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The West Wants In: Conservative Christianity and Western Canadian Conservatism

Logan Jaspers
logan.jaspers@ucalgary.ca

Abstract

Commentators on Canadian politics often argue that the Western provinces are more socially conservative than the rest of the country. Indeed, there is a perception that British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba together form a Canadian "Bible Belt," analogous to the religiously socially conservative South in the United States. Drawing upon secondary research on Canadian history and political science and documentary evidence, this essay argues that conservative forms of Christianity have helped distinguish conservatism in Western Canada and especially in Alberta from the rest of the country, but that the influence of conservative Christianity is more nuanced than simply making Western Canadian conservatism more socially conservatism. The essay shows the religious demographics of the Western provinces compositionally made Western Canadian conservatism more socially conservative on hot button social issues, but by charting out the political thought of Preston Manning, Ernest Manning, and William Aberhart, the essay demonstrates that evangelical theology also influenced Western Canadian conservatism's distinctly libertarian and populist streaks. In turn, Western Canadian conservatives drifted to conservative parties other than the mainstream conservative party, like Social Credit and the Reform Party, which better speak to the socially conservative, libertarian and populist instincts of Western Canadian conservatives. The essay concludes with a suggestion on future topics of topics within the literature and with a brief summary of the essay's contents.

Keywords:

Canadian Politics, Political History, Religion and Politics, Alberta Politics

Introduction

When the Mulroney coalition unravelled in 1993, the Progressive Conservatives (PCs) were left in the dust in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba by the newly ascendant Reform Party, speaking to a profound regional divide within Canadian conservatism. As one explanation for this divide, this essay argues that conservative Christianity informed the distinctiveness of conservatism in Western Canada. To this end, it utilizes secondary history and political science research and primary documents while focusing on the Western provinces, especially Alberta, and using conservatism in Eastern and Atlantic Canada as a comparative foil. To substantiate the thesis, the paper is divided into three arguments. First, it makes a straightforward compositional argument—that the preponderance of conservative Christians in Western Canada and especially Alberta has made Western Canadian conservatism comparatively socially conservative on contemporary hot-button issues. Second, the paper argues that the individualism and populism of evangelical theology has influenced Western conservatism's emphasis on fiscal conservatism and democratic reform. Third, it argues that these religiously derived differences help explain why Western Canadians have gravitated to right-of-centre parties other than the PCs. Finally, it terminates with a brief comment on the topic's relevance today and a summative conclusion.

Religion and Contemporary Social Conservatism in Western Canada

Western Canada's religious composition has made the region more socially conservative on moral issues. Generally, actively religious Canadians are more likely to be conservative on issues like abortion and gay rights (Wilkins-Laflamme & Reimer, 2019, p. 867). British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba are disproportionately inhabited by conservative Christians, which has made conservatism in the West more socially conservative. The religious

demographics of the Western provinces are unrealistic; despite occasional descriptions of Western Canada—and Alberta especially—as Canada's "Bible Belt," these provinces are less religious than the national average (Banack, 2016, pp. 170–3; Burkinshaw, 1995, pp. 5, 259–60). Likewise, when it comes to moral issues, attitudes in Western Canada barely deviate from those in the rest of Canada (Rayside et al., 2012, p. 5). Instead, Western Canadian social conservatism has been influenced by the fact that evangelicals and other conservative Christians, despite being a minority, are disproportionately numerous in the West (Bowen, 2004, pp. 54–5; Rayside et al., 2012, p. 5; Wilkins-Laflamme & Reimer, 2019, pp. 877–8). While Western Canada may be less religious than the rest of Canada, believers in Western Canada are more religious than their counterparts in other regions.[1]

Evangelicals have played a disproportionate role in politics in Western Canada, especially in Alberta. Two of Alberta's most consequential premiers, William Aberhart and Ernest Manning, were themselves fundamentalist preachers. Manning's son, Preston Manning, a devout evangelical, founded the Reform Party, which was home to evangelicals like Deborah Gray, the first Reform Party member of Parliament, and Stephen Harper, the future Conservative prime minister (Hoover, 1997, p. 201; Ibbitson, 2015, pp. 140–2). Of the fifty-two Reform MPs elected in 1993, around 40 per cent were evangelicals (Hoover, 1997, p. 201). Indeed, Preston Manning and Stephen Harper were both socially conservative; Harper made his opposition to same-sex marriage a prominent issue in the 2006 election (Ibbitson, 2015, pp. 205–6; Wells, 2006, pp. 173–4), and Manning opposed abortion, euthanasia, and homosexuality (Rayside, 1998, p. 128; Mackey, 1997, p. 199). At the grassroots level, Reform members were notably

[1] To see a province-by-province breakdown in the West versus the national average with regard to irreligion and conservative Christianity, see appendix A.

socially conservative, passing a resolution at the party's 1995 convention to codify in their platform opposition to same-sex marriage, and Canadian Alliance[2] voters were significantly more hostile to legal abortion and same-sex marriage than voters of other parties (Rayside et al., 2017, pp. 47–9; Ibbitson, 2015, p. 113). Likewise at the provincial level, the greater proportion of evangelicals inhabiting rural Alberta made the PC caucus more avowedly socially conservative from 1993 onward, as its members were increasingly disproportionately rural; even if MLAs did not share their constituents' religious views, they brought their traditionalism to the legislature, moving the Klein government toward social conservatism (Banack, 2016, pp. 178–9; Martin, 2002, p. 195). Thus, evangelicals consistently shifted the political agenda in Western Canada, both federally and provincially, toward social conservatism, either through their direct involvement in politics or by influencing their representatives to voice their views on moral issues.

It is harder to generalize about the effect of smaller streams of conservative Christianity, like Pentecostals and Latter-Day Saints, on Western Canadian conservatism, but adherents of these faiths are overrepresented in Western Canada as well as among right-of-centre politicians in the West. Perhaps the most prominent contemporary socially conservative federal politician of the 1990s and early 2000s was Stockwell Day. A former pastor and teacher at the Pentecostal Bentley Christian Centre, Day served in Alberta Premier Ralph Klein's cabinet and led the Alliance between 2000 and 2002 (Harrison, 2002, pp. 3–8). Unlike Manning's or Harper's more latent social conservatism, Day's social conservatism was central to his public persona; he rested on the Sabbath during campaigns, appeared on the television program *100 Huntley Street*, and

[2] The Canadian Alliance was the successor party to the Reform Party, founded as an attempt to unite the then-divided right, though it largely served as a continuation of the Reform Party in terms of its beliefs, voters, and membership.

was even said to be a Young Earth creationist in a CBC documentary aired during the 2000 election (Harrison, 2002, pp. 55, 83–4; Ibbitson, 2015, p. 130; Martin, 2002, pp. 200–1). In his bids for the Alliance's leadership, Day placed his social conservatism at the forefront of his efforts by campaigning among other conservative Christians, giving speeches in church basements to sell party memberships (Ibbitson, 2015, pp. 153–4; Harrison, 2002, p. 53). Similarly, Latter-Day Saints, who are avowedly socially conservative, are disproportionately concentrated in Alberta, where they became an important political constituency. Despite discomfort with Mormons among some evangelicals, Ernest Manning appealed to Alberta Mormons, converting them into a reliable voting bloc for Social Credit and encouraging them to seek office (Marshall, 2001, p. 249; Mackey, 1997, p. 65; Wiseman, 1981, p. 111). The longest-serving federal leader of the Social Credit Party, Solon Low, was a Latter-Day Saint (Mackey, 1997, p. 30), and Mormons have prominently featured in politics since. Given the fervent social conservatism of both Pentecostals and Mormons, their disproportionate role in politics have thus contributed to making conservatism in the Western provinces more socially conservative (Wilkinson & Ambrose, 2020, pp. 107–28; Brinkeroff et al., 1987, pp. 244–6; Wiseman, 1981, p. 111).

With all that said, the extent to which social conservatism defines Western Canadian conservatism can be overstated. For one, social conservatism is not a solely Western Canadian phenomenon. Prominent Tory philosopher George Grant, from Ontario, was an outspoken opponent of legal abortion (Grant, 1998, p. 115). The federal PCs always had social conservatives among their MPs from the Laurentian and Atlantic provinces, like New Brunswick's Elsie Wayne, who bitterly opposed abortion and recognition of gay rights (Rayside, 1998, p. 117; Farney, 2008, p. 10). Indeed, the PC caucus between 1988 and 1993 had enough

social conservatives to kibosh discrimination protections for gays and lesbians (Fife, 1993, pp. 137–40). Likewise, despite their religiously derived social conservatism, both Preston Manning and Stephen Harper de-emphasized social conservatism compared to other issues on their agenda (Mackey, 1997, pp. 196–7); in Parliament, Harper voted to protect access to abortion in 2010 and 2012 (Malloy, 2013, p. 194; Banack, 2016, p. 199), and Manning was willing to do the same if his constituents from his riding so wished (Mackey, 1997, p. 199; Banack, 2016, pp. 196–7). Even Stockwell Day softened his opposition to abortion by leaving the issue to a hypothetical referendum (Harrison, 2002, p. 56). Nevertheless, the overrepresentation of conservative Christians in the Western provinces, especially Alberta, has made conservatism in the region more socially conservative, and thus religion is one factor that distinguishes Western Canadian conservatism from conservatism in the rest of Canada.

Evangelicalism, Populism, and Individualism

The religious differences between the West and the rest of Canada have influenced Western Canadian conservatism's positions on economics and institutions. As mentioned, despite his religious beliefs, Preston Manning did not emphasize social issues. The Reform Party's 1989 platform does not mention homosexuality, for example, though the 1996 edition affirmed the party's opposition to same-sex marriage following pressure from the grassroots membership (Reform Party of Canada, 1996, p. 31). Likewise, Reform did not take a stance on abortion or capital punishment beyond affirming them as issues of conscience that ought to be determined in a referendum (Reform Party of Canada, 1989, p. 11; Reform Party of Canada, 1996, pp. 39–40). Instead, the party platforms prioritized fiscal, economic, constitutional, and democratic matters. Reform's foremost priorities were cutting taxes and government spending, balancing the budget, turning the Senate into an elected body, making politics more responsive to Canadians through

referenda and recall legislation, the decentralization of power, and ending the perceived favouritism by the federal government toward Quebec (Reform Party of Canada, 1989, pp. 6–25; Reform Party of Canada, 1996, pp. 10–24, 29–35, 38–42). In sum, the Reform Party defined itself by libertarianism and a democratic, reform-minded populism, themes ostensibly more secular than those that tend to characterize social conservatism (Banack, 2016, pp. 180–1). However, evangelicalism helped foster the libertarianism and populism that distinguishes conservatism in Western Canada through religiously derived senses of individualism and populism.

As an evangelical who attends a Christian and Missionary Alliance church (Mackey, 1997, p. 94), Preston Manning's individualism and libertarianism were reminiscent of evangelical theology. Amid a religious revival in the mid-eighteenth century, conservative American Protestant theology adopted individualistic and populist views of the person and their relationship to God, arguing that the common man was just as qualified to interpret scripture, if not more so, than trained clergymen, and that to be born again, an individual had to undergo a profound emotional conversion experience of their own (Banack, 2013, p. 233). In other words, evangelical thought trusts the wisdom of "the people" in attaining their own salvation rather than privileging the clerical elite. As found by Banack (2016) in a series of interviews with Manning, the former Reform leader acknowledged that the democratic-individualist logic of evangelical Christianity influenced his libertarian and populist political convictions. Manning believed that a bloated federal bureaucracy with sweeping social programs had deprived individuals of agency without adequately providing the welfare such programs were designed to deliver (Banack, 2016, pp. 191–2). Likewise, emulating what he perceived as Christ's faith in the judgment of the common man, Manning deferred to his constituents on various issues, understanding himself as a

facilitator who would present his vision to those he represented, but ultimately accepting their will if they differed (Banack, 2016, pp. 190–2, 196–9). While Manning did his best to separate his public political statements from his theology, the process by which he arrived at his libertarianism and reformism was very much informed by his evangelical notions of individualism and populism.

These evangelical principles of individualism and populism can also be found in the ideologies of William Aberhart and Ernest Manning. Aberhart and Manning explicitly tied politics to their evangelicalism, as both men regularly delivered sermons on the radio while serving as premier of Alberta (Marshall, 2001, pp. 244–5; Guenther, 2000, pp. 95–7). Aberhart, who assumed power amid the Great Depression, was more demagogic in his populism than the Mannings, railing against the Laurentian "Fifty Big Shots" and the local media for being oppositional (Mackey, 1997, pp. 25, 61; Schultz, 1964, p. 198). The Aberhart government briefly implemented recall legislation but quickly repealed it when Aberhart's own constituents attempted to recall him (Laycock, 1994, p. 241). While not an ardent fiscal conservative like the Mannings, Aberhart's theology also centred the individual's need to reform themselves; as a pre-millennialist, Aberhart felt an obligation to lead others to Christ before the rapture, rather than to end poverty in the Social Gospel sense (Banack, 2016, pp. 118–20; Wiseman, 1981, p. 110). Believing that to be born again meant people needed the capacity to understand scripture and convert earnestly, as premier Aberhart sought to relieve the worst of extreme poverty, but not to end poverty altogether, let alone end class divisions or institute public ownership of the means of production (Banack, 2016, pp. 120–1, 127–33). Aberhart's goal was to cultivate economic freedom so that individuals could focus on spiritual regeneration instead of material, worldly concerns. Ernest Manning's individualism and populism differed from Aberhart's in the details,

but his ideology was broadly similar in terms of its underlying principles. Manning's populism was inclusive and conciliatory, emphasizing listening to others and reflecting the views of his constituents. This populism was on display when the Manning government, after holding a province-wide plebiscite on whether to further loosen restrictions on the sale of liquor in 1957, chose to abide by the vote in favour despite Manning's personal opposition to liberal liquor laws (Banack, 2016, pp. 145–7). While not necessarily opposed to government intervention in the economy—the 1946 Alberta Bill of Rights guaranteed social security for jobless adults and pensions for seniors (Mackey, 1997, pp. 39–40)—Manning believed a government detached from the people would fail to adequately provide social services, and that the state's encroachment on welfare provision opened society up to secularization by displacing the role of churches and charity in caring for the poor, helping explain his opposition to national medicare (Mackey, 1997, pp. 73, 84; Banack, 2016, p. 143). As the cases of Aberhart and Manning demonstrate, the principles of individualism and populism, in line with the evangelical theology they both preached, informed conservative thought in Alberta for decades, well before the advent of the Reform Party.

In sum, Western Canadian conservatism is defined in large part by populism and individualism, principles informed by evangelicalism. In these respects, Laurentian conservatism differs strongly from its Western counterpart. Tory thought in Upper Canada was based around the need for the state to maintain a hierarchical, well-ordered society through the maintenance of an established Anglican Church (Westfall, 1989, pp. 36, 196). As a result, even before the advent of the postwar welfare state, Toryism endorsed higher social expenditures in the early nineteenth century to maintain the loyalty of groups like Catholics in Upper Canada (McKim, 2013, pp. 82–3). While not socialist—George Grant, for instance, rejected the NDP's secular conception of

collectivism (Grant, 1995, pp. 58–9, 66–70)—Toryism is communitarian, aiming to conserve institutions by having the state assume paternalistic responsibility for the worse off. This attitude is consistent with PCs like Brian Mulroney labelling social programs a "sacred trust," or Robert Stanfield endorsing a guaranteed income and wage and price controls (Plamondon, 2009, p. 332; Hayday, 2024, pp. 17–18). Influenced instead by Anglican thought, Toryism lacks the individualism, and thus the libertarianism, of Western Canadian conservatism, rejecting a focus on the individual explicitly to maintain traditional institutions and hierarchies, a view that differs strongly from the democratic populism of conservatism in Western Canada.

Conservative Christianity and Political Parties

Due to these compositional and ideological differences stemming from religion, Western Canadian conservatives have tended to form and support right-of-centre parties other than the PCs at the federal and provincial levels. As mentioned, the Reform Party and the Canadian Alliance were examples of such parties. Reform overtly appealed to a sense of Western alienation, framing itself as a defenders of Western interests and criticizing the traditional parties for seemingly pandering to Quebec, famously exemplified in the party's 1997 advertisement singling out Québécois politicians for mismanaging Canada (Nevitte et al., 2000, p. 91; Blais et al., 1999, p. 201). Reform did not field candidates east of Manitoba in 1988, did not run candidates in Quebec in 1993, and placed but a few token candidates there in 1997. In fairness, in the 2000 election, the Alliance fielded candidates in most Quebec ridings, though all were unsuccessful (Ellis, 2001, p. 81). Likewise, Reform and the Alliance never won seats in the Maritimes, while only ever winning one in Ontario in 1993 and two in 2000. Conversely, the Reform Party and the Alliance were strong enough in all four Western provinces to form the

official opposition in 1997 and 2000, respectively.[3] While the federal Social Credit Party never achieved the degree of success enjoyed by Reform, it proved a credible third party, winning a majority of Alberta's seats in every election between 1935 and 1957, consistently electing MPs from British Columbia from 1949 to 1957, and also winning two seats in Saskatchewan in 1935. From 1958 onward, however, Social Credit struggled in the West while, peculiarly, finding success in Quebec due to Réal Caouette's charismatic appeal (Caiden, 1962, pp. 78–80); while the last Social Credit MP to be elected from a Western province was elected in 1965, the party continued winning seats in Quebec up to 1979. Given the ideological differences between the respective conservate camps in Western Canada and the rest of the country, the success of Reform, the Alliance, and Social Credit in federal politics should come as somewhat of a surprise. These parties better reflected the peculiarity of conservatism in the Western provinces, a peculiarity in part derived from conservative Christianity.

Provincially, Social Credit dominated Alberta and British Columbia for decades. Under the leadership of Aberhart and Ernest Manning, Alberta Social Credit formed a majority in every election from 1935 to 1967, rarely facing meaningful competition. The BC branch of Social Credit first won in 1952, forming provincial governments in all but one election until 1991. BC evangelicals proved an essential and reliable part of the Social Credit base (Burkinshaw, 1995, pp. 196–7), and Ernest Manning's *Back to the Bible Hour* broadcasts helped propel BC Social Credit to power (Mackey, 1997, p. 14). Furthermore, the Wildrose Party in Alberta echoed this same conservatism. Under Danielle Smith's leadership, Wildrose focused on the same themes of libertarianism, direct democracy, and Ottawa-bashing, de-emphasizing social issues (Rayside et

[3] For a breakdown of seat numbers and vote share for Reform and the Alliance in the Western provinces, see appendix B.

al., 2012, pp. 15–16, 21–2). However, multiple Wildrose candidates made controversial statements prior to the 2012 election, such as the homophobic "lake of fire" blog post and a racist response to a radio interviewer (Rayside et al., 2012, pp. 22–3). While Smith clarified that she did not share those candidates' views, herself being irreligious, she did not condemn them, reflecting a reluctance to alienate the Wildrose's conservative Christian base and highlighting the party's social conservatism (Banack, 2016, pp. 179, 211; Rayside et al., 2012, p. 19). In the cases of provincial politics in Alberta and British Columbia, the influence of conservative Christianity explains both the success of the provincial branches of Social Credit as well as the Wildrose Party's populist libertarianism and its appeal to social conservatives.

Returning to federal politics, the divide on the Right in the 1990s between Reform and the PCs helped the Liberal Party remain in power, leading to the eventual merger of the Alliance and the PCs in 2003 as the Conservative Party of Canada. Three years later, Stephen Harper led the Conservatives to victory. The Conservative Party, as a merger of the Alliance and PCs, is not a direct continuation of either; though to the right of the PCs, the Harper government accepted Quebec as a distinct society within Canada, maintained the welfare state, and did little to advance democratic reform. On social issues, the Conservatives walked a careful tightrope, holding an unsuccessful and half-hearted vote to reopen the debate on same-sex marriage in 2006 and granting MPs freedom of conscience on abortion bills in 2010 and 2012, while avoiding proactively socially conservative legislation on hot-button issues (Ibbitson, 2015, pp. 216, 370; Malloy, 2013, p. 194). Despite occupying a middle ground between the ideological positions of their predecessors, the Conservatives have retained and even expanded the Alliance's evangelical base, reflecting the extent to which the Conservative Party is able to "speak the same language" as evangelicals while maintaining the status quo on issues like abortion and same-sex marriage

(Malloy, 2013, pp. 186, 195–6; Rayside et al., 2017, p. 54). Nevertheless, while the Right today is united, the historical divide between conservative parties in Western Canada and in the rest of the country cannot be fully appreciated without understanding the role of conservative Christianity in cultivating that divide.

Conclusion

The southern Manitoba riding of Portage-Lisgar is notable for being the riding with the highest concentration of Mennonites anywhere in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2024). In the 2021 federal election, the People's Party of Canada, which advocates for a populist and libertarian agenda along socially conservative lines, finished in a strong second place in Portage-Lisgar, winning over 21 per cent of the vote in the riding despite failing to send any MPs to Ottawa. Indeed, this same area in southern Manitoba also elected Manitoba's only Social Credit MLA, who served from 1959 to 1973, and it is where the Reform Party's first Manitoba MP was elected in 1993 (Wiseman, 1981, p. 110). Similar to evangelicals, Pentecostals, and Latter-Day Saints, Canadian Mennonites are conservative Christians who have been more likely to support right-wing, populist, libertarian parties. The strength of the People's Party in Portage-Lisgar in 2021 demonstrates the enduring appeal of populism and libertarianism in the Western provinces, and, given the growing association of Mennonites with the wider evangelical movement (Burkinshaw, 1995, p. 188), a study of the politics of Canadian Mennonites would be a worthy contribution to the literature on the intersection of religion and politics.

This essay has shown that conservative Christianity influenced Western Canadian conservatism in three distinct senses. First, the disproportionate number of conservative Christians in the Western provinces has resulted in numerous conservative Christians serving in public office, who along with the religious grassroots, have given Western conservatism a more

socially conservative hue than its Laurentian counterpart. Second, evangelicalism's emphasis on individualism and populism has shaped Western Canadian conservatism into a more stridently libertarian and reformist form of conservatism than Laurentian, Anglican-establishmentarian Toryism. Third, these differences have resulted in Western Canadian conservatives forming and backing different parties than the PCs in both federal and provincial legislatures. What form conservative Christianity's influence will take in an increasingly diverse and irreligious Canada is uncertain, but the political history of Canadian conservatism cannot be fully understood without grasping the outsized impact of conservative Christianity on the Western provinces.

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Appendix A:

Irreligion and Conservative Christianity in the Western Provinces and Canada Compared

Religious group	% of Adherents in Canada and the Western Provinces[4]				
	Canada	British Columbia	Alberta	Saskatchewan	Manitoba
"No religion and secular perspectives"	34.6%	52.1%	40.1%	36.6%	36.7%
"Other Christian and Christian-related traditions"	2.1%	2.0%	3.0%	2.9%	2.9%
"Pentecostal and other Charismatic Christians"	1.1%	0.8%	1.3%	1.4%	1.6%
"Latter Day Saints"	0.2%	0.3%	1.1%	0.2%	0.1%
"Anabaptists"	0.4%	0.4%	0.5%	1.1%	2.4%

[4] Data sourced from Statistics Canada (2024).

Appendix B:

Reform Party and Canadian Alliance Strength in the Western Provinces

Election	Strength of the Reform Party/Canadian Alliance by Province, 1988–2000[5]			
	British Columbia	Alberta	Saskatchewan	Manitoba
1988	0/32 seats, 4.8% of the vote	0/26 seats, 15.4% of the vote	0/14 seats, 0.74% of the vote	0/14 seats, 3.3% of the vote
1993	24/32 seats, 36.4% of the vote	22/26 seats, 52.3% of the vote	4/14 seats, 27.2% of the vote	1/14 seats, 22.4% of the vote
1997	25/34 seats, 43.1% of the vote	24/26 seats, 54.6% of the vote	8/14 seats, 36% of the vote	3/14 seats, 23.7% of the vote
2000	27/34 seats, 49.4% of the vote	23/26 seats, 58.9% of the vote	10/14, 47.7% of the vote	4/14 seats, 30.4% of the vote

[5] Data sourced from Kirby (n.d.).