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We are better off studying provinces than regions. Discuss

While Canadian provinces are formally established entities with precisely defined borders and enduring political institutions, 'regions' are something much less tangible. It is impossible to state conclusively how many regions Canada ought to contain, how to define their boundaries, or which characteristics to use to define and compare regions. For instance, two similarly defensible yet incompatible methodologies are to define regions in terms of cultural characteristics like language or history or to define regions in terms of economic integration and interaction. That being said, it remains plausible that there are regional differences in North America that have political importance and that value can be derived from studying them. Because of their institutional embodiment, the study of provinces may most fruitfully focus on matters of law and policy. Because they are defined through abstract shared values or economic relationships, the study of regions may illuminate more about private forms of interaction or about the philosophical assumptions that inform politics in different parts of North America. In the end, because provinces have the institutional capacity to perpetuate their distinctiveness they may be a more promising target for study than regions, which are amorphous and not linked to instruments of power.

Sections 91 and 92 of the *Constitution Act, 1867* defined the relative powers of the provincial and federal governments, inescapably putting the provinces at the heart of Canadian political life. Canada's provinces also have extensive institutional machinery: incorporating provincial legislatures, laws and regulations, courts, educational systems, lieutenant governors, and so on. The legitimate extent of provincial and federal jurisdiction has been a contentious issue in Canadian

history, particularly given the case of Quebec.¹ As such, no serious analysis of Canadian politics can entirely avoid consideration of the role of provincial governments. Keith Brownsley and Michael Howlett highlight many of the ways in which the provinces exercise independent authority.² The provinces deliver many of the programs and services relied upon by Canadians, so they are often the most prominent practical face of government. Provinces also engage directly with the federal government on issues like regional transfers and constitutional amendment, sometimes going as far as to take the federal government to court. Finally, the provinces have historical importance in terms of the order and manner in which they joined confederation. These "shared events and histories" affect the self-perception of provinces, as well as their perceived legitimate role within confederation.³ All of these provincial features contribute to the provinces being relatively promising targets for scholarly inquiry. This inquiry can take a variety of forms, including game-theoretical analysis of how the provinces influence one another, of the sort undertaken by Kathryn Harrison.⁴ The work of R.A. Young and others also demonstrates how the provinces can be subjected to detailed empirical examination, which can in turn yield an improved understanding of the general political functioning of Canada.⁵

In "Comparative Provincial Policy Analysis: A Research Agenda" Imbreau et al describe four reasons for which Canada's provinces are an especially appropriate target for statistically-based empirical analysis of policy, calling them "a superb laboratory for testing hypotheses and building

¹ Robert Young, Phillippe Faucher and André Blais, "The Concept of Province Building: A Critique," *CJPS* 17:4 (December, 1984). p. 784

² Keith Brownsey and Michael Howlett, eds., *The Provincial State in Canada: Politics in the Provinces and Territories* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2001).

³ Aisla Henderson, "'Small Worlds' as Predictors of General Political Attitudes," *Regional and Federal Studies* 20: 4-5 (October-December, 2010). p. 472

⁴ Kathryn Harrison, "Provincial Interdependence: Concept and Theories," in Harrison, ed., *Racing to the Bottom? Provincial Interdependence in the Canadian Federation* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006)

⁵ Young. *Ibid.* p. 783-818.

theories in policy analysis".⁶ The first of these characteristics is the similarity of the provinces in terms of constitutional constraints, electoral systems, taxation structure, and historical experience - though it should be noted that there is at least some variation between the provinces on all of these fronts, given the special constitutional treatment of Quebec, variations in the structure of provincial legislatures and taxes, and obviously varied historical experience. Other characteristics that are methodologically helpful for the statistically-minded include the "high level of inter-provincial variability on a number of phenomena of interest to policy analysts, notably health, education, and income maintenance". Imbeau et al also argue that Canada's ten provinces provide an ideal number of cases: large enough to allow a variety of statistical techniques, but small enough to avoid being excessively bogged with in data. Finally, they describe how comparing Canadian provinces carries lower costs than international comparisons, for instance because only two languages are necessary. While the last point may not be of particular interest to those exclusively interested in matters of Canadian politics, the other three characteristics support the view that studying the provinces has the promise to be intellectually fruitful in a numerically demonstrable way.

Defining 'regions' is much less straightforward. In the opening of one article, James Bickerton and Alain Gagnon recognize this by quoting other academics on how regions are a "slippery idea" and by explaining how the term may refer to a variety of different characteristics, each to a greater or lesser degree.⁷ Drawing regional boundaries is a complicated and contested process, which limits the degree to which the analysis of different scholars can be directly compared. Cameron Anderson lists four "traditional regions" in Canada – 'West', 'Ontario',

⁶ Louis Imbeau, et al., "Comparative Provincial Policy Analysis: A Research Agenda," *CJPS* 33:4 (December, 2000), 505-29.

⁷ James Bickerton and Alain-G. Gagnon, "Regions and Regionalism," in Bickerton and Gagnon, *Canadian Politics*, 5th ed., p. 71

'Quebec', and 'Atlantic' – which are "differentiated by current and historical variation in demography, political culture, immigration patterns and ethnicity, economic activity... [and] geography".⁸ By treating some provinces as regions and lumping together other provinces into regions, this typology muddies the distinction between regions and provinces, complicating the task of assessing which has more explanatory power. Arguably, the temptation to define regions as provinces and amalgamations of provinces reveals the degree to which provincial variation is the richer source of explanatory power, when compared with regions more amorously defined. It may also be telling that Anderson makes no attempt to justify his selection of regions in his data and methods section, simply accepting those that are "traditional". The motivation for sidestepping the task of definition in this way may well be the desire to avoid the inevitable ambiguity that accompanies any rationale for defining the boundaries of a region. Still, it may have added to the usefulness of Anderson's work if he had considered several different models of where Canada's regions lie, and then examined whether one or another view seems to offer clearer statistical results.

While provincial variation is clearly important, there are also geographic patterns in North American politics that do not correspond to the boundaries of provinces or states. In the appendix to this essay are maps of recent electoral outcomes in Canada and the United States. Both show some similar characteristics in the distribution of successful outcomes for political parties with particular ideological leanings. There seems to be a strong relationship, for instance, between increasing population density and a tendency to vote for left-leaning candidates. Both densely-populated states and provinces and densely-populated areas within states and provinces have shown themselves to be more willing to support the Democratic party in the United States and the Liberal

⁸ Cameron Anderson, "Regional Heterogeneity and Policy Preferences in Canada: 1979- 2006," *Regional and Federal Studies* 20: 4-5 (October-December, 2010) p. 448

and New Democratic parties in Canada. Conversely, sparsely populated regions of both countries have shown themselves to be more willing to elect right-leaning representatives. Even in states and provinces that support conservative candidates in aggregate, dense urban regions often elect progressives. One possible explanation for this trend could be that rural dwellers are able to maintain the illusion that their lives are independent from those of their fellow citizens, while city dwellers are constantly confronted with the realities of interdependence. This pattern of geographical outcomes doesn't really equate to 'regions', since densely populated areas are scattered across both countries. Still, it shows a relationship between the geographic circumstances in which people live and their likely political views.

There are many challenges associated with defining political regions in a meaningful way. It is quite possible that the most fruitful definition of 'regions' will not accept the Canada-U.S. border as an absolute dividing line. Many political commentators have noted that the west coast provinces and states of British Columbia, Washington State, Oregon, and California share a number of cultural features. 'Cascadia' may be a more meaningful region than the Canadian 'west' defined as everything west of Ontario and south of the territories. Canada's economy is also largely integrated on a north-south basis with U.S. states, rather than in an east-west way from Pacific to Atlantic. Whether we define regions economically or culturally, it is possible to argue that those that exist are not wholly contained within Canada. There is also a risk that regions will be defined too coarsely for the purposes of analysis. A great deal of writing on politics in Canada refers to 'the west' as though it is a cohesive and generally right-leaning part of the country. This misrepresents the politics of British Columbia, in particular, which in some ways may be more closely matched with Quebec than with Alberta. It is also quite possible that the appropriate boundaries for regions will be in different places when regions are defined differently – culturally and economically defined regions may not cover the same territory or blend neatly into one another. In at least some

cases, the literature on 'regions' in Canada simply refers to provinces. For instance, Ailsa Henderson writes about "regional powers" and "regional government" – which are meaningless terms in Canada, unless they actually mean "provincial powers" and "provincial government".⁹ Whatever regions are, they are not organized polities that can accrue and exercise powers. Rather, they are collectivities defined on the basis of commonalities that are considered important, possibly based on a shared historical experience or common contemporary concerns.

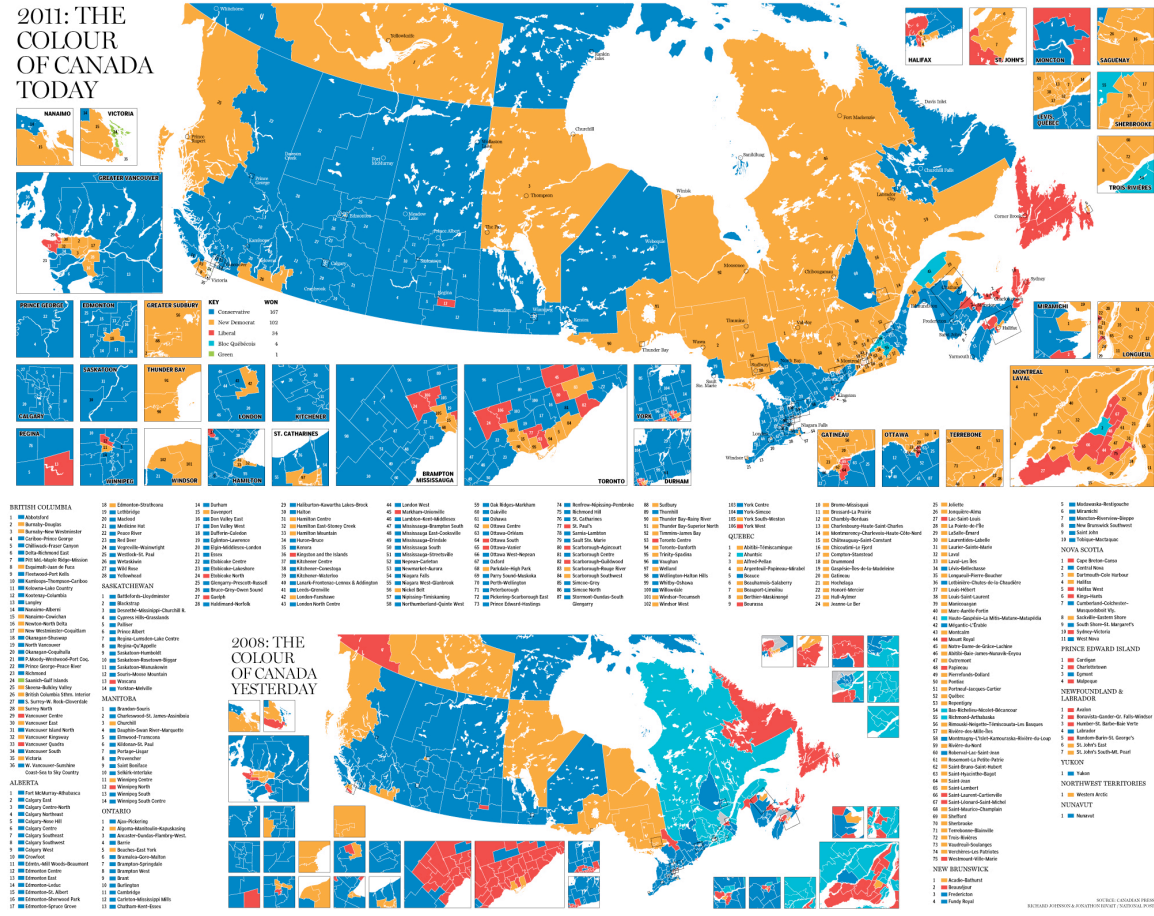
Perhaps the greatest value in studying regions is the way in which doing so forces scholars to decide which common features are most politically important and which historical and institutional traditions have ongoing relevance to Canadian political life. The act of asserting the existence of a region is the same as the act of defining a set of common characteristics that gives the definition meaning. Compared to the comparative study of provincial government behaviour, this is an abstract and somewhat sociological enterprise. It is also more impressionistic and unquantifiable. Travelling between the many regions of Canada, a scholar might be left with a clear sense that people have different political expectations and cultures in different places, but it would be hard to draw clear boundaries where those expectations change (aside from across provincial boundaries, particularly those of Quebec) or to rigorously express the ways in which such regional variation ends up having practical political consequences.

Much can be learned from the study of both provinces and regions. Overall, the study of provinces may be more generally fruitful than the study of regions. This is because provinces have clear boundaries with legal and constitutional importance, as well as enduring political institutions like legislatures. While they are bound by economic and cultural connections, regions are far more amorphous and the process of defining them is essentially contested. This conclusion is also

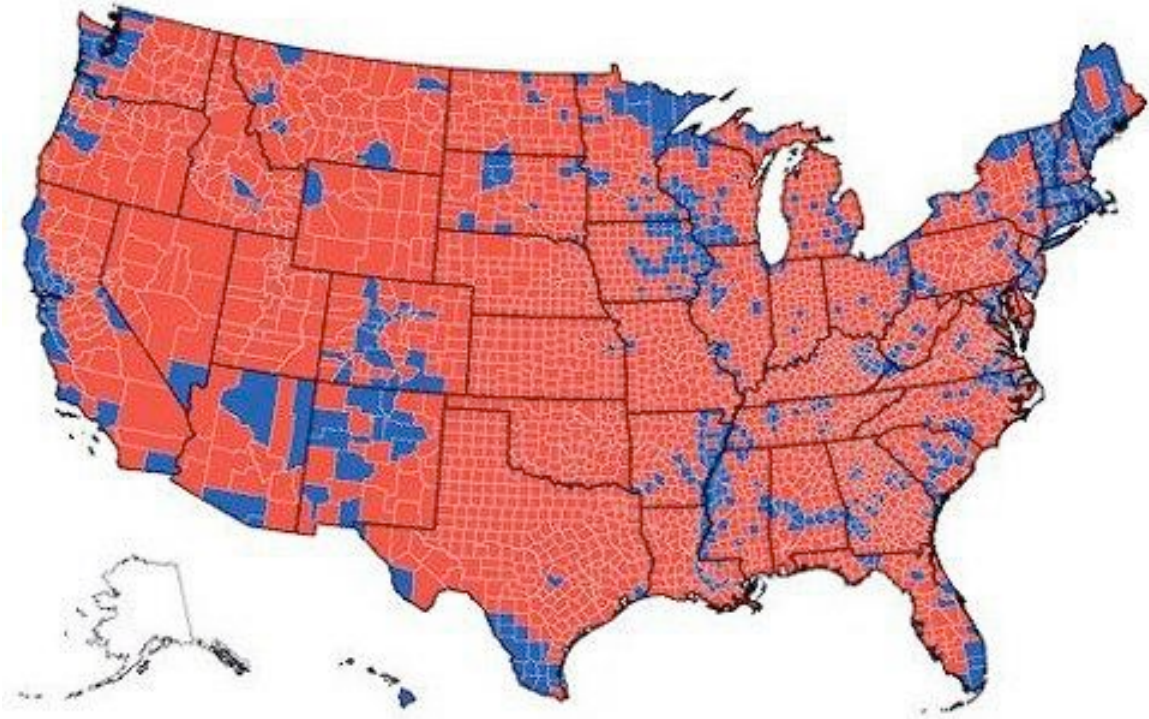
⁹ Ailsa Henderson, "Why Regions Matter: Sub-state Politics in Comparative Perspective," *Regional and Federal Studies* 20: 4-5 (October-December, 2010), 439-45.

supported by the special case of Quebec. Because of the forcefulness with which the provincial government has sought to maintain cultural and linguistic distinctiveness, Quebec cannot easily be described as part of a region larger than the province. Quebec as a region-unto-itself suggests that the most powerful forces perpetuating the distinctiveness of different parts of Canada are connected to enduring provincial institutions that are capable of enacting laws, regulations, and policies. While regions may be an interesting topic for study, they have neither the cohesion or influence that is characteristic of the provinces.

Appendix: Canadian and American electoral maps



Electoral map following 2011 Canadian federal election



2012 U.S. presidential election results by county