The political codes of the prairies

by David McGrane

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Jared Wesley's *Code Politics: Campaigns and Cultures on the Canadian Prairies* is a fresh look at the study of political culture by an up-and-coming scholar. The book comes out of Wesley's doctoral thesis completed at the University of Calgary and is animated by the question: Why did Canada's three prairie provinces develop such distinct political cultures over the course of the 20th century? After all, Wesley points out, they began their existence as randomly drawn lines on a map in Ottawa and share a number of socioeconomic and institutional features.

To examine what he terms the "prairie paradox," Wesley turns to qualitative studies of political culture by writers such as Louis Hartz, Gad Horowitz and Nelson Wiseman. In particular, Wesley is inspired by Wiseman's concept of "probing history" to measure a province's political culture through examining the ideas of its political parties and major social movements, particularly during the formative periods of their histories (see, for

example, Wiseman's *In Search of Canadian Political Culture*). Wesley rightly critiques Wiseman for focusing too heavily on the formation of Canadian provincial political culture and neglecting how provincial political cultures are transmitted. Wiseman seems to take it for granted that political cultures, once established, will continue onward in perpetuity.

Whereas Wiseman probed history in a haphazard manner, selectively picking examples to prove his points, Wesley's method is much more structured. He read through all of the election platforms of the dominant parties in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba from 1932 to 2008 and qualitatively coded these documents according to their themes. His core theoretical approach is that "dominant political parties act as carriers of political culture, transmitting it to both new generations and new arrivals during election campaigns."

By repeating certain themes during provincial campaign rituals held every four years, the leaders and their party machines on the prairies continually reinforced the touchstones of their provinces' respective political cultures. Once the political cultures of these provinces were formed, leaders of dominant political parties and their followers sought success through espousing "the values that correspond most closely with the prevailing norms of society." In doing so, they established and perpetuated powerful codes that continue to shape the nature of each province's politics.

Wesley devotes one chapter to each province to explore the dominant codes in that province's political culture. He examines only the "dominant" parties of an era in that province (for example, the Liberals in Saskatchewan from 1905 to 1944) and not their opponents who occasionally formed government but never achieved sustained success (e.g. the Progressive Conservatives in Saskatchewan from 1982 to 1991).

He argues that Alberta's dominant parties have crafted a freedom-based narrative that stresses individualism through free enterprise, populism through appeals to the "common sense" of the people and provincial autonomy through resisting control by Ottawa. Manitoba's code is one of moderation characterized by "middle of the road ideology," incremental change and "transpartisanship" where elites consistently claim that they will place the interests of the province above those of their party even it means cooperating with their opponents. In Saskatchewan, party elites crafted a code of security that emphasized collectivism through all segments of society working together to protect one another, dirigisme by according the provincial state an important role in guiding the economy and polarization with elites constantly highlighting the grave dangers associated with allowing their opponents to govern. He argues that such polarization is less accentuated in Alberta where conservatism dominates and in Manitoba where dominant parties tend to govern

from the "progressive centre" as a haven from the extremism of left or right.

Wesley's work produces very parsimonious conclusions. Which is a virtue. Political culture is a vast concept, and it is easy either to produce convoluted arguments or simply to search for examples to prove your intuitions from the myriad of available sources. Throughout *Code Politics*, the reader is always aware of Wesley's source of data and his methodological approach. His conclusions are presented with outstanding clarity.

On the other hand, the parsimony of analysis is sometimes also its weakness. While it is easy to accept that "dominant parties" have shaped the political cultures of their provinces, one cannot help wondering about the effect of less dominant parties. Did these nondominant parties fail because some other party better articulated the dominant codes of a political culture? Or did these parties ultimately fail because their discourse was at odds with the dominant codes?

The inclusion of a more detailed analysis of the Thatcher Liberals and Devine Conservatives in Saskatchewan, the Progressive Conservatives under Lyon and Filmon in Manitoba and the Notley NDP and Decore Liberals in Alberta could have helped answer these questions. Without an analysis of these political parties, it is difficult to judge the power of the codes that Wesley explores. Can these codes be successfully undermined and altered as a recipe for political success? Or are they so dominant that even conservatives in Saskatchewan have to sound and act like social democrats to maintain power?

Overall, Wesley's *Code Politics* is an important contribution to the study of Canadian

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politics and any future work on Canadian political culture will have to take this study into account., The book's greatest contribution is to open up several new avenues for research. Obviously, the code politics model could be applied to other Canadian provinces. Beyond that, the conclusions of *Code Politics* may be affirmed or contradicted using different methodological approaches. For instance, to what extent do governments in the prairie provinces produce policies that conform to these codes? Further, would quantitative surveys of these provinces' electorates show that the general population holds values consistent with the codes that Wesley has found in campaign literature? Finally, do these codes exist outside the realm of provincial election campaigns in prairie art, school curriculums or newspaper editorials? *Code Politics* will inspire new and exciting research about political culture in Canada.