

The Alberta Election: Making History Either Way

Premier Jim Prentice is trying to do something that four premiers before him have done – extend the Lougheed legacy and continue Alberta’s PC government’s period of uninterrupted rule since 1971. With less than two weeks to election day – and even less to advance voting, public polls indicate that the PCs are running behind and face an unfamiliar two-front war.

This note looks at historic parallels and imagines what the various campaigns are thinking right now, as they head into the final stretch of the campaign leading up to May 5th.

The Big Bang Approach to Changing Government in Alberta

When government changes in Alberta, it resembles an explosion.

When Laurier created Alberta in 1905, the Liberals went on to govern for 16 years. Out of nowhere came the United Farmers of Alberta (UFA) who seized government in their first election in 1921, winning two-thirds of the seats.

My grandparents, living in Drumheller during the 1920s and 1930s, supported the UFA and likely could not have imagined that the Social Credit Party would show up for the first time in the 1935 election and win 56 out of 63 seats. They could not have imagined that the Social Credit would govern for 36 uninterrupted years.

The Social Credit faced the same fate as the UFA when they were wiped off the political map by Peter Lougheed and the PCs. Lougheed rose from 6 seats to 49, sparking 44 years of continuous rule.

It may take a while, but when Albertans move, they move decisively.

There have been close calls. Ralph Klein took a damaged PC brand and held off a strong challenge by Laurence Decore and the Liberals in 1993. By 2012, the Klein-Stelmach years had given way to a yearning for change manifested in the creation of the Wildrose Party. Alison Redford ran from the left and won a convincing mandate, defying pre-election polls by rallying voters late in the campaign – turnout increased from 41% to 57%.

Will Jim Prentice be able to extend the PC’s reign?

Public Polls and holding your nose

Why would we trust anything the public pollsters are telling us? They provide free polls to the media, who devour them like hungry dogs. Over and over, the pollsters are embarrassed on Election Day. Alison Redford, Christy Clark, Kathleen Wynne – they all relished their “I told you so’s” on Election night.

Having got that off my chest, let’s look at what is out there.

Public media polling has evolved in recent years from telephone, to online, and now to IVR. In my view, telephone is *still* the most reliable form of election polling because it is random and can be comprehensive. While land lines seem to be disappearing, telephone surveys can target cell phones as well. It is very difficult these days for telephone surveys to find respondents under 35 years of age. It costs more money and therefore pollsters weight the data accordingly. The difficulty in reaching this demographic is offset by the fact that younger people are not as big a factor in elections as older people, like it or not.

Online surveys are flawed in that they are not random. In fact, there is no such thing as “margin of error” in online surveys because they are merely “representative” samples. If an online panel is recruited with a bias or a skew, then it will repeat that flaw time and time again. Online panels are less likely to have participants who are less comfortable with English and/or less literate. They can also be regionally skewed – it all depends on how the company recruits their panel. It can be ‘lumpy’.

Finally, there is Interactive Voice Response (IVR) – the automated calls that ask you to press “1” or “2” in response to questions. The advantage of IVR is that it can cost-effectively reach a large sample. Like a telephone poll, it’s random. However, it has limited capacity for questions and you’re not really sure who answered the phone. It is not really possible to get more than a few minutes on an IVR survey.

In this election, most public polls released have been IVR.

You take what you get with media polls. Media organizations are not in a position to pay for research so they take the low hanging fruit. Reliable information is best found through custom research.

What the public polls are saying and what to take away from them

Between April 2 and April 20, there have been five public polls in the field, three from one organization – Mainstreet Technologies (IVR); one from Forum Research (IVR); and one from ThinkHQ (online). There have been no polls released conducted by telephone.

With all the aforementioned caveats in mind, the five polls demonstrate the following in terms of decided vote:

- PCs in the mid 20's, far below their 2012 election night popular vote of 44%
- Wildrose above 30% in all polls, rising to 35% in the latest
- NDP ranging from 26% to 31% in the latest

The latest poll from Mainstreet (conducted entirely on Monday, April 20 with 3000+ responses) suggests that the Liberals have cratered, losing more than half their support, with the three main parties gaining at their expense, however, Wildrose chief among them.

Province-wide support levels are one-thing, but seat counts are what really matters. Polling thus far shows the NDP with a dominant lead in Edmonton, a three-way battle in Calgary, and a comfortable Wildrose lead outside of Calgary and Edmonton.

When you look further at the age distribution of party support, the NDP appear the most vulnerable. It has the youngest supporters, which typically does not follow through on Election Day. If turnout is 57%, as it was in 2012, then there are 43% that simply won't vote. They are disproportionately young. This would suggest a relative edge to Wildrose, then the PCs.

With regard to undecideds, those respondents in polls are often non-voters and are undecided because of a lack of engagement. However, so-called committed supporters can and will move. There is volatility at this stage of the campaign as voters process election news and consider their options. They may be parked in a protest vote right now and return home, or they may abandon their traditional vote and follow a pack.

What we can take away from these polls is that, yes, the PCs are in a major battle on two fronts. They face losses in the cities, particularly Edmonton, from the NDP, and face a resurgent Wildrose in rural Alberta.

Regardless of the veracity of the polls, the polls themselves will influence the race to some extent. They will be demoralizing to the PC grassroots. If the poll results ring true with what they see in their own research or on the ground, then the public polls and news coverage will accelerate the concern and, possibly, panic. In BC's 2013 campaign, the public poll results did not ring true with the BC Liberal tracking or responses at the door. If anything, they contributed to NDP over-confidence. Strong poll results can be a burden. Both Wildrose and NDP campaigns must be in a state of shock over their seeming good fortune and managing expectations will be very challenging. The polling narrative potentially moves Prentice from "heavy overdog"

to “underdog” in the space of weeks which could shift the pendulum of news coverage away from PC failings to scrutiny of potential Wildrose and NDP governments.

It is a very thin line between being mauled on Election Night and winning a decisive majority. When a party crosses a magic line, the seats can stack up like firewood. I looked at comparable provincial elections over the last forty years where there were three contending parties and the winning party won the election with less than 40% of the vote, which may be the case in Alberta.

The lowest win I found was 32% - a three-way fight in Quebec in 2012 – where the PQ won plurality and through an efficient vote distribution gained an outsized share of seats in the National Assembly. Quebec Liberals pulled a similar feat in 2007. While there are examples where parties that won the popular vote lost the election (BC 1996; Canada 1979), in three-way races, the party with the plurality of popular vote usually wins the most seats.

Assuming the Alberta Liberals, Greens, and Alberta Party take a chunk of vote at the margins, the three main Alberta parties will be dividing an estimated 90% of the vote between them. Table 1 shows that results can vary depending on how high the lead party climbs in the 30s. Bob Rae won 57% of Ontario’s seats in 1990 with less than 38% of the popular vote; four examples below 37% all resulted in minority governments.

Table 1: Example: Election Wins < 39% of popular vote

Win example	% vote	% seats	Lose example	% vote	% seats
Quebec PQ 2012	32.0%	43%	Quebec CAQ 2012	27.1%	15%
Quebec LIB 2007	33.1%	38%	Quebec ADQ 2007	30.8%	33%
Ontario PC 1975	36.1%	41%	Ontario LIB 1975	34.3%	28%
Nova Scotia PC 2003	36.3%	48%	Nova Scotia LIB 2003	31.5%	23%
Ontario NDP 1990	37.6%	57%	Ontario LIB 1990	32.4%	27%
Ontario LIB 2011	37.7%	50%	Ontario PC 2011	35%	35%
Manitoba PC 1988	38.4%	44%	Manitoba LIB 1988	36%	35%
Ontario LIB 2014	38.7%	54%	Ontario PC 2014	31.3%	26%
Saskatchewan NDP 1999	38.7%	50%	Saskatchewan LIB 1999	20.2%	7%

If the Alberta election results in no party gaining more than 35%, a minority government is likely. The likelihood of a majority government increases – in the context of three competing parties – as one party’s vote creeps toward 40%.

A party underperforms when its vote is spread too evenly across the province and it ‘wastes’ votes in second place finishes without having its own core of support.

In Alberta, the NDP appears to have a red-hot core vote in Edmonton, while Wildrose appears to have a strong core in rural Alberta. The PCs are not dominating any region now, but won all three in the 2012 election. A rising tide lifts all boats – a PC resurgence, whether it is takeaways from NDP/Wildrose, or undecided breaking PC as they did in 2012, could catapult them to victory across the board.

Right now, www.threehundredeight.com is applying the latest poll results to a seat model in order to predict the outcome. As of April 21st, they predict a Wildrose minority (41 seats), an NDP opposition (34 seats), and relegating the PCs to third (10 seats). The Liberals would hold two. Two weeks earlier, they predicted a PC majority.

Have we seen this Election before?

The 2015 Alberta elections bears resemblance to past campaigns across Canada but it is not quite a perfect fit.

The FrontRunner misreads the electorate

Ontario 1990 – Premier David Peterson called an election following the collapse of the Meech Lake Accord. He was riding high in the polls after having had immense national profile during the negotiations. However, unrest quickly developed about whether the election was needed which grew to unstoppable momentum for change. No one predicted Bob Rae to emerge as Premier, which happened in part because of a resurgent PC party battering the governing Liberals from the right. Bob Rae took 70 of 125 seats with less than 38% of the vote. Difference: Peterson had a five-year record to defend.

Rumours of their demise is greatly exaggerated

Ontario 2011 – The McGuinty Liberals were 15 points behind in June but rallied to win a minority government in October. The polls were bullish on the Ontario PCs. Difference: McGuinty started campaign as an underdog.

Quebec 2012 – The governing Charest Liberals limped into the campaign beset by scandal. The public polls relegated them to third place, however, they fell just short on election night – by four seats – thwarting a PQ majority government. Difference: the Liberals entered the election in a weakened state with a longtime leader.

New Leaders / New Life

Alberta 2012– Wildrose grew stronger during the writ period until the final week when Alberta moderates rallied behind PC Premier Alison Redford. The public polls were calling for a Wildrose win. Difference: Election 2012 was not a two-front war.

BC 2013 – Christy Clark followed a similar trajectory to Redford – strong start replacing Gordon Campbell mid-term, stumbles, then strong finish. The public polls called for an NDP victory. Clark, like Redford, was able to create a new identity for her party’s brand and separate from past baggage. Difference: Clark entered the campaign as overwhelming underdog.

Wildfire

Manitoba 1988 – A deeply unpopular NDP government was set to hand the keys to government over to Gary Filmon’s PCs. Along came Sharon Carstairs’ Liberals who rocketed to the top of the polls and challenged for government, falling just short, and depriving Filmon of a majority. Difference: Incumbent government was never in contention

BC 1991 – A deeply unpopular Social Credit government was set to hand the keys to government over to Mike Harcourt’s NDP. Along came Gordon Wilson’s Liberals who rocketed to the top of the polls and challenged for government, falling short but moving from zero to Official Opposition. Difference: Incumbent government was never in contention.

Examples abound. Kim Campbell returns to restore a flagging brand PC nationally in 1993 and fails spectacularly. Ralph Klein revives a flagging brand in Alberta in 1993 and restores PC victory.

Where does Jim Prentice fit among these examples?

We won’t know until the votes are counted but what we do know is:

- He has misread the electorate. Surely, the PCs would not have called the election if they had seen this coming.

- His demise may be exaggerated. It has happened time and time again and Prentice has the advantage that he is new. An old brand, but a new leader. So far, he has fallen short, but voters will see the next week as a test of his mettle.
- There is a Prairie wildfire happening right now, moreso on the left than the right. Wildrose is at about their popular vote in 2012 right now. The NDP is over three times their 2012 level. There are many examples where mid-campaign wildfires are doused by effective counterattacks, advertising, and heightened media scrutiny (Canada 1988 – Turner debate, BC 1991, UK 2010 – Lib Dems); other times, they continue unabated (Canada 1993 – Reform; Canada 2011 – NDP in Quebec).

What might be going on inside the campaigns now

PCs

They didn't expect this to happen. Inside the campaign, the mood has probably evolved from confidence to concern to alarm. They will know that they need to take action and change their plan.

Strategists will be looking vigorously at any and all options to reverse the momentum of Wildrose and the NDP.

They will look at their own numbers and not worry as much about the public polls. They will look at likely voters and, among them, who is persuadable.

They most certainly will be doing everything they can to change the conversation from the PC record and budget and "time for a change", to the risk of an NDP government and the risk of Wildrose. Their challenge is that they are tainted as a messenger; they will need to find surrogates to help them with that message. They will need to move the media to new storylines.

They are probably holding focus groups right now, looking at new ad creative. They will be holding focus groups while the debate is happening Thursday night to help shape the post-debate narrative.

Premier Prentice is likely getting advice from all quarters. He will need to give the campaign clear direction in picking a lane and focusing their efforts in the final two weeks. He can do that by giving his campaign team the consent to do that; his situation will worsen if there is internal conflict and indecision; if the caucus is or

has lost faith with the campaign leadership. Keeping a lid on problems will be a draining process, if it becomes a problem.

Yet this could also be Prentice's finest moment. He is being seriously tested and how he responds is what campaigns are all about.

The PC campaign needs that bounce – it needs a momentum swing that turns the media in another direction and puts the other parties on the defensive. As of April 23, there are only about ten newspaper editions (two weekend editions) remaining; there are only 8 or 9 weeknight news hours remaining. The Calgary Flames playoff run further distracts voters from the election discussion, especially the post-debate coverage.

A week is a lifetime in politics. One good poll – two good news days – one step in front of another. That is what they will be saying in the room. Find the strategy. Execute. No more mistakes.

Wildrose

They are on a wild ride, not necessarily because they have risen sharply but because the PCs have fallen. Wildrose leadership deserted them mere months ago. Their apparatus was destroyed. Any thinking that was taking place about the next election walked out the door or the work hadn't started in the first place.

They are likely taking it one day at a time. People they had probably never met or barely know are likely showing up to play important roles in their campaign. They are most likely doing very little on the mechanics of the campaign like opinion research, voter ID, targeting and so forth. They are just trying to keep up.

Their grassroots supporters are likely bouncing off the walls with righteous indignation ("they defected and we are showing them").

Those that went down this road in 2012 are likely heeding warnings not to screw it up this time. They probably realize that their leader may be the right leader at the right time and desperately want him to pull this off. But some won't get it and might stall momentum in the final days.

In many ways, they don't know what they don't know. They may not be able to anticipate what will happen as most of them haven't been through it like this before. While they had heady expectations in 2012, it was a different leader and different group. There wasn't the NDP factor to consider.

They are at the point where people are starting to knock at their door – bearing cheques, offers of support, people wanting their foot in the door *just in case*. That process can also be draining. They will struggle with how to harness these offers and make full use of them. Money will help but then they have to determine how to spend it. Do they have an ad agency that can turn around TV ads? Can they book enough TV time? Etc etc Someone will insist that they must spend more on social media. It always happens.

Yet it can all evaporate *just like that*.

NDP

The NDP have benefited from a convergence of personality and policy. New leader Rachel Notley's family is steeped in NDP history and the respect for the family name extends beyond partisan boundaries. Her personal performance thus far has propelled the NDP into an unforeseen position of strength.

The NDP can now dream, by moving beyond their red-hot Edmonton base to targeted ridings in Calgary, Lethbridge, and other areas where like-minded voters can be found.

The last thing they would want to be talking about is forming government. They want the voters to teach the PCs a lesson, not elect an NDP government. They want the voters to vote for the likeable, competent NDP leader, not imagine what an NDP cabinet would look like or how they would act. They do not want the voters to believe the NDP could actually win.

But in so much as those questions come, they will be ensuring to temper the enthusiasm of local candidates. They will want to stay in the message box and not throw any pitches that the PCs can hit out of the park.

Doubtlessly, legions of labour organizers are flying into Alberta to join this historic battle. They will be sent to targeted ridings where they will do nothing but door knock. They will identify the vote in as many polls as possible and they will personally get that vote out.

Money, to some extent, will flow in from the rest of Canada to shore up their campaign. Down in the mouth NDPers, bemoaning losses in BC and Nova Scotia, fearing the future in Manitoba, will rally to Rachel Notley's side. She, right now, is the most exciting NDP politician in the country.

The Alberta NDP campaign will be receiving offers from senior strategists from Ottawa, BC and Ontario. “We’ve been through this before”. They might listen, they might not. Alberta’s tradition is much different.

The immediate focus will be on the debate and the post-debate news cycle, then it’s an all out sprint.

The What-Ifs

If the polls continue to show Wildrose and NDP in the 1-2 position, someone wise and distinguished in each party will whisper in the Leader’s ear and say, “Have you thought about transition?” The Leader will try to keep his/her focus on the campaign alone, but decisions will need to be made.

Then the media will amplify their questions about a minority government situation. Can the Wildrose and NDP share power? Will the PC’s support an NDP government? Can the NDP win the most seats but be shut out by the “right wing” parties? The leaders will likely be very non-committal. The smart ones will realize that “process stories” don’t appeal to voters; issues drive voter support.

Looking Ahead

Not always, but debates can have a huge impact on campaigns. Sometimes they can have a major impact at the ballot box (Canada 1984, Manitoba 1988, BC 1991, BC 2013) or its impact can fizzle by election day (Canada 1988, UK 2010). In Alberta’s case, any momentum that develops has a short runway to election day. Thursday’s debate may give badly-needed momentum to Jim Prentice and help him prick the NDP balloon of support, and arrest Wildrose support. He will be making efforts to redefine the ballot question.

Brian Jean will be hoping to look like a future Premier of Alberta and hold on for the next 12 days of campaigning. He will try to finish the job by having voters do what Wildrose thinks they should have done in 2012 and vote for change.

Rachel Notley will try to stand apart from her male counterparts and stick with issues that give her the centre-left. She will look to appeal especially to women, while trying to motivate younger voters to turn out to vote.

Regardless of the outcome, this will be an historic election. If Prentice’s PC’s pull it off, they will continue a reign of power that is without precedent in Canada and stands out among all parliamentary democracies. A change in government will be only the third time since 1935 that Albertans changed horses. Campaigns matter, as they always have.