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The Social Capital Balance Sheet: A Report from the Prairies

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It has been argued that the current slowing down of the Canadian economy may not be felt as strongly in the Prairie Provinces as it will be in the rest of Canada. This is rather good news for those living in the Prairies; however, the Prairie Provinces need to worry about another type of deficit and slowdown related not to their economic capital but rather to their social capital.

The concept of social capital has been in wide circulation since the early 1990s in reference to those resources that become available to individuals and communities as a result of the richness of their social ties and communal connectedness. Such richness normally reflects itself in things like higher trust in fellow citizens, increased confidence in government, possession of larger social networks, and more serious involvement in civic life. Many studies over the past two decades have shown that a rich endowment of social capital is not a mere luxury, without which a community can still go on; rather, it has been shown that a serious deficit of social capital can adversely affect the functioning of a society in other areas, such as the economic arena, public safety protection measures, health care, education and democratic governance. A sustainable societal development, therefore, requires robust growth not only in the conventional economic arena but also in the area of social capital.

The concern over social capital is particularly paramount in communities – cities, provinces, countries – that experience a sudden change in a short period of time. This can include a fast-appearing economic boom, a sizable change in the population, or a quick transformation of the cultural and social fabric of the community. In the case of the Prairie Provinces, all three of these elements seem to be present. These provinces seem to have experienced an economic boom, have received a large number of people from other provinces, and have witnessed rapid growth of their immigrant population mostly originating from developing countries. Against this background, this article endeavours to take a closer look at the state of social capital in the Prairies, both as a comparison among the three provinces and with the rest of Canada.

It should be noted from the outset that social capital is not a monolithic force. Rather, it consists of different dimensions and, more importantly, those dimensions do not always go hand in hand. It is therefore possible for a community to advance in certain social capital fronts, while lagging in others. Depending on the composition of its social capital, a particular community can become stronger in one area and vulnerable in another. The first step, therefore, is to identify the building blocks of social capital.

Against the above background, three issues are addressed here. First, various dimensions of social capital will be briefly introduced. Second, the state of social capital in the Prairie Provinces will be discussed, within some of these dimensions. Third, the relationship between one of these dimensions – social trust – and ethnocultural diversity in Canadian cities will be examined. For this purpose, a variety of data sources have been utilized, including the 2001 Census of Canada and the Canadian General Social Survey (Cycle 17). The latter survey was conducted in 2003 and

TABLE 1
Dimensions of social capital

|	
People can be trusted	
How trustworthy: people in your family	
How trustworthy: people in your neighbourhood	Trust
How trustworthy: people in your workplace or school	
How trustworthy: strangers	
Confidence in police	
Confidence in judicial system	
Confidence in health care system	
Confidence in school system	Confidence in public institutions
Confidence in welfare	
Confidence in government	
Voted in the last federal election	
Voted in the last provincial election	Voting
Voted in the last municipal or local election	
Past year: member/participant in religious affiliated group	
Frequency of religious attendance of the respondent	Religious involvement
Importance of religious/spiritual beliefs in how to live life	
Past year: member/participant in any other type of organization	
Past year: did unpaid volunteer work for any organization	Volunteering
Average number of hours of volunteering per month	
Past year: member/participant in political party or group	Political party involvement
Past year: volunteered for political party	
Past month: has done a favour for a neighbour	Neighbourliness
Past month: has received a favour by a neighbour	
Past year: searched for information on a political issue	
Past year: expressed views by contacting newspaper or politician	Political sensitivity
Past year: spoke out at a public meeting	
Past month: gave help teaching, coaching, practical advice	
Confidence in bank	Confidence in private-sector institutions
Confidence in major corporation	
Past year: member/participant in sports or recreation organization	
Frequency of participating in group activities and meetings	Engagement in recreational activities
While in grade/high school, participated in an organized team sport	
Past year: signed a petition	Irregular political activism
Past year: participated in a demonstration or march	
Number of friends (neither relatives nor close friends)	Social networks
Past month: frequency of seeing friends	
Past year: member/participant in cultural organization	Cultural–community engagement
Past year: member/participant in school or neighbourhood association	
Confidence in business people	
Past year: donated money or goods to an organization or charity	Donation (of time/money)
While in grade/high school, belonged to a youth group	
Past year: member/participant in a union or professional association	
Past year: member/participant in service club or fraternal organization	Engagement in self-interest activites
Frequency of following news and current affairs	

**Social capital endowments,
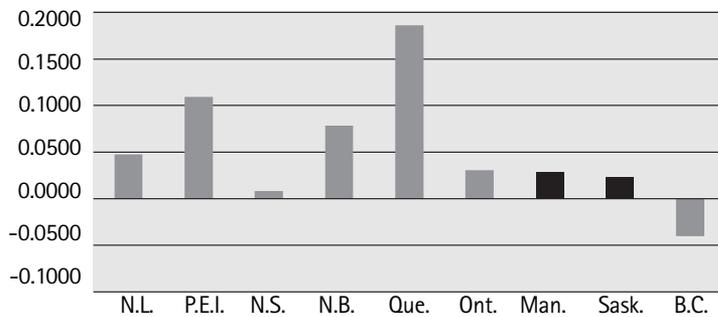all other provinces compared to Alberta, 2003[a]**
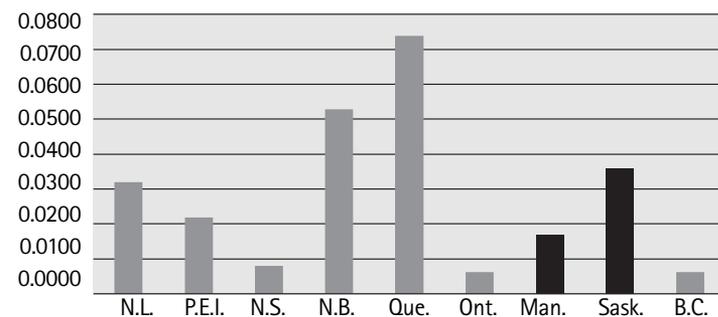
Voting
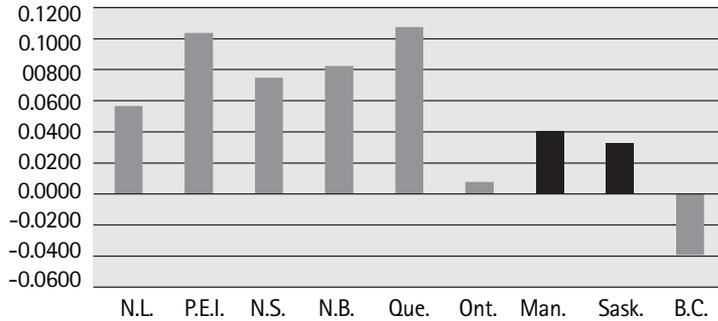
Social trust
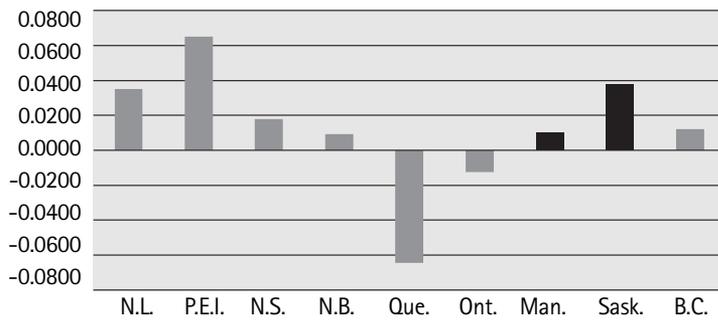
Confidence in public institutions

Confidence in private-sector institutions

consists of the responses of more than 25,000 Canadians to an array of questions pertinent to social engagement, making it an extremely rich source of data for social capital research.

Dimensions of social capital

Table 1 lists all 15 dimensions of social capital that have been identified, as well as the variables associated with each of those dimensions (for details regarding the technical procedures that were used, see Kazemipur 2008a and 2008b). To facilitate the discussion of these dimensions, they are labelled as follows: 1) Trust; 2) Confidence in public institutions; 3) Voting; 4) Religious involvement; 5) Volunteering; 6) Political party involvement; 7) Neighbourliness; 8) Political sensitivity; 9) Confidence in private-sector institutions; 10) Engagement in recreational activities; 11) Irregular political activism; 12) Informal social networks; 13) Cultural-community engagement; 14) Donation; and, 15) Engagement in self-interest activities.

Social capital in the Prairies, compared to the rest of Canada

Figure 1 shows the scores of various Canadian provinces on seven of the 15 dimensions aforementioned. These are the dimensions for which the differences among provinces were statistically significant. In all these figures, Alberta is used as the baseline, due to its relatively unique status even within the Prairies. All scores therefore show the relative status of each province compared to that of Alberta, with positive and negative values indicating a surplus or deficit, respectively, compared to Alberta. Also, the other two Prairie Provinces of Manitoba and Saskatchewan are shown in black bars, in order to facilitate the comparison of the Prairies with the rest of Canada.

The different charts in Figure 1 show a diverse and interesting combination. The most visible difference is noted in the voting index, for which all other provinces have scores visibly higher than Alberta, with the exception of British Columbia. Ontario is the closest province to Alberta, in terms of the frequency of voting. The relatively low scores reported for Manitoba and Saskatchewan, while putting them slightly ahead of Alberta, indicate an overall lower level of voting in the Prairies. A similar pattern can be seen for confidence in public institutions and involvement with

political parties, with the exception that Québec is the most distant from Alberta in the former and the closest in the latter.

The scores for social trust, neighbourliness, and religious involvement follow a similar pattern, in which Alberta visibly lags behind all other provinces, with the exception of Québec. This is a particularly important feature, as the presence of social trust facilitates the development of a healthy and pleasant social environment, separate from formal institutions. The confidence in private-sector institutions constitutes a third pattern, whose defining feature is the fact that Alberta scores lower than all other provinces. This is particularly worrisome, given the relative role of such institutions in Alberta's fast-growing economy.

Ethnic diversity and trust

The impact of ethnocultural diversity on immigrant-receiving societies is an issue of rising interest. Most studies have shown a negative relationship between the rise of diversity and many dimensions of social capital, including trust (see Putnam 2007, also see Lloyd 2006a and 2006b, Coffe and Geys 2006, Letki 2008, Alesina and Ferrara 2000 and 2002, Leigh 2006a and 2006b, Howe et al. 2006, Aizlewood and Pendakur 2005, Kay and Johnston 2007). In a previous study, this author has shown that, in all Canadian cities except Montréal, in which a high level of ethnic diversity is associated with an extremely low level of social trust, trust is positively associated with ethnic diversity (see Kazemipur 2006). Figure 2 captures the essence of this positive association.

In a more recent study (Kazemipur 2008b), this author has examined some of the possible reasons behind the "Montréal exceptionalism," and has found that the low level of trust seems to be associated with a corresponding low level of social interactions between people of different ethnic backgrounds. In the case of Montréal, for instance, one reason behind its unusual combination of high ethnic diversity and low trust was found to be the high level of residential segregation of ethnic groups in that city. When segregation is present, the existing diversity fails to translate into social interaction and, therefore, into the development of trust among individuals of different ethnic origins, which would be particularly slow.

The relationship between trust and diversity in the Prairies is shown in Figure 3. The trend
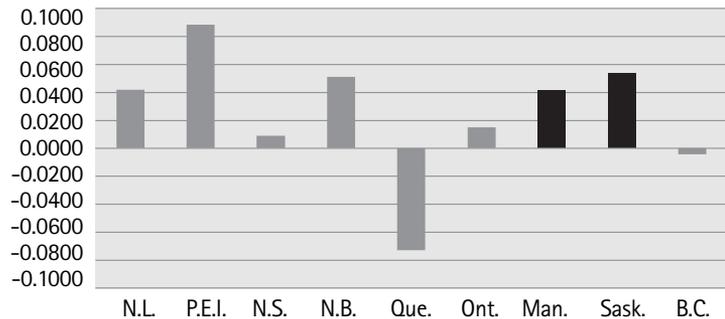
**Social capital endowments,
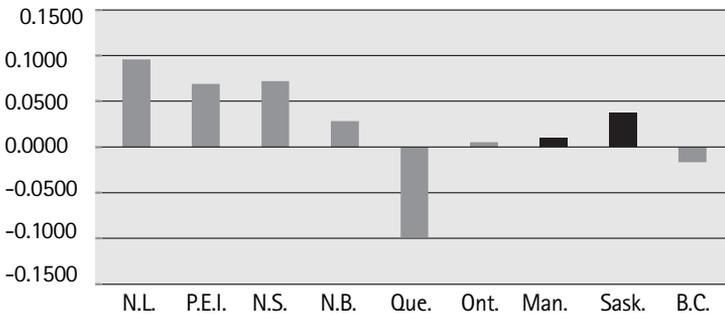all other provinces compared to Alberta, 2003[a]**

Political party involvement
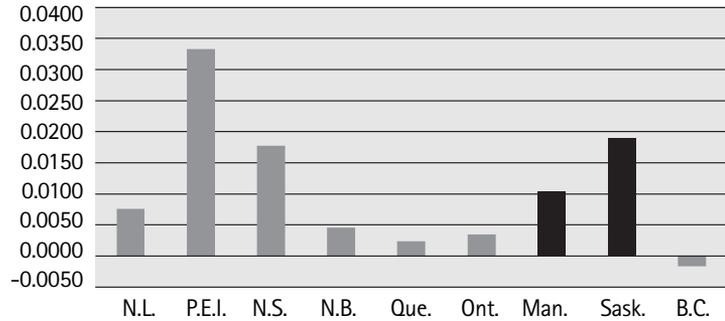

Religious involvement

Neighbourliness

[a] Alberta is used as the baseline in all of the above figures.

Source: Author's calculations based on the Canadian General Social Survey (2003) and the 2001 Census of Canada.

shows the presence of a positive association up to a certain level of diversity, and a negative association from that point on. This so-called curvilinear pattern indicates the possible change in the social environment and in the nature of relationship among the residents of a city, as a result of fast increases in its diversity. Earlier, Blalock (1967) had found a similar pattern for the views of White residents of American

FIGURE 2
Trust level and ethnic diversity, Canadian cities, 2003
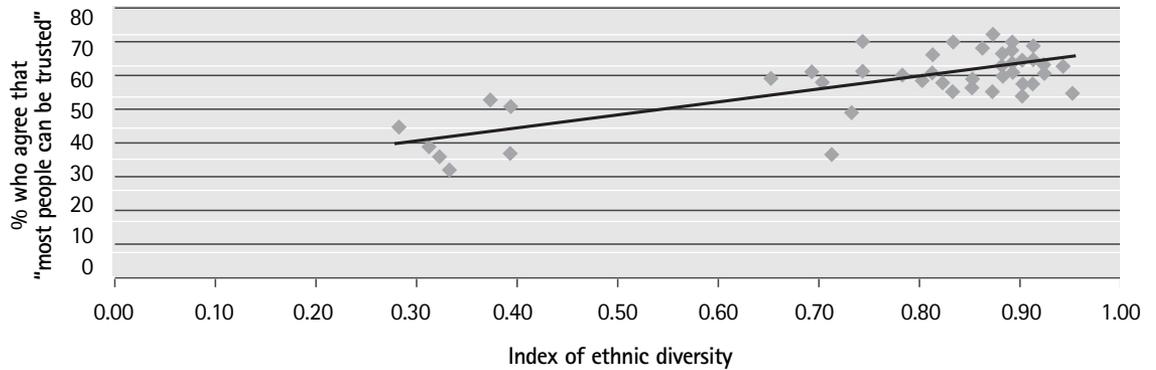
Source: Author's calculations based on the Canadian General Social Survey (2003) and the 2001 Census of Canada.

FIGURE 3
Social trust and ethnic diversity, Prairie cities, 2003
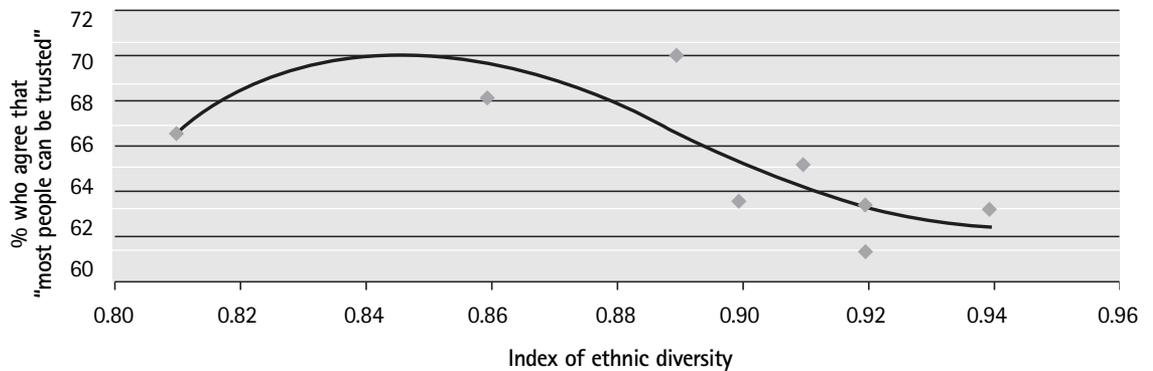
Source: Author's calculations based on the Canadian General Social Survey (2003) and the 2001 Census of Canada.

neighbourhoods with the increase in the number of Black residents (see also Fox 2004, Glaser 1994). These scholars have attributed this change to a perceived threat, on the part of the White residents, of their lifestyle.

While the small number of cities included in the analysis does not allow for a definite conclusion about a possibly distinct Prairies pattern, the presence of such a pattern is certainly informative for a better understanding of the overall situation in Canada.

Policy implications

The relative economic stability of the Prairie Provinces has acted as a magnet for migrants, both local and international. As indicated by the results of this preliminary analysis, however, the social environments of these provinces do not seem to be particularly prepared to accommodate their new residents. The state of social capital, for instance, is most worrying in Alberta, as it is the fastest growing part of the region. This calls for particular attention to, and heavy investment in, the social infrastructure. The rise of ethnic diversity of the cities in the Prairies, a trend destined to continue in light of the recent influx of immigrants, also seems to be leading to a lower state of trust, unlike the general trend in other Canadian cities. The recent backlash against Sudanese immigrants in the city of Brooks in Alberta was a manifestation of some of the problems that can erupt, in the absence of an investment in the social preparedness of communities in this region. There is need of a better understanding of this issue in the Prairies – through extensive and more targeted research – so that the economic prosperity of the Prairies does not get halted by its social capital deficit.

About the author

ABDIE KAZEMIPUR is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Lethbridge. He studies the experiences of ethnic minorities and immigrants in Canada, as well as the socio-cultural trends in the Middle East. His most recent books are *Generation X: A Sociological Account of the Iranian Youth* (2008) and *Social Capital and Diversity: Some Lessons from Canada* (2008). He is currently conducting research on the integration of Muslim immigrants in Canada.

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