

Party loyalty in Saskatchewan: A research brief

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Saskatchewan Election Study team¹

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Introduction

Voters' decisions regarding which party and candidate to cast a ballot for are shaped, in part, by their evaluations of the incumbent government's performance, leaders, and where the parties stand on important issues. These factors, of course, change from election to election: some governments are judged as successful, while others are not; leaders are replaced; and particular issues capture, and then lose, public attention. Not surprisingly, then, parties' shares of the vote can shift substantially from election to the next.

Nevertheless, most political parties can count on a relatively stable base of loyal supporters when they enter an election campaign. A considerable number of voters are willing to stick with the same party through thick and thin, even as issues and leaders come and go. This kind of party loyalty is typically referred to as *party identification* – an enduring sense of attachment to a political party (Campbell et al., 1960). We know that Canadians have these enduring attachments when it comes to federal political parties (Johnston et al., 1992; Blais et al., 2002), but far less is known about party loyalty at the provincial level, including Saskatchewan.

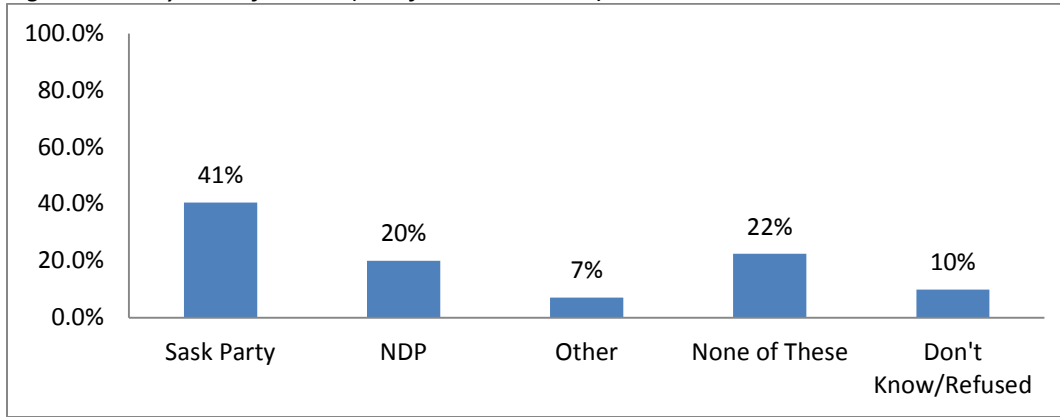
This research brief explores party loyalties in Saskatchewan. How many people identify with Saskatchewan political parties? How deep do their loyalties run? The evidence from the 2011 Saskatchewan Election Study shows while politics in our province remains polarized between the Saskatchewan Party and the NDP, a sizable minority of voters do not identify with any political party. At the same time, there is strong evidence the Saskatchewan Party has created a base of loyal supporters. The relative 'newness' of the Saskatchewan Party has not put it at a disadvantage compared to the much older and more established NDP. Indeed, the results suggest the Saskatchewan Party starts out election campaigns with a considerable advantage. Election campaigns can sway decisions of many voters, but it is much harder to change the minds of those who identify with a political party. This research brief illustrates that not only does the Saskatchewan Party have a greater number of loyal supporters than the NDP but that Saskatchewan Party supporters have slightly stronger ties to their party.

The Saskatchewan Party advantage

Saskatchewan Election Study respondents were asked a question commonly used to measure party identification: "Thinking about *provincial politics* in Saskatchewan, do you *usually* think of yourself as a 'New Democrat', 'Liberal', 'Saskatchewan Party', 'Green Party' or 'None of these'?" More than two thirds of respondents (67.7%) indicated they did usually think of themselves as a supporter of one provincial party. The evidence suggests the Saskatchewan Party has a clear advantage over other parties heading into an election: 40.6% of all respondents identify with the Saskatchewan Party – more than twice as many as its closest competitor, the NDP (20.1%).

Party loyalties vary considerably with age and educational attainment. Different age cohorts do not differ significantly in terms of which parties they support, but younger residents are more likely to be non-partisans. Individuals aged 18-34 are more inclined (28.0%) to state they do not identify with any provincial party than 35-54 year olds (22.5%), or individuals aged 55 and over (17.4%). Party identification also varies with educational attainment. Respondents with lower levels of education are neither more nor less likely to identify with a party than those with higher levels of education, but educational attainment does matter when it comes to which parties Saskatchewan residents support. Respondents with a completed university degree are less likely (32.5%) to identify with the Saskatchewan Party than those with lower levels of educational attainment (approximately 44%). Men and women do not differ significantly.

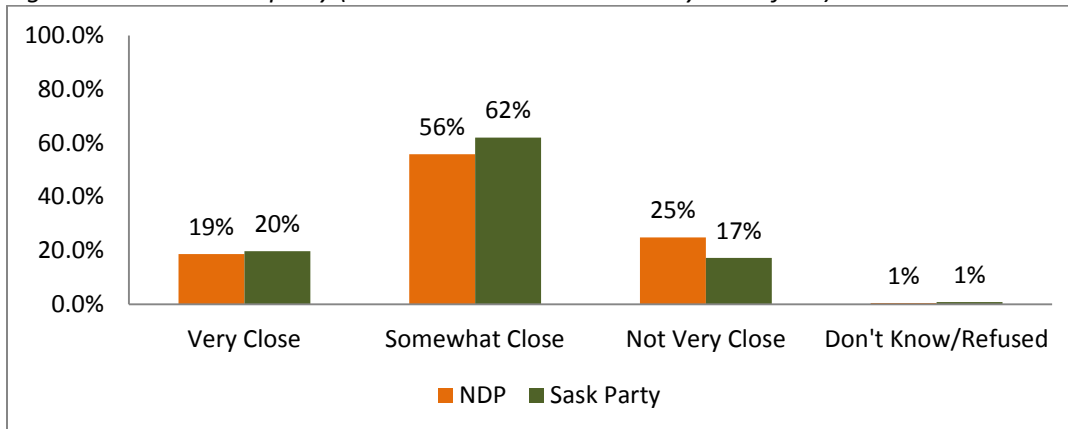
Figure 1: Party identification (All of Saskatchewan)



Strong party ties?

Just how deep are party loyalties? Respondents who identified with a provincial party were also asked how close they feel to that party (Figure 2).² Given that the overwhelming majority of respondents who identify with a party chose the Saskatchewan Party or the NDP, the remainder of the analysis focuses on those two parties. Although far more people identify with Saskatchewan Party than the NDP, supporters of both parties appear equally loyal. The majority of Saskatchewan Party (62.0%) and NDP (55.8%) identifiers indicated they feel 'somewhat close' to their respective party. Approximately one in five Saskatchewan Party and NDP identifiers indicated they felt 'very close' to their party.

Figure 2: Closeness to party (NDP and Saskatchewan Party identifiers)



Like other forms of political attachment (national identities and provincial identities, for example), party identification includes an affective, or emotional, component. Another way to gauge the strength of party loyalties is to find out whether party identifiers would “take it personally”, as it were, when other people talked about their party. Respondents were asked to rate their agreement with two different statements. The sample was divided in two: approximately half of those who identified with a party were presented with a negative statement, “When someone criticizes the [NDP / Saskatchewan Party], it feels like a personal insult.” The other half of party identifiers were presented with a positive statement, “When someone praises the [NDP / Saskatchewan Party], it feels like a personal compliment.” Both Saskatchewan Party and NDP identifiers were less inclined to take it personally if someone were to criticize their party. Fewer than one quarter of identifiers with either party agree “it feels like a personal insult” when someone criticizes their party (Figure 3). However, a majority of Saskatchewan Party identifiers (56.6%) agree “it feels

like a personal compliment” when someone praises their party (Figure 4). NDP identifiers were only slightly less enthusiastic, with 45.9% agreeing.

Figure 3: Agreement with the statement “When someone criticizes the party, it feels like a personal insult” (NDP and Saskatchewan Party identifiers – 50% sample)

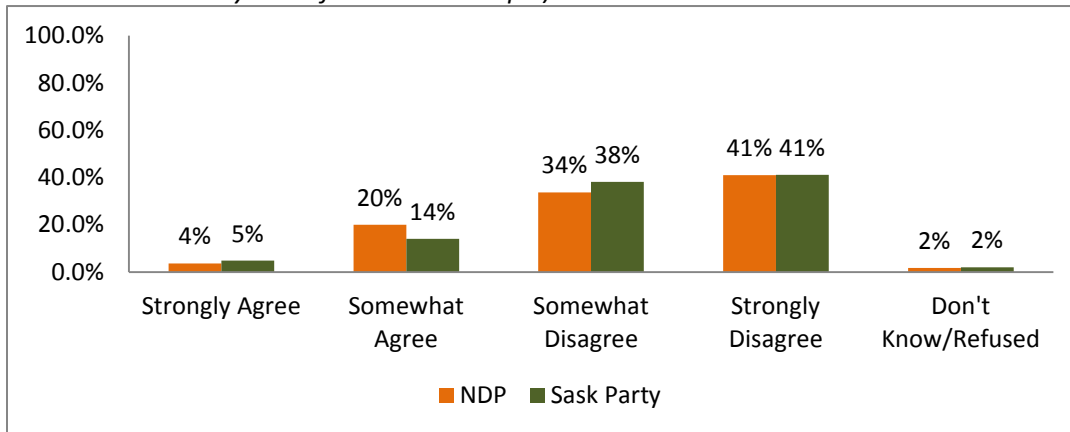
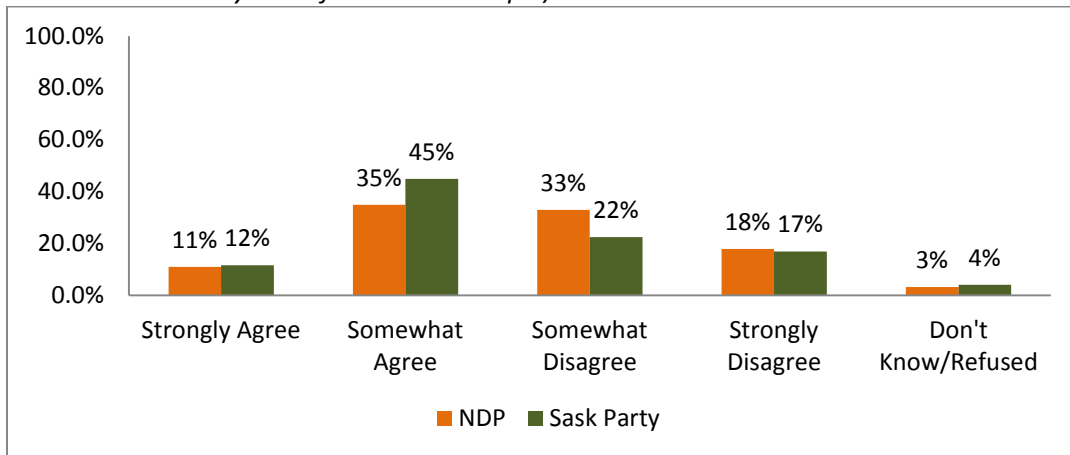


Figure 4: Agreement with the statement “When someone praises the party, it feels like a personal compliment” (NDP and Saskatchewan Party identifiers – 50% sample)



In addition to the emotional component of party loyalty, there is good reason to believe party attachments run deeper when supporters see themselves and their respective parties as like-minded. Respondents were once again divided into two groups, and asked to rate their agreement with two different statements, one positive and one negative. Approximately half of those who identified with one of the province’s major parties were presented with the statement, “I think like a member of the [NDP / Saskatchewan Party].” The other half were presented with the statement, “I *don’t* think like a typical member of the [NDP / Saskatchewan Party].” When prompted to assess whether they think like members of their respective parties, the majority of identifiers with either party agree (Figure 5).

However, Saskatchewan Party identifiers are slightly more inclined to claim a common ideological disposition than their NDP counterparts (57.0% compared to 45.9%). That dynamic is also reflected in responses to the negative statement (Figure 6), where 48.8% of NDP identifiers agree they *do not* think like a typical member of their party, whereas only 40.2% of Saskatchewan Party identifiers agree. More than one in five (21%) NDP identifiers expressed strong agreement with this statement, compared to only 6% of Saskatchewan Party identifiers. These results suggest a subtle difference between NDP and Saskatchewan Party loyalists in terms of party cohesion. This difference, however, may well reflect

the short-term consequences of the provincial election, where the Saskatchewan Party won decisively and the NDP was defeated for the second consecutive election.

Figure 5: Agreement with the statement “I think like a member of the party” (NDP and Saskatchewan Party identifiers – 50% sample)

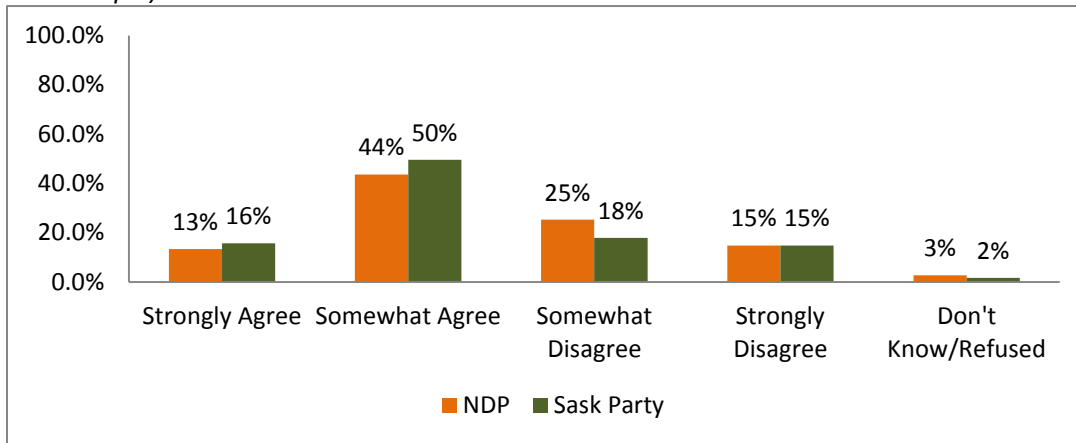
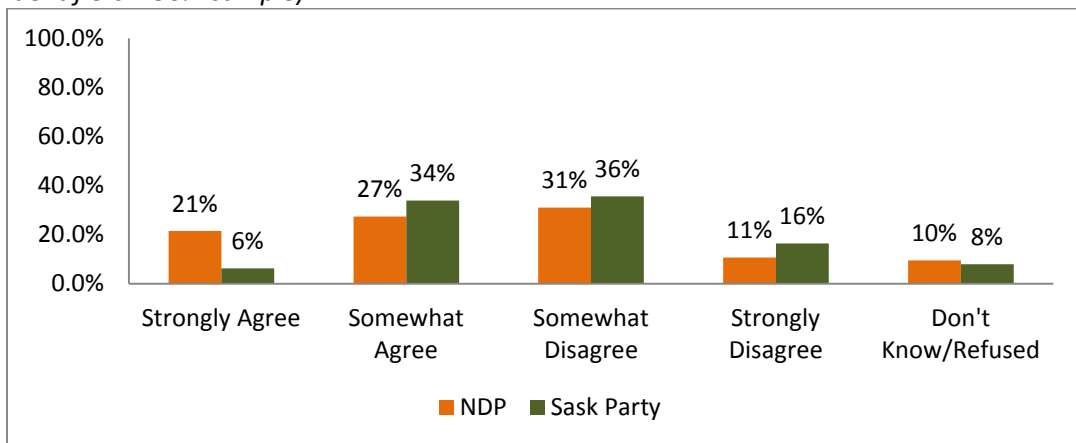


Figure 6: Agreement with the statement “I don’t think like a typical member of the party” (NDP and Saskatchewan Party identifiers – 50% sample)



Methodology of the Saskatchewan Election Study

The 2011 Saskatchewan Election Study was the first study to use the newly-created survey lab in the Social Sciences Research Laboratories (SSRL) complex at the University of Saskatchewan. Deployed as a telephone survey using WinCATI software, 1,099 Saskatchewan residents, 18 years of age and older, were administered a 15-minute survey on political attitudes and behaviours in the province from November 8, 2011 to November 21, 2011. Results of the survey, which generated a response rate of 23.6%, are generalizable to the Saskatchewan population (18 years of age and older) +/- 2.95% at the 95% confidence interval (19 times out of 20). The Saskatchewan Election Study was funded by the Johnson-Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy, with additional support from LEAD Saskatoon, St. Thomas More College and the College of Arts and Science at the University of Saskatchewan.

References

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¹ Research team members are listed in alphabetical order. The research team would like to thank Kirk Clavelle for his research assistance.

² Question wording: "Do you feel 'Very close' to the *[insert party]*, 'Somewhat close', or 'Not very close'?"