

A Comparison of North-South and West-East Differences in Political Attitudes in Canada

BORIS DEWIEL

The Northern Review #25/26 (Summer 2005): 71–80.

Abstract

Using data from the 2000 Canadian Election Study, this paper compares differences in political values and attitudes from west to east with corresponding differences from north to south. On social issues, the West is not generally more traditional or conservative than the East, but the North is somewhat more conservative than the South. On economic issues, the West is somewhat more libertarian than the East, while the North does not differ much from the South. In attitudes toward Ottawa, the North shows greater signs of alienation than the West.

Increasingly in recent years, Canadian federal elections have resulted in a regionalized pattern of political representation. In the 2000 election, none of the five major parties was strong throughout the country. The federal Liberals won their majority by dominating in Ontario, while the Canadian Alliance won official opposition status by dominating in British Columbia and Alberta. The federal New Democratic Party (NDP) came closest to having balanced support across Canada outside of Quebec, but they failed to dominate in any region. The Progressive Conservatives, meanwhile, were strong only in Atlantic Canada and the Bloc Québécois ran candidates only in Quebec.

A question that arises from these regional differences in party support is whether Canadians differ systematically by region in their political values and attitudes. A preliminary analysis of left-right self-identifications across Canada suggests that this may be so. As shown in Table 1, the West and the East differ in ideological profile. Moving from west to east, left-wing self-identifications rise steadily and right-wing self-identifications decline steadily.¹ Only in the East do leftists outnumber rightists, while in the West rightists outnumber leftists by more than two-to-one. Does this pattern in regionally aggregated data represent a more general trend in issue attitudes, when these are measured at the individual level?

A possible second dimension of regional differences in Canadian politics is the divide between Northerners and those in the South. However, if there are differences in attitudes and values along this dimension, these may simply be due to varying levels of urbanization. To determine whether

Table 1: Left-Right Self-Identification by Region

	Canada	West	Ontario	Quebec & Atlantic
Left	17.5%	14.3%	15.6%	23.8%
Centre	55.9%	52.6%	58.5%	56.2%
Right	26.6%	33.1%	25.9%	20.0%
(N)	(1980)	(940)	(578)	(770)

Data from the 2000 Canadian Election Study. Regional N does not equal national N because of weighting.

there are general ideological and attitudinal differences in Canadian politics along north-south lines, levels of urbanization must be taken into account.

Methodology

This paper examines these questions by looking for associations between respondents' geographical locations and their political attitudes using data from the 2000 Canadian Election Study (2000 CES) and the Statistics Canada Postal Code Conversion File.² The latter is used to match the postal code variable from the 2000 CES with latitude and longitude coordinates, to produce interval-level variables measuring each respondent's "northernness" and "westernness."³ These variables were then correlated with attitudinal variables in three categories: progressive versus traditional social attitudes, egalitarian versus libertarian economic attitudes, and attitudes toward the functioning of democracy and political institutions in Canada.

The 2000 CES includes a wide array of variables measuring general issue attitudes and specific feelings of political satisfaction or alienation. For the purposes of this analysis, responses for all ordinal-level issue variables were recoded into three categories: "for" (coded 1), "against" (-1), and "neutral" (0) if included. Issue variables that were originally given as interval-level, such as feeling thermometers, were not recoded. The result is a series of ratio-level variables that may be correlated with the northernness and westernness variables.

Because the Canadian North is less urbanized than the South, the study uses city size as a control variable. The Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) variable from the 2000 CES was converted into a variable for city size using data from the 1991 census. Respondents for whom no CMA was reported were assumed to be from rural areas or from smaller towns. These respondents were assigned a value of 500 for this variable. In addition, since westernness correlates to some degree with northernness in Canada (due mostly to the population density and southernness of Southern Ontario), each of the geographical variables was controlled for respectively; that is,

the effect of northernness was measured while controlling for the effect of westernness and the effect of westernness was measured while controlling for northernness. This procedure allows us to compare the independent effects of northernness and westernness on political attitudes in Canada. Thus the results reported below are second order partial correlations with two control variables, city size and either northernness or westernness.

A preliminary analysis using data for respondents from all ten provinces indicated a strong pattern of northern alienation in Canada. For example, using the full national data set, northernness in Canada correlates negatively with the feeling thermometer variable measuring a respondent's warmth for Canada. However, further investigation showed that much of this effect was eliminated when Quebec was removed from the analysis, suggesting that the particular character of Quebec politics skews the national results. To eliminate this effect, and to increase the likelihood of linearity in the effects of the northernness and westernness variables, the study was conducted using only data for Canada outside Quebec.

General Issue Attitudes

We began by asking whether Westerners are more right-wing than other Canadians. In colloquial usage, the language of left-right differences tends to have a dual meaning. On the one hand, it is common to talk about left-wing and right-wing social attitudes, such that the left-right continuum in one connotation refers to social progressivism versus social traditionalism. On the other hand, we commonly speak of left-wing and right-wing economic differences, so that the second meaning of the left-right spectrum refers to economic egalitarianism versus economic libertarianism. We will look in turn at each of these two connotations of left-right difference.

In interpreting these data, a correlation of 1.0 represents a perfect positive relationship between either northernness or westernness and the issue in question, while a correlation of -1.0 represents a perfect negative relationship. Statistical significance is a measure of the likelihood that a datum was produced by random sampling error. For example, data marked *** have only a 1/1000 likelihood of having been produced by the idiosyncrasies of this particular sample of respondents. Such findings are therefore highly likely to be generalizable to the broader population of Canadian voters.

On the progressive versus traditional cleavage-dimension of left-right differences, a range of social issue variables with significant associations with either northernness or westernness are shown in Table 2. In each case, the correlations reported were produced by controlling both for city size and for westernness or northernness, respectively. The expectation here, following the preliminary analysis of left-right self-identifications in three regions from west to east, was that right-wing attitudes toward social tra-

Table 2: Social Issue Attitudes among Northerners and Westerners outside Quebec in the 2000 CES (Pearson's R)†

Difficult for non-whites to be successful		The lack of women in government is a problem		Sympathetic toward feminism	
North	West	North	West	North	West
-0.10**	0.07*	-0.09**	0.08**	-0.06*	0.03
N=973		N=961		N=1738	
Support the death penalty		Fewer problems if there were more emphasis on traditional family values		Promoting traditional family values is important election issue	
North	West	North	West	North	West
0.00	0.06**	0.05	-0.07*	0.03	-0.08***
N=1909		N=1014		N=2313	
Favourable to Aboriginal peoples		Aboriginal peoples are worse off than others		More tolerant of those with different standards	
North	West	North	West	North	West
-0.07*	-0.01	-0.09***	0.05*	0.05	-0.09**
N=1761		N=2251		N=993	
Favourable to environmentalists		Protecting environment is important election issue		Only police and military should have guns	
North	West	North	West	North	West
-0.08***	-0.04	-0.08***	0.02	-0.12***	0.03
N=1851		N=2357		N=2323	

† Second order partial correlations, controlling (a) for West and North, respectively, and (b) for city size.

* sig. at $\alpha < .05$; ** sig. at $\alpha < .01$; *** sig. at $\alpha < .001$

ditionalism would correlate with westernness. In most cases, however, this does not seem to be the case. For example, westernness in Canada outside Quebec tends to be negatively correlated with support for traditional family values, both as a general issue area and as a campaign issue during the 2000 election campaign. Similarly, Westerners are somewhat more likely to think that the disproportionate ratio of men over women in the federal parliament is a serious problem, and they are more likely to agree that visible minorities face special obstacles to success in Canada. Westerners tend

not to differ from other Canadians in their feeling thermometer attitudes toward Aboriginal peoples and tend by a small margin to be more likely to agree that Aboriginal peoples are worse off than other Canadians. Perhaps surprisingly, westernness does not seem to be negatively related to attitudes toward gun control; unsurprisingly, this is a stronger issue in the North. Neither do Westerners tend to differ from other Canadians in their support for environmentalism.

In a few cases, however, the trend toward liberalism in social attitudes by Westerners compared to other Canadians outside Quebec is reversed. Westerners are more likely to support the death penalty, and they are less likely to believe that we should be "more tolerant of people who choose to live according to their own standards, even if they are very different from our own." Apart from these exceptions, however, the expectation that Westerners will be more right-wing in social attitudes appears from these data—when we control for the effect of northernness and city size—not to be supported.

Instead, on some social issues it is not westernness but northernness that correlates with social traditionalism. Northerners are less likely to think that women's under-representation in Ottawa is a serious problem and they are slightly less likely to be sympathetic toward feminism. However, they do not tend to differ from other Canadians in their support for the death penalty or for traditional family values. Neither are they significantly more likely than others to support tolerance for those who live by different standards than their own. Northerners are less likely to be supportive of Aboriginal peoples and environmentalists. In the case of these latter two issue areas, the interests of Northerners are often more directly affected than those of Southerners; if so, these attitudes may simply reflect self-interest.

Generally speaking, perhaps the most significant finding in Table 2 is that the effects of northernness and westernness on social attitudes appear to be independent of each other. A glance at a map of Canada shows that the four western provinces are more northern than the other provinces: most of the Atlantic region (except for Labrador and the northern edge of Newfoundland) and the southern third of Ontario are below the 49th parallel. This fact highlights the importance of controlling for the effect of both dimensions of geographic location in relation to the other. When we do so, much of the supposed social conservatism of western Canada seems to disappear.

Turning to economic issues, Table 3 shows that Westerners are somewhat more economically libertarian than eastern Canadians, while Northerners, with the exception of the importance they gave to tax cuts as an election issue, tend not to differ from Southerners on economic issues. Interestingly, Westerners seem to be less supportive of free trade and closer ties to the US than are Easterners. However, Westerners did not support

welfare improvements and job creation as important election issues.

Generally speaking, the pattern of economic attitudes in Table 3 seems
 Table 3: Economic Issue Attitudes among Northerners and Westerners
 outside Quebec in 2000 CES (Pearson's R)[†]

Improving welfare programs is an important election issue		Creating jobs is an important election issue	
North	West	North	West
0.03	-0.09***	0.00	-0.06**
N=2305		N=2341	
Cutting taxes is an important election issue		Cutting government debt is an important election issue	
North	West	North	West
0.09***	-0.04	-0.03	0.04*
N=2341		N=2321	
If businesses make money everyone benefits including the poor		Leave it entirely to the private sector to create jobs	
North	West	North	West
0.02	0.05*	0.00	0.05*
N=1871		N=2275	
Free trade with US has been good for Canadian economy		Canada's ties with US should be closer	
North	West	North	West
-0.03	-0.06**	0.02	-0.07**
N=1745		N=1896	
If businesses make money everyone benefits including the poor			
North	West		
0.02	0.05*		
N=1871			

† Second order partial correlations, controlling (a) for West and North, respectively, and (b) for city size.

* sig. at $\alpha < .05$; ** sig. at $\alpha < .01$; *** sig. at $\alpha < .001$

to show that Westerners do tend to be more economically libertarian than other Canadians outside Quebec. However, the magnitudes of these effects do not seem strong enough alone to cause the growing regionalization of Canadian politics in recent years.

To address the latter question we must turn toward a more specific set of political attitudes, those concerning feelings of political alienation and dissatisfaction with Canadian democracy. In recent years, western alienation has increasingly become a topic of popular political discussion. However, if (as the data here seem to show) northernness and westernness operate as distinct dimensions of influence on social and economic attitudes, are they also distinct in their effect on feelings of alienation? In Canada, should we be concerned not just with growing feelings of western alienation from the geographic centre, but also with feelings of northern alienation from the South?

Political Alienation among Northerners and Westerners

As a final stage of analysis, northernness and westernness were correlated with a number of attitudinal variables such as feelings of satisfaction with democracy, feelings of political efficacy and attitudes toward provincial-federal tensions. The results are presented in Table 4.

The variable inquiring into respondents' feelings of satisfaction with democracy appears twice in the 2000 CES, in the first wave of the survey during the election campaign and again in the second, post-election wave. Among Westerners, the campaign wave variable did not produce evidence of dissatisfaction with democracy, but after the election they had become increasingly dissatisfied. We do not know if this was a reaction to campaign events, such as the Prime Minister's joke that Albertans are not like the rest of us, or if it was due simply to unhappiness with the election outcome. It seems likely, however, that a combination of factors was involved, such as dissatisfaction with the results of the election as viewed through the lens of unhappiness with the conduct of the campaign. In any case, these data suggest that dissatisfaction with democracy in the West may be due more to short-term events rather than to long-term structural imbalances in the nation.

The same may not to be the case with regard to feelings of dissatisfaction with democracy among Northerners. Their levels of dissatisfaction, although not very strong in either wave of the survey, nonetheless were both statistically significant and constant across these two waves of the survey. This finding suggests that long-term structural imbalances in political representation and the perceived lack of responsiveness to northern concerns may be the cause of entrenched feelings of political alienation among Northerners.

The control procedure used in this analysis shows that feelings of

dissatisfaction with democracy in the North and in the West are distinct phenomena, but given the geographical lay of the Canadian land, the two phenomena tend to be reinforcing. The eastern provinces tend to be further south and western provinces are further north, so feelings of northern alienation and western alienation, although conceptually distinct, overlap in their practical effect. In addition, as the increasing urbanization of the Canadian population causes further growth in southern political ridings, these problems are likely to increase in the future. There may be a reason here to argue for an increase the disproportionate ratio of voters per riding in northern ridings compared to southern ones. Together with the fact that the overall population growth of western Canada is gradually leading to an increase in ridings in British Columbia and Alberta, an increase in the number of northern ridings would lead to an overall gain in political representation for the West.

The data in Table 4 also show that support for grassroots democracy

Table 4: Political Alienation among Northerners and Westerners outside Quebec in 2000 CES (Pearson's R)[†]

Dissatisfied with democracy (pre-election)		Dissatisfied with democracy (post-election)		Grassroots can solve most of our problems	
North	West	North	West	North	West
0.05*	0.03	0.05*	0.10***	0.08*	-0.06
N=2280		N=1877		N=871	
Fed. gov't treats my province worse than others		In division of powers, provinces should have more power		People like me don't have say in government	
North	West	North	West	North	West
0.23***	0.03	0.15***	-0.02	0.07*	0.03
N=2229		N=963		N=1017	
Confidence in federal government		Confidence in provincial government		Blame federal gov't for federal-provincial conflict	
North	West	North	West	North	West
-0.08*	-0.05	0.13***	-0.14***	0.19***	-0.09**
N=1032		N=1040		N=876	

[†] Second order partial correlations, controlling (a) for West and North, respectively, and (b) for city size.

* sig. at $\alpha < .05$; ** sig. at $\alpha < .01$; *** sig. at $\alpha < .001$

is associated with northernness rather than westernness. Again, this effect is not due to an urban-rural cleavage, since this is controlled for in this analysis. Similarly, northernness, but not westernness, is significantly correlated with the belief that, "People like me don't have any say about what the government does." This suggests that the populist appeal of prairie protest parties in Canada, from agrarian socialists in the past to the rise of the Reform Party more recently, may be due not to the westernness but to the northernness of the Prairie Provinces.

One of the more notable findings in the 2000 CES is that people in the West tend increasingly to feel that the federal government treats their province worse than others. Surprisingly, the data here suggest that this is caused not by western alienation but by northern alienation. In these data, there is no significant correlation between westernness and the perception of unfairness toward one's province by the federal government. The correlation of this variable with northernness, however, is the strongest level of association uncovered in this study. It is not Westerners but Northerners who believe that their province is treated worse by the federal government. Again, this finding suggests that northern alienation may be a greater problem in Canadian politics than western alienation. When we control for northernness and for city size, feelings of western alienation seem largely to disappear.

This suggestion is further supported by the variables in Table 4 that measure attitudes toward federal-provincial relations. Northernness but not westernness is associated with a lack of confidence in the federal government. In the corresponding variable measuring confidence in the provincial government, the effects of the two geographical variables are each relatively strong but operate in opposite directions: northern respondents tend to have more confidence their provincial governments, while western respondents tend to have less confidence in their respective provinces. (Part of the latter effect is due to the very high levels of dissatisfaction among British Columbians with their provincial government at the time, with 77.5 percent reporting little or no confidence in the NDP administration.) Similarly, northernness is fairly strongly associated with the tendency to blame the federal government in cases where the two orders of government come into conflict, while westernness is associated with the tendency to blame the provincial government. Whether the latter finding is due to short-term events such as provincial dissatisfaction in BC, will require further study.

The method used here to distinguish between northernness and westernness as individual-level variables in explaining regional differences in political attitudes appears to show that the two geographic dimensions produce distinct and sometimes opposite effects. These effects are observ-

able but are not very strong with regard to social and economic issues, but are quite strong and consistent in relation to feelings of political alienation. In general, this study suggests that northern alienation may be an important but previously unrecognized phenomenon in Canadian politics.

Northern alienation may, in one regard, be less problematic than western alienation but, in another regard, it may be more troubling. The good news may be that northern jurisdictions are not organized into separate provinces. This means that feelings of northern alienation are mediated at least in two ways, in intergovernmental affairs through the provinces and in federal politics through political parties. This means that at the provincial level and in political parties, feelings of northern alienation will be diluted (as it were) by the numerically larger interests of more satisfied Southerners.

The bad news, however, is that northern alienation would appear to be due to long-term structural imbalances within the Canadian federation. As the North continues to be developed, this is likely to produce ongoing feelings of political dissatisfaction with the Canadian political system among a large sector of its citizens. The result, if the findings here are supported in further research, is that this newly discovered cleavage-dimension in Canadian politics is likely to be a further cause of disunity and regionalization in the nation.

About the Author

Boris DeWiel <dewielb@unbc.ca> is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Northern British Columbia. He is the author of *Democracy: A History of Ideas* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2000).

Endnotes

1. The left-right self-identification variable used in the 2000 CES allows three relevant responses: left, right and centre. 70.9% of respondents were willing to locate themselves within these categories, suggesting the language of left-centre-right differences remains cogent in Canadian politics.
2. Statistics Canada Cat., No 92F0027XDB.
3. The postal code data from the 2000 CES were truncated after the third digit to identify only the postal sorting division. The latitude and longitude for each division were assigned using average latitude and longitude for the full range of postal codes within each sorting division. This summarizing step is convenient given the size of the StatsCan conversion file, which includes approximately 1,000,000 postal codes.