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RIGHT-POPULISTS AND PLEBISCITARY POLITICS IN CANADA

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to explain the appeal direct democratic instruments hold for contemporary right-populist parties by drawing on recent experience in Canada. Our thesis is that a particular approach to direct democracy – which we label 'plebiscitarianism' – complements right-populist parties' broader ideological commitment to a scaling back of the welfare state, and of public life more generally. Starting with a theoretical approximation of plebiscitarianism, we trace this complementarity with reference to the democratic ideas and practices of right-populists in Canada, both historically and in the present context.

KEY WORDS ▪ Canada ▪ direct democracy ▪ plebiscitarianism ▪ populism ▪ representation

> How many politicians does it take to grease a combine? Fourteen, if you put them through real slow.
>
> (Preston Manning, quoted in Sallot, 1997)

The Reform Party of Canada's use and promotion of direct democracy is one of more than a dozen cases explored at the 1997 ECPR workshop on Political Parties and Plebiscitary Politics. Established a decade ago but already Canada's official parliamentary opposition, Reform has growing and influential company in western party systems as a right-populist, anti-statist party interested in the popular appeal and potential anti-party clout of direct democracy. In this paper, we demonstrate how a critical appraisal of the Reform Party's plebiscitarianism contributes to understanding the politics of direct democracy.[1] On first encounter, Reform's interest in direct democracy might be accounted for in terms of their members' desire to democratize Canadian public life. More cynically, one might focus on their leaders' desire to capitalize electorally on growing levels of citizen dissatisfaction with existing representative politics.

Neither of these explanations fully accounts for Reform's support for

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direct democracy. There is no denying that party members and activists are enthusiastic about these as supra-partisan mechanisms of citizen empowerment. Attendance at any of the party's annual assemblies will confirm this. There is also little doubt that Reform Party elites see political advantages in the advocacy and use of direct democratic mechanisms. In today's political climate, there is much promotional and recruitment mileage to be gained by suggesting alternatives to rule by discredited elites.

Nonetheless, we believe that the party's championing of direct democracy is best understood in the light of its challenges to the welfare state and a public sphere constituted by a pluralistic and multi-dimensional representation of organized interests. As promoted and used by Reform, the instruments of direct democracy appear to be highly congruent with the downsized public life the party envisions. In such a case, direct democracy becomes a defining element of the distinctive ideology we shall call 'plebiscitarianism'.

We begin our analysis by conceptualizing plebiscitarianism. Then we briefly consider Canada's openness to plebiscitarian appeals as a condition of Reform Party success. Next we place the emergence of the Reform Party in the historical context of Canadian populism and outline the ideological foundations of Reform's project. Following this, we examine a number of the party's forays into direct democracy, both as proposed and performed. Finally, we situate these efforts within the broader outline of the party's ideological agenda, suggesting that the comfort of this fit, not just the prospect of electoral success, accounts for the affinity shown by plebiscitarian parties towards direct democratic instruments.

Plebiscitarian Politics: A Theoretical Approximation

Plebiscitarianism is one of many ideological approaches to democratic representation. It purports to radically curtail the distortion and mediation of citizen preferences by compromised political organizations, offering to substitute direct connections between the people and the policies or social results they seek. These direct connections are the recall, the initiative and the referendum. Their value is typically conveyed in terms of allowing market-like registration of citizen preferences, in political markets where exchanges have previously been hedged by political parties and interest groups.

A plebiscitarian approach to democracy strongly suspects that a proliferation of such mediating organizations brings dysfunction to the body politic. Mediation of citizens' policy preferences through deliberation in and among traditional political parties and organized interests is best minimized, because such processes are captured by a closed circle of 'special interests' and their benefactors. The only alternative to the polity being damaged in this manner is to minimize the influence of such institutional players in the policy process by maximizing the number and impact of detours around them.

In this view, direct democracy is a construction kit for detours around corrupt policy intersections, clogged and fouled by parties and organized interests. In an era of increasing cynicism about politics and public life, there is a viscerally appealing quality to mechanisms advertised to minimize the impact of parties, politicians, governments and groups assisted by redistributive government interventions. The case for such mechanisms partakes of the generic anti-partyism found in much contemporary political reform discourse (Poguntke, 1996; Scarrow, 1996), but treats the animus against party as a specific but key instance of a more systemic corruption of democratic representation.

We can situate plebiscitarian approaches to democratic representation on a three-dimensional grid, as visually represented in Figure 1. The horizontal axis measures the extent, layering and density of mediation of citizen policy preferences through delegation. Choice exercised exclusively through direct democratic instrument use is at the left pole of this axis, while exclusively indirect representational practices are at the right pole. The vertical axis represents approaches to the use of associational decision-making in formally democratic systems. Its bottom pole is defined by policy choice exclusively through private and highly individualized calculation of citizen interests and preferences, and the top pole by policy choice exclusively through various structured forms of associational and hence public deliberation.

The third-dimensional diagonal axis maps leader–citizen relations. Unambiguous leader manipulation of supporter policy preferences and related

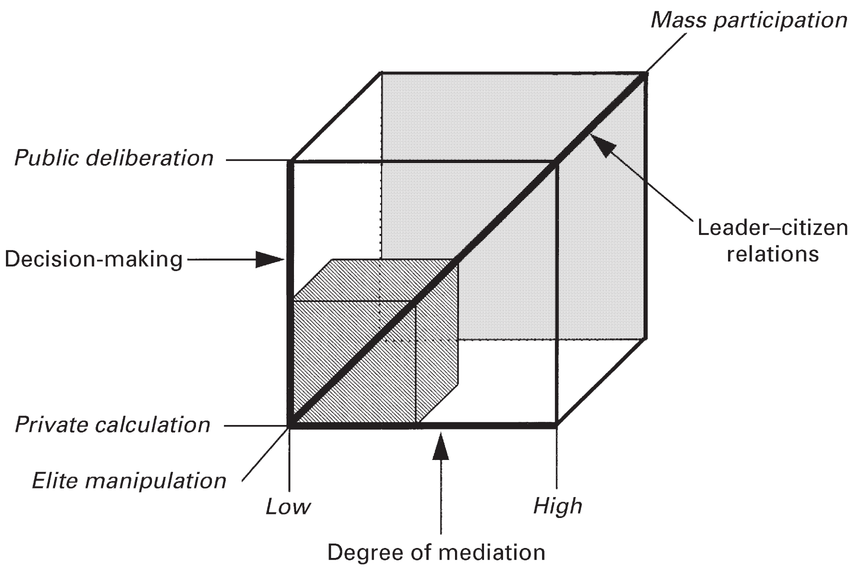

Figure 1. Plebiscitarian political space

attitudes defines the bottom front left pole, while equal sharing of agenda-setting power among leaders and supporters defines the top rear right pole. Clearly, the poles of all three axes represent ideal types; most representational practices in western polities would be plotted in clusters concentrated closer to the overlapping centres than to the poles of these axes.

Real-world plebiscitarian politics are found in the lower front left cube of this eight-cube space.[2] They promote what at first sight may appear to be a paradoxical combination: private, direct (i.e. unmediated by institutionalized organizations) links between citizens and their policy preferences, and heavy leadership structuring of citizen attitudes towards these policies. This combination works best if the 'grassroots' believe that they actually drive the agenda of a party or party government, and that the little delegation of power to which they have formally acceded is checked by a tight relationship of accountability.

One of the advantages of visualizing the politics of democratic representation in this manner is that it does not force us to say that only right-wing political forces can be attracted to plebiscitarianism. Although we discover on further reflection that there will be fewer on the left than the right, we have seen authoritarian leftist variants of plebiscitarian politics. Such regimes present pre-packaged binary options to citizens, treating them as the natural yet somehow polar expressions of the people's will. Opposition to one option is generated by treating it as the preference of evil capitalists or imperialists, and few opportunities are provided for meaningful forums or organized voices in civil society that might promote a broader, more nuanced deliberation on the issues. The government lets 'the people' decide through plebiscites carefully staged to tap citizens' good sense. Even if these plebiscites have been formally initiated outside of government circles, we would call this manipulative. Formally, however, private citizen calculations were translated through direct democratic processes into public policy.

In pluralist democratic regimes, it is reasonably easy to account for the preponderance of right- over left-wing preferences for plebiscitarian politics. Both public deliberation and an emphasis on indirect representation are characteristic features of modern welfare states. Many channels of representation exist outside electoral politics, often within the policy networks characteristic of public policy development processes. Typically, forces on the left see these institutionalized interventions through policy networks as a good thing, primarily because they provide a forum in which non-business interests can seek to influence the state's moderation of the distributive injustices of the capitalist economy. Thus a bias in favour of extensive public deliberation and a large range of indirect representational networks typically goes with a commitment to a redistributive politics.

The other clear advantage of this spatial conceptualization is that it discourages a simple identification of plebiscitarianism with the use of direct democracy instruments. Occasional referendums that involve widespread public dialogue, or even regular referendums held against a backdrop of educational, spending-limit and other requirements, do not in themselves establish a plebiscitarian politics. This three-dimensional account shows that using such instruments is a necessary but not sufficient condition of plebiscitarian politics. Equally important is a bias against public, highly pluralistic and group-organized deliberation, and a tendency to manipulative use of the preferred decision-making instruments.

Canada's Openness to Plebiscitarian Appeals

Canada's experience with direct democratic instruments of initiative, referendums and recall is limited. Most Canadian provincial governments had enabled and experienced government-initiated referendums by the end of the first world war. After the 1920s these mechanisms were seldom used to resolve controversial policy issues in provincial political arenas, with the notable exception of 1980 and 1995 referendums on sovereignty in Québec. Federal governments have employed only three referendums, on the socially divisive questions of liquor prohibition (1898), conscription for wartime military service (1942), and constitutional reform (1992). Thus, proposals for a major injection of direct democracy into Canadian governance are a marked departure from established practices.

Neither the Québec sovereignty referendums nor the 1992 constitutional reform referendum should be thought of as plebiscitarian. In none of these cases was the referendum instrument deployed with the primary goal of circumventing and delegitimizing established structures of interest articulation and aggregation. In fact, these referendums occasioned vigorous citizen deliberation, often animated and mediated by existing state and civil actors, including government, political parties and interest groups (Johnston et al., 1996). Even the 1992 referendum on the Charlottetown Accord – necessitated by perceived deficiencies in the system of executive federalism – occurred at the end of a substantial period of state-directed civic deliberation.

Like all western democracies, Canada finds itself susceptible to escalating calls for systemic institutional and policy change. Canadians experience what Offe and Preuss (1991) refer to as a threefold alienation from public life. First is an alienation from the processes and actors responsible for decisions most closely affecting them as citizens. Second is an unsettling alienation of citizens from one another. Finally, individual citizens are increasingly alienated from the social knowledge required to make conscientious and community-orientated political decisions (Offe and Preuss, 1991: 164–5). Each of these aspects of citizen alienation is arguably grist for plebiscitarian mills, since each contributes to perceptions that mediated, deliberative and collective decision-making practices are procedurally untenable, and unconnected to policy results.

Evidence of this matrix of citizen alienation can be readily gleaned from recent behavioural research in Canada, including Blais and Gidengil's

(1991) research on attitudes towards parties, politicians and political financing, Clarke and Kornberg's (1992) insightful analysis of Canadian approaches to citizenship and Nevitte's (1996) comparative account of Canadian attitudes towards political authority. These studies suggest a Canadian public open to many aspects of the plebiscitarian appeal, particularly those identifying parties as untrustworthy mediators of the people's views, and those that suggest the mere statement of one's own preferences qualifies as good civic judgement. The findings also suggest, however, that the public is inclined to be suspicious of the leader-dominated and public-debate-reducing dimensions of such a politics.

The Reform Party of Canada has achieved success by responding to many of the attitudes sketched above. It was formed in 1987, under the careful direction of Preston Manning. In the 1993 federal election, Reform received 18.7 percent of the popular vote, while in 1997, 19.4 percent of the popular vote provided Reform with Official Opposition status in Canada's parliament. Outside Québec (where the party ran only a handful of candidates), Reform garnered 27 percent of the 1997 vote. All 60 MPs were elected west of Ontario, Canada's industrial heartland and population centre.

Much of Reform's pre-1998 success is attributable to its neo-conservative fiscal and social policies. But by presenting itself as the only alternative to unaccountable parliamentary majorities, Reform occupies a position squarely within the plebiscitarian space created by public disenchantment with traditional representative structures. Reformers point to organized interests and failing brokerage parties as the cause of 'ordinary Canadians' opting out of participation in the party system, and press for integration of plebiscitary instruments into Canadian governance practices, including experimentation with 'more efficient and less expensive' electronic voting and communications technology (Manning, 1992: 324–5). Its 1997 'Fresh Start' election campaign culminated in an 'accountability guarantee' proposing greater reliance on referendums, initiatives and recall.

The Reform Party has benefited enormously from civic alienation in Canada, and has adeptly pitched its appeal to resonate with those who suffer from it. But can the democratizing aspirations of party rank and file be met by Reform's approach to direct democracy? Are such aspirations, in other words, well served by a plebiscitarian approach to representation? To answer these questions, we begin by examining Reform's populist ideology against the backdrop of Canadian populism, then review some evidence that suggests the Reform Party promotes a plebiscitarian approach to democracy.

The Traditions of Canadian Populism

Many political movements in Canada's prairie provinces have emphasized the need to democratize public life. Affinity for the instruments of direct democracy has varied among these movements, depending on their diagnoses of the democratic 'problem'. For instance, from 1910 until the early 1920s, urban labour organizations in the prairies and Ontario presented direct democracy as a means of reducing the power of business interests in two-party competition. After the mid-1920s, organized labour shifted its political energy into maintaining viable social-democratic parties, often allied with left-wing farmers' organizations. Democratization of political parties, policy development processes and various aspects of economic and working life were typically invested with far more significance than direct democracy in prairie populist organizational discourse (Laycock, 1990). These organizations identified the political and economic power of central Canadian capitalists as the chief obstacles to serious democratic reform. The initially anti-finance-capitalist and somewhat egalitarian Social Credit League of Alberta was created by Preston Manning's godfather William Aberhart, then led for 25 years by his biological father, Ernest Manning. By the early 1940s, their version of a democratic alternative to mainstream national parties had become essentially anti-centralist and anti-statist (Aberhart, 1943; Finkel, 1989). Social Credit's technocratic leanings (Laycock, 1990) and hold on government power in Alberta from 1935 to 1971 discouraged an emphasis on referendums and direct legislation as tools of governance. In the movement-building phase of 1934–5, and until 1940 when seeking popular legitimation, leader Aberhart frequently employed voice votes and straw ballots at public meetings and mail-in voter pledges (Macpherson, 1953).

Some account of essential social antagonisms between elites and 'the people' is central to all forms of populism. For the Social Credit premiers, the people's adversaries were government planners, bureaucrats and promoters of social welfare programmes. Reform's updated portrayal of the people's enemies includes 'special interests', bureaucrats who secure their own livelihoods by expanding programmes to meet special interests' demands, and unaccountable, 'old-line' parties, particularly those with leaders from Québec.

Reform Party leaders and activists respond to corrupted policy development processes with calls for a much smaller, less interventionist state, and periodic soundings of the people's voice through direct democracy. By contrast, criticism of 'the people's' exclusion from the policy process in most earlier Canadian populisms was given an anti-capitalist spin. While not anti-capitalist per se, even Social Credit proposed more state intervention to address market-generated inequities. Other prairie populists proposed extensive participation by excluded, non-elite groups in the policy process (Laycock, 1990).

The plebiscitarian dimension of Reform's political practice comes to light in its valuation of direct democracy. It places heavy emphasis on the sense in which preferences registered in this manner are analogous to preference signalling in markets. Participation modelled on market exchanges between isolated individuals accords with the party's commitment to a minimalist public life, in which the role of mediating institutions and organizations is consciously devalued. Illustrating the connections between plebiscitarian perspectives on democracy and new right views of public life requires first a review of Reform's ideological agenda, and then identification of direct democracy's place within this agenda.

Reform Party Ideology

The major thrust of the Reform Party is to redefine Canadian public life by substantially contracting political – and group pluralistic – modes of decision-making in policy spheres concerned with distributional issues (Laycock, 1994). At Reform's ideological core is a commitment to the market as a neutral distributor of economic and social values, and to a corresponding minimization of the state's role in this regard. In this view, the costs of state-directed redistributive policies are borne disproportionately by individual property-holders through confiscatory taxation. At the same time, the benefits of such regimes flow to powerful 'special interests', and to government agency bureaucrats who manage these programmes. Remedying this pathology requires drastically marginalizing special interests' and bureaucrats' roles in interest representation and mediation, and returning the power of political decision-making directly to taxpayers. This strategy can be theoretically located near the left horizontal and bottom vertical poles of the two basic conceptual axes of representation presented in our model of plebiscitarianism (Figure 1).

In previous research, we have argued that Reform's definition of 'special interests' is intended to specify an organization's or identity-group's beneficial relationship with a redistributive state (Laycock, 1994; Barney, 1996a). Special interests are thus actors and groups who promote state intervention in the market distribution of social and economic goods, and who therefore encourage the pathology outlined above. Feminist lobby groups, native organizations, private and public sector unions, multicultural and ethnic groups, crown corporations, and managers of state agencies all fall within this category.

Conversely, organized interests that do reject redistributive demands, or explicitly endorse increased market freedom, are not designated 'special'. Reform carefully sets business groups in a separate category from special interests. From its inception, the party has been closely associated with right-wing organizations, especially the Fraser Institute, the Canadian Taxpayers' Federation and the National Citizen's Coalition. Advocating greatly reduced state intervention in the market accords neo-conservative and business organizations legitimacy as public actors. Legitimacy in public life thus increases in direct proportion to support for curtailing the scope of public life itself.

The Reform Party critique of special interests strongly implies that the latter take the logic of pluralist democracy too seriously. Indulging special interests' claims that fair competition for policy influence requires some redistribution of economic and social resources leads to excessive government responses to interest group members' demands, and insufficient attention to the preconditions of private success. Cumulatively, special interests' claims on public resources have created a 'tyranny of modern "Family Compacts" of bureaucrats, politicians and special interests that exercise the tyranny of a minority over democratic majorities' (Manning, 1992: 321).

This depiction of the powers thwarting the people's will fits well within the plebiscitarian 'cube' of democratic representational space sketched above. It also merges Alberta Social Credit's early cold war critique of the welfare state with neo-conservative accounts of 'ungovernability' in western polities. The latter contend that by excessively supporting groups' claims to both social 'entitlements' and a voice in the policy process, liberal democracies have artificially inflated the political market of pluralist competition to the point that no political will (or electoral incentive) exists to stem the tide of 'demand overload' (Huntington et al., 1975; Hayek, 1979).

The Reform Party proposes to revive individual initiative and responsibility by lifting a burden from taxpayers. The truly disadvantaged will turn to private charities or insurance programmes, not the 'compulsory' state-supported social safety net, thereby eliminating much of the 'new class' state elite (Reform Party, 1990: 20). In 1994, Reform Party Assembly resolutions proposed eliminating landed immigrants' eligibility for social assistance, 'workfare' programmes for all unemployment and welfare benefit recipients, and excoriated all affirmative action and employment equity programmes. Such programmes are presented as contrary to equality, and supported only by state bureaucrats, not the groups purportedly aided by them (Reform Party, 1994). In this and other biannual assemblies, Reform delegates have endorsed a major dismantling of the Canadian welfare state.

Like right-populist parties elsewhere, Reform blames unemployment and poverty on state intervention in the entrepreneurial private economy (Betz, 1994; Kitschelt, 1996). Reform's 1997 election platform called for 'a country defined and built by its citizens, rather than by its government' (Reform Party, 1997: 5). 'Social justice' would involve Canadians 'working for themselves and their families, instead of for the government' and in devolving previously public obligations to private individuals, families, and unspecified 'communities' (Reform Party, 1997: 5, 11).

Governments beholden to special interests and hobbled by party discipline are unable to hear or implement the common sense of the common people. As a remedy, Reform proposes an accountability 'guarantee', relaxed parliamentary party discipline, and plebiscitary uses of the recall, referendums and citizen's initiatives instruments (Reform Party, 1997: 22–3). Reformers promise that power stripped from the bureaucratic elite and their special interest constituencies would go to 'the people' – that is, to all citizens neither members of nor represented by the special interests.

Reinventing Representation and Participation

Would Reform's proposals for opening up the policy process give effective voice to those now excluded? Part of the answer rests in a critical examination of their proposals for Senate reform and improved accountability of MPs, which is beyond the scope of this paper.[3] In this section we focus on the Reform case for, and experience with, direct democracy.

Reform's 'New Canada' would entail a massive decentralization of federal power and subsequent localized contraction of public services. Citizen identities based on anything other than region, or one's status as a 'taxpayer', undermine the foundations of consensus about the minimalism of state and redistributive action in the New Canada. Consequently, Canadians must be convinced of the need to minimize the influence of associations representing recently proliferating and politicized identities. Reform supports the revitalization of pluralist civil society only to the extent that it does not entail associational extension into policy-shaping channels within the public sphere. Direct democracy is an important part of this programme, because plebiscitary instruments bridge the divide between individualized private spheres and the sphere of state action without involving market-threatening, tax-heightening and bureaucracy-building mediation by organized interests.

The Reform Party has spent much time criticizing the way other parties represent voters. Yet Preston Manning has arguably been less accommodating of free thinkers in his caucus than other Canadian party leaders. When a number of prominent Reform MPs decided not to run for re-election in 1997, many commentators averred that Manning's authoritarian grip on his party caucus was largely responsible for these departures. As his former senior policy adviser attests, Manning insists on controlling his parliamentary caucus and party with a very tight rein (Flanagan, 1995). Despite all this, the 1997 platform promised that a Reform government would allow more free votes in Parliament, thereby 'reducing the power of party discipline over individual MPs and senators while strengthening the powers available to citizens' (Reform Party, 1997: 23).

In 1992, Manning promoted what he called a 'unified field' theory of representation, in which Reform MPs would blend delegate, mandate and trustee representational roles (Manning, 1992: 322). This theory of representation offered no clear guide as to how MPs should decide between loyalties to party, personal conscience and constituents, in the event that these came into conflict (Laycock, 1994). Perhaps in response to membership unease concerning this issue, a 1996 report from the party's 'Task Force on Democratic Populism II' attempted to clarify the party's position on representation. It suggested that party activists and MPs understand that their party's populist credentials rely heavily on the delegate theory of representation implicit in their critique of other parties. Sensing this, the 1996 Task Force recommended adding to their official statement of principles and policies the following:

> When a Reform MP speaks and votes in the parliament of Canada, he or she represents: (1) the principles, policies and platform of the Reform Party of Canada on which the MP was elected; (2) the views and interests of constituents, in particular the consensus of a majority of constituents, if such a consensus can be determined; and (3) the application of the Member's own knowledge, judgment and conscience to the issues at hand. For Reform MPs, where (1), (2), and (3) are in conflict, it is (2) – the consensus of the will of the majority of constituents – which takes precedence.
>
> (Reform Party, 1996a: 2).

Almost half the Task Force's report discusses how MPs can ascertain a constituency consensus on issues deemed important by the party caucus. Ultimately, however, it states that

> . . . in light of the populist democratic concerns of the Reform Party, with its emphasis upon individual Members seeking the will of their constituency, Task Force members felt that individual members were best able to determine the most appropriate means of discovering the will of their constituents.

This inconclusiveness is surprising, especially given Reform's critique of other parties' ineffectiveness in translating the people's will clearly.

The 1996 Task Force report closes with a one-page appendix, a 'Caucus-approved Process for eliciting the will of constituents'. The process combines constituency polls, responses to survey questions in MPs' 'householder' pamphlets, telephone surveys, constituents' calls/letters, and a 'constituency vote utilizing electronic, or traditional, technology and involving not less than 3,000 responses'. In an earlier section, the report contends that householder pamphlet surveys 'could yield results as reliable as expensive scientific polls under specified circumstances' (Reform Party, 1996a: 4). Ironically, the party's 1992 Task Force on democratic populism reported members' annoyance regarding questionnaires in the regular 'sustainer letters' and newsletters. Many members believed questions were structured to ensure particular results, and over-simplified policy decisions with yes/no options, instead of 'real, substantial and markedly different options to choose from' (Reform Party, 1992: 12).

The prologue of the Task Force's report concludes:

> The Reform Party's commitment to broadening democracy makes it clear that when one or more of these roles [mandate, delegate or trustee] comes into conflict, it is the will of the electors which must predominate. Without such a commitment, true democracy cannot take root and grow in the political institutions of Canada.
>
> (Reform Party, 1996a: 1).

However, the party's difficulty in formulating procedures that would allow it to live up to this commitment makes it difficult to accept this as its last word on representation. Specifying the technicalities of delegate-style representation is only attempted in a footnote to the Report, which emphasizes that 'the Reform caucus is best placed to judge when changes are necessary' to the process of eliciting the people's will (Reform Party, 1996a: 5, n.2).

At the party's Assembly in June 1996, Task Force Chair Ted White MP was asked why the party should bother to produce a distinctive set of alternative policies in a party 'grassroots'-driven policy development process, if in the final analysis the MPs will allow their parliamentary votes to be directed by a majority will in their constituencies. Mr White assured the concerned party activists that this would not pose a problem, as 'the people's' views on all contentious issues would coincide with those of the party rank and file.

This response draws our attention to Reform's view that a substantive consensus actually exists among local, regional or national majorities of citizens on most matters of public policy. In any non-homogenous society, this assumption regarding the nature of democratic representation would be implausible; Canada's highly regionalized political culture renders it even more dubious. Unfortunately, like their predecessors in the Social Credit League, Reform's theory and practice of representation skirt difficult questions about democratic translation of public opinion into public policy.

What about the party's own practices in this regard? Reform's experiments with electronic referendums suggest that the party's direct democracy proposals would not reinvigorate democratic political culture in Canada, but instead achieve other ideological goals. During the 1990s Reform has experimented with direct democracy in a number of formats, including televotes and electronic town hall meetings. These events and their democratic shortcomings have been detailed elsewhere (Barney, 1996a). When measured against minimally demanding criteria of democratic legitimacy, Reform's exercises were found wanting. They involved participation fees, multiple votes by individual voters, artificially inflated reported rates of participation, and the depiction of self-selected samples as diverse and therefore representative constituencies, all of which compromised the democratic integrity of these exercises.

More importantly, Reform televotes have not encouraged citizens to set their own democratic agendas or consider a real range of policy options. Their subjects have reflected Reform's major themes, with questions designed to produce 'yes' or 'no' answers that legitimize party policy. Reform has not conducted or participated in serious information campaigns prior to these votes, nor has it suggested mechanisms for on-going participation related to these issues outside its own organizational walls. Perhaps unsurprisingly, its use of direct democratic instruments is somewhat reminiscent of the early Alberta Social Credit League's plebiscitarian spectacles. Yet Reform insists that its brand of direct democracy is less distorting and more reflective of the public will than traditional representative government.

Examining the pattern of issues Reform wishes to subject to direct democratic determination suggests another reason that these instruments are attractive to Reform's leadership. In its current policy manual, the Reform

Party lists two types of issues appropriate for national referendums in Canada:

> 1 Issues Which Change Canada's Basic Social Fabric. The Reform Party has identified immigration, language and measurement as falling into this category.
> 2 Issues of Personal Conscience. The Reform Party identifies abortion and capital punishment as falling within this category.
>
> (Reform Party, 1996b)

Party elites have long suggested that aboriginal land claim settlements and self-government agreements should be subjected to confirmation via referendums. Reform's economic policy stipulates that federal governments should run deficit budgets or increase taxes only after these are approved by referendum (Reform Party, 1996b).

At the 1996 Reform convention, the party Task Force on the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Canada's constitutionally entrenched bill of rights since 1982) presented its report to a lively workshop. The audience unanimously endorsed the Task Force's recommendation to hold a national referendum on repealing section 15.2 of the Charter, which has been judicially interpreted to permit and protect affirmative action programmes. Yet the same Task Force suggested unilateral federal government action to amend the Canadian constitution to 'entrench property rights' (Reform Party, 1996b: 6–7). Party activists do not appear confident enough in the common sense of the common people to leave constitutionalizing property rights up to their democratic discretion.

A common thread connects these issues. All are animated by a suspicion of the state's legitimacy as a public institution that pursues public welfare by moderating private interests. State mediation of these interests is seen as corrupting, illegitimate and unnecessary. When coupled with the marginalization of mediating associations, and a process of interest registration that neglects the requirements of meaningful civic deliberation, the appeal of the plebiscitarian approach to issues such as these comes into focus. Plebiscitarian campaigns may or may not result in the re-introduction of the death penalty, the re-criminalization of abortion, or the elimination of affirmative action programmes. But portraying these as subjects regarding which a public consensus has failed to emerge through existing deliberative channels, and which must thus be resolved through unmediated, direct expression of preferences, tends to have a collateral result. It undermines participation in, and legitimacy of, existing structures of representation in the policy process, especially those that sustain the welfare state.

The legitimacy and moral appeal of various 'social rights' provide modern welfare states with much of their normative foundation. Proponents of these social rights make explicit reference to institutionalized barriers to equal opportunity for women, visible minorities or other groups. These rights are anathema to neo-conservative visions of market-driven opportunity structures. They are offensive to right-populists who see state elites as the principal foe of chronically over-taxed and over-regulated 'ordinary' citizens. Social rights are perceived as the not-so-thin end of the socialist wedge. A polity that recognizes social rights ensures taxes will remain above levels neo-conservatives find acceptable, which in turn enables state bureaucrats to continue inventing means of meddlesome intrusion into citizen-consumers' lives.

Overall, then, the issues the Reform Party has targeted for direct democratic resolution emerge from its broader agenda for scaling back public life, since public life during the 20th century has characteristically involved a market-restricting, redistributive dimension. This is most obvious in their proposals to hamstring the redistributive capacities of government by requiring binding referendums for deficit spending or tax increases.

In terms of non-economic issues, Reform's interests appear to be twofold. First, the party wishes to hold referendums on policies such as affirmative action or aboriginal self-government that are explicitly intended to open up public life to previously disenfranchised classes of citizens, and must do so by pitting the expansion of social rights against one-off calculations of the interests of voting majorities. In our earlier theoretical terms, these referendums are designed to slide representational practices further down the vertical axis of representation, or away from the pole involving structured deliberation among organized social groups. Second, the party prefers referendum issues, such as capital punishment and abortion, which highlight the distance that often separates citizens certain of their convictions from governments that try to balance ethical complexity with effective policy. By urging referendums on issues such as these, plebiscitarians can portray governments as indifferent at best and, at worst, immoral.

Direct democratic instruments that present citizens with stark binary choices on complicated questions can potentially weaken and disable existing pluralist representational processes, especially when the latter are widely portrayed as morally bankrupt and/or unable to understand the citizens they serve. Advocacy of plebiscitary instruments thus enhances Reform's argument that existing representative and policy institutions are illegitimate because of their capture by special interests. In our estimation, it is this which ultimately represents the appeal of these instruments for the Reform Party.

Direct Democracy against Pluralized Democracy

There is little doubt that creatively used instruments of direct democracy could contribute to the democratization of public life in Canada (Resnick, 1997) and elsewhere (Fishkin, 1997). Public institutions and organizations like legislatures, city councils, school boards, political parties, trade unions, social movement organizations and interest groups are not perfect participatory sites. In much North American practice, however, they place an explicit and practical value on inclusiveness, accommodation, communication and deliberation. They offer more meaningful participation, and more moderation of individual by community interests, than referendums or initiatives can except under unusual circumstances.

Direct democracy that works with the deeply diverse associational life in modern polities may even augment the efficacy of existing parties and interest groups as instruments of public deliberation (Budge, 1996; Fishkin, 1997). When direct democracy is operationalized to produce 'end-runs' around such mediating institutions, however, it shrinks the space of effectively pluralistic, public decision-making. Recent American referendums and initiatives have often seen right-wing forces attempting such end-runs to undermine public institutions and services. Instruments of direct democracy are frequently promoted or utilized in North America because of their potential for marginalizing public actors deemed responsible for high taxes or over-regulation of business activity. In the USA, matters of tax relief, public sector downsizing and environmental deregulation top the list of citizen-initiated referendums (Cronin, 1989). The groups financing citizens' initiatives are overwhelmingly corporate in character (Magleby, 1994).

Earlier Canadian populists saw referendums as checks on majoritarian democracy or business-dominated political parties. But they argued that referendums enhanced democratic decision-making only if community-based organizations had a direct role in shaping the policy agenda. Direct democracy would make no sense detached from widespread democratic participation in two sets of institutions shaping public life: social and economic associations of civil society, and representative institutions and policy-making processes associated with governments.

Detachment from democratic participation that spans the associational life of civil society and government policy processes is promoted in Reform's combination of referendums and a diminished role for 'special interests' in pluralist political life. This combination shares with all plebiscitarian perspectives the assumption that 'the people' are massively in agreement on matters that affect their well-being. Parties' and organized interests' involvement in public deliberation create confusion and division among the people on substantive policy matters. *If* parties and interests can be cut out of the political calculus, the general will can be heard, then swiftly and unambiguously implemented. Overwhelming consensus simply needs to be registered, not deliberated upon.

The assumption that 'the people' are in natural consensus not only removes the need to facilitate deliberation among groups with distinct positions and interests, but it also singles out the dialogic aspects of democratic life as virtually corruptive. This approach makes sense only if one believes that none of those whose interests are represented by 'the special interests' are also part of 'the people'. This, however, is tantamount to arguing that there is no middle ground on the horizontal axis of our democratic representational space in Figure 1. In other words, structuring deliberation though associational mediation gives the game away to the special interests, while direct democracy is the only real means of letting people's real preferences emerge. The practical implication of this logic is simple: if special interests' demands could be removed from the political market as an 'artificial' influence, political market failure can be averted.

A similar simplification of public life was promoted by Alberta's Social Credit League, but decisively rejected by the other major Canadian prairie populisms of the inter-war period. The latter contended that groups participating in an inclusive policy process would learn from each other, modify their positions, and work out policy compromises. These broadly consensual compromises could be identified only through a participatory, inclusive policy development process populated by groups with clear and distinct interests. (Laycock, 1990). Prairie populists outside the plebiscitarian mindset anticipated much of the argument made by recent 'deliberative democracy' theorists for more structured, yet open and accountable, inter-group dialogue on major public policy issues.

Reform Party leaders have adopted a neo-conservative redefinition of the public sphere that is antithetical to earlier populist democracy in another crucial respect. Their critique of parties and special interests suggests that citizens' problems of economic insecurity and social alienation stem from what neo-conservatives call 'democratic excess'. Too many groups with inflated senses of their disadvantage make too many claims for state support and parties seeking election must offer these groups something. The solution to deficits caused by too much pluralist democracy is to have private, market-driven activities replacing the functions performed by public institutions in meeting citizens' needs. Private charity and profit-seeking would supplant public obligation; the registration of fixed, private preferences would replace public decision-making.

The anti-statist orientation of right-wing populism is thus basic to its rejection of democratic decision-making over the distribution of power and resources. Convinced that traditional, pluralist mechanisms of policy making are dominated by anti-free-market organized interests, the Reform Party attempts to substantially shrink the political arena in which these interests operate. Direct appeals to 'the people' are certainly intended to legitimize Reform Party proposals. But they end up delegitimizing the influence of organized interest groups, public institutions, social agencies and their advocates in the policy process. Even though this latter function of Reform's plebiscitarian practices is not likely to be intended by most of its supporters, it is potentially the most significant political effect of such plebiscitarian appeals, especially in a polity readjusting its representational practices and social policies through welfare state reform.

Part of the Reform Party's politics of anti-politics involves claiming they are distinguished from other parties because they listen to 'the common sense of the common people'. Yet if we take seriously the demanding social, economic and discursive conditions of citizens reaching common understandings, Reform appears to be proposing removal of much that is 'common' (i.e. shared, or public) about the articulation of the people's good sense, and replacing it with private calculation. As suggested by our model, Reform's plebiscitarianism converts citizens in public and interactive spaces into isolated, individual registrants of private choice. The liberal polity has historically accommodated both types and contexts of citizen choice, but it is not clear that meaningful citizenship and dynamic civil societies can withstand too much emphasis on the privatized option (Taylor, 1995).

By treating citizens as political consumers who simply need to register privately formed preferences on a pre-established set of choices, plebiscitarian democracy bypasses the social processes and political institutions that moderate individual interests in the light of community needs (Abramson et al., 1988: 21). This may be a strength for the new populist right, because these institutions and processes are fertile breeding grounds for exactly those special interest groups that generate and sustain unwanted state action.

Finally, what can be said in response to the argument that Reform's advocacy of citizen-initiated referendums – processes over which the party cannot be guaranteed control – indicates that their leaders' affinity for direct democracy is as genuine as that of the party's grassroots supporters? Elsewhere we have shown that this argument is difficult to sustain (Barney, 1996b). American initiatives are typically used to roll back legislative decisions regarding taxation, spending and regulatory activities (Cronin, 1989: 205). Initiatives have also been a popular weapon for those opposed to protection of minority groups through anti-discrimination laws, in the name of public 'morality' or eradication of 'special rights'. American experience also suggests that the exorbitant costs of initiative campaigns would prevent most groups that Reform sees as 'special interests' from engaging in them (Magleby, 1988; Cronin 1989: 215; Macdonald, 1991). Reform could thus welcome the initiative's likely contribution to advancing the party's neo-conservative ideological agenda, especially if institutionalized, as they advocate, with no spending limits, financial disclosure, or regulation of 'umbrella' organizations during initiative campaigns.

Conclusion

Direct democracy is most easily defended if it is explicitly designed to encourage and facilitate citizens' abilities to participate meaningfully in decisions most closely affecting their lives and communities. This can be made clearer if we return to the representation of plebiscitarian political space within the range of democratic representational options discussed earlier. Considering the three dimensions of representative behaviour in Figure 1, we would say that direct democracy is most useful to citizens when it complements substantial measures of both associational deliberation (a practical combination of orientations and practices located on the vertical and horizontal axes) and grassroots empowerment/leader-balancing options (from the diagonal axis). In negative terms, direct democracy is of little value to citizens whose consideration of public issues is either disconnected from deliberation in politically significant associations in civil society, or inordinately shaped by powerful leaders.

Theoretically, referendums and initiatives can be expected to enhance democratic political life when effectively integrated into a larger process of participatory deliberation by diverse associations in a dynamic public life. Direct democracy can aid democratic determination of the public's business if citizens and political elites find ways to enhance community awareness, senses of civic responsibility, and appreciation of the plurality of citizens' viewpoints. If isolated from, or conceived antagonistically to, other means and approaches to participation in public life, referendums and initiatives may produce a continuum of less attractive results. They may do little more than register and entrench easily manipulated private preferences. They may add to the tendency of electronically assisted consumer culture to present democratic politics as a spectacle, and to suggest that privatistic, socially anonymous perspectives on social choices are consistent with socially acceptable outcomes. This is why they have been so often associated historically with leader-dominated movements, parties and governments (Ignazi, 1996), and with civil societies lacking what Taylor (1995) calls the 'nested public spheres' of effective democratic discourse created by political parties, social movements, and a diversity of organized interests.

In this essay, we have argued that by design and/or in practice, plebiscitarianism often contributes to democratic, representational and civic dysfunctionality, instead of alleviating it. Like non-iterated prisoner's dilemma games in which participants have greater incentives to defect than cooperate, the artificially fixed and socially disconnected choices typical of referendum campaigns will predictably produce more loss than gain to social utility. They can also leave voters alienated from each other, and from political organizations and their 'nested public spheres'. A plebiscitarian approach to direct democracy might thus easily undermine rather than support the democratic cultural goods (tolerance, compromising skills, other-regarding perspectives) produced though deliberative representational practices. The right-plebiscitarian adaptation of direct democracy cannot seek a contraction of the policy reach of public institutions without diminishing the deliberative participation of groups and associations in those institutions. This double contraction is necessary because the public sphere is the site of the redistributive and market-limiting initiatives of the welfare state, and consequently the medium of group-associational activity most essential to those for whom the welfare state is not a liability but a necessity.

As we noted earlier (p. 320), this characteristic of the public sphere in the modern welfare state helps to explain the preference of parties and organized interests on the political left for a representational life involving high levels of group mediation and deliberation. Parties on the left are thus inclined to feel far less comfortable about direct democracy than those on the populist right. At some level, they understand that the logic collecting direct democracy, private calculation and leader domination together in the 'plebiscitarian political space' is antagonistic to the left's broad political project. In our language of representational space mapping, the left's political project challenges the market model of social choice, and presses for redistributively orientated social choices mediated through structured democratic deliberations. Such deliberations can potentially offer the added benefit of educating citizens regarding the substance and processes of policy choice. In practice, the technocratic tendencies of social democratic governments have often undermined these educational benefits. Ironically, these civic educational resources are indispensable for citizens engaged in direct democratic decision-making, should they be asked and inclined to do so.

By delegitimizing many vehicles of pluralist representation and deliberation as mere tools of 'special interests', plebiscitarian approaches to direct democracy can easily threaten the conditions of meaningful democratic participation. This will happen regardless of, and in fact in direct opposition to, many Reform Party supporters' desires to render democratic citizenship more efficacious. Plebiscitarianism devalues opportunities for developing the tolerance and social decision-making skills essential to democratic politics. Anything that entrenches citizen attitudes while deepening cynicism about political institutions and processes, in turn, undermines popular comprehension of significant public issues, and reduces incentives to engage in meaningful public dialogue.

This plebiscitarian dimension puts the Reform Party at odds with, not heir to, the most valuable democratic traditions of Canadian populism. Unlike Reform and Social Credit party plebiscitarianism, other prairie populisms promoted reforms of existing democratic processes that might moderate individual interests with group needs and collective priorities. Such processes are basic to modern pluralistic democracies that mix market and state mechanisms of social choice. Beyond a certain point, the rejection of established deliberative institutions and associations that bridge group solitudes threatens the basic principles – toleration and a predisposition to equality – upon which a democratic political culture rests.

Democratic political cultures are not well served by approaches to social choice that entrench private preferences and delegitimize institutionalized venues for compromise. Consequently, incorporation of direct democratic options into existing representative democratic systems must be undertaken with a measured appreciation of their costs and benefits. Leaders of right-populist parties like Reform contend that substantial benefits can accrue from increased privatization of political culture and representational structures. More privatized polities require fewer public institutions, are less costly to maintain, and acknowledge fewer social obligations to convert some private wealth into public goods. From the perspective of governments trying to relieve their societies of demand overload, privatized individuals should also be easier to manage than citizens tied to dynamic associational networks that see collective stakes in the transformation of public life.

Plebiscitarian procedures appear before politically alienated citizenries as easy weapons for combatting their growing sense of disenfranchisement. In this regard, we have argued that direct democracy can readily be made into something of a Trojan Horse, potentially concealing an agenda of privatizing, inegalitarian and counter-deliberative policies. Whether plebiscitarian weapons will enjoy increasing popularity will depend on many factors. Perhaps community associations, social movements and rejuvenated political parties will succeed in channelling civic alienation from conventional politicians and policies in innovative and constructive democratic directions. On the other hand, citizen alienation could take increasingly de-politicized paths, as people once bound together by associational and solidaristic ties are quietly absorbed into the atomizing distractions of consumer culture. In the latter case, the connection between democratic health and individual well-being will become increasingly obscure to many well-intentioned citizens, for whom short-term 'rational actor' perspectives on political and social life will seem increasingly natural. Short-term strategic 'defection' choices made by citizens with respect to public goods and redistributive programmes will be more likely if citizens are isolated and alienated from the politically engaged associations in civil society that have fostered solidaristic and egalitarian sentiments in most western countries throughout the 20th century (Offe, 1987).

This latter scenario is far from improbable in many western polities. For reasons we hope to have suggestively sketched, this scenario also provides a congenial opening for plebiscitarian responses to citizen alienation. Our theoretical location of plebiscitarianism within democratic representational space suggests that the primary suppliers of plebiscitarian alternatives will be leader-dominated parties of the new right, offering opportunities for unmediated and non-deliberative approaches to policy choice. These choices will revolve principally around defections from supporting the public goods of the welfare state, and from the democratic associational and representative networks that sustain these goods. Insofar as the experience of the Reform Party of Canada testifies to links between plebiscitarianism and the socio-political project of the new right, we believe it holds instructive lessons for those wishing to explain the appeal of direct democracy to right-populist parties – and voters – in many liberal democracies.

Notes

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1 The literature on right-wing populism is growing rapidly and overlaps with many cases best understood as instances of the new, 'radical right', for whom racist agendas trump all others. For overviews of these parties in Europe, see Betz (1994) and Kitschelt (1996). On the specifically anti-party dimension, see the suggestive article by Schedler (1996).
2 This mapping of the representational space was a truly joint project, among all 18 members of the 1997 ECPR Workshop over 4 days (and evenings) in Bern. However, the proposal for a three-dimensional framework was initiated on the final day by Jan Assarson Teorell of the University of Uppsala, then helpfully modified by other members of the workshop. While not all workshop participants will endorse our elaboration of the preliminary model, we thank them all for their contributions, with special thanks to Jan.
3 See Laycock (1994) for relevant discussion.

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