. This reality is rooted in the "internal colonization" that has long seen the North developed primarily in the interests of the South, without firm reference to the needs and interests of the people of the North.

The political landscape of the northern half of Saskatchewan, typically referred to as the Northern Administrative District, has not changed in quite some time. The region has two ridings—Athabasca and Cumberland—both dominated by primarily Indigenous communities, with a robust traditional economy, a strong mining sector, and sharp socio-economic and cultural differences from the rest of the province. The ridings are strongly influenced by the larger centres: Creighton, Cumberland House, and La Ronge in the case of the Cumberland constituency and Green Lake, Beauval, Ille a la Crosse, Buffalo Narrows, and La Loche in the Athabasca riding.

The 2020 election results seemed almost preordained: near unanimous forecasts of a 2020 NDP sweep of the two northern seats held true. Created in 1975, the two northern ridings had not been affected by the 2016 redrafting of electoral boundaries. The New Democratic Party (NDP) won both northern ridings in 1975 and has won almost every election since that time. Buckley Belanger won as a Liberal Party representative in 1995. He shifted to the NDP three years later and held the seat through to the 2020

election, when he defeated Saskatchewan Party candidate Kelly Kwan. Belanger won more than 56 per cent of all the votes, almost 20 per cent more than Kwan and well ahead of the less than seven per cent secured from Green Party candidate Leroy Laliberte. Likewise, the NDP has held the Cumberland seat since 1975. First elected in 2008, MLA Doyle Vermette has held the seat since that time, securing more than 60 per cent of the vote in 2016 and gaining a similar majority (66 per cent versus 31 per cent) over Saskatchewan Party representative Darren Deschambeault in 2020. The Green Party candidate Aaron Oochoo received only three per cent of the votes.

Northern Saskatchewan was not able to project regional concerns onto the provincial scene, although not for a want of effort. The Saskatchewan Party and NDP candidates pushed their provincial agendas in the North but with little northern comment. NDP leader Ryan Meili visited the region and promised, if elected, to reinstate the Northern Teacher Education Program (NORTEP). He also made particular mention of the efforts of La Ronge resident Tristen Durocher to promote suicide prevention strategies. Highlighting the limited attention given to the region by the Saskatchewan Party government, Meili stated, "We have a choice this election between a government that ignores the North and one that will invest in northern people."

Premier Moe and the Saskatchewan Party kept a low profile in the North, beyond continuing their strong support for mining in the region. Northern leaders had resisted efforts by the government in April 2020 to reopen the provincial economy and were upset about a perceived lack of attention to regional health, education, and economic

development issues. The Saskatchewan Party's dismissal of Tristen Durocher's suicide prevention campaign did not endear the party to northern residents, nor did the general lack of interest in northern issues. Given that the Saskatchewan Party was running on its track record, it did not have many northern initiatives to highlight. The Premier and the party made a lacklustre effort in the Athabasca and Cumberland constituencies and could hardly be surprised by the results.

It is not as though the North was lacking in political concerns. The region's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, while a source of friction with the Saskatchewan government, had been well-coordinated and effective, in the main. The management of the crisis sharpened regional interest in political and administrative autonomy. More broadly, a sharp multi-year decline in the uranium mining sector created a surge in underemployment in the region and real economic distress, without an appropriate provincial response to the economic challenges. Northern Saskatchewan continued to experience persistent difficulties with health care (including the absence of dialysis care in the region), high costs of living, problems with Indigenous housing, and the absence of a strategy for addressing Indigenous political, legal, and cultural aspirations.

The North did not wait for provincial political parties to propose region-specific solutions. New North, an association of northern communities, issued a press release critical of the provincial parties' approaches to the region; Chair of New North and Creighton Mayor Bruce Filder commented, "While the COVID-19 pandemic brought attention to the poor health outcomes of northern residents and heightened the concern of leaders and authorities in the north, all that seems to have been forgotten come election time as the north appears to be mostly off the radar this election campaign, if the party platforms are anything to go on."

New North articulated both a list of serious challenges and pragmatic steps to address northern Saskatchewan concerns. The organization emphasized the need for substantial improvements in northern health care, including mental health initiatives and suicide prevention

efforts. New local politicians highlighted the need for region-wide economic development and job creation, creating a ministry for northern Saskatchewan, and funding a task force to emphasize northern economic development. The latter called for a coordinated pan-northern approach to planning, investment and business promotion, with the creation of a regional authority with the human and financial resources needed to capitalize on real northern strengths. Perhaps most significantly, the organization criticized all of the provincial parties for failing to reach out to communities on political priorities and program investments.

The northern political situation may be changing. The emergence of the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan as a stronger and larger organization and the possible development of a Métis land claim will reshape northern politics. The province-wide land claim would raise the profile of Métis affairs and change political and administrative issues in the North. It would provide a new and more empowered locus for Métis and northern activism and could reduce interest in provincial politics. But these developments scarcely made a dent in the provincial election, with neither major party advancing a comprehensive strategy for the North, little constructive or original thinking on Indigenous issues generally, and with party leaders paying little attention to the region throughout the campaign.

The 2020 provincial election in northern Saskatchewan unfolded much as it had for almost half a century. On election night, the region voted strongly for incumbents (Belanger and Deschambeault), once again elected NDP candidates, and failed to penetrate the provincial political consciousness. Northern politicians and community leaders had articulated serious issues and fundamental political questions. But the provincial campaigns of the Saskatchewan Party and the NDP did not fully embrace regional concerns. As had been the case for decades, the northern half of Saskatchewan remained well outside the provincial political mainstream, receiving little indication that Saskatchewan as a whole incorporated the North into their understanding of the province's present or future.

22. The Business Sector and the 2020 SK Election

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Saskatchewan is a province noted for its stark contrasts. These contrasts are evident, most notably in our geography and climate but also in our political culture and unique brand of electoral politics. Saskatchewan's almost folkloric social democratic tradition and DIY co-operative spirit exists (often uneasily) alongside its equally storied reputation for developing (and exporting) rugged, innovative entrepreneurs. Saskatchewan today is equal parts Tommy Douglas and Brett Wilson. Our provincial economy is marked by state ownership of key industries such as auto insurance and utilities that operate alongside private sector resource-based businesses competing in a hypercompetitive global marketplace.

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With this juxtaposition in mind, our central argument here is that neither the newly re-elected centre-right Saskatchewan Party (Sask Party) nor the left-leaning opposition New Democratic Party (NDP) this time around proposed any grandiose ideas or suggested a major course change. Instead, party platforms focused more on practical measures, such as getting money in the hands of businesses and households and getting people back to work. The need for the parties to address voters' more pressing COVID-19-related concerns about economic recovery and health care amidst a second wave likely served to temper parties' bolder policy ambitions.[1] This piece will illustrate this point further by citing specific examples in the following areas: business taxation, childcare affordability, and government procurement.

Business Taxation

Neither the Sask Party nor the NDP policy platforms articulated any sweeping changes on the business taxation front. The Sask Party's proposal to reduce the provincial small business rate (SBR) from the current two per cent to zero per cent over two years is a temporary measure that will likely be well-received by small business owners, a key constituency group for the Sask Party.[2] This proposal would benefit about 31,000 of Saskatchewan's roughly 40,000 incorporated small businesses that maintain payroll.[3] While reducing the SBR to 0 per cent temporarily will provide much-needed tax relief for small businesses, not mentioned in the Sask Party platform was a pledge to reduce the higher general corporate rate or reduce the differential between the SBR and the general corporate rate as a means to encourage small businesses to scale up.

Instead of promising to lower statutory corporate rates across the board, the NDP opted for targeted tax measures, such as

reinstating the film tax credit, bringing back start-up loans for rural small businesses, reducing the province's regressive craft beer levy to assist homegrown producers compete, and removing the PST on construction labour that has been a thorn in the side of the industry since 2017.[4] No doubt these measures were developed with key groups in mind, such as creatives in the film industry, craft brewers, rural entrepreneurs, and workers (and their trade unions) operating in the building trades.

Other established parties with no representation in the legislature also included targeted tax measures in their platforms. The Liberals promised to eliminate the PST on insurance, modernize the tax system by adjusting income tax brackets for inflation (bracket creep), and reinstate the film tax credit.[5] The Progressive Conservative Party wanted to 'create' a manufacturing tax credit,[6] reinstate the potash production and film tax credits, as well as remove PST from select goods.[7] It is noteworthy that none of the established parties proposed a review of the province's tax system or significant tax policy changes such as GST/PST harmonization or even PST recoverability for businesses.

Childcare Affordability

Sask Party and the NDP pledged to make childcare more affordable, but each party approached it from a different angle. In true small-c conservative fashion, the Sask Party's approach to achieving childcare affordability was more supply-side focused. Its pledge to create 750 new spaces over the next four years is focused on reducing the up-front costs borne by licensed daycare providers with the expectation that those cost savings would be passed along in the form of lower daycare costs for parents.[8]

In contrast, the NDP pledged to create 2,200 new spaces every year, deliver subsidized $25 per day childcare, and conduct an expert panel review of the childcare system.[9] The Liberal platform included a vague promise to make quality licensed daycare affordable for all low- and middle-income families.[10] While parties may differ on specific actions around childcare, they do so only by varying degrees. COVID-19 has forced parties of all ideological persuasions to make childcare affordability a way to promote labour force (re)attachment, particularly among women who often find themselves tasked

with caregiving duties. Promoting childcare affordability will be crucial to helping Saskatchewan businesses remain competitive. It will go a long way in ensuring workplaces have available to them the skilled workers they require.

Government Procurement

Both Sask Party and NDP policies around government procurement for this election were shaped heavily by the massive disruption to established supply chains brought on by COVID-19 and the need to retool government procurement policy to ensure that Saskatchewan workers and businesses enjoy the full stimulative impacts of an unprecedented COVID-19 economic stimulus package worth $7.5B total in spending over two years.[11] Just before the writ was dropped, the Sask Party government put into force a SaskBuilds Board-approved government policy designed to prioritize Saskatchewan-based vendors—consistent with the original intent of *Priority Saskatchewan*.

The awarding of many tenders to out-of-province firms has been a point of contention among the province's business community in recent years. In an attempt to court frustrated voters operating in the procurement space, the NDP platform contained a "Saskatchewan First" procurement policy whereby Saskatchewan-based firms and workers would be given priority for Crown and government-led projects.[12] The Progressive Conservative Party platform also contained similar overtures regarding a preference for sourcing locally.[13] In the case of government procurement policy, the Sask Party, NDP, and the Progressive Conservative Party platforms did not differ substantially in this regard.

Conclusion

The need to address voters' pressing concerns over COVID-19 served to temper the more grandiose policy ambitions (and therefore spending promises) of established parties for this election. The ideological gulf that has gradually narrowed over time between parties, particularly the Sask Party and the NDP, is indicative of a larger trend that began in the 1990s and continued into the 2000s.[14] Whether the next provincial election, scheduled for 2024, will see a continuation of ideological convergence toward the centre or a stark departure from it is anybody's guess.

23. Trade Policy and the 2020 SK Election

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Trade is central to Saskatchewan's economic future. Given that all the parties vying for office in this election wanted to change the structure and performance of the economy, aspects of our trading relationships were relevant but, unlike in past elections where disputes about our preferred trading relationships dominated, little of the formal debate in the media or in campaign material dwelt on the merits of the policy options. The one exception was minor skirmishes between the parties about how much Saskatchewan procurement or construction should be open to out-of-province firms and workers.

Saskatchewan is more trade dependent than all other provinces. In the last five years (2014–18), the province exported on average $51B of goods and services, or about 64 per cent of GDP.[1] Approximately two-thirds of our sales go to the rest of the world and one-third to other provinces. The lion's share of our international revenue comes from oil, potash, and crop exports, about half from the U.S. and much of the rest from Asia. On average, Saskatchewan posts international trade surpluses of $12.4B annually. In spite of strong exports in recent years, a range of trade disputes in Asia, with the U.S., and in Europe currently depress some markets.[2]

From a policy perspective, Saskatchewan is bound by an alphabet soup of trade agreements, including the World Trade Organization (WTO) Agreement, the recently revised Canada, U.S., Mexico Agreement (CUSMA, which replaced NAFTA), the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA, between Canada and the EU), the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), and myriad of specific international

institutions that govern quality, safety and functioning of the key markets with which we engage. As a trade-dependent province, Saskatchewan relies heavily on the international trade architecture, but few of the institutions are within the power of the province to do much about it.

Domestically, the province is a principal in two key trade interprovincial agreements: the Canadian Free Trade Agreement (CFTA, 2017) and the New West Partnership Trade Agreement (NWPTA) between the four western provinces. Both work to open up market opportunities in other provinces while at the same time allowing firms from elsewhere into the province to conduct business and to bid on and deliver key construction and industrial services and procurement.

The provincial economy was suffering as the election was called. The combination of low commodity prices and a delayed harvest in 2019 took the wind out of the provincial economy at the end of the year. The furloughs and shutdowns in response to the COVID-19 pandemic earlier this year knocked the economy down, with employment dropping sharply and incomes impaired. Polling in September 2020 revealed that 35 per cent of residents thought the economy was continuing to fall, 34 per cent saw continuing stagnation, and only 27 per cent could see any prospects for improvement.[3]

Given that international markets are next to impossible to change from Saskatchewan, there was more interest in domestic opportunities. Apart from the Sask Party—which signed onto both domestic agreements during its time in office and remains committed to its purpose—all the

other parties have had long-standing concerns about the loss of local markets for local firms and the limits those agreements put on provincial policies and programs. The logic for many is that, as recovery takes hold, reserving those contracts and jobs for locals would generate a more robust circular economy in the province.

More generally, the economic goals of the different parties revealed that each sees a somewhat different role for exports and trade agreements.

The Saskatchewan Party ran on its previously announced Growth Plan 2020/30.[4] The growth plan focussed on bolstering export-driven recovery as a way to deliver 100,000 more jobs by 2030. This involves increasing the value of exports to the rest of Canada and abroad each by 50 per cent, with much of the growth coming from expanding the number of $1B-markets. This would require sharp rises in agri-food, potash, uranium, forestry and manufacturing exports, and a bump in the relatively small tourism industry. Getting to these targets requires higher private capital investment (up to $16B annually), much of it to increase processing and value added to primary products, combined with about $30B of new infrastructure, much of it for transportation networks to get goods to market. This policy fundamentally requires aggressive trade liberalization to open up these markets.

The New Democratic Party laid out its ideas in its People-First Recovery economic plan in June of 2020.[5] While the majority of this plan was concerned with economic recovery from COVID-19, it focused less on the big-firm growth opportunities and targeted bolstering entrepreneurship, supporting innovation, promoting product, and accessing capital both within the province and globally. Part of this plan was to enhance access to diverse markets by strengthening the Saskatchewan Trade and Export Partnership, a provincial public-private partnership that assists firms and sectors in exporting to existing markets and tapping into new markets.

The other parties had less to say about trade but leaned towards limiting external controls on domestic policies. The Buffalo Party asserted that if elected they would push for provincial control of all trade and markets and would pursue a Saskatchewan-first procurement and construction policy.[6] The Green Party, committed to managing the phase-out of fossil fuel and creating a low-carbon economy, proposed a mix of local projects and initiatives, many of which could abrogate some of the measures in our domestic and international trade agreements.[7] The Progressive Conservative Party promised to scrap the New West Trade Partnership and similarly pursue a buy-local policy.[8] The Liberals were silent on what they would do with our trade or markets, except to promote community infrastructure and green solutions through some form of local venture bonds.[9]

While trade, and the rules that govern our trading prospects, are core to the economic future of the province, the trade agenda seldom captures much attention in provincial campaigns, for the simple reason that most of the levers of control are outside the control of the province. This campaign was no exception.

While trade, and the rules that govern our trading prospects, are core to the economic future of the province, the trade agenda seldom captures much attention in provincial campaigns, for the simple reason that most of the levers of control are outside the control of the province. This campaign was no exception.

24. Law and Courts in the Saskatchewan Election

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Issues concerning law and courts were less evidently at the fore amid a campaign shaped more by the pandemic and economic issues. However, the law and the courts always present an important area of government policymaking, and these areas help to highlight some important differences between the contending parties in the 2020 campaign.

One area of difference evident in the platforms concerned the parties' responses to crime. The Saskatchewan Party made some reference to issues of crime both during the campaign and the lead up to it. The platform of the Saskatchewan Party cited back to its track record of policing and the associated reduction of crime from 2008–2011 and projected into the future that they were "committed to fighting crime and giving law enforcement officers the investments and supports they need to keep [the] communities safe."[1] Months before the election, the Saskatchewan Party-led government had earmarked $120M to expand the Saskatoon Correctional Centre.[2] By contrast, the NDP had criticized this spending on the correctional centre and had urged the channeling of that money toward addressing housing, mental health, and addictions in the hope of addressing root causes of crime.[3] During the campaign, the NDP platform furthered related emphases, promising an opioid and crystal meth strategy, starting with an investment of $2M.[4] There were thus contrasts evident between approaches focused on criminal justice and approaches focused on crime prevention.

The 2020 campaign also took place in the context of a significant legal dispute with Ottawa toward which the parties manifested differing attitudes. On September 22 and 23—just under a week before the start of the campaign—Saskatchewan's lawyers argued at the Supreme Court of Canada in the reference case concerning the federal government's carbon tax. Saskatchewan had been first out of the gate in challenging the constitutionality of the carbon tax on federalism grounds, sending reference questions to the Saskatchewan Court of Appeal in April 2018 on the legal issues that would ultimately see five other provinces join in supporting its case by September 2020. The challenge to the carbon tax remained a key part of the Saskatchewan Party platform, which mentioned the challenge and committed to continuing it: "We will continue to stand up for Saskatchewan in its fight against the costly and ineffective federally-imposed carbon tax."[5] The NDP platform did not mention the carbon tax issue, and previous NDP comments on it had not directly opposed the challenge but had raised issues with it, criticizing the legal costs of the litigation and arguing that Saskatchewan would not have had to pursue the challenge had it adopted carbon pricing on its own.[6] The Buffalo Party, which ended up placing ahead of the NDP in several rural ridings, made platform commitments on the issue even more dramatic than the Saskatchewan Party's approach, with the Buffalo Party promising to pass laws to make the tax illegal in Saskatchewan.[7]

The divide on even these limited issues concerning law and courts goes some distance in explaining the political landscape of the province. The Saskatchewan Party has effectively maintained a centre-right populism that is ready to expand law enforcement to tackle crime and that is ready to demand respect for classical federalism. At the same time, it avoids the more extreme positions of those

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> *The divide on even these limited issues concerning law and courts goes some distance in explaining the political landscape of the province.*

rural populists who registered a surprisingly strong protest vote through the Buffalo Party. While the NDP's approach to crime follows traditional party patterns of focusing on crime prevention, the reticence of the contemporary NDP about challenging Ottawa over jurisdiction in the resource context marks a change from the NDP of Allan Blakeney and Roy Romanow. The underlying shift toward urban issues and environmental concerns as priorities relative to maintaining provincial jurisdiction has likely furthered the alienation of the party from rural areas focused on resource activity, and, more generally, from the larger populist base in the province that sees economic independence of the province as a key priority. Indeed, the party's policies in this area would appear to have helped alienate from the contemporary NDP some of its own traditional base, contributing toward the ongoing Saskatchewan Party hegemony.

> *the reticence of the contemporary NDP about challenging Ottawa over jurisdiction in the resource context marks a change from the NDP of Allan Blakeney and Roy Romanow.*

Even these limited issues on law and courts thus help to mark out some important ongoing divides that were evident in the 2020 election. There are clear contrasts between the Saskatchewan Party and the NDP on approaches to crime and on attitudes to provincial jurisdiction. The second of these areas, that concerning the legal norms of federalism, marks a change in the NDP

relative to its past positioning that may help to explain some of its ongoing electoral challenges. How these two parties continue their engagement with issues of law in the years ahead will have ongoing significance in Saskatchewan politics. Premier Moe's election night address referred to hearing the message from the protest votes against Ottawa, and he spoke of ongoing assertiveness vis-à-vis Ottawa. There are interesting times ahead on ongoing disputes over federalism, and those disputes may mark out a divide that continues to favour the Saskatchewan Party's centre-right populism.

25. Organized Labour and the Impasse of Working Class Politics in the 2020 Saskatchewan Election

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Entering the 2020 Saskatchewan Election, the labour movement understood that it was operating in a hostile political environment. Since the conservative Saskatchewan Party was first elected in 2007, the government has targeted the organized labour movement for its anti-conservative and pro-New Democratic Party (NDP) leanings. In government, the Saskatchewan Party has clamped down on workers' rights to organize and strike, and has routinely restricted workers' abilities to collectively bargain.[1] Partly because of these attacks and partly because of its long alliance with the NDP, the organized labour movement in Saskatchewan threw itself into the 2020 election campaign in order to build a working class base for a rebuilding NDP. Although that rebuilding assisted in training dozens of new activists and expanding its messaging to the broader working class, it did not translate into improved electoral support for the NDP.

The Lead up to the 2020 Campaign

Under the leadership of Brad Wall and Scott Moe, the Saskatchewan Party has never prioritized a positive or even working relationship with the labour movement. Rather, the party has governed around the labour movement, speaking to workers about broad macro-economic issues rather than valuing the importance of worker representation through independent unions. On one level, this is surprising given that over 30 per cent of the provincial workforce belongs to a union (see chart 1). Yet, on another level, the Saskatchewan Party's antagonistic relationship with unions reflects traditional right-wing hostility toward the organized working class.

That hostility arises from the union movement's close political connection to the NDP and, given the increasing concentration of unions in the broader public sector, in union abilities to challenge government directly through the withdrawal of labour.

It is for these reasons that under the Saskatchewan Party's tenure, the *Trade Union Act* has been amended several times (and amalgamated into an *Employment Act* in 2014), generally with the goal of weakening labour's collective power. The success of the Saskatchewan Party's agenda is clear in at least two areas: first, since 2007, the unionization rate across the province has declined, notwithstanding a fairly significant economic boom in this period. Second, workers across the public sector have seen their negotiations delayed for months and even years, which has accelerated since the government mandated a public sector wage reduction in 2017. This latter issue was highlighted quite dramatically just prior to the election when frustrated long-term care workers represented by the Service International Employees Union West occupied the cabinet office in Saskatoon protesting the fact that they have been without a collective agreement for over three years.[2]

Chart 1 : Unionization in Saskatchewan, 2007-2019 [3]
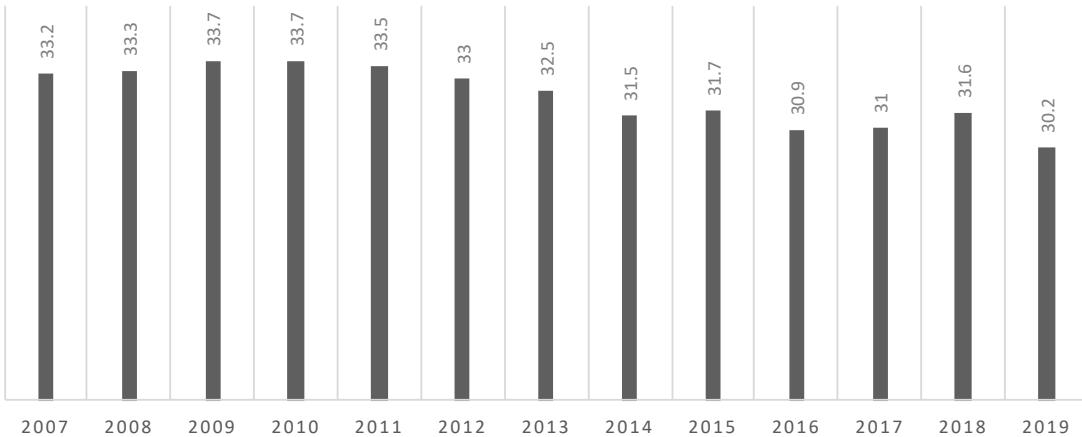
The 2020 Election Campaign

Recognizing the long and antagonistic history with the Saskatchewan Party, the province's labour movement entered the 2020 campaign with a goal of working with its allies in the NDP to build a broader electoral base of support for the party. That strategy was built on several principles. First, led by the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour (SFL), unions pushed several issues that were tied directly or indirectly to many of the policy priorities championed by the left and the NDP. These policies included prioritizing the creation of good union jobs and protecting the province's treasured Crown corporations. Recognizing the detrimental implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on workers, the SFL also championed paid sick days for all workers, strengthened health and safety laws, expanded access of personal protective equipment for frontline workers, and ensured higher wages for "frontline heroes, and all workers."[4]

More concretely, the SFL's campaign of "Putting Workers First" closely mirrored the provincial NDP's campaign platform of "Putting People First." Many of the promises that the NDP raised in their platform—including a $15 minimum wage, restoring workers' rights to join unions, enacting pay equity legislation, and expanding worker training—aligned with and was supported by the SFL campaign.[5] Importantly, these policy priorities were targeted at a large and non-unionized workforce, which was meant to appeal to a cross-section of the working class rather than just existing union members.

At the heart of the SFL's campaign was associating the Saskatchewan Party's economic message about "strength" in the economy with the fact that economic growth has led to a bleak future for thousands of workers who continue to struggle. In other words, the SFL's herculean task was to counter the Saskatchewan Party's corporate-funded messaging with the reality that hard-fought union wages and good jobs were increasingly a thing of the past. For the SFL, the election of an NDP government would not just bring better wages, greater economic security, and better-quality public services to all members of the working class; it would also assist in rebuilding a declining labour movement. In order to promote this message, the SFL sent dozens of activists into the field, while also promoting online campaigns and sponsoring public messages through advertising, in commercial print, and on social media sites.

Did the Message Resonate?

Judging by the results of the election alone, it is clear that labour's immediate campaign goal was not successful. After all, the NDP resonated with less than 30 per cent of the electorate. Yet, the message and issues raised by organized labour's "Workers First" campaign will not so easily be defeated. Those policies are clearly designed to organize the broader working class, which will be necessary as the province enters an uncertain economic future. While the SFL's political goals fell short, its message will resonate well into the future.

26. 2020 Saskatchewan Election: Voter Turnout

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What is Voter Turnout and Why is it Important?

Voter turnout is the proportion of registered electors who vote in an election:

Number of votes cast/Number of registered voters = per cent turnout.

Determining the level of voter turnout is a useful way of gauging citizen interest in an election. The greater the attention voters pay to an election campaign, to party policies and promises, to statements of party leaders and candidates, and the more they discuss the election with fellow workers, friends and family, the greater the likelihood they will vote. Accordingly, that interest will be reflected in a higher level of voter turnout. The less attention the voters pay to parties, leaders, policies and promises, and to political engagement generally, the lower the level of turnout.

A higher, in contrast to a lower, level of voter turnout is an important indicator of a political system's legitimacy and well-being. For the better part of a century, Saskatchewan had one of the highest levels of voter turnout among the provinces. This pointed to a considerable support for, and engagement in, the political system on the part of Saskatchewan citizens. Those days are now behind us, as has been demonstrated by turnout figures from the past thirty years. That is rightly seen as a cause for concern about the state of electoral democracy in Saskatchewan.

Voter Turnout in the 2020 Election

For most of the past century, Saskatchewan registered high levels of voter turnout in provincial elections. In 15 of the province's 18 elections between 1921 and 1991, turnout ranged from a high of 84.9 per cent in 1934 to a low of 80.3 per cent in 1975. The remaining three elections were in the range of 70–79 per cent: 1925 (73.6 per cent), 1967 (77.8 per cent), and 1978 (79.4 per cent). For all 18 elections over that 70-year period, the turnout in Saskatchewan averaged 82 per cent. These are impressive figures for a jurisdiction that, along with all others in Canada, has never adopted the compulsory vote.

But voter participation in Saskatchewan elections began to slip in the mid-1990s. In the six elections between 1995 and 2016, not one reached the 80 per cent+ range: two (2003, 2007) averaged 73.5 per cent; three (1995, 1996, 2011) averaged 65.6 per cent; and in the province's penultimate election (2016), turnout dropped dramatically to a record low of 56.8 per cent.

Based on the 2020 election night totals of ballots cast in person at the polls, ballots cast over the five-day advance voting period, and ballots cast in personal care facilities, a total of 385,461 votes were counted. As the number of registered voters was 820,850, the turnout rate was 46.95 per cent. It would be highly unlikely that the ballots remaining to be counted between October 28 and November 7 would add a further ten percentage points to the level of voter turnout. Thus, the voter turnout in 2020 will enter the record books as the lowest in the province's history.

Voter turnout can be negatively impacted by short-term, "one-off" events, such as fires, floods, or blizzards. A pandemic such as the novel coronavirus outbreak in Canada (and the rest of the world) would fall into that category of a totally unprecedented event. Only further study can determine how many electors chose to avoid voting in a public place on Election Day or took advantage of any of the "convenience voting" mechanisms (mail-in ballots, advance polls) that Elections Saskatchewan made available. It is reasonable to expect a decline in turnout because of the virus.

Regardless of the pandemic, however, the fact remains that a gradual slippage in the level of voter turnout in Saskatchewan and other provinces has taken place over the past few decades.

Explanations vary for the declining turnout. They include (1) the widespread disinterest in and indifference to the political process, particularly among younger people; (2) the almost total absence of "civics" in the K–12 school curriculum; (3) the growth in alternative forms of political participation, such as demonstrations and boycotts; (4) the popularity of social media and the decline of direct personal engagement (such as door-to-door canvassing) by candidates and parties with voters; and (5) a marked fall in citizen participation in voluntary organizations, service clubs, churches, and (most important from the standpoint of a healthy democracy) political parties.

Why does Voter Turnout Vary from One Election to the Next and from One Riding to Another?

As in previous elections, voter turnout rates in 2020 were far from uniform across the province. They tended to be lowest in ridings with little effective inter-party competition, such as the two northern ridings (Athabasca and Cumberland) dominated by the NDP. With an average turnout of 28.8 per cent, they were 20 percentage points below the province-wide total. The Lloydminster seat, effectively controlled by the Sask Party through several elections, fell into the same category with turnout of 30 per cent. It is also the case that the two inner core ridings in the two largest cities (Saskatoon Centre and Regina Elphinstone-Centre) typically have low turnout figures.

With an average turnout of 29.9 per cent in those two, 2020 proved to be no exception.

By contrast, voter turnout was average or above average in urban ridings in the relatively new fringes of the two principal cities. These can be loosely characterized as having populations above the average provincial riding size and as being made up of young families with above-average incomes (often two incomes) and education levels. In Regina Wascana Plains, for example, the turnout was slightly over 50 per cent.

Finally, one last group of ridings stood out as exceeding the provincial average turnout level to a degree unmatched by any other group. These were the four rural ridings in the province's oil-producing areas in which the Buffalo Party placed second to the winning Sask Party candidate: Cannington, Kindersley, Cypress Hills, and Estevan had an average turnout of 56.2 per cent—nearly eight points ahead of the provincial turnout level. The Buffalo Party's showing points to the importance of (a) party organization in mounting a challenge to the status quo and, at the same time, (b) engaging citizens in the electoral process.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This paper amounts to a preliminary reading of voter turnout in the 2020 election. It was written on October 28 when the counting of some categories of ballots was still underway or had yet to be undertaken. Accordingly, the voter turnout figures referred to were based on election night totals—the so-called "First Preliminary Count." That is the total of ballots cast in-person at designated polls, advance polls, and personal care facilities. It constitutes the overwhelmingly large share of the total number of votes cast. However, it does not include the mail-in ballots returned to Elections Saskatchewan by Election Day (61,265 ballot packages were mailed to registered voters), which are slated to be counted starting on October 28. Nor does it include the in-person Absentee ballots, Hospital, Remand and Temporarily Displaced Voters' ballots, and Extraordinary Voting ballots, which will be added to the "Final Count" of all ballots and announced on November 7.

ENDNOTES

Chapter 2 – Saskatchewan's Political Parties in the 2020 Election

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Chapter 5 – Social Media and the 2020 Saskatchewan Election

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Chapter 7 – Elections in the Time of COVID: The Economic Effects of COVID-19 on the 2020 Saskatchewan Election

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