

Choice by voters in Sask. will hold significant sway

David McGrane, *Saskatoon StarPhoenix*, September 18th, 2008, A11

Following is the viewpoint of the writer, assistant professor of political studies at St. Thomas More College at the University of Saskatchewan.

When Prime Minister Stephen Harper called the election, the response of many people in Saskatchewan was undoubtedly: "Not another election!"

With two federal elections and one provincial election during last four years, a little voter fatigue is understandable. Nonetheless, we should not let our weariness allow us to fall prey to old, cynical arguments that, "All politicians are the same" and "Your vote doesn't make a difference."

The votes cast in Saskatchewan on Oct. 14 will be important for the future of our province, and our choice will make a difference.

With the probability that the Conservatives will pick up another 20 seats in Quebec, voters in Saskatchewan should start from the premise that the Conservatives are within striking distance of forming a majority government. Even with their additional seats in Quebec, the Conservatives will still need to retain all their seats in English Canada and add a few more to attain what will be a razor-thin majority. Therefore, the Conservatives need to sweep Saskatchewan once again.

If voters reject the Conservatives in a number of key Saskatchewan ridings, that could be the difference between a majority and minority government. If you choose to vote Conservative, you must assume that you are contributing toward the election of a majority government. Putting all that power into Harper's hands has a number of significant consequences for Saskatchewan.

He would introduce little new social policy and would enact tax cuts targeted to his potential supporters in Saskatchewan, such as the owners of small businesses, and truckers and farmers who are heavy users of diesel.

He would continue his "go slow" approach on climate change, which would not unbalance Saskatchewan's oil industry. However, the Conservatives' gradualist approach to climate change would probably mean that Saskatchewan would continue to have per-capita greenhouse gas emissions that are three times higher than that of all other provinces except Alberta.

Saskatchewan voters who reject the Harper agenda have three choices -- Liberal, NDP, or Green.

The Liberals have a bold carbon tax plan based on the lofty principle that the "polluter pays," and that we need to change consumer behaviour to truly combat climate change. Some observers, such as U of S public policy professor Janice MacKinnon and Premier Brad Wall, have argued that Liberal Leader Stephane Dion's Green Shift plan could adversely affect Saskatchewan through handicapping our resource-based economy while Central Canada gets the lion's share of the personal and corporate tax cuts designed to offset the impact of the new carbon taxes.

Besides their environmental plan, the Liberals have yet to announce other policies that would have a significant effect on Saskatchewan and have preferred to concentrate on policies, such as banning semi-automatic assault rifles or investing in the modernization of the fishing industry, that target other parts of the country.

With Dion's uninspiring leadership during the first couple of weeks of the campaign, even the Conservatives are admitting that NDP Leader Jack Layton is looking like the real leader of the opposition. With the NDP having the best chance to beat the Conservatives in most Saskatchewan ridings, many provincial voters may consider voting NDP as the best way to deny Harper a majority and provide a spirited opposition in Ottawa.

With a large Opposition caucus, the NDP would attempt to force Harper to pay more attention to social policy and act on consumer issues such as high ATM fees and price-gouging at the gas pumps. The NDP, which opposes carbon taxes on consumers, also would push a Conservative government to create a "cap and trade system" on carbon that would force large corporate polluters either to reduce emissions or pay heavy fines. However, like the Liberals' Green Shift, the NDP's environmental plan would necessitate considerable adjustment on the part of companies in Saskatchewan's oilpatch.

Finally, some Saskatchewan voters may be tempted to vote for the Green party as a way to send a message to the established parties that they are unhappy with current state of Canadian politics and consider the environment to be the defining political issue of our times.

These voters must face the reality that a vote for the Greens will not elect that party's candidate in their riding, and may allow the Conservatives to win by taking away votes from Liberal or NDP candidates. Potential Green voters in Saskatchewan must ask themselves if sending a message to Canada's established federal parties is worth the risk of contributing to the election of a Conservative candidate whose party is the least likely to take dramatic action on environmental issues.

Saskatchewan voters have an important choice to make on Oct. 14 that will affect their own lives and the future of their province. We should all analyze the current political situation and seize our power to vote.

Your vote matters. Use it!