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ORANGE CHINOOK: Politics in the New Alberta
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Ready for Rachel: The Alberta NDP's 2015 Campaign

Melanee Thomas

Though public opinion polls predicted that the Alberta New Democratic Party would win the 2015 provincial election (see Brown and Santos, this volume), it was still a surprise to actually see it happen on 5 May 2015. Indeed, many Albertans may have doubted that the incumbent Progressive Conservatives, having held office since 1971, would ever be defeated. That their loss came at the hands of an unapologetically left-leaning alternative, rather than a more conservative party such as the Wildrose Party, was more surprising still.

Given the unusual circumstances of the PCs' loss, many would argue that the 2015 election result was an extraordinary event that had more to do with voters' anger with the PCs than their excitement with the NDP. This chapter disagrees, and instead argues that the "just an anti-PC vote" description of Alberta's 2015 election is incomplete and ignores the role of the NDP leadership, as well as strategic and effective campaign work.

In general, election results can be summarized by the answers to two questions that come to voters' minds. First, "does this government deserve to be re-elected?" Voters who answer yes may simply vote for the party in government. For those who answer no, a second question is required: "is there a credible alternative?" If voters cannot find a credible alternative to the party in government, as was arguably the case for dissatisfied voters in 2008 and 2012, then they may choose to abstain from voting or hold their nose and vote for the party in government. However, if voters decide there is a credible alternative to the incumbent party, then they may decide to vote

for that alternative in large numbers. Thus, any full explanation of Alberta's 2015 election must determine why so many Albertans decided that the NDP represented a credible alternative to the status quo represented by the PCs.

This chapter outlines how the NDP, anticipating the 2015 spring election call, planned to considerably grow its position in the legislature. In so doing, this chapter places the 2015 election within the larger context of political science literature on campaigns and elections, with an emphasis on economic voting and the role of leadership in campaigns and vote choice. Further evidence is gathered from semi-structured interviews with, and public statements made by, NDP insiders.

Both groups of sources—the academic literature and NDP insiders—broadly agree: the 2015 electoral context was unique and tilted in favour of unseating the incumbent PC government. To do so, the NDP needed to have a strong campaign centred around a popular leader. Indeed, after Rachel Notley's selection as party leader in the fall of 2014, the NDP was the only party other than the PCs to claim it was running to form a government; because they were organized, the NDP had the strategic foresight to effectively respond to the economic context and the PCs' strategic errors. Though the campaign was not error-free, and while few (if any) anticipated from the outset that the party would win government outright, the NDP's 2015 election campaign was professional and persuasive. This, combined with Rachel Notley's effectiveness as a political leader, largely explains the NDP's success. Notably, the NDP did this all with a commitment to diversity unparalleled in Canadian political history, as the 2015 election produced Canada's first government caucus with near gender parity, and its first cabinet comprised of a majority of women. Taken together, these factors all support the conclusion that any explanation of the 2015 election result that does not include a considerable focus on the NDP campaign itself is incomplete.

This chapter proceeds in four parts. First, general context about Alberta in 2015 and implications derived from that context are presented. In the next two sections, key aspects of the NDP's 2015 campaign—from organization to execution—are presented. The chapter ends with a reflection on what lessons from 2015 can be applied to the 2019 election. Throughout, evidence is presented from three key sets of sources: academic research on elections and political behaviour, semi-structured interviews with staff

active in the NDP's 2015 campaign, and a public panel discussion with key actors in the campaign presented at the NDP's 2016 convention.

General Context

Before examining the specifics of the NDP's campaign preparation, it is important to highlight a key part of the electoral context: the economy. Alberta experienced an oil boom in the early 2010s, but international oil prices started to decline precipitously in 2014. By the spring of 2015, most analysts suggested strongly that oil and gas prices would be suppressed for quite some time. Given the Alberta government's reliance on natural resource revenue for programs such as health care and education, the economic outlook was both grim and deeply politicized.

Research shows that voters generally integrate media reports of anticipated changes in the economy into their vote choice.[1] When the anticipated changes are positive, incumbent governments and candidates are typically rewarded; when the anticipated changes are negative, incumbent governments and candidates are punished.[2] Importantly, voters tend to react more forcefully to negative information than they do to positive information. In the context of the 2015 election, this suggests that voters would have used most, if not all, available economic information to answer the question with which this chapter was opened—does this government deserve to be re-elected?—in the negative. Other factors may have reinforced this; some are noted below, while others are discussed in greater detail in Duane Bratt's chapter about the PC campaign.

Laying the Foundation: NDP Organization before the Writ

When Rachel Notley was selected as leader of the Alberta NDP in October 2014, many party activists felt it was "the obvious time and she was the obvious choice."[3] First elected in 2008, Notley had long been identified as a potential party leader, in part because of her political pedigree, and in part because of her skill as a politician, inside and outside of the legislature. Several interviewees noted a palpable shift in public perception toward the

NDP in 2012, and a growing dissatisfaction with the PCs since 2008. This has led some to suggest that voters' increasing "awareness and openness to the party [meant] that the best thing for it would be a new, fresh face."[4] Others suggested that alternatives such as the Wildrose Party "scared more people than it inspired." Thus, with Albertans' "festering dissatisfaction" with the PCs, the NDP was seen as a newer option that people liked and identified with.[5]

For NDP campaign organizers, Rachel Notley is the foundation for their success. Every interviewee directly credited Rachel Notley with crucial parts of the NDP's successful campaign strategy and organization. Similarly, every interviewee argued that Notley was the most important factor in the NDP's 2015 campaign, due in large part to her political skills. Thus, it is both plausible and reasonable to suggest that, in anticipation of a 2015 election, Notley's selection as party leader coincided with a serious push for growth on the part of the NDP.

In addition to new leadership, the NDP employed three other identifiable pre-election strategies: candidate search and organization, discrediting the party in government (PCs), and presenting the NDP as the only credible alternative for government. Though the NDP is far from the first party to use these strategies, they proved to be particularly effective tools in the the 2015 election.

By nominating a full slate of candidates, the NDP sought to establish the narrative that the only party that should be taken seriously as a challenger to the incumbent PCs in the 2015 election campaign was the NDP, as both the NDP and the PCs were the only parties with the necessary organization to represent the whole province. The Wildrose did not field a candidate in Edmonton-Strathcona, and the Alberta Liberals and the Alberta Party both failed to nominate candidates in a considerable number of districts. Obviously, any party that wishes to credibly claim to be government must nominate a full slate of candidates. Here, part of the NDP success is predicated on the party's

> insistence that we weren't [just] campaigning in Edmonton; that the presence in Calgary was established months before E-Day. That the work in other regions was starting in a very substantial way with MLAs, candidates, and others leaving

the relative comfort of Edmonton and making sure the pro-
file of the party, the profile of the caucus, and the profile of
the leader was established elsewhere.[6]

This strategy included the nomination of anchor candidates in four target-
ed ridings: Joe Ceci (Calgary Fort), Sarah Hoffman (Edmonton Glenora),
Shannon Phillips (Lethbridge West), and Marlin Schmidt (Edmonton Gold
Bar). Note the geographical distribution of these targeted seats. As expect-
ed, the NDP sought to build on its strength in Edmonton, but it also expect-
ed to build in Calgary and the south, both areas where the NDP has had
some, but not considerable, electoral support. Particularly with Ceci, a local
notable with considerable name recognition and a city-wide profile through
his past career as a Calgary city councillor, the NDP presented in 2015 as a
party determined to make gains.

In hindsight, it is fair to suggest that with these four targeted seats, a
reasonable electoral strategy for the NDP in the fall of 2014 was to try to
double the size of its caucus. Beyond this, some interviewees reported the
secondary and tertiary goals of identifying a number of other districts in
which to build over the medium term, as the party organized to form gov-
ernment. This supports the idea that the NDP looked to grow in 2015 and
into the future. Similarly, this narrative may bolster the argument that the
NDP wanted to frame itself for voters, the media, and the other parties as
the only credible alternative to the PCs.

The other aspect of candidate recruitment that requires examination is
the NDP's focus on equity and diversity in representation. Notably, Alberta
is the only jurisdiction in Canada in which women hold a majority of cabi-
net positions.[7] Just as notable—and perhaps surprising—is the fact that the
Alberta NDP nominated an equal number of women and men. The NDP
has had an equity nomination policy in its constitution since 1984.[8] Despite
this, NDP candidates have remained less diverse than the Canadian popu-
lation over time. This was not the case in 2015 with the Alberta NDP, as 50
per cent of the party's nominated candidates were women. This translates to
47 per cent of the NDP's government caucus, and 31 per cent of the legisla-
ture itself (Parliament of Canada 2017).[9]

When asked why the Alberta NDP succeeded in finding and nomi-
nating diverse candidates where NDP organizers and local associations

in other jurisdictions have failed, interviewees credit Notley's leadership. In short, representational diversity was "something that was incredibly important to the leader, that candidates reflected the diversity of the province."[10] Organizers were clear: no specific instructions or quotas were given beyond the leader's preference that candidates reflect the diversity of Albertans. They report that they looked for candidates in different places than they typically might have, and they were candid that recruiting people of colour, women, and sexual minorities required more time and effort than more conventional candidates. Some quipped, "there's never a shortage of middle to older white males who are able bodied who put their hands up to run for election. There's a level of comfort there" that must instead be built among underrepresented groups.[11] What was required, then, in order to reflect the diversity of Albertans was for those in the NDP involved in candidate searches to find less common candidates and make them feel comfortable seeking a nomination. This takes considerable time and effort, but Alberta NDP organizers and local associations did this work because it was clear the leader expected them to. This mirrors Notley's own words, as she has been candid that, at least with respect to gender, space needs to be made in politics for diversity, as it will not happen organically on its own (CBC 2016).[12] This speaks to a "commitment rather than a directive" on representational diversity within the Alberta NDP,[13] and it highlights how equity in representation, at least on gendered grounds, is possible if a party and their leader genuinely want it. This is potentially an instructive case for those studying political parties in parliamentary systems well beyond Alberta or Canada.

From a political science perspective, this insight both confirms what is known from the literature about Canadian political parties, and suggests that a principal reason why other political parties do poorly on representational diversity is because of (a lack of) leadership. It is already well established that in Canada, party leaders get what they want.[14] Notley and the Alberta NDP show that if a party leader is serious about representing women, people of colour, sexual minorities, youth, and other historically under-represented groups, their parties will reflect that. This is, perhaps, similar to Stephen Harper's Conservatives, who doubled the number of women nominated as candidates between the 2006 and 2008 federal elections, presumably at the leader's request.[15] Where Notley appears to be different than

other party leaders, including her NDP counterparts elsewhere in Canada, is an expectation that equity be achieved in diverse representation, rather than at a level that is merely "respectable" or "best in class."

As noted above, once candidates are nominated, every political party must then succeed in convincing voters to answer two questions in their favour. First, "does this government deserve to be re-elected?" If the answer to that question is no, the second question is, "is there a credible alternative?" For its part, the NDP had to convince Albertans of two things: that the PCs were no longer deserved to be in government, and that the NDP were, in fact, a credible alternative.

To present itself as the only credible alternative to the PCs in 2015, the NDP took advantage of freedom of information (FOIP) requests that produced information that embarrassed the PC government. A number of groups were actively engaged in FOIP research, from advocacy organizations, to organized labour, to the party itself.[16] The goal for the NDP was to take information that would hold the PCs to account and/or embarrass them, and then use the media to showcase Notley and the caucus to the media and to the public. This helped both to undermine the government and also to present Notley and the existing NDP MLAs as credible representatives. Interviewees reported that the communications staff in the NDP who had designed this strategy were happy with how it played out prior to the election call,[17] and that it helped set up a positive relationship between the NDP war room and journalists during the 2015 election campaign.[18]

The NDP did not have to do much to discredit the other parties during the election: most interviewees indicated that their challengers engaged in behaviours that the NDP could capitalize on. The PCs were seen as Machiavellian for orchestrating the Wildrose floor-crossing/takeover in December 2015. Though a fulsome investigation of the floor-crossing is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is plausible that one of the PCs' primary goals was to use this event to neutralize the Wildrose and undermine the idea that it could plausibly form government. This both alienated PC supporters who disliked the Wildrose, and also made it impossible for the PCs to credibly identify what was left of the Wildrose as their main opponent during the 2015 election campaign. This narrative arguably helped the NDP as much, if not more, than it helped (or hurt) any of the other parties.

Worse, the PCs then introduced "a budget that pleases nobody"[19] and then, according to NDP insiders, failed to defend it. One organizer observed:

> I think the PCs, if they went hard left or hard right, they would have formed government again. Specifically, if they went hard right. If they came out and said, "We are making drastic cuts across the board," I think they would have gained a lot of the Wildrose vote and formed government. Similarly, I think if they came out and said, "There will be no cuts and, in fact, we're going to invest in some of the critical public services that are needed during a recession," similarly I think they would have formed government. Instead, they did this kind of mealy-mouthed, wishy-washy half measure, and because Jim Prentice put so much political capital on a revolutionary platform, a revolutionary budget, and it came out the other end and everybody was just kind of a little disappointed. . . . [pause] People were just left underwhelmed.[20]

The idea that Albertans were "underwhelmed" may be a kind way of putting it. Other interviewees suggested that Albertans were angered by Prentice's proposed budget, because it "taxed the hell out of Martha and Henry"[21] and was tone deaf. In a televised address to Albertans, Prentice suggested that because he was new to Alberta's provincial government, Albertans themselves were to blame for the economic downturn. As such, they only needed to "look in the mirror"[22] for an explanation of how the province wound up in a financial mess.[23] Prentice seemed unaware of the irony that, though he himself might be new, his cabinet and caucus were decidedly not. It is perhaps unsurprising that voters reacted poorly to this presentation.

Here, NDP activists saw the Wildrose as helping the NDP campaign. Specifically, when the PCs refused to increase corporate taxes alongside personal taxes and fees for regular Albertans, even the Wildrose (and their supporters) appeared to be saying, "we might not want corporate taxes, but if our taxes are going up, then tax them a bit too."[24] In other words, by protecting corporations and bigger businesses from tax increases, the PCs abandoned Prairie populism, and were seen instead to advocate for corporate oil and gas, who were perceived to have done very well during the recent

boom at the expense of everyday Albertans. In many respects, this rhetoric was a sharp change away from the populist "Martha and Henry" messaging of the Klein years.

Importantly, while this sentiment was shared across the Wildrose and the NDP, NDP organizers perceived it as being a net benefit for their party. Both the Wildrose and the NDP are Prairie populist parties that advocate for "the people" over powerful elites;[25] where the parties differ, according to NDP organizers, is that the Wildrose "have not been able, and still haven't been able, to counter the narrative they are primarily a rural-based party. They continue to only play to their base, and [they are] never trying to reach beyond their base. . . . They've failed to reach out to people in the city."[26]

Thus, while the PCs (perhaps unintentionally), Wildrose, and NDP were all working to discredit the PCs in government, the view inside the NDP was that only they were organized and able to take full advantage of the context leading up to the 2015 election. As one interviewee argued, "we did not create the circumstances by which the outcome of the election came to be, but we were well positioned to take advantage of those dynamics."[27] Similarly, Gerry Scott candidly stated during the 2016 NDP convention that,

> in the winter and early spring before the election was called, [Notley] and the caucus really emerged as the real opposition. I think we can all remember those days where the Wildrose and the Liberals[28] were invisible in talking about what was going on and presenting an alternative to a government that was increasingly in disarray. That meant that going into the campaign, there was real momentum around the NDP as *the* alternative. It was remarkable work, because at that point, the caucus was the fourth [largest] in the legislature, and very quickly in January emerged as the real opposition. A critical factor in my view.[29]

Scott also argued that "the campaign victory in my view wasn't in five weeks, or four weeks, or twenty-eight days. It never is in a strong campaign. The work that was done in the years and months before the campaign was absolutely critical. . . . Without the work that was done in the months after the leadership convention, we wouldn't be here today."[30]

"Leadership for What Matters": The NDP's 2015 Campaign

Though NDP insiders argue that their pre-writ work was crucial to the party's victory, the campaign itself also needed to be run well to ensure an NDP victory. As noted above, if the 2015 election were simply about anti-PC sentiment, then Alberta arguably would have changed governments in 2012. Instead, the Wildrose's 2012 campaign included notable missteps from candidates and the leader that contributed to the narrative that the Wildrose did not win that election.[31]

So, what did the NDP do during the campaign that led to their success? Interviewees all identified the leader, professionalism, the platform, key events such as the debate and the five CEOs (see below), and resources as key factors associated directly with the campaign period. Much of this comports with existing research on successful election campaigns. And, while interviewees did not directly address it by name, populism is a factor that always plays a role in election results in Alberta. Though each of these factors could be seen as distinct, they are perhaps best understood as complimentary facets that all highlighted Rachel Notley's leadership abilities for Alberta voters.

One of the first things to note about the NDP's 2015 campaign is that, with one notable exception, it was professionally run and free of gaffes. Interviewees remarked this professionalism was a conscious choice. Brian Topp and Gerry Scott, both experienced NDP campaign managers, were brought in to help run the campaign and the war room. Anne McGrath and Kathleen Monk were also brought in as the campaign progressed, and both were seen as anchors for the transition to government. The NDP was determined to run a well-financed and well-staffed campaign, long before the polls suggested that the party was going to form government. As one interviewee said, "It was probably the best-resourced campaign we've had here in Alberta. For sure. I've worked campaigns in other parts of the country; it would be on par in BC, for example, but we've never had a campaign in Alberta that was as well resourced. And that's the number of staff but also the quality of staff."[32]

Organizers and analysts alike credited Rachel Notley herself for the strength of the NDP's campaign. Academic research certainly highlights

the important effects that leader evaluations have on vote choice.[33] Notably, all voters evaluate parties based, in part, on their leaders, including their assessments of a leader's competence and character. "Competence" here typically refers to whether or not voters think a leader is intelligent, arrogant, knowledgeable, or strong; "character" refers to whether a leader is viewed as honest, trustworthy, compassionate, or moral.[34] Crucial for party leaders on the political left, such as Notley, character-based assessments matter more to vote choice than do perceptions of competence; importantly, partisans across the political spectrum, including the political right, have typically evaluated left-leaning party leaders' character positively.[35]

This has implications for the NDP's 2015 campaign: in presenting itself as a credible alternative for government, the party's primary goal should have been to get voters to like Rachel. If voters found her honest and compassionate, research suggests that those voters would view Notley positively, regardless of where they sit on the ideological spectrum. Though positive leader evaluations are not typically important enough to overpower other factors such as partisanship,[36] it is plausible that in Alberta in 2015, when (PC) partisanship might have been somewhat unsettled, establishing these positive evaluations of Notley's character may have been the most important part of the campaign.

It appears as though this is precisely what the NDP campaign did. Interviewees explicitly attributed the NDP's success in 2015 to Notley's likeability. For example, as one interviewee stated,

> There's also in politics just a likeability factor; it's very difficult to describe. People like the premier, they respect and trust her, and the PC brand was severely undermined and damaged, due in no small part to the NDP and the research that was put out before [the writ], but also by the other opposition parties, to be clear. But then the choice became: if you don't trust the leader of the PC Party, do you trust Brian Jean or Rachel Notley?[37]

They went on to report that, "I think the platform was key. It was a platform that . . . [pause] and I'll put it almost entirely on the leader, Rachel Notley, something that she determined was something that we could run on, that

we could perform government on."[38] Other interviewees noted that during the campaign, journalists would explicitly ask Notley why voters liked her so much. This lead one interviewee to conclude that

> the PC brand was very damaged, and there was a shift of PC voters to the NDP, and I think that the party, we've got to tip our hat a little bit to the Official Opposition, the Wildrose, because they were instrumental in undermining that brand. The PC voters, the ones that shifted, they looked at Brian Jean and that party's brand was not really rock solid either. I mean, they had the lake of fire stuff in the previous election and some climate denialism and other things. And it came down to the likeability factor: those PC voters were looking for a home . . . [pause] and they chose Rachel Notley, because she's more likeable, the platform was very well thought out, and also, I think it bears mentioning, it reflected the time that we were going into, a recession. Everyone knew it was coming. Jim Prentice let everyone know it was coming. So, the choice was "cut" or "don't cut." I think the message of investing in public services, running a deficit and weathering the storm, and this idea of "don't worry, we've got your back," that was very instrumental. It fit with Rachel Notley's personality as well; the people wanted that kind of comfort and trust.[39]

In other words, NDP insiders argue that the reason why the NDP did well was in large part because voters viewed Notley's character positively. Given the academic research on elections, the economy, and the importance of leaders, it is perhaps striking that organizers' comments so clearly comport with research. The party's focus on Notley's personality and likeability, filtered through what they determined to be a credible platform given the provincial economic context, appears to be a considerable part of the NDP's success.

Certain key events during the campaign reinforced Notley's likeability among voters. First, she "launched her campaign with unapologetic optimism about the future. . . . She stood in front of the legislature with all

the candidates and she announced that she was running to be premier. She was the only candidate outside of Prentice who was willing to do that."[40] Second, Notley's brilliant performance during the leaders' debate "was a turning point for everybody." The consensus was that Notley handily won the leader's debate, and in so doing, solidified the idea that the NDP was the only real alternative to the PCs, and that Notley was both credible and legitimate. Insiders suggest that the debate was the moment at which Notley "wasn't just seen as the NDP leader, but as herself [and] as a political symbol in the province."[41]

Notley's strong debate performance arguably mitigated the campaign's one major error. A few days before the debate, the NDP was forced to issue a retraction of its promise to balance the budget by 2017, as previous cuts to health care, education, and universities were not "properly" reflected in the party's previous estimates.[42] This had the potential to be catastrophic for the NDP, as the party does not typically "own" economic issues.[43] Thus, when Jim Prentice quipped at Notley that "math is difficult" during the debate,[44] some interviewees candidly suggested that the comment was fair because of this budgeting error.

There are two reasons why the "math is hard" comment was devastating for Jim Prentice, and why the budgeting error did not stick to Notley or the NDP during the campaign. First, Sally Houser, Rachel Notley's press secretary during the 2015 election campaign, contends that the budget error was managed well by the NDP campaign: it was quickly retracted, with apology, and the party made a point of "not being arrogant or a jerk about it." This may have resulted in a softer landing on the budgeting error from the media. Second, it is clear that the debate audience did *not* view the "math is hard" comment with the NDP's budget in mind; instead they saw a man in politics try to tell a woman that she was not very good at math. Subsequently, "criticism of the PC leader exploded on Twitter."[45]

While the reasons why Prentice or the PC campaign could not legitimately mark the Wildrose as their chief rivals seem clear, what is less clear is why they did not anticipate that Notley would be a skilled political operator, given her prior tenure as an MLA (first elected in 2008). Indeed, Brian Topp had role-played being the PC leader for Notley's debate prep; he noted, "I've done a little bit of debate prep over the years, and I've never seen such a just spring-loaded, compelling counterpunch."[46] This is echoed by other NDP

organizers, including one who stated that, "for anyone, this was their opportunity to see this five-foot, two-inch feisty woman just. I mean, Prentice would go after her and she just turned around and gave it back. And she proved that night that not only was she incredibly intelligent and articulate on every file that you could think of, but also that she was very clever and very funny. And she knocked it out of the park that night. . . . [pause] If we did have to pick a turning point in the campaign, that was certainly it."[47]

Interestingly, research suggests that debates typically do not have much of an effect on vote choice, so perhaps the Alberta 2015 election is the exception that proves the rule. In addition to Brown and Santos's chapter in this book, every party's support dropped after the debate except for the NDP's, and that Google searches for Rachel Notley dramatically increased after the debate as well.[48] This suggests that Notley's debate performance, and the narrative that she won the debate inspired voters to learn more about her.

The PC response to this increased interest in Rachel Notley was to run a series of advertisements admonishing voters not to vote for the NDP. One NDP organizer suggested that this may not have worked well in the PCs' favour:

> To me, that was a massive mistake on their part; they basically spent millions of dollars legitimizing the idea that we could form government. If we talked about it, that would have been met with skepticism and incredulity, but when they said it, suddenly the idea itself had legitimacy. It solidified the non-Conservative vote in Calgary behind us. If you were looking to form a government that wasn't PC, by their own admission, it was the NDP. Every time I heard that ad run, I heard it as an ad for us.[49]

Similarly, about a week after the leaders' debate, an event occurred that highlighted the momentum of the NDP's campaign; this event also highlights how populism is key to understanding election results in Alberta. On 1 May, five CEOs gathered for a press conference to argue that Albertans should re-elect the PCs. Because the NDP war room had been informed of the press conference in advance, they were able to release lists of the CEOs' donations to the PCs while the press conference was underway. This

strategy was effective, as the CEOs' financial support of the PCs was integrated into most media reports of the event.[50] Cheryl Oates argued that the CEOs "went on and on about, 'why me, why should I have to contribute more, why should my business have to contribute more?' and really that was the moment that solidified a narrative for Albertans that, even despite this economic downturn, the PCs were really in it for themselves, their friends, and insiders."[51]

The CEOs' press conference sparked considerable negative reaction from the public. On social media, the hashtag #PCAAHostageCrisis was used to express discontent with the idea that the CEOs would stop donating to charitable organizations if the PCs lost the 2015 election. When interpreted through a populist lens, the CEO press conference was disastrous for the PCs, as it reinforced the idea from the PC budget that those who many Albertans perceived as benefitting most from the oil and gas boom should be shielded from the economic downturn regular Albertans could not avoid. This violated the most basic premise of Prairie populism, since it showed the PCs backing powerful elites at the expense of "the people." This key idea, that of the people versus the powerful, is deeply seeded in Alberta's political culture.[52] Notably, supporters of all of Alberta's political parties are deeply populist, as Sayers and Stewart show in chapter 17 of this book. Thus, any political party that wishes to do well in Alberta must appear to follow the principles of Prairie populism. In 2015, the NDP and Notley resonated on populism in ways that the other leaders, especially Prentice did not.

Thus, given all these factors, the 2015 election ended with the momentum clearly in the NDP's favour. Organizers reported that donations started to flood in the back half of the campaign and simply did not stop. Similarly, Scott Payne, the NDP's Calgary field organizer during the campaign, observed that

> at one point very late in the election, I plunked down in a fairly remote parking lot in southeastern Calgary with about 2,000 Rachel Notley signs, and we blasted an email out and said, "if you want a sign, come to this location." We showed up at 10 [a.m.] and were out of signs by 2 [p.m.]. Offloading that number of signs before this election was unheard of. Going out of the way, coming to you, and they're someone

you don't recognize, that tells me there's really something happening.[53]

Yet, Payne also reported that there was

> no milestone that we hit that told me that we were going to a) form government or b) form a majority. It wasn't until the last twenty-four hours that I thought we would form government. And it wasn't until I was told that it was a majority. You just don't see elections like that. A once-in-a-lifetime sort of thing. . . . [pause] It's a testament to the power that the electorate has.[54]

Looking Forward to 2019

The NDP's 2015 campaign was successful, at least in part, because it was well designed by smart actors deployed at the right time with the right leader. Given the unique context of the 2015 election, what can we learn from the success of the NDP's campaign for the next provincial election in 2019? Certainly, it would be foolish to suggest that we can use the information outlined above to predict the next election's outcome; it is not unreasonable, though, to look at these factors and draw potential expectations.

Leadership will continue to be a crucial factor. The key for all parties, including the NDP, will be to get voters to like their leader and to view them through a Prairie populist lens. This will arguably be a more difficult task for Rachel Notley after a term in government than it was in 2015. She will be facing a united, socially and fiscally conservative party led by an experienced political operator, Jason Kenney, though Kenney is arguably less adept at populist appeals than Notley is. Indeed, research shows that voters evaluate leaders with new eyes during each electoral cycle, and that these evaluations are always measured against the other leaders in the campaign.[55] Thus, what made Albertans like Notley in 2015 (when she was compared to Prentice) will certainly change in 2019 (when she is compared to Kenney). What may also be important for Notley is a platform that she

can credibly sell for a second term in government; again, this may be more challenging in 2019 than it was in 2015.

Similarly, the economy will be an issue, but in a very different way than it was in 2015. When Prentice announced his budget, it was clear that Alberta was at the start of a major economic downturn, with the worst of it to come after the election was finished. It appears as though the worst has now passed, and that a recovery is on its way. Research suggests that this may produce positive expectations about the future economy in Alberta; this may not necessarily help the NDP, but it certainly will not hurt it.[56] Yet, an economic recovery is not the same as an economy that is fully recovered; given that party identification colours how voters perceive information about the economy, a recovering economy may not be enough for the NDP to receive the expected incumbent boost.

It seems reasonable to expect that 2019 will be an election unlike any Alberta has seen before. Just as was the case in 2015, resources will be crucial to strong campaigns. Unlike 2015, there is a new statutory framework that will govern party and campaign finances in 2019. Despite the creation of the United Conservative Party, the NDP continues to lead all parties in financial donations, taking in over $51,000 more in the first quarter of 2018 than did the UCP. This is in keeping with financing trends between 2015 and 2017, as the NDP led both the Wildrose and the PCs in contributions prior to the UCP's formation.[57] Given this, the creation of the UCP itself, and new leadership for at least two parties in the Alberta legislature (the Alberta Party and the Alberta Liberals), 2019 may be Alberta's most interesting election to date. Yet, given the considerable importance research places on leadership, resources, and populism in Alberta elections, the insights generated from the NDP's 2015 election campaign could potentially successfully inform their future electoral strategies.

Notes

1   See Stuart Soroka, Dominic Stecula, and Christopher Wlezien, "It's (Change in) the (Future) Economy, Stupid: Economic Indicators, the Media, and Public Opinion," *American Journal of Political Science* 59, no. 2 (2015): 457–74.

2   Michael S. Lewis-Beck and Mary Stegmaier. 2007. "Economic Models of Voting," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Behavior*, ed. Russell J. Dalton and Hans-Dieter Klingemann, 518–37 (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

3   Trevor McKenzie-Smith (pre-writ organizer), interview with author, 26 November 2016.

4   Ibid.

5   Scott Payne (pre-election Calgary organizer, Calgary field organizer), interview with author, 8 December 2016.

6   Gerry Scott, NDP campaign director, "Campaign 2019—The Path Forward" (Alberta NDP convention), Calgary, 11 June 2016.

7   Though both Justin Trudeau (federal) and Jean Charest (Quebec) have appointed parity cabinets, their cabinets remain majority male, as the chief political executive (prime minister, premier) tips the balance. As a woman, then, Notley is the first to lead a majority female cabinet in Canada.

8   See William Cross, *Political Parties* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004).

9   See Parliament of Canada, "Women in the Provincial and Territorial Legislatures: Current List," 2017, http://www.lop.parl.gc.ca/ParlInfo/compilations/ProvinceTerritory/Women.aspx?Province=edad4077-a735-48ad-982e-1dcad72f51b6&Current=True (accessed 1 March 20170. Opposition parties appear to struggle to nominate women as candidates and elect them as MLAs; at the time of writing, only two women sit in the opposition benches. A third, Sandra Jansen, crossed the floor from the PCs to the NDP after allegations of gendered harassment from within her own party. See Justin Giovanetti, "Alberta Tory MLA Sandra Jansen defects to NDP, citing sexism and personal attacks," *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), 17 November 2016, http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/alberta/former-alberta-tory-leadership-candidate-sandra-jansen-crosses-floor-to-ndp/article32902968/ (accessed 1 March 2017).

10   Payne interview.

11   Ibid.

12   "Canada's female premiers on Hillary Clinton and sexism in politics," *CBC News*, 31 August 2016, http://www.cbc.ca/news/thenational/canada-s-female-premiers-on-hillary-clinton-and-sexism-in-politics-1.3694912 (accessed 1 March 2017).

13   Payne interview.

14   See R. Kenneth Carty, "The Politics of Tecumseh Corners: Canadian Political Parties as Franchise Organizations," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 35, no. 4 (2002): 723–45; Carty, "Parties as Franchise Systems: The Stratarchical Organizational Imperative," *Party Politics* 10, no. 1 (2004): 5–24; and Cross, *Political Parties*.

15   Melanee Thomas, "Equality of Opportunity but not Result: Women and Federal Conservatives in Canada," in *The Blueprint: Conservative Parties and Their Impact on Canadian Politics*, ed. J. P. Lewis and Joanna Everitt (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017).

16   Ted (pseudonym; war room), interview with author, 6 December 2016.

17   Sally Housser (press secretary for Rachel Notley), interview with author, 4 November 2016.

18   Ted interview.

19 Houser interview.

20 Ted interview.

21 Lois (pseudonym; local campaign organizer), interview with author, 20 November 2016. Coined by former premier Ralph Klein, the catch phrase "Martha and Henry" is used to describe regular Albertans. Of course, rhetorically, who Martha and Henry are depends on the speaker's own views and goals. For example, between 2004 and 2009, feminists based in Lethbridge, organized "Martha's Monthly," sending emails on a current event related to women or women's issues to a constituency office or minister's office on the eighth day of every month.

22 This sparked the Twitter hashtag #PrenticeBlamesAlbertans, something NDP communications staff integrated into their communications strategies. See Cheryl Oates, (media relations), "Campaign 2019—The Path Forward," Calgary, 11 June 2016, and "#PrenticeBlamesAlbertans goes viral after Jim Prentice's 'look in the mirror' comment," *CBC News*, 5 March 2015, http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/ prenticeblamesalbertans-goes-viral-after-jim-prentice-s-look-in-the-mirror- comment-1.2982524 (accessed 1 March 2017).

23 Chris Varcoe, "Prentice says Albertans must 'look in the mirror' for the province's financial crunch," *Calgary Herald*, 5 March 2015, http://calgaryherald.com/news/ politics/prentice-says-albertans-must-look-in-the-mirror-for-the-provinces-financial- crunch (accessed 1 March 2017).

24 Houser interview.

25 See David Laycock, "Populism," *Canadian Encyclopedia*, 2015, http://www. thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/populism/ (accessed 21 March 2017), and David Stewart and Anothony Sayers, "Breaking the Peace: The Wildrose Alliance in Alberta Politics," *Canadian Political Science Review* 71, no. 1 (2013): 73–86.

26 Ted interview.

27 Payne interview.

28 The Liberal Party of Alberta could arguably have been a factor in the 2015 election campaign. However, unlike the NDP, the Liberals were poorly organized and poorly positioned to react to the context. First, many of their incumbent MLAs declined to seek re-election, either because of retirement or because they were seeking Liberal Party of Canada nominations for the upcoming federal election. Leadership was also arguably weak, as David Swann was not seen as a viable leader in the long term, and the incumbents who sought re-election did not have a cohesive message. One NDP organizer (Ted) observed:

Yeah, I think a big part of the reason why they lost out in that election campaign is because of Laurie Blakeman. Her gambit was strategic voting. Right from the beginning, "you gotta vote strategically." She was running for three parties at once, basically. There was a very clear shift in the middle of the campaign with her message, which I thought was fantastic. So, consistently saying, "vote strategically, if you want to get rid of the PCs, you gotta vote strategically," and people didn't view David Swann as a viable leader. I mean, when you go talk to voters, they put a lot of their image of the party on the leader, so the leadership definitely matters. Swann didn't really have a

clear campaign message, he had some big gaffes in terms of what he had to say during televised addresses and debates, and then Laurie Blakeman didn't really help the cause because she was roaming in a different direction, and what she had to say was "vote strategically." About halfway through the campaign, I remember reading a news article with her in it saying, "DON'T vote strategically!" [laughs] So, what happened was that people said, "Yeah, we're going to vote strategically, we want to get rid of the PCs. Who's the best party to do that? Rachel Notley and the NDP!" And she clearly misread people's intentions when she was talking about strategic voting.

29   Scott, "Campaign 2019—The Path Forward."

30   Ibid.

31   See Richard Cuthbertson, "Analysis: In the last three days before the Alberta vote, the cracks in the Wildrose were showing," *National Post* (Toronto), 27 April 2012, http://news.nationalpost.com/news/canada/analysis-in-the-last-three-days-before-the-alberta-vote-the-cracks-in-the-wildrose-were-showing (accessed 1 March 2017).

32   Ted interview.

33   See Amanda Bittner, *Platform or Personality? The Role of Party Leaders in Elections* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

34   Ibid.; see also Bittner, "Personality Matters: The Evaluation of Party Leaders in Canadian Elections," in *Voting Behaviour in Canada*, ed. Cameron D. Anderson and Laura B. Stephenson (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 190.

35   Bittner, *Platform or Personality?*, especially Tables 5.3. and 5.4.

36   Bittner, "Personality Matters."

37   Ted interview.

38   Ibid.

39   Ibid.

40   Oates, "Campaign 2019—The Path Forward."

41   Payne interview.

42   "NDP's balanced budget to come a year later, due to accounting error," *CBC News*, 21 April 2015, http://www.cbc.ca/news/elections/alberta-votes/ndp-s-balanced-budget-to-come-a-year-later-due-to-accounting-error-1.3042240 (accessed 1 March 2017).

43   See Éric Bélanger, "Issue Ownership by Canadian Political Parties 1953–2001," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 36, no. 3 (2003): 539–58.

44   Jen Gerson, "Alberta election debate 'math' remark could subtract voters for PC's Jim Prentice," *National Post* (Toronto), 24 April 2015, http://news.nationalpost.com/news/canada/canadian-politics/math-remark-during-debate-could-subtract-voters-for-alberta-pcs-jim-prentice (accessed 1 March 2017).

45   Gerson, "Alberta election debate."

46   Brian Topp, head of communications, "Campaign 2019—The Path Forward," Calgary, 11 June 2016.

47   Oates, "Campaign 2019—The Path Forward."

48   Paul Fairie, "The Election Index: How Alberta turned orange," *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), 8 May 2015, http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/the-political-index-how-alberta-turned-orange/article24352152/ (accessed 1 March 2017).

49   Payne interview.

50   See, for example, Slav Kornik and Caley Ramsay, "Edmonton business leaders support PC government; NDP dismiss them as 'PC donors,' " *Global News*, 1 May 2015, http://globalnews.ca/news/1973934/edmonton-business-leaders-support-pc-government-ndp-dismiss-them-as-pc-donors/ (accessed 1 March 2017).

51   Oates, "Campaign 2019—The Path Forward."

52   See David Stewart and Keith Archer, *Quasi-Democracy? Parties and Leadership Selection in Alberta* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000), and Stewart and Sayers, "Breaking the Peace."

53   Payne interview.

54   Ibid.

55   Bittner, "Personality Matters."

56   See Soroka, Stecula, and Wlezien, "It's (Change in) the (Future) Economy, Stupid."

57   See Elections Alberta, "Financial Disclosure: Parties," 2018, http://efpublic.elections.ab.ca/efParties.cfm?MID=FP (accessed 23 May 2018).