

***Fair Share or Free Ride? A thematic and critical analysis of the political discourse of
Canada's equalization program under the Harper and Trudeau government.***

by

Mirusha Ramaj

Supervisor: Dr. Ian Roberge

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Masters of Public Policy, Administration, and Law

in

Faculty of Graduate Studies

York University

Toronto, Ontario

April 17, 2025

© Mirusha Ramaj, 2025

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to those who supported me throughout the journey of writing this paper.

Thank you to my dad, Gani, for always listening, whether it was hours of me rambling about equalization or making terrible jokes about my research findings. Your support means everything.

To my supervisor, Dr. Roberge, thank you for your encouragement, wisdom, and pep talks, especially when I needed them most.

To my family and friends, thank you for keeping me grounded and cheering me on.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge York University and the Master of Public Policy, Administration and Law program for helping me discover my passion for public policy, intergovernmental affairs, and equalization.

Abstract

Canada’s constitutionally entrenched equalization program is intended to ensure that every province can deliver comparable public services at comparable tax rates, yet it has become one of the federation’s most polarizing symbols. This study asks how political discourse around equalization evolved in Alberta, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Ontario between 2006 and 2024, and what that discourse reveals about contemporary Canadian federalism. Drawing on 1,339 Hansard references, the paper first conducts a thematic analysis to map recurrent narratives inside each legislature. It then applies critical discourse analysis to the rhetoric of leading provincial actors, such as Jason Kenney, Dwight Ball, and Dalton McGuinty, to uncover the ideological work equalization performs. The findings show that while themes of fairness, federal tension, and political accountability recur everywhere, their expression diverges sharply. Alberta frames equalization as evidence of systemic exploitation and Western alienation; Newfoundland and Labrador oscillates between pride in brief “have-province” status and betrayal over unmet federal promises; Ontario turns the program into a mirror of provincial decline and partisan blame. Across all three cases, limited federal transparency allows provincial leaders to recast equalization as a discursive battleground for identity, grievance, and legitimacy. Reform must begin with communication: without clear, accessible explanations of how equalization works, attempts to depoliticize or restructure the program will founder on a widening gap between fiscal reality and political narrative.

Keywords: equalization; fiscal federalism; political discourse; thematic analysis; critical discourse analysis; Alberta; Newfoundland and Labrador; Ontario; fairness; Canadian federalism.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgement	ii
Abstract	iii
1.0 Introduction	1
2.0 Background	2
2.1 Equalization in its early days	3
2.2. The evolution of equalization	6
2.3 Modern day equalization and its contentions	7
2.3.1. Expert critiques	8
2.3.2. Evolving grievances and politicization	9
2.4 International context	10
2.5 Positioning this paper in the ongoing dialogue on fiscal equalization	13
3.0 Methodology	15
3.1 Limitations	17
4.0 Results	18
4.1 Newfoundland and labrador: frequency results	18
4.1.1 Defining major themes through examples	19
4.1.2. Key political actors analyzed using CDA	23
4.1 Alberta: frequency results	28
4.1.1 Defining major themes through examples	29
4.1.2. Key political actors analyzed using CDA	33
4.1 Ontario: frequency results	37
4.1.1 Defining major themes through examples	38
4.1.2. Key political actors analyzed using CDA	41
5.0 Discussion	44

5.1 Recommendations	47
6. Conclusion	48
References	50

*Fair share or free ride? A thematic and critical analysis of the political discourse of
Canada's equalization program under the Harper and Trudeau government.*

1.0 Introduction

With a landmass of 9.985 million km² and a 41.5M population (Statistics Canada, 2025), Canadians are considered to be small in numbers but vast in space. Providing reasonably similar services to every Canadian, while having reasonably similar rates of taxation, seems like an impossible task. With 13 provinces and territories, all with different societies and economies, each carries its own symbolic history that has been intertwined in the fate of the federation. Given these considerations, it is unsurprising that Canada faces significant vertical challenges and horizontal fiscal imbalances in its pursuit of a more equitable society. To address the concerns of these structural disparities, the St. Laurent Liberal government introduced the equalization program in 1957. The program established unconditional fiscal transfer to provinces with lower revenue-generating capacity. The very principle of equalization was later enshrined in Section 36(2) of the Constitution Act, 1982, under Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, forever committing Canada to the goal of ensuring that all provinces can provide reasonably comparable levels of public services at reasonably comparable levels of taxation.

Yet, despite its nation-building aspirations, equalization has become one of its most politically contested elements of Canadian federalism. Over the past two decades, it has served as a rhetorical flashpoint for regional grievances and evolving provincial-federal dynamics. This study focuses on three prominent provinces, Alberta, Ontario, and Newfoundland and Labrador, to explore how equalization is framed and contested in different political and economic contexts. Alberta was selected for its long-standing position as a “have” province and its 2021 referendum calling for constitutional renegotiation of equalization; Ontario for its unprecedented fall to “have-not” status in 2009-2010 fiscal, which marked a turning point in federal-provincial fiscal relations; and Newfoundland and Labrador for its transition from

“have-not” to “have” status and its more recent constitutional court challenge that reflects changing attitudes toward the program. Representing Western, Central, and Atlantic Canada, these provinces offer regionally different, politically meaningful case studies for examining equalization discourse. A central question remains at the crux of this issue: how has political discourse on equalization evolved in Alberta, Ontario, and Newfoundland and Labrador between 2006 and 2024, and what does this discourse reveal about the changing nature of Canadian federalism?

To address this question, the paper employs a two-stage methodological approach. First, it uses thematic analysis to identify recurring narratives in legislative debates across the three provinces. Second, it applies critical discourse analysis to the rhetoric of three key political figures who have significantly shaped the narrative of equalization in their respective regions. Through this approach, the paper aims to uncover how equalization functions not only as a fiscal tool, but as a discursive site where broader questions of identity, fairness, autonomy, and national belonging are negotiated.

This paper argues that equalization has become a discursive battleground through which provinces project deeper anxieties about their place in Confederation; revealing how the language of fiscal redistribution has evolved into a potent symbol of regional attitude, political critique, intergovernmental tension, and provincial resentment.

2.0 Background

The challenge of managing interprovincial wealth inequality has consistently sparked political contention in Canada’s federal system (Janigan, 2020; Béland, Lecours, & Tombe, 2022). Recent developments, such as British Columbia's call for a re-evaluation of the formula (CBC, 2023), Newfoundland and Labrador's legal challenge (The Star, 2023), and Alberta's Premier Danielle Smith threat to revive the Fair Deal Panel as a negotiation tactic (CBC, 2025), are not entirely new, but rather reflections of enduring concerns about horizontal fiscal

imbalance and reminders of the contentious nature of fiscal federalism. To understand how these tensions have evolved, it is necessary to examine the historical development of the equalization program and the policy shifts that have shaped its current structure.

2.1 Equalization in its early days

Canada has grappled with horizontal fiscal imbalance since its origins, dating back to the British North America Act of 1867, which, while not containing formal equalization, introduced per capita subsidies that scholars have interpreted as precursors to modern equalization (Courchene, 1984; Béland & Lecours, 2014). Despite its longstanding history, a formal equalization program was not established until 1957. Before then, various informal measures, including tax rental agreements with Ottawa, were employed and often resulted in inequitable fiscal conditions across provinces, fostering regional tensions and raising concerns about the sustainability of Canada's federal structure (Courchene, 1984; Marchildon, 2005; Stevenson, 2007; Béland & Lecours, 2010). Recognizing the limitations of these fragmented fiscal arrangements, and spurred by the economic turmoil of the Great Depression, the federal government established the Rowell-Sirois Commission (Marchildon, 2005; Wardhaugh and Ferguson, 2021). The crisis exposed a structural imbalance, attributed to the constitution, in which provinces bore increasing responsibilities for social services but lacked the fiscal capacity to fulfill them, while the federal government held more revenue-generating power with fewer obligations (Wardhaugh and Ferguson, 2021).

The Rowell-Sirois Report, commissioned in the late 1930s and finalized in the early 1940s, represented the first systematic attempt to evaluate and propose long-term solutions to these disparities within Canadian federalism (Goldberg and Speer, 2020). Prompted by the economic turmoil of the Great Depression, which severely strained provincial finances and exposed deep structural inequalities, the Royal Commission on Dominion-Provincial Relations was tasked with assessing the fiscal relationship between federal and provincial governments

in a changing economic landscape. As Smiley (1978, p.177) explains, *“It was necessary to use the national powers of taxation and borrowing to transfer income from one region to another. The greater the disparities in the incidence of the depression and the greater the failure to use national economic policies to reduce these disparities, the larger were the transfers which had to be made.”* This rationale informed the Commission’s recommendation for a formal equalization system. With the need for such a program now clearly established, attention turned to the question of how it should be structured, implemented, and sustained within Canada's evolving federal framework.

Grounded in its extensive study of domestic and international fiscal arrangements, the Rowell-Sirois Report proposed an equalization system for Canada that included two key design recommendations (Béland & Lecours, 2011). Firstly, the system would evaluate provinces' fiscal capacity as well as their expenditure needs, thereby incorporating both revenue and expenditure components, similar to the Australian model (Brown, 1996). Secondly, it suggested the creation of a financial commission akin to Australia's Commonwealth Grants Commission to advise Ottawa on the allocation of National Adjustment Grants (Royal Commission on Dominion-Provincial Relations, 1940).

Canada's rejection of the 'Australian model' stemmed partly from fears of increased centralization, granting more power to Ottawa, and concerns about insufficient adaptation to the Canadian context (Lecours et al., 2017). This caution reflected a broader political climate in which provinces were increasingly resistant to federal dominance; as Cameron and Simeon (2002) observe, *“in the two decades after the end of World War II, the intergovernmental agenda was focused on the construction of the Canadian welfare state... [yet] the system adapted to these new roles for government with few changes in the formal distribution”* of authority (p. 50). For the Rowell-Sirois Commission, creating a federal equalization program alongside permanent fiscal centralization represented a solution to both the horizontal and

vertical fiscal gaps prevalent in the 1930s. The Commission proposed transferring significant taxation powers to the federal government while implementing national revenue-sharing mechanisms to address disparities in both provincial capacity and constitutional obligations (Lecours & Béland, 2010; Mackenzie, 2006). However, these recommendations were met with strong resistance from provinces, most notably Québec and Ontario, who viewed permanent fiscal centralization as a threat to their autonomy and control over provincial resources (Janigan, 2020, p. 100; Mackenzie, 2006). This provincial opposition played a pivotal role in shaping Ottawa's eventual decision in 1957 to adopt a more politically feasible model of equalization. Rather than using the needs-based approach envisioned by Rowell-Sirois, the federal government implemented a system based solely on the measurement of provincial fiscal capacity, deliberately avoiding an evaluation of expenditure needs to respect provincial sensitivities (Lecours & Béland, 2010; Marchildon, 2005).

Although the 1957 program laid the foundation for equalization, it remained a political initiative without constitutional backing. That changed in 1982 with the patriation of the Constitution, which formally entrenched the principle of equalization in Section 36(2). As Krelove (1997) explains, under the section devoted to "Equalization and Regional Disparities," the federal and provincial governments are committed "*to promote equal opportunities for the well-being of Canadians, to further regional economic development, to reduce disparity in opportunities, and to provide essential public services of reasonable quality to all Canadians*" (Leslie, 1993, as cited in Krelove, 1997).

While Section 36(2) formally embedded equalization into the Constitution, its lack of legal enforceability has left implementation largely dependent on political will and federal-provincial negotiation. As Mackenzie (2006) observes, although the issue of fiscal imbalance is rooted in constitutional arrangements, its development has been shaped more by economic realities and political considerations than by constitutional obligation (p. 12). As a result,

equalization remains a flexible and contested policy instrument rather than a binding legal commitment.

2.2 *The evolution of equalization*

Over the years, the Equalization Program has undergone significant transformations to respond to Canada's evolving fiscal landscape and the diverse economic conditions across provinces. Initially introduced in 1957, the program's formula focused on equalizing revenue-generating capacities using just three provincial tax sources: personal income tax, corporate income tax, and succession duties, chosen for their uniformity and documentation across all provinces (Courchene, 2008). By 1967, the formula had expanded to 16 sources, including sales taxes, fuel taxes, and resource royalties (Perry, 1997), and by the 1980s, it accounted for up to 33 sources, significantly increasing its complexity (MacNevin, 2004; Lecours et al., 2017).

In response to the rise in energy prices and the resulting increase in provincial natural resource royalties, the formula evolved in the 1980s and 1990s to incorporate various government revenue schemes. Economic recessions and growing demands from provinces for a more equitable distribution of funds prompted substantial changes to the formula. It was during this period that additional revenue streams, such as sales taxes and revenues from natural resources, were included to better reflect the economic realities of the provinces (Courchene, 2008). These adjustments sought to prevent traditional "have" provinces, like Ontario, from receiving equalization payments, purportedly to maintain the program's integrity. This period also marked significant constitutional development; the entrenchment of equalization in the Constitution Act of 1982. Section 36(2) of the Act mandated that the federal government provide equalization payments to enable less prosperous provinces to offer services at levels reasonably comparable to those in more affluent provinces (Béland & Lecours, 2014).

In the last two decades, the Equalization Program has continued to be reshaped under the leadership of Prime Ministers Stephen Harper and Justin Trudeau. Notably, under Harper's

tenure, two key reforms were implemented; first in 2007, when the federal government reinstated a formula-based system to replace the fixed-sum model used since 2004, and again in 2009, when the formula was revised to limit total payments, coinciding with Ontario becoming a recipient province (Library of Parliament, 2024). Since then, the program has been renewed every five years without major structural changes, with the current renewal set to expire on March 31, 2029 (Library of Parliament, 2024).

2.3 *Modern day equalization and its contentions*

Today, the Budget Implementation Act (formerly bill C-74, 2018) sets the financial framework for equalization, outlining its budgetary provisions and funding allocations until 2024 (House of Commons, 2018). The current formula operates by comparing each province's potential revenue at standardized average tax rates to a national benchmark; the average fiscal capacity of all provinces, excluding the highest and lowest (Department of Finance Canada, 2023). Provinces with fiscal capacities below this benchmark receive equalization payments to bridge the gap (Government of Canada, 2023).

According to a 2024 Library of Parliament report, federal Equalization payments for the 2024–2025 fiscal year total \$25.3 billion, making up roughly 4.7% of total federal spending. Currently, seven provinces qualify for these transfers: Manitoba, Ontario, Québec, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland and Labrador. Québec receives the largest portion, just over half of the total amount, mostly because of its relative population size among the recipient provinces. On a per capita basis, Prince Edward Island receives the most at \$3,718, whereas Ontario receives the least at \$38. In several smaller provinces, such as Manitoba, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and PEI, Equalization transfers make up as much as one-fifth of total provincial revenues. By contrast, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia are not eligible to receive any Equalization payments this year (Library of Parliament, 2024; Government of Canada, 2024). With such stark differences in who pays

and who receives, especially when Equalization makes up a significant share of some provincial budgets, it's no surprise that the program has become a lightning rod for political tension and debate. But these tensions are not new. Economists and policy experts have been raising concerns about the program's design and fairness for nearly two decades, well before political leaders made equalization a point of public controversy.

2.3.1 *Expert critiques*

In the early 2000s, a number of economists and policy panels began raising foundational concerns about the design and long-term viability of Canada's Equalization Program. A 2008 report by TD Economics argued that Ontario's transition into a recipient province was not a result of its economic decline, but rather due to surging fiscal capacities in resource-rich provinces like Alberta and Newfoundland and Labrador, highlighting potential distortions caused by the existing formula. Wade Locke and Paul Hobson (2004) similarly cautioned that the inclusion of natural resource revenues could undermine provincial incentives and lead to imbalances, particularly for provinces like Newfoundland and Labrador. Locke later emphasized these concerns publicly, calculating an estimated \$11 billion shortfall in Newfoundland and Labrador's equalization benefits due to formula changes introduced in 2007 (CBC News, 2007).

In a broader review, Bev Dahlby (2014), like others, proposed structural reforms, including reducing the inclusion rate for natural resource revenues (Courchene (2005) argued 25% as the balanced option), eliminating the equalization ceiling (Lévesque, 2024; Robson et al., 2025), and improving the program's efficiency and fairness. These concerns echoed those raised by the 2006 Expert Panel on Equalization and Territorial Formula Financing, which argued that the program needed to be "*put back on track*" to meet its national objectives without becoming overly complex or politically divisive.

Concerns about the effectiveness and equity of equalization persisted into the following decade. In Ontario's 2012 Commission on the Reform of Ontario's Public Services, commonly known as the Drummond Report, economist Don Drummond identified structural flaws in the equalization formula and questioned whether it adequately adjusted to changing economic conditions. He highlighted the disconnect between fiscal need and revenue-generating capacity, warning that the system could perpetuate regional imbalances rather than alleviate them. Similarly, in Alberta, the 2020 Fair Deal Panel Report reflected widespread provincial frustration over perceived unfairness in federal fiscal transfers. The panel criticized the equalization formula as outdated and insensitive to Alberta's fiscal challenges, especially given the province's declining revenues despite ongoing non-recipient status. In time, what began as expert commentary evolved into a political flashpoint. These critiques laid the rhetorical groundwork for provincial leaders to reframe equalization not as a tool of fairness, but as a symbol of imbalance.

2.3.2 Evolving grievances and politicization

Equalization has long-been a focal point of contention and legal challenges among provinces, reflecting deep-rooted regional tensions and diverse economic realities. In theory, equalization should remain a cornerstone of the Canadian identity and present an opportunity for national unity. It is essentially spelled out in the reading of s.36(2), that sets out this notion of all Canadians, not some, not few, but all Canadians having access to similar services under similar rates of taxation. However, the national identity crisis, seen through resentment towards the perceived accommodation of Québec (Béland & Lecours, 2011), and the perceived zero-sum nature of the program (zero-sum here meaning some provinces are in receipt and others are not), have led to the perception of unfairness and inadequacy. This can be seen in the drastic changes in the most recent with Newfoundland and Labrador spearheading a court case challenging the formula's legitimacy, arguing that it fails to account for the province's unique

economic conditions, particularly its dependence on volatile resource revenues (Roberts and Cowan, 2024). Newfoundland is not alone in its legal action; British Columbia has expressed support, and Saskatchewan has officially received intervener status (Dayal, 2024; DeRosa, 2024), highlighting a wider sentiment of Western Alienation, at the very least. The same notion has resonated in Alberta, where Albertans still feel that they are giving more and receiving less (Mintz, 2021). More specifically, when asked “*should section 36(2) of the Constitution Act, 1982 – Parliament and the government of Canada’s commitment to the principle of making equalization payments – be removed from the constitution?*”, 61% of Albertans answered “yes” in the ballot box (Elections Alberta, 2021), displaying a strong sentiment for the removal of the equalization principle from the constitution. Although unable to force any constitutional change, it signals deep-seated discontent with the current system (Harrison, 2021). The question proceeds in both of these cases as to whether equalization itself lacks fairness or whether political discourse contributes to these perceptions.

2.4 *International context*

In addressing regional fiscal disparities, Canada’s equalization program is part of a broader international effort to ensure equitable distribution of resources and public services across sub-national jurisdictions. The structural and institutional frameworks of federations, like Canada, Germany, Australia, and the United States, significantly influence the politicization and effectiveness of such programs (Béland et al., 2017). Canada’s equalization program, unlike Germany’s integrated federalism where states participate directly in policy making through the *Bundesrat*, lacks formal regional representation at the federal level. In part due to the concept that Canadians have an expectation that the “watertight” compartments, as reaffirmed in Harper’s *open federalism*, are being respected. This means that provinces are responsible for local needs as they are most capable of handling it, such as Education, Healthcare, Trade etc., while the federal government is responsible for things such as currency,

criminal code, and international relations (Béland et al., 2017). This suggests that there is a reliance of democratic rule when it comes to the outcomes of political discourse. This absence compels provinces to engage directly with the federal government, often politicizing fiscal policies. The intense lobbying efforts by provinces, driven by a strong sense of autonomy and identity, typically garner significant public support, especially when provincial premiers contest federal policies (Simeon, 1972; Théret, 2002).

Countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom, and South Africa have implemented similar mechanisms aimed at mitigating fiscal imbalances between their regions (Béland and Lecours, 2014). In Australia, the Commonwealth Grants Commission administers a well-established system for equalization, distributing funds to states and territories to enable consistent standards of public services nationwide. Conversely, the United Kingdom uses mechanisms like the Barnett Formula to allocate funds to its devolved governments, albeit with limitations in scope and effectiveness. South Africa has developed a constitutionally backed intergovernmental transfer system that seeks to balance the vast regional inequalities left by apartheid. This system aims to maintain fiscal cohesion within a highly decentralized structure. The United States presents a stark contrast, as it refrains from adopting a formal equalization program, reflecting a deep-rooted preference for states' rights and limited federal intervention in sub-national fiscal affairs. This absence has exacerbated disparities in public service quality and accessibility across states, leaving wealthier states better equipped while poorer states struggle to maintain basic service levels (Béland and Lecours, 2014).

Canada's approach, underpinned by a constitutional mandate (s.36(2) of the Constitution Act, 1982), balances fiscal capacities across provinces, reflecting a commitment to both regional equity and national unity. Having the equalization program written in its constitution is not necessarily unique, as Germany can be a similar example. However, the program operates on a scale that addresses economic and political-cultural imperatives,

intertwining financial redistribution with regional identities. While the goal of equalization is to reduce disparities, it often stirs political tension, with no policy fully satisfying all regions simultaneously. In part, the lack of reform in order to continue executive discretion by part of the federal government has allowed the provinces to therefore take an aggressive stance when bargaining with the federal government, especially when they frame issues as intersecting with their interests or identity (Stevenson, 2007; Béland et al., 2017). On the other hand, Jha illustrates this well by making a compelling argument that the very structure of strong executive federalism and weak legislative federalism in Canada has paved the road for the politicization of equalization transfers, where equalization is “*seen as a tool to reward some provinces or punish others*” (2017, p. 14). This becomes more important when discussing the lack of support for a reform option that has been repeated by far the most amongst all the literature – arm’s length agency (Béland et al., 2011; Dahlby, 2017; Jha, 2017; Feehan, 2020).

Literature on Canadian equalization has consistently highlighted the influence of Québec nationalism and ever-growing Western alienation on the political discourse surrounding the policy (such as Béland and Lecours, 2014). These regional dynamics contribute to a growing resentment in provinces that perceive themselves as either disproportionately contributing to or dependent upon federal equalization payments. Ontario’s evolving economic status has significantly impacted the equalization debates, questioning the program’s sustainability and fairness (Béland and Lecours, 2014). Thus, Canada’s equalization program exemplifies the challenges inherent in balancing fiscal equity with regional diversity. While structurally distinct and tailored to Canada’s political landscape, its evolution reflects ongoing debates over regional autonomy, national unity, and the limits of federal intervention. The complex web of provincial identities, economic realities, and political priorities continues to shape the path forward for Canada’s equalization framework.

2.5 *Positioning this paper in the ongoing dialogue on fiscal equalization*

As discussions about Canada's equalization program continue, it is clear that political framing plays a central role in shaping public understanding of both the program's purpose and its perceived effectiveness in addressing regional economic disparities (Stevenson, 2007; Lecours et al., 2017; Jha, 2017). Narratives constructed by key political figures, from portrayals of equalization as a unifying force to claims that it enables regional exploitation, directly influence how Canadians interpret fiscal fairness and national solidarity. These narratives do more than reflect public sentiment; they actively reinforce regional divides and complicate efforts to build consensus around equalization's role in Canadian federalism and the greater unity of Canada. Understanding the impact of these narratives is therefore crucial for assessing equalization's actual and perceived successes and failures.

However, debates must be considered in their entirety. Central to the ongoing debates on equalization in Canada is the question of whether equalization has effectively reduced fiscal imbalances or if it has inadvertently perpetuated them. While equalization has provided essential financial support to less affluent provinces, enabling a more uniform standard of public services, critics argue that it has, at times, fostered dependency rather than self-sufficiency in recipient provinces. Additionally, wealthier provinces contend that the program burdens their economies without adequately incentivizing economic development in recipient regions, such as the case in the ongoing dialogue seen out of Alberta. The literature on equalization presents mixed views, with some studies suggesting it alleviates fiscal disparities and others pointing to unintended consequences, such as reinforcing economic stagnation in certain provinces.

For future reform, there is a pressing need to address these challenges by considering depoliticized approaches to equalization that focus on sustainability and fairness across regions. Reform efforts could aim to recalibrate the program in ways that reduce its politicization, ensuring that equalization is seen as a stabilizing mechanism rather than a source of inter-provincial contention. Potential reforms might involve transparent criteria for payments,

adjustments that more closely reflect regional economic realities, or mechanisms to encourage economic development in recipient provinces. By fostering a non-partisan understanding of equalization's role, Canada could work towards a program that not only addresses fiscal disparities but also garners broader support across political and regional lines.

However, it is safe to say that many of these reform options have already been presented and argued in the literature (Béland and Lecours, 2010; Béland et al., 2017; Dahlby, 2017; Jha, 2017; Feehan, 2020 – to name a few). Although the status quo has been described as being insufficient in meeting the needs of “have-not” provinces (Feehan, 2020) and changing landscapes regarding fluctuations in the price of resources, no clear alternative has genuinely been explored beyond the oft-mentioned arm's length model.

It is in this context that the current paper seeks to make its contribution. Lecours and Béland (2010) were among the first to systematically explore the political dimensions of equalization in Canada, shifting the focus from purely technical assessments to the narratives, identities, and political dynamics that shape how the program is understood and debated. This paper builds directly on that work by extending the analysis across a broader timeline, covering the years 2006 to 2024, and across the legislative arguments made by political actors. It provides a thematic analysis of how equalization has been framed in public and political discourse, with particular attention to Alberta, Ontario, and Newfoundland and Labrador, provinces that have either received, challenged, or publicly criticized the program in significant ways.

The ultimate goal of this paper is to provide the most current analysis of narratives presented by political actors, with a focus on the prominent voices coming out of each respective province. While this literature review has established the long and complex history of equalization, there remains a notable gap in recent scholarship, particularly surrounding the Trudeau administration, regarding how the program has been framed and understood in contemporary politics. In order for future reforms to effectively recalibrate the balance between

fostering economic growth in less prosperous regions and ensuring that contributions from wealthier provinces are perceived as equitable, this research is necessary. Achieving this balance will require an understanding of political acuity, as well as the capacity to develop reform options that move beyond the argument of the default arm's length solution and respond to current and future fiscal pressures in a sustainable way.

As this review concludes, it highlights the necessity for continued research that not only tracks the evolution of these debates but also evaluates the impact of proposed changes. The forthcoming analysis addresses this gap by examining how political framing has influenced the trajectory of equalization reform efforts during the past two decades. In doing so, this paper contributes to a broader understanding of Canadian fiscal federalism and offers insight into the political narratives that will likely shape the future of one of the country's most debated intergovernmental programs.

3.0 Methodology

This observational study employs a qualitative, multi-method approach combining thematic analysis with critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine political rhetoric surrounding Canada's equalization program in three key provinces: Alberta, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Ontario. The provinces were selected due to their distinct positions and heightened discursive activity on the topic; Alberta for its 2021 referendum and long-standing opposition to equalization; Newfoundland and Labrador for its advocacy and legal positioning regarding federal transfers; and Ontario for its symbolic transition from economic powerhouse to recipient status.

Hansard transcripts from 2006 to 2024 were collected and analyzed using the keyword "equalization." This timeframe was selected to encompass two dominant federal political eras, Conservative governance under Stephen Harper and Liberal governance under Justin Trudeau, and to capture the last major shifts in equalization policy (2006 and 2009). The search was

conducted separately within each provincial legislative record. Once data was collected and transferred into a Microsoft Word document, in table format, an initial review was conducted to highlight key words and codes that stand out, the initial step in the model outlined in Naeem et al. (2023). Once these are applied, the data was then transferred into an Microsoft excel sheet, and themes were developed. Up to 5 themes were considered for each statement. The data was then cleaned, to remove any blanks or insufficient themes. Once the data was cleaned, on a separate Microsoft Excel sheet, the dates, political actor, and individual themes were lined up for the next stage: the frequency analysis.

The pivot table feature on Microsoft Excel was used to determine the frequency of themes and actors. Various degrees of manipulation were performed, including using themes as rows, political actors as values, and dates in columns, as well as other variations of these.

The frequencies of thematic mentions were then categorized into four distinct tiers: low, moderate, high, and very high. Each category was defined based on a division of the range of valid theme counts, with the minimum count being considered ≥ 10 , into four approximately equal intervals, adjusted for each province's data distribution. Newfoundland and Labrador with a total of 810 theme mentions, the distribution was divided from 0 to the maximum count of 155 mentions; *low* identified from 0 to 38 mentions; *moderate* from 39 to 77; *high* from 78 to 116; and *very high* from 117 to 155 mentions. For Ontario, with a total of 581 theme mentions, the distribution divided from 0 to the highest frequency of 119 mentions; *low* from 0 to 29 mentions; *moderate* from 30 to 59; *high* from 60 to 89 mentions; and *very high* from 90 to 119. For Alberta, with a total of 661 theme mentions, the range considered for categorization extends from 0 to approximately 105 mentions; *low* as up to 26 mentions; *moderate* from 27 to 52 mentions; *high* from 53 to 78; and *very high* from 79 to 105 mentions.

Thereafter, specific for the identification of key political actors, an additional frequency analysis was conducted in Microsoft Excel, allowing for the quantification of mentions and the

identification of the top individuals who repeatedly engaged in equalization-related discourse. CDA was then applied to the most frequently cited political actors in each province.

The CDA component focused on the context, positioning, and strategic deployment of rhetoric by these actors to uncover underlying ideologies, power dynamics, and intergovernmental relationships embedded in their statements. This layer of analysis allowed for a deeper interpretive reading of how equalization is used politically; not only as a fiscal policy but as a discursive tool to negotiate identity, blame, and legitimacy within the federation.

3.1 Limitations

Despite the depth and interpretive rigour of this study, several considerations and limitations must be acknowledged. First, the decision to focus on Ontario, Alberta, and Newfoundland and Labrador, while justified by their respective referenda, court challenges, and shifts in fiscal status, nonetheless excludes a crucial actor in the equalization conversation: Québec. As historically one of the largest beneficiaries of equalization transfers and a frequent point of reference across the debates analyzed, Québec's omission reflects a methodological limitation driven by feasibility and scope rather than analytical oversight. Due to the language barrier the researchers possess, Québec was not included for analysis in the study.

While the keyword search strategy using only “equalization” in provincial Hansard databases ensured consistency across jurisdictions, it may have limited the capture of relevant rhetoric that referenced the program in indirect or conceptual terms (e.g., “fiscal fairness,” “redistribution,” or “federal transfers”). Additionally, the process of developing themes involved an inherent degree of subjectivity, as it relied on the researcher’s interpretation of political and rhetorical content, especially as it relates to each province separately. While efforts were made to apply consistent coding criteria, such as the use of the same researcher to encode all the themes, qualitative analysis is unavoidably shaped by the researcher’s perspective, potentially influencing how themes were constructed, categorized, or emphasized.

Future research would benefit from an inclusion of Québec and ultimately, all other provinces, to present a more comprehensive portrait of interprovincial dynamics. As well as, more analysis using various key terms and exploring not only what the stories are, but potentially, are they correct? Further driving home the point of the politicization of equalization.

4.0 Results

The analysis proceeds in three stages; first, it outlines the frequency and salience of themes within each province, with a summary presented in table format; second, it provides specific examples of emerging themes and greater context for which to allow proper analysis in the subsequent discussion section; and finally, it examines the language and rhetorical strategies of key political actors using the CDA framework aforementioned.

4.1 Newfoundland and Labrador: frequency results

The thematic frequency analysis reveals that Political Accountability (very high) was the most dominant theme in Newfoundland and Labrador from 2006 to 2024, followed by Provincial Comparison (high), and Federal Tension (high).

Table 1. *Frequency of thematic references in Newfoundland and Labrador discourse on equalization (2006–2024).*

Theme	Count	Frequency
Call for change	32	Low
Canadian Unity	15	Low
Constitution	16	Low
Dependency	32	Low
Economic Independence	42	Moderate
Fairness	76	High
Federal Mention	101	High
Negotiations (11)		Low
Accountability (9)		Low
Tension (89)		High
Unique Characteristics	35	Low
Migration (13)		Low
Unique Conditions (22)		Low
Political Accountability	155	Very High
Advocacy for Province	46	Moderate
Pride in Status Change	69	Moderate
Provincial Resentment	19	Low
Provincial Comparison	94	High
Technical	78	High
Total	810	

The themes of economic independence and pride in status change frequently co-occurred, with a combined total of 108 mentions, one of the strongest paired appearances across the dataset. Notably, these themes peaked in 2008 with 34 total mentions (10 for *economic independence*, 24 for *status change*), followed by 2009 (17 total; 8 and 9 respectively) and 2013 (19 total; 7 and 12 respectively), reflecting periods of heightened provincial self-assertion. The theme of fairness was consistently present between 2016 and 2022, with notable increases in 2019 (11 mentions), 2021 (12 mentions), and a peak in 2022 (16 mentions). This sustained presence suggests a deepening concern with equitable treatment under the equalization framework.

References to federal tensions were highest in 2007 (27 mentions), a period marked by intergovernmental strain. Earlier appearances in 2006 (9 mentions) and renewed mentions from 2019 to 2022 (ranging from 8 to 7 respectively) indicate persistent but episodic federal-provincial friction. The theme of political accountability emerged prominently in 2006 and 2007, with 21 and 24 mentions respectively. It peaked in 2016 at 45 mentions, 18 of which involved direct attribution of blame to the previous administration, before declining slightly to 20 mentions in 2017. The theme of provincial comparison followed a similar trajectory, peaking in 2016 with 22 mentions, and remaining active through 2021 (11 mentions).

Among the most frequently cited political actors were MHA Keith Hutchings (61 statements), former Premier Paul Davis (37 statements), and MHA Anna Thistle (37 statements). Former Premier Dwight Ball also played a significant role in the discourse, with 27 statements attributed to his public and legislative statements, and thus, is considered an honourable mention in this analysis.

4.1.1 Defining major themes through examples

Pride in status change and economic independence

The themes of pride in status change and economic independence reflect a collective sense of achievement and self-sufficiency, often juxtaposed against previous dependency on federal equalization payments. Examples of pride in status change can be seen in the statement made by MHA Kevin Pollard, PC, on May 12th, 2009, *“First of all, I would like to remind everybody that we are off equalization. We are a have Province. Our confidence is renewed and that has instilled pride again in all Newfoundlanders and Labradorians. You cannot put a monetary figure on that...”* Whereas one that can express the economic independence can be shown through former Minister of Tourism, Culture, and Recreation, MHA Sandy Collins, PC, on May 08th, 2012, *“Do we go to Ottawa with cap in hand now? No, we do not. Do you know what we go to Ottawa with now? We go with a cheque, because now we are paying in. Our*

money goes to the other provinces, Ontario and Québec, the former powerhouses. We are paying their equalization payments. We are paying.” The two themes can be seen intertwined in statements such as *“The reason we became a have province and stopped relying on equalization for the very first time, and proved that yes, we can stand proudly on our own strength in this federation.”* by the Leader of the Official Opposition, Tony Wakeham, PC, on March 04th, 2024.

Fairness

The theme of fairness is no stranger when discussing equalization. Often, fairness would be explicitly mentioned, such as this example from Premier Dwight Ball, Liberal, who stated on November 05th, 2019, *“Mr. Speaker, no, it's not fair. It's not fair what's happening in Nova Scotia, PEI, New Brunswick, Québec, Ontario and Manitoba right now. It is not fair the way the equalization formula is designed. We have made that quite clear.”* Other times, fairness is not explicitly stated, but more so implied such as this example by MHA Paul Lane, Independent, on May 10th, 2022, that states *“We don't deserve that. That's not a back-patting opportunity. It's only pittance and a photo op. It's only a pittance compared to what we need and compared to what, I would argue, we deserve. Because as we all know, the equalization formula is not taking into account our circumstance in this province.”* For the most part, the theme of fairness was invoked in relation to the perceived failure of the equalization formula to account for the unique service delivery needs of provinces like Newfoundland and Labrador. Criticisms were frequently tied to the inclusion of non-renewable resource revenues in the equalization formula, which many argued distorted the province's actual fiscal capacity.

Federal tensions

Federal tensions were particularly pronounced in relation to the Harper government's 2006 commitment on equalization, which was widely perceived to have been broken. This sentiment is effectively captured by journalist Lana Payne (2008), who summarized the issue

by recalling that then-Premier Danny Williams had received a letter during the 2006 election campaign in which Stephen Harper promised to “remove non-renewable natural resource revenues from the equalization formula to encourage development of economic growth in the non-renewable resources sectors across Canada.” The subsequent failure to fulfill this commitment became a defining moment in federal-provincial relations. In response, Premier Williams, who served from 2003 to 2010, launched the now-infamous ‘Anything But Conservative’ (ABC) campaign during the 2008 federal election. As he stated in a House session on March 10, 2008: “The Harper Conservatives are developing a well-deserved reputation for being untrustworthy, and one of their greatest betrayals so far was the betrayal to Newfoundland and Labrador.”

Political accountability

The theme of political accountability appears closely tied to moments of electoral transition and partisan critique. Notably, a spike in accountability-related discourse followed the province’s 49th general election on November 30, 2015, which marked the transition from a three-term Progressive Conservative to a Liberal government. On June 06th, 2016, during a House debate, former Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, Dale Kirby, Liberal, criticized the outgoing administration’s inaction on equalization reform, stating: “*They talk about pride as Newfoundlanders and Labradorians at the same time advocating that somehow we go and get them to break the equalization formula. [...] Who advocated for Newfoundland and Labrador the two occasions that they had to negotiate legitimate changes to equalization? They did nothing*” However, the theme also appears more routinely as a tool of opposition critique, particularly in moments of federal negotiation. For example, on December 07th, 2006, MHA Anna Thistle, Liberal, challenged the ability for the government of the day, PC at that time, to secure a promised federal agreement, declaring: “*If he comes home empty handed I would say there is going to be a by-election in Ferryland. [...] If he comes*

back empty-handed without the deal signed up like Stephen Harper promised, that is the next paper that is coming up for nomination” In both examples, accountability is framed as both a partisan instrument and a standard of government performance in negotiations related to equalization.

4.1.2 Key political actors analyzed using CDA

MHA Keith Hutchings

Keith Hutchings served as an MHA under the PC party from 2007 to 2019, holding various ministerial positions, including Minister of Municipal and Intergovernmental Affairs, Minister of Fisheries and Aquaculture, and the Minister responsible for the Office of Public Engagement to name a few. His diverse portfolio provided him a significant platform to influence public policy and engage in intergovernmental dialogues.

Throughout his tenure, Hutchings actively promoted the narrative of Newfoundland and Labrador’s economic independence and optimism. On December 14, 2009, he eloquently captured this sentiment, stating,

*"Mr. Speaker, I think I spoke of the word optimism. **I think optimism is something in Newfoundland and Labrador that is alive and well.** Alive and well because of this government and the actions that have been taken since 2004 and things we have done. One of the big ones over the last couple of years is the fact that we are **no longer on equalization.** Newfoundland and Labrador have **taken our rightful place in this federation.** People are looking to Newfoundland and Labrador now and what we are doing and the success we are having. That is very important in terms of the optimistic outlook that Newfoundlanders and Labradorians have, **knowing that we can make our own way.** We are generating our own revenues, we are providing our services. In terms of contributing, we are a have Province in terms of this country."*

His understanding of economic policies and their impact on provincial status are every prevalent, especially as Hutchings was able to through provincial comparisons. This can be seen through the statement made on March 9, 2016, when he remarked,

*"At times, various jurisdictions in Canada are part of the Equalization Program; other times, they are not. Remember decades ago, **the Province of Ontario** was the industrial heartland of Canada through manufacturing*

and through their exports. **Today we see them on equalization.** That is fine; that is how the program works. It balances through tough economic times to see jurisdictions through those economic times. That rise and fall in revenue certainly makes that happen."

Moreover, Hutchings did not shy away from criticizing the previous government's fiscal strategies, particularly highlighting ineffective budget management and failure to negotiate.

This can be seen on the statement from June 6th, 2016:

"It's really unique that they say we had no choice. You always have choices. As you're building a budget, as you're executing that budget, I suggest as you're changing the budget, as they did with this levy – there was going to be no changes. We heard the Premier from time to time, going through it, there were going to be no changes. **Then magically they get \$27 million and then the whole equalization payment is kicked down the road.** They kicked the can down the road for 2022. They didn't get relief from it; they just kicked it down the road to 2022."

These statements collectively demonstrate his vigorous advocacy for fiscal prudence and the province's autonomy.

Former Premier Paul Davis

Paul Davis served as the 12th Premier of Newfoundland and Labrador from September 26, 2014, to December 14, 2015, and his tenure as MHA from 2010 to 2018. During his leadership with the PC party, he also held the role of Leader of the Opposition from 2015 to 2018.

During his leadership, Davis frequently discussed provincial fiscal disparities and the need for Newfoundland and Labrador to assert its rights within the federation. A poignant moment of this advocacy came in a statement on March 08th, 2016, where he questioned the provincial leadership's efforts in securing federal support compared to other provinces:

"This year, **Newfoundland and Labrador does not have sufficient revenues** to provide reasonable, comparable levels of public services at reasonable, comparable levels of taxation. So why is it that Premier Wall and Premier Notley can be out looking for those much-needed revenues through equalization, but our Premier is not out with them? **I'm sure our Premier doesn't expect Premier Wall or Premier Notley to fight for them or to work for our province.** They're looking for equalization reform.

They're looking for stabilization reform. They're looking for stimulus and emergency relief.”

Davis uses this narrative to critique the lack of proactive fiscal advocacy under the current government, emphasizing the need for Newfoundland and Labrador to actively engage in reform discussions. His mention of other provincial leaders underlines a comparative framework, highlighting a disparity in leadership initiative.

Davis also addressed the perceived shortcomings in both federal and provincial fiscal management, notably discussing the nuances of federal-provincial financial arrangements by the government of the day, which can be seen in this statement from June 06th, 2016:

“Thankfully, the federal government came along and had some funding, came up with some funding. Well, actually that's not right, Mr. Chair. They didn't come along with any funding. What they did was, they said to the province – **the province has a payment due to the federal government. An equalization overpayment** has to be paid back over a number of years, over a 10-year period. They had to make a payment this year, \$27 million this year.”

His statement begins with apparent gratitude but quickly shifts to clarify a misconception about federal support, thus revealing a deeper frustration with the handling of fiscal responsibilities. Davis effectively uses this correction to underscore the challenges of managing provincial finances under restrictive federal stipulations.

On May 03rd, 2017, Davis voiced his dissatisfaction with the lack of vigorous defence for provincial interests, particularly in sectors critical to the province, such as fisheries and fiscal equalization, and in turn, keeping the government of the day accountable with the following statement:

“He's upset about it, Mr. Speaker, because they won't fight. **This government and this Premier won't fight for Newfoundland and Labrador.** They won't fight for the fishery and they won't fight for equalization. That's the problem, and the problems would be different.”

By repeating "they won't fight," Davis emphasizes a perceived passivity in current governmental efforts. This rhetorical repetition serves to rally public and political support for a more assertive approach in defending provincial interests.

MHA Anna Thistle

Anna Thistle served as an MHA from 1996 to 2007, representing the Liberal party. During her time as an MHA, Thistle emphasized the critical importance of securing reliable commitments from the federal government concerning equalization payments, reflecting her commitment to the financial stability of Newfoundland and Labrador. Her rhetorical question on December 6, 2006, "Mr. Speaker, our equalization deal is so important, **why can't you get the commitment from Stephen Harper?**" showcases this quite well.

Thistle further critiques the federal government's commitment to Newfoundland and Labrador was a recurring theme in her statements, especially highlighted in her critique from December 4, 2006:

"Mr. Speaker, we all know that this Province deserves a better deal on equalization and we all know that **their federal cousins are trying to dodge away** from keeping their commitments they made in writing to this Province."

Incorporating a strategic political threat, Thistle's statement from December 7, 2006, "If he comes home empty handed I would say there is going to be a by-election in Ferryland. That is the next by-election, the one in Ferryland, **because that is the test now.**" links the outcomes of federal negotiations to potential electoral consequences. Taking a step further, Thistle links demographic trends to fiscal entitlements, underlying a level of dependency to the equalization program. Comments such as the ones made November 21st, 2006, "He said we have the highest death rate and the lowest birth rate and **you know that impacts on our equalization.**" show that concept of dependency by using terminology such as "our" when referring to equalization.

Former Premier Dwight Ball

Dwight Ball, a member of the Liberal Party, served as the 13th Premier of Newfoundland and Labrador from December 14, 2015, to August 19, 2020, during his extensive tenure as an MHA from 2013 to 2020. His tenure was marked by efforts to address fiscal challenges and manage federal-provincial relations, particularly in the context of federal equalization payments. Ball frequently criticized the decisions made by previous administrations regarding the equalization formula, emphasizing the long-term impacts of these decisions on the province's financial health. On March 9, 2016, he discussed the limitations imposed by a new equalization formula adopted by his predecessors:

“It was not as responsive as the old formula. What happened? **The previous administration made the decision to go into a new formula.** The problem is if you opt into a new formula, guess what? You could not come out of it. Therefore, the natural resource revenue and so on would get included in the overall revenue that we see within our province and it made it more difficult to receive equalization more responsive. **All provinces, by the way, are into this new formula as it exists today, so it makes it more difficult.**”

In the same speech, Ball also addressed significant financial obligations stemming from decisions made by past governments, particularly concerning an overpayment that the province was required to repay:

“What he agreed to do was pay back the money for the next 10 years, starting in the spring of 2016. After ignoring it for over 10 years, now, the people of Newfoundland and Labrador are left on the hook to repay \$271 million in an overpayment that was acknowledged by the previous administration back in 2005. **Completely ignored, and here we are, Newfoundland and Labrador, left on the hook to pay back this equalization.**”

In addressing the perceived disparities in federal support, Ball commented on April 18, 2016, about the ineffectiveness of vocal advocacy by other provinces for more equalization benefits, “What I'm saying is what he's thinking is that Alberta and Saskatchewan, because they seem to be shouting a bit **as he says, that the volume is what's required.** Alberta and Saskatchewan **have not received** any more from equalization.”

4.2 *Alberta: frequency results*

The thematic frequency analysis reveals that Provincial Mention (very high) was the most dominant theme in Alberta from 2006 to 2024, followed by several other very high frequency themes, including Opposition Commentary, Political Accountability, Fairness, and Federal Tension.

Table 2. *Frequency of thematic references in Alberta discourse on equalization (2006-2024).*

Theme	Count	Frequency
Advocacy for Province	44	Moderate
Canadian Unity	25	Low
Constitutional Significance	32	Moderate
Negotiation (13)		Low
Opposition Commentary	111	Very High
UCP Hypocrisy (36)		Moderate
Jason Kenney Criticism (72)		High
Political Accountability	88	Very High
Fair Deal	20	Low
Fairness	103	Very High
2021 Referendum	90	Very High
Support (33)		Moderate
Criticism (17)		Low
Federal Tension	80	Very High
Provincial Mention	105	Very High
Comparison (41)		Moderate
Resentment (57)		High
Reform	12	Low
Technical	29	Moderate
Total	661	

Under the theme of provincial mention, two sub-themes emerged: provincial comparison (moderate frequency) and provincial resentment (high frequency). Notably, these themes both peaked in 2021 with 30 mentions total (14 mentions attributed to *provincial comparison* and 16 to *provincial resentment*). Surprisingly, the two themes diverge on their second most frequent time period: *provincial comparison* reached a second peak in 2016 with

9 mentions, whereas *provincial resentment* reached a second peak in 2022, with 8. The divergence displays a change in provincial perspective.

The theme of fairness was consistently present between 2016 and 2022, with a significant peak in 2021, which obtained 41 mentions. The years prior and subsequent resulted in diffusion over time. For example, 2022 saw a count of 10 mentions, and 2023 saw zero, with 2024 having 3 counts. Alternatively, the theme of federal tension witnessed three peaks; the first peak in 2007 with 14 mentions; the second peak in 2021 with 20 mentions; and the third peak in 2022 with 15 mentions. No notable peaks outside of the three were significant enough to report.

The theme of opposition commentary was considered to have two sub-themes, which included *UCP hypocrisy* and *Jason Kenney commentary* (or criticism against Jason Kenney). The two are divided in the timeline, which showcased an earlier peak for UCP hypocrisy in 2016, with 21 mentions, and 2017, with 20 mentions, whereas Jason Kenney commentary peaked in 2021, with a count of 42 mentions. Interestingly, the theme of provincial accountability peaked in 2017, with a count of 24 mentions, with two other peaks seen in 2016, with 13 mentions, and 2022, with 12 mentions.

When considering the key political actors who were most frequently cited in the theme mentions, it was apparent that former Premier Jason Kenney was the most prevalent voice (70 statements). The two subsequent political actors that were tied in the mention count are former Premier Rachel Notley (58 statements) and MLA Drew Barnes (58 statements).

4.2.1 Defining major themes through examples

Provincial mention

Alberta's political discourse often features explicit expressions of resentment towards Québec's benefits from equalization payments. For instance, on November 17, 2021, MLA Jason Stephan, UCP, remarked, "A litigation lawyer friend of mine suggested this government

should explore a reference to the court to see if equalization is being misinterpreted by politicians to mean annual structural welfare payments primarily from Alberta primarily to Québec.” This statement reflects a direct accusation of misinterpretation used to benefit Québec at Alberta’s expense. Similarly, MLA Devinder Toor, UCP, who is a committed supporter of the *Alberta Sovereignty within a United Canada Act* (French, 2022), articulated on the same day, “Québec is providing \$8.50 daycare. We could have done this instead of sending the payments to Québec, if we could stop it, and provided those social services and public services to Albertans. They deserve it.”

Beyond explicit statements, resentment is also inferred through critiques linking Québec’s environmental policies to fiscal issues. Stephan’s comment on July 13, 2020, highlights this connection: “The Premier of Québec says that there is no social acceptability for Alberta pipelines while inbound oil tankers sourced from Saudi Arabia are accepted.” However, when considering Stephan’s comments, it must be contextualized as coming from a political actor who refers to the NDP’s policies (24-04-2022) or Québec as “parasitic” (08-06-2020; 23-11-2023; and 04-11-2024).

Alberta’s politicians frequently draw comparisons between Québec’s advantages and the situations in other provinces. On November 17th, 2021, MLA Jordan Walker, UCP, stated, “Québec disproportionately benefits, and Alberta is carrying everyone on their back.” Such statements are aimed at highlighting the perceived unfairness in the distribution of equalization payments, highlighting both the comparison under equalization and resentment. Further emphasizing this point, MLA Richard Gotfried, UCP, noted on November 28th, 2016, “By contrast, only six of Canada’s provinces receive equalization payments: P.E.I., Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Québec, Ontario, Manitoba. Mr. Speaker, we know that those numbers are large and largely on the backs of Albertans in many cases.”

Fairness

The theme of fairness is central to Alberta's political rhetoric on equalization, consistently framed as a call for equitable treatment rather than financial assistance. As MLA Nate Horner, UCP) stated, "We don't look for welfare as a province; we look for fairness" (07-12-2020), reinforcing Alberta's self-image as economically self-reliant yet structurally disadvantaged. This sentiment is echoed in similar sentiments by MLA Kaycee Madu, UCP, on June 02nd, 2021, asserting the province's pursuit of "a fair deal within this Confederation," and Kenney (07-06-2021) emphasizing the strategic intent behind equalization-related motions: "an effort to elevate... our demand for fairness." The framing of equalization as "fundamentally unfair to Albertans," as MLA Jeremy Nixon, former Wildrose turned UCP, stated on June 09th, 2021, underscores a perception that the province's contributions are disproportionate to its returns. These narratives not only reflect ongoing fiscal grievances but also work to legitimize broader demands for increased autonomy and reform.

Federal tension

Much of Alberta's federal tension discourse centers on standing up to Ottawa and asserting provincial autonomy. This is exemplified by former Premier Jason Kenney's 2021 claim that "no government in modern Alberta history has done more to assert this province's autonomous role within the Canadian federation" (16-06-2021), echoing broader skepticism about the utility of federal mechanisms like equalization, as seen in the question posed by MLA Joseph Schow, UCP, "how will a referendum question on equalization help Alberta stand up to Ottawa?" Perceptions of federal favouritism also fuel this narrative. As MLA Ron Orr, former Wildrose turned UCP, stated on December 07th, 2022, "time and time again Ottawa flaunts its provincial biases," framing Alberta's resistance as a response to "imperious and unbalanced laws." This is further reinforced by feelings of political exclusion, as voiced by Premier Danielle Smith on the same day: "when Albertans voted... to remove the principle of equalization, the Prime Minister ignored Alberta, and to this day has never made any attempt

to acknowledge... the expectations of Albertans.” These statements together construct a narrative of marginalization, reinforcing Alberta’s calls for greater provincial power and respect within the federation, ultimately leading to tension in the perceived notions that “Ottawa still mocks [Alberta]” (Orr, 07-12-2022).

Opposition commentary

Many of the arguments towards federal tensions and fairness are attributed to key political figures within the United Conservative Party (UCP). Across the party lines, other members have had strong reactions that are in line with confronting UCP hypocrisy and criticism towards former Premier, Jason Kenney.

Former Minister of Community and Social Services, Irfan Sabir, NDP, for instance, criticized the UCP’s persistent attacks on the federal government by highlighting their partisan alignment: “They do criticize the federal government all day long but often forget that... equalization – the federal Conservatives were there” (28-02-2024). Former Minister of Finance and President of the Treasury Board, Joe Ceci, NDP, took aim at perceived inconsistency, stating on June 15th, 2021 “How many versions of this Premier are hiding out in the sky palace? Truth be told, Albertans are having a hard time keeping up with all his contradictions.”, while, at the time Leader of the Opposition, Rachel Notley, NDP, offered a more satirical critique, such as the one on June 09th, 2021, stating: “The Premier wants to convince Albertans that he has a Trojan Horse when it’s actually a My Little Pony, a plastic hobby horse, deployed solely to prop up Canada’s least popular Premier, him. Mr. Speaker, the truth is that the Premier helped to write the flawed equalization formula.” These responses expose internal provincial fractures and challenge the UCP’s ability to frame equalization as solely a federal failure, emphasizing instead the role of Alberta’s own leadership in shaping the policy outcomes they now oppose.

4.2.2 Key political actors analyzed using CDA

Former Premier Jason Kenney

To understand Jason Kenney's prominent role in shaping Alberta's equalization discourse, it is essential to situate his contributions within the broader context of his political career. Jason Kenney served as the 18th Premier of Alberta from 2019 to 2022 and was the founding leader of the United Conservative Party (UCP), a merger of the former Progressive Conservative (PC) and Wildrose parties. Prior to his provincial leadership, Kenney held several high-profile cabinet roles in the federal conservative government under Prime Minister Stephen Harper from 2006 to 2015.

Throughout his tenure in Alberta, Kenney cast the issue of equalization within a broader ideological struggle for provincial autonomy and federal accountability. A defining feature of Kenney's rhetoric is his emphasis on democratic legitimacy and follow-through. In defending the 2021 equalization referendum, a centrepiece of his government's "Fair Deal" strategy, Kenney framed it as an exercise in democratic renewal: "This government was elected on a commitment to hold a referendum this October on the principle of equalization. Promise made, promise kept" (09-06-2021). By attacking the NDP as the "Old Autocratic Party" for opposing direct democracy mechanisms such as recall and referenda (09-06-2021), Kenney further positioned himself as a champion of provincial empowerment and civic participation.

Kenney's discourse also leaned heavily on the theme of fairness, articulating a deep sense of provincial sacrifice and federal exploitation.

"Let me be clear. **Albertans are generous.** They are proud to have been able to share much of our prosperity with the rest of Canada when times have been good here but bad elsewhere. Madam Deputy Speaker, what we cannot abide and what **we will no longer abide**, through this motion, **is a system where** we are compelled to subsidize public services in other parts of Canada while **our ability to generate the wealth that creates those transfers is constantly impaired and impeded** by policies of the national government and indeed of some other provinces" (09-06-2021)

Here, Kenney emphasizes a contradiction between Alberta's contributions and the constraints it faces, tapping into long-standing feelings of Western alienation. Even after conceding the legal limitations of the 2021 referendum, Kenney reaffirmed the emotional and

political weight of the result, stating: “None of that can allow us to turn our attention away from the fundamental sense of **unfairness and alienation that has long abided here** in Alberta” (18-11-2021).

Kenney drew rhetorical parallels to Québec, framing Alberta's referendum as part of a broader tradition of provincial assertion: “They have failed to act, so **we must take a lesson from Québec and elevate our fight** for fairness through a referendum, which we intend to do next year” (17-06-2020). At the same time, he warned against separatist extremes, noting the dangers of fragmentation: “We are talking about whether we will become 10 balkanized little provinces, undermining the dream of Confederation” (17-10-2019). In doing so, Kenney struck a delicate balance between protest and federal loyalty, leveraging equalization as both a political grievance and a platform for reasserting Alberta’s place within Canada on more equitable terms.

Former Premier Rachel Notley

Rachel Notley, NDP, Premier of Alberta from 2015 to 2019, and the former Leader of the Opposition from 2019 to 2024. Notley’s premiership and win for NDP marked the end of the Progressive Conservatives' 44 year hold on Alberta. Unlike her conservative counterparts, Notley’s discourse on equalization has focused less on federal exploitation and more on holding both past and present Conservative governments accountable for structural inequities within the program. Her rhetoric frequently emphasizes historical continuity and political responsibility, as reflected in her statement: “They made no changes to the equalization formula, no changes at all, so it’s a little bit rich that this is a priority for them now” (21-03-2017). Grounded in calls for pragmatic reform rather than emotional appeals to grievance, Notley’s approach critiques the politicization of equalization and underscores the need for constructive federal-provincial dialogue based on consistency and policy substance.

A recurring theme in Notley's rhetoric is the attribution of blame to previous Conservative administrations for Alberta's perceived fiscal disadvantage under the current equalization formula. For example, she asserted in 2017:

“...the last time this was negotiated, there was a Conservative government in Ottawa and a Conservative government in Alberta, and it is quite true that **we did lose money as a result** of the tweaks to the formula made by the **Conservative government in Ottawa** and the **Conservative government in Alberta.**” (11-12-2017)

Here, Notley frames equalization not as a standalone grievance but as the product of a political lineage of mismanagement, effectively redirecting critique away from the program itself and toward her political opponents' past actions.

This rhetorical strategy continues in her accusation that Conservatives have historically failed to act, stating: “the members opposite and their leader had decades to do something on the equalization file, but instead they sat on their hands when they were in Ottawa” (07-11-2017). By situating the equalization debate within a longer historical continuum, Notley attempts to delegitimize present Conservative outrage over equalization as both performative and hypocritical. In a pointed remark about former Premier Jason Kenney's tactics, she said: “Don't worry, Mr. Speaker; I'll be on it in 2023. The Premier wants to convince Albertans that he has a Trojan Horse when it's actually a My Little Pony, a plastic hobby horse” (09-06-2021). This metaphor serves to ridicule what she perceives as the performative populism of the sovereignty or "fair deal" narrative, portraying it as a hollow effort to distract from past complicity.

MLA Drew Barnes

Drew Barnes served as MLA from 2012 to 2023. During his tenure, Barnes was a member of the Wildrose and UCP, finally sitting as an independent MLA from 2021 to 2023. Barnes positioned himself as a vocal advocate for Alberta's fiscal autonomy and critic of the federal equalization program. His discourse around equalization reveals a persistent framing of

the program as an unjust imposition on Alberta, paired with a critique of provincial leadership for failing to challenge federal arrangements effectively. To contextualize these findings, it must come with an understanding that Barnes has been quite vocal on Alberta's separatist movements, including suggesting Premier Smith to lower the threshold for Albertans to force an independence referendum (ChatNewsToday, 2025).

At the core of Barnes' rhetoric is the notion of political accountability. He repeatedly criticized the provincial government for perceived inaction or lack of resolve in asserting Alberta's interests. For instance, he asked pointedly, "My question to the Premier: after two years of inaction, **are you ever going to get serious about fighting for a fair deal** for Albertans?" (24-03-2022). This sentiment was echoed in another statement a month later: "About every six months or so this Premier has attempted to delay action and shift blame for his lack of progress in fighting for us and our families for a fair deal" (25-04-2022). Here, Barnes situates equalization not merely as a fiscal concern, but as a test of political will and leadership, a litmus test for whether Alberta's government is defending provincial sovereignty and standing up to federal overreach.

His discourse is also marked by a populist tone and emotional appeals, often invoking resentment toward perceived federal favoritism. He framed equalization as a vehicle through which Alberta is economically exploited to support provinces like Québec and Ontario:

"...a federal government too blinded by its misguided focus to recognize the immense number of their beloved social programs that would cease to exist without **Alberta footing the bill for Québec and Ontario** through obscene equalization payments" (22-03-2017).

The language of "obscene" payments and "vilifying" energy producers serves to dramatize Alberta's role as the economic engine unfairly penalized within Confederation.

4.3 *Ontario: frequency results*

The thematic frequency analysis reveals that Identity (very high) was the most dominant theme in Ontario from 2006 to 2024, with the two sub-themes of crisis (high) and net

contributor (low). It is followed by the theme of Political Accountability (very high) and Fairness (high).

Table 3. *Frequency of thematic references in Ontario discourse on equalization (2006–2024).*

Theme	Count	Frequency
Call for change	18	Low
Dependency	17	Low
Fairness	72	High
Financial Mismanagement	54	Moderate
Identity	119	Very High
Crisis (87)		High
Net Contributor (29)		Low
Opaque Program	12	Low
Provincial Mention	40	Moderate
Comparison (13)		Low
Competition (15)		Low
Resentment (12)		Low
Political Accountability	92	Very High
Reciprocity	30	Moderate
Stigmatization	37	Moderate
Technical	29	Low
Total	581	

Within the theme of identity, the sub-theme of crisis, denoted identity - crisis in the original thematic development, exhibited notable fluctuations. The most pronounced peak occurred in 2008, with a count of 43 mentions, which can be attributed to the transition into “have-not” status for the province. Subsequent mentions were significantly lower, with only 9 occurrences in both 2011 and 2014. The other sub-theme within identity, labelled net contributor, presented two peaks in the years 2008 and 2009, with counts of 13 and 6 mentions, respectively. This coincides with the Don Drummond report of 2008, which displayed that although Ontario may move into a have-not status, the province still contributes significantly more to Ottawa than it would receive on equalization.

The theme of political accountability was most prominently featured in 2008, receiving a substantial count of 47 mentions. Following this peak, the theme maintained a steady presence with the discourse, albeit at much lower levels, with minor peaks occurring in 2010 (8 mentions) and 2014 (7 mentions). Interestingly, the theme of financial mismanagement also saw a similar scale, with the most significant peak in 2008 (count of 31 mentions). The smaller subsequent peaks occurred in 2014, with a count of 7 mentions. The theme of fairness first emerged as a major topic in 2006 with a count of 14 mentions, and reached its peak in 2008 with 35 mentions.

The discourse surrounding these themes was often driven by the same key political figures. Amongst the most prominently involved is the former Leader of the Opposition, Tim Hudak, with a substantial lead at 90 statements. Another significant political actor included former Minister of Children, Community, and Social Services of Ontario, Lisa MacLeod, with a statement count of 40. At the onset of the data collection period, former Premier Dalton McGuinty played a significant role in the discourse, with 27 statements.

4.3.1 Defining major themes through examples

Identity

The theme of identity emerged prominently in Ontario's equalization discourse, particularly during the province's transition into "have-not" status. While some Liberal voices, such as the former Premier Dalton McGuinty and MPP Jeff Leal, worked to reframe the narrative, emphasizing Ontario's continued role as a net contributor, the broader discourse reflected discomfort and anxiety over perceived shifts in provincial identity. Leal, for example, framed Ontario as a continued economic force, pointing to its substantial contributions despite receiving equalization: "... hard-working Ontarians are putting \$11 billion into equalization... People talk about \$7-a-day daycare in the province of Québec. They talk about low tuition fees in the province of Québec... It is because the hard-working men and women in Ontario, through equalization, are providing that to our fellow Canadians in the province of Québec" (13-05-

2013). This positioning sought to preserve Ontario's self-conception as the economic crutch of the Confederation.

However, the more dominant tone, particularly among PC members, reflected an identity crisis rooted in the stigma of equalization. MPP Jane McKenna, PC, warned, "We are now receiving equalization payments... for the first time ever. If that doesn't scare anybody, I don't know what else possibly could" (09-05-2013), while MPP Rod Jackson, PC, described equalization as akin to "... or worse may look like receiving handouts from the rest of Canada to supplement poor financial performance, such as \$3 billion in equalization payments." (29-08-2012). This narrative of decline was reinforced years later, as McKenna went so far as to criticize Ontario's diminished fiscal status by comparing it unfavourably to historically less affluent provinces: "Ontario used to be the engine. If we can believe it, we took equalization payments from Newfoundland and Labrador. It's shocking to me that we actually say that out loud. Newfoundland and Labrador were paying our bills." (20-11-2019).

Financial Mismanagement

In addition to concerns over identity, Ontario's equalization discourse was marked by internal political tensions and critiques of the province's declining fiscal stature. A notable early example came from Premier Dalton McGuinty, who in 2006 rejected the premise of expanding equalization, arguing instead for broader support to all provinces through vertical fiscal balance: "Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty — a vertical imbalance guy — said the federal government should enhance payments to all the provinces rather than pour money into the equalization program, which just benefits the have-nots" (Toronto Star, 14-10-2006). This position, which implicitly challenged the structure of the equalization program, drew criticism from opposition members, who accused the McGuinty government of scapegoating. As MPP Peter Shurman, PC, stated, "Years after they started looking for a scapegoat on which to pin the economic crisis

that has now befallen Ontario, they finally spotted opportunity and pointed their finger at equalization payments..." (25-09-2008).

The perception that Ontario had lost its economic footing also featured prominently in the discourse of then-Leader of the Opposition Tim Hudak, PC, who warned in 2008 that Ontario was "\$84 above that equalization standard, from \$400 just four years ago. If that trend continues, Ontario's in jeopardy, in two or three years' time, of falling below that banner and becoming a have-not province." (08-04-2008). These concerns were echoed in policy commentary, such as by Mark Milke of the Fraser Institute, a conservative think tank, who framed Ontario's status as symbolically humiliating: "It's bizarre at all that we're talking about the protection of quasi-equalization payments for Ontario. That shows how weak Ontario has become fiscally and what a mess its own fiscal situation is that it's going to Ottawa begging for a transfer protection" (Globe and Mail, 20-01-2014). Collectively, these statements reflect not only fiscal concern, but also a broader anxiety over Ontario's loss of economic prestige and the political implications of receiving support traditionally associated with less prosperous provinces.

Fairness

Ontario's discourse on equalization also invoked the theme of fairness, often framed as a call for reciprocal respect within the federation. Former Finance Minister Charles Sousa, Liberal, acknowledged long-standing concerns with the structure of the program, stating, "We've lived with this inequality in the equalization program for many years now" (23-04-2015). Similarly, MPP Brad Duguid, Liberal, emphasized the province's demand for equitable treatment: "Support our efforts to ensure that the federal government treats Ontario fairly when it comes to equalization payments" (10-07-2014). These concerns were frequently linked to the idea of reciprocity, acknowledging Ontario's past generosity and demanding recognition of its evolving fiscal challenges. As MPP Joe Dickson, Liberal, expressed, "We are proud to have

helped other provinces. But let us be clear: Equality must be a two-way street. I know that when our province built Highway 16 to Ottawa, we built it both ways” (06-03-2014). This metaphor of infrastructure as symbolic of mutual responsibility underscored a growing sentiment in Ontario that the province's historical role as a contributor warranted not only financial recognition, but a more balanced approach to federal-provincial relations in times of need.

4.3.2 *Key political actors analyzed using CDA*

Former Leader of the Opposition, Tim Hudak

Tim Hudak, the former Leader of the Opposition and a prominent member of the PC party, emerged as the most vocal critic of equalization throughout the period covered in this study. Hudak’s rhetoric consistently framed Ontario’s status as a recipient province as both a fiscal and symbolic decline, placing the blame squarely on the McGuinty government’s economic management. One of his most comprehensive statements came on November 3, 2010, where he articulated the cumulative themes of provincial decline, fiscal irresponsibility, and loss of status:

“Let me put this into perspective, Minister: **Never in the history of our great country has Ontario** been on the receiving end of equalization payments. Premier McGuinty’s policies, his failed economic policies, have put us on the welfare rolls of Confederation, and now our welfare cheque has tripled under your watch. But you continue with your reckless spending, your failed McGuinty economic policies, and you’re digging Ontario families deeper and deeper into debt and chasing jobs out of our province. **The reality is, our welfare payments from the federal government have tripled.**”

This narrative of reversal was also echoed earlier, when Hudak lamented Ontario’s new dependency status in relation to Newfoundland, a provincial comparison:

“November 2008 was the month that Newfoundland pushed itself into have status while Ontario, for the first time in Confederation, became a have-not province with its hand out to the federal government for equalization payments. **Where once Ontario was proud to lend a hand to our friends on the east coast**, today **Newfoundland is actually financing and supporting spending** in the province of Ontario.” (29-03-2010).

Hudak repeatedly tied Ontario's economic decline to Liberal governance, arguing as early as March 19th, 2008, that "... when the McGuinty government took office, our per capita GDP was about \$400 above the equalization bar, and now it is barely treading water above that bar." illustrating Hudak's involvement in the themes of identity crisis, fiscal mismanagement, and political accountability.

Former Minister of Children, Community, and Social Services of Ontario, Lisa MacLeod

Lisa MacLeod, former Minister of Children, Community, and Social Services when the PC was in office, persistently voiced concerns to the economic decline and Liberal mismanagement as it ties to equalization. MacLeod's rhetoric repeatedly returned to the theme of lost provincial status, often framed through emotionally charged language such as "welfare cheques" and "have-not payments." On April 6, 2009, she plainly stated: "It was just five days ago when this province, for the first time since Confederation, started accepting equalization payments from the federal government." Earlier that year, she lamented:

"...I don't need to remind them that **their economic track record** has taken this province from being the **first in economic growth to the worst** in Canada, and thanks to them, we're now accepting have-not equalization payments" (02-03-2009).

MacLeod's framing turned fiscal dependency into a narrative of humiliation and structural decline: "During that period of time, they've also doubled the debt of this province, and they have tripled our reliance on welfare cheques from the federal government through equalization" (31-03-2010). This association between equalization and shame continued into 2011, as she argued:

"We see that the proof is in the pudding. This is a government that has lost 300,000 well-paying manufacturing jobs. This is a government that has forced Ontario families to **take subsidized payments from the federal government** through the equalization program. **This is a government that has staggered the economic growth of what used to be the economic generator in this nation—from first to worst.** This is a government that has doubled the debt. This is a government that has the largest deficit in Ontario's history. This is a government that won't take responsibility for one of its actions." (16-05-2011)

Together, these statements are used to critique Liberal governance and to signal a loss of identity for what was once considered the country's economic engine. Across the dataset, MacLeod is most strongly associated with the themes of political accountability, identity crisis, and fiscal mismanagement, similar to her counterpart, Tim Hudak.

Former Premier, Dalton McGuinty

Opposite to the two previous key political actors, Dalton McGuinty, who served as Premier of Ontario from 2003 to 2013, approached the issue of equalization with a distinct rhetorical strategy centered on fairness, federation loyalty, and fiscal autonomy. McGuinty framed Ontario's contributions and subsequent receipt of equalization as a form of fiscal self-support. He frequently emphasized that although Ontario was technically a recipient, its residents continued to contribute more to federal revenues than they received, thereby casting the province not as dependent but as self-sufficient within a flawed system:

“In 2005, ‘Ontario residents contributed a hefty \$21 billion more to federal coffers than what was returned to the province in federal spending.’ ... ‘In actuality then, Ontario residents will, in effect, **be paying the equalization tab with their own money.**’ So if there was anybody to be rescued, we would rescue ourselves.” (30-04-2008)

McGuinty's rhetorical framing sought to neutralize the stigma of "have-not" status by reframing it as internal redistribution. This position was also reflected in his opposition to expanding the equalization envelope, which were the premise of the main reforms that took place in 2006 and 2009, stating “I think it would be inappropriate and unfair to Ontarians to contribute to a further enhanced equalization program.” (10-05-2006) Even when supporting reforms, he emphasized parity rather than preferential treatment, describing the 2007 adjustment as “only fair” because it ensured no recipient province would surpass Ontario in fiscal capacity (20-03-2007).

McGuinty's commentary consistently aligns with the theme of fighting for fairness, emphasizing Ontario's continued contribution to the federation despite qualifying for aid, rather than identity crisis, situating their identity as net contributors.

5.0 Discussion

While the principle of equalization is designed to foster national unity, the discourse analyzed in this study reveals that the program is more often framed as a source of division or discontent, and particularly unfair. Consistent with the work of Béland and Lecours (2011), the findings suggest that equalization is deeply embedded in broader political and identity-based discourse, serving as not just a wealth-redistributive tool, but also a symbolic vessel for regional identity construction and political narrative framing. The themes analyzed in this study show that across Alberta, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Ontario, political actors routinely invoke equalization to signal exclusion, pride, victimhood, or economic decline. These narratives are not merely reactive but are often rooted in deeper provincial histories and economic trajectories. Grievances are ultimately tied to notions of fairness, allegations of federal favouritism, and calls for political accountability, particularly in relation to perceived financial mismanagement or inadequate provincial advocacy.

Although common themes such as fairness, federal tensions, and political accountability emerged across all three provinces, their expression was far from uniform. In Alberta, the discourse is distinctly characterized by a persistent sense of grievance and external antagonism, particularly directed toward Québec and the federal government. Themes of resentment, perceived unfairness, and federal overreach appear to function rhetorically as instruments to recalibrate what is viewed as an uneven national balance of power, one that tilts toward central Canada, not necessarily because of fiscal contribution, but due to demographic weight. While Alberta's economic output is substantial, political influence remains largely tied to population. With nearly 60% of Canada's population residing in Ontario and Québec (Statistics Canada,

2022), central Canada exerts significant sway under constitutional mechanisms, such as the “7/50 rule”, and electoral power. This reality complicates any prospect of amending or removing the equalization principle, despite long-standing discontent in provinces like Alberta. In this context, Premier Jason Kenney’s 2021 equalization referendum should not be interpreted as simply “promise made, promise kept”, but as a symbolic negotiation tactic, an attempt to amplify provincial discontent and reassert Alberta’s voice within a federation perceived to be structurally imbalanced. Although long-standing criticisms of the referendum are valuable and support a healthy balance of dialogue, when conventional constitutional channels are inaccessible, the resort to political symbolism, including calls for greater autonomy or even sovereignty, becomes a strategic expression of frustration.

In a comparable sphere of outward blame, Newfoundland and Labrador diverges from Alberta in both tone and trajectory. The dominant rhetoric in the province oscillates between pride in its brief period of fiscal independence and a deep sense of betrayal, particularly in response to the Harper-era revisions to the equalization program. Here, equalization is framed simultaneously as a symbol of past progress and a source of present injustice, capturing a broader narrative of federal promises unfulfilled and the precarity of a resource-dependent economy. Notably, the initial pride in achieving “have” status in 2008 proved short-lived. Within just over a decade, the province initiated legal action challenging the formula’s fairness, particularly its treatment of non-renewable resource revenues. Additionally, the province’s discourse frequently emphasizes its unique geographic and demographic challenges, namely its rural, dispersed population, and declining population, which complicate the provision of services and render the current equalization formula particularly inadequate. This shift shows just how quickly celebratory narratives can give way to renewed resentment when economic gains are not sustained or equitably recognized.

In contrast to both Alberta and Newfoundland and Labrador, Ontario exhibits a fundamentally different rhetorical orientation. The province's political discourse around equalization has been comparatively less confrontational and more introspective, focusing primarily on internal political accountability rather than federal antagonism. Aside from former Premier Dalton McGuinty's vocal critique of expanding the equalization envelope and his appeals for fairness, Ontario's debates have largely centred on the province's fall from economic preeminence. Liberal actors, such as McGuinty, framed Ontario's status as a recipient not as dependency, but as a case of "paying itself" due to continued net contributions to the federation. Conversely, PC politicians frequently attributed Ontario's decline to domestic policy failures, using equalization as a symbolic indicator of broader mismanagement. Unlike the externally focused grievances in Alberta and Newfoundland, Ontario's discourse rarely targets the federal government or other provinces. Instead, equalization is employed as a rhetorical device to show economic deterioration, governance failure, and a crisis of provincial identity. This may help explain why McGuinty's appeals for fairness and resistance to equalization expansion were met with disproportionate criticism; Ontario's "Canada-first" orientation meant that any assertion of provincial interest over federal consensus was perceived as both paradoxical and politically provocative. This internal focus has also prompted commentary from other provinces, which have often cited Ontario's transformation into a "have-not" province as evidence of poor leadership, further amplifying the theme of lost prestige within the federation.

All three provinces, however, displayed a healthy degree of political accountability, an essential mechanism to any well-oiled democratic institution. Political parties across the spectrum were subject to criticism, though some voices were more prominent than others. However, there remains a persistent lack of clarity around how equalization actually works. Across all three provinces, political actors frequently referred to the program but often framed

it inaccurately, either by simplifying or misrepresenting its technical mechanisms. This lack of clarity has contributed to public misunderstanding and created space for misinformation, particularly in relation to regional grievances. This issue is compounded by limited federal engagement. Both Liberal and Conservative federal governments have done little to explain or communicate the program's function to the public. In a decentralized federation like Canada, where provinces hold significant autonomy, this lack of federal transparency makes equalization more vulnerable to political framing. As a result, actors from across the political spectrum have portrayed equalization as a symbol of economic unfairness, political betrayal, or regional disadvantage. While these framings may reflect real concerns, they often obscure the program's core objective: to ensure all Canadians, regardless of where they are located in the Confederation, have access to reasonably comparable public services.

5.1 Recommendation

The lack of clarity surrounding equalization has tangible consequences. It contributes to public mistrust, fuels interprovincial resentment, and undermines the legitimacy of one of Canadian federalism's core principles. The tendency to reduce complex fiscal arrangements to simplistic political messaging also limits the potential for constructive reform. For Canadians to engage in an informed discussion about the future of equalization, there must be a deliberate effort to depoliticize the program through greater transparency. Without such efforts, the federal government's ongoing silence will continue to leave room for provincial grievances and opportunistic reframing.

The most pressing reform for Canada's equalization program is not necessarily structural, but rather communicative. This research demonstrates that across Alberta, Ontario, and Newfoundland and Labrador, a lack of transparency, both in the program's design and in how it is communicated, has created conditions for confusion, mistrust, and politicization. Political actors frequently rely on narratives that exploit the complexity of the formula, framing

equalization as a source of regional unfairness rather than a constitutional tool for promoting interprovincial equity. While existing literature often recommends establishing an independent, arms-length agency to administer equalization, this study suggests that such a reform may not fully address the broader issue of political buy-in. Provinces have, at times, called for the complete elimination of the program, regardless of how or by whom it is administered. A more pragmatic institutional response would be for fruitful dialogue between the Federal and Provincial governments, and expansion of the knowledge base of the public. In an era of severe misinformation, knowledge and education of the public to make informed decisions is the only way. No longer relying on the “8” experts of the niche field of equalization to explain its mechanisms, but rather a working knowledge so no one is left assuming truth where there not need to be.

6.0 Conclusion

In a country as vast and diverse as Canada, national unity is often less about shared identity and more about shared fairness. Few policies test that principle more than equalization. It becomes ironic, then, that a program intended to promote fairness and solidarity has come to symbolize inequity and alienation. Through thematic and discourse analysis, this study set out to understand why equalization has been framed as such across Western, Central, and Eastern Canada. By examining how equalization has been framed and politicized in Newfoundland and Labrador, Alberta, and Ontario from 2006 to 2024, it becomes evident that equalization operates not only as a fiscal transfer mechanism but as a powerful symbol in Canada’s federal landscape, one that is deeply intertwined with regional identities, partisan narratives, and evolving economic conditions. While the technical function of equalization is to ensure comparable levels of public service across provinces at reasonably similar levels of taxation, its rhetorical function has diverged significantly across regions. In Alberta, it has come to embody alienation and perceived injustice. In Newfoundland and Labrador, it evokes both pride and betrayal. In

Ontario, it signals a fall from economic dominance and is used to assign political blame. These narratives illustrate a widening gap between equalization's intended purpose and how it is understood, and contested.

In a decentralized federation marked by economic disparity and political asymmetry, this gap has allowed equalization to be reframed as a symbol of injustice rather than a principle for national cohesion in Canada. Importantly, the research suggests that the core tensions surrounding equalization stem less from the formula itself and more from how it is communicated, or left uncommunicated, by governments. A lack of transparency and public engagement has left the program vulnerable to politicization, misinformation, and declining legitimacy. If equalization is to remain a viable and unifying pillar of Canadian federalism, reform must begin with clarity. Transparency about how the program works, why changes occur, and how commitments are maintained is essential. While political rhetoric will always influence public opinion, the federal government must take greater responsibility in limiting the space where misrepresentation thrives. A well-informed public is not merely a democratic ideal, it is a prerequisite for solidarity in a federation as decentralized, diverse, and interdependent as Canada.

In the end, the question is not simply whether equalization offers a fair share or a free ride, but whether Canadians can recognize the difference when they are not given the tools to understand it.

7.0 Reference List

- Béland, D. (2010). Federalism and fiscal policy: The politics of equalization in Canada. In *Publius: The Journal of Federalism*, 40(4), 569–596.
- Béland, D., & Lecours, A. (2014). Accommodation and the politics of fiscal equalization in multinational states: The case of Canada. *Nations and Nationalism*, 20(2), 337–354.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12049>
- Béland, D., Lecours, A., Marchildon, G. P., Mou, H., & Olfert, M. R. (2017). Fiscal federalism and equalization policy in Canada. *University of Toronto Press*.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423917001494>
- Béland, D., Lecours, A., & Tombe, T. (2022). The federal equalization program as a controversial and contested policy success. In *Policy Success in Canada*.
- Boadway, R., & Watts, R. L. (2004). Fiscal federalism in Canada, the USA, and Germany. *Queen's University: Institute of Intergovernmental Relations*.
- Brown, D. M. (1996). Equalization on the basis of need in Canada. *Institute of Intergovernmental Relations, Queen's University*.
- Cameron, D., & Simeon, R. (2002). Intergovernmental relations in Canada: The emergence of collaborative federalism. *Publius: The Journal of Federalism*, 32(2), 49–72.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3330945>
- Campbell, M. (2017, May 17). Equalization: The 800-Pound Gorilla in This Election. *Cape Breton Spectator*. <https://capebretonspectator.com/2017/05/17/equalization-cbrm-%20election-issue/>
- Chat News Today. (2025, April 3). Ex-MLA urges Premier Smith to lower referendum threshold. chatnewstoday.ca/2025/04/03/ex-mla-urges-premier-smith-to-lower-referendum-threshold/

CBC News. (2007, April 13). \$11-billion rift found on equalization: Economist. *CBC News*.

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/11-billion-rift-found-on-equalization-economist-1.636795>

Courchene, T. J. (1984). *Equalization Payments: Past, Present and Future*.

<https://archive.org/details/equalizationpaym00cour/page/4/mode/2up>

Courchene, T. J. (2005, August). Resource Revenues and Equalization: Five-Province Standard, National Standards, and Revenue-Sharing. *Institute of Intergovernmental Relations*.

Courchene, T. J. (2008). Equalization and the Canadian federation: fiscal origins and outcomes. *IRPP Working Paper*.

Dahlby, B. (2014). Reforming equalization: Balancing efficiency, entitlement and ownership (SPP Research Paper No. 7(22)). *The School of Public Policy, University of Calgary*.

<https://www.policyschool.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/dahlby-equalization.pdf>

Dawson, T. (2021, October 20). Majority of Canadians believe equalization is unfair to Alberta: poll. *National Post*.

Dawson, T. (2021, November 10). For the first time in more than 50 years, Alberta received more money from Ottawa than it sent. *National Post*.

Department of Finance Canada. (2023). Federal Transfers. *Government of Canada*. Retrieved from <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-finance/programs/federal-transfers.html>

Dayal, P. (2024, June 1). Sask. to join Newfoundland and Labrador in court challenge over equalization formula. *CBC News*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatoon/sask-newfoundland-labrador-equalization-court-challenge-1.7222055>

DeRosa, K. (2024, June 13). B.C. may join N.L. in challenging feds over equalization payments. *CBC News*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/bc-newfoundland-labrador-court-challenge-equalization-1.7234487>

- Drummond, D. (2012, February 15). Public services for Ontarians: a path to sustainability and excellence. *Ontario Public School Boards' Association*. <https://www.opsba.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/drummondReportFeb1512.pdf>
- Eccleston, R., & Woolley, T. (2014). From Calgary to Canberra: resource taxation and fiscal federalism in Canada and Australia.
- Eisen, B., & Milke, M. (2010, May 1). The real have-nots in confederation: British Columbia, Alberta, and Ontario. *Policy Options*. <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/the-fault-lines-of-federalism/the-real-have-nots-in-confederation-british-columbia-alberta-and-ontario/>
- Elections Alberta. (2021). Official Referendum Results – Equalization Question. officialresults.elections.ab.ca/orResultsReferendum2021.cfm?EventId=68RQ1&QUESTIONNO=1
- Environics Institute. (2022). Canadian opinions on taxation and government spending. https://www.environicsinstitute.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/cot-report-1_equalization_april-4f.pdf?sfvrsn=a8417201_0
- Fairness Alberta. (n.d.). Equalization. <https://fairnessalberta.ca/equalization/>
- Feehan, J. (2014, September). Canada's Equalization Formula: Peering inside the black box and beyond.
- Feehan, J. P. (2020, January). Canada's equalization program: Political debates and opportunities for reform. *Institute for Research on Public Policy*. <https://irpp.org/research-studies/canadas-equalization-program-political-debates-and-opportunities-for-reform/>
- Fraser Institute. (2023). Ontario's have-not status sets divided Canada. Retrieved from <https://www.fraserinstitute.org/commentary/ontarios-have-not-status-sets-divided-canada>

- Goldberg, J., & Speer, S. (2020, November 12). Reforming Canadian fiscal federalism: The case for intergovernmental disentanglement. *Ontario 360*. <https://on360.ca/policy-papers/fiscal-federalism/>
- Government of Canada. (2018). Budget Implementation Act, 2018, No. 1. https://laws.justice.gc.ca/eng/AnnualStatutes/2018_12/page-26.html
- Harrison, T. (2021). Alberta's 2021 referendum on equalization: context and consequences.
- House of Commons. (2018). Budget Implementation Act (Bill C-74, 2018).
- Janigan, M. L. (2017). The art of sharing: the richer versus the poorer provinces since confederation. *York University*.
- Janigan, M. (2023). The art of sharing. *Witness to Yesterday*, Episode 120: The History of Equalization in Canada, hosted by G. Marchildon. *The Champlain Society*.
- Jha, P.C. (2017). Equalization transfers in Canada: emerging challenges. *University Library of Munich, Germany*. [mpira.ub.uni-muenchen.de/82506/1/MPRA_paper_82506.pdf](https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/82506/1/MPRA_paper_82506.pdf)
- Kelso, D. (2022, July 27). Alberta retains the Canadian income crown (with a jewel or two removed). *Business Council of Alberta*.
- Kernaghan, K., & Siegel, D. (Eds.). (2021). *The Rowell-Sirois Commission and the Remaking of Canadian Federalism*. University of Toronto Press.
- Krelove, R. (1997). Canada. In T. Ter-Minassian (Ed.), *Fiscal federalism in theory and practice* (pp. 189–218). *International Monetary Fund*.
- Lajoie, A. (2007). *Constitutional Law and Canadian Federalism*. *University of Toronto Press*.
- Lecours, A., & Béland, D. (2013). The institutional politics of territorial redistribution: federalism and equalization policy in Australia and Canada. *Canadian Journal of Political Science*.
- Lévesque, L. (2024, November 7). Not all quiet on the equalization front in Canada. *Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy*.

<https://www.schoolofpublicpolicy.sk.ca/research-ideas/publications-and-policy-insight/policy-brief/policy-paper-equalisation-canada.php>

Library of the Parliament. (2024). Canada's equalization formula. *Parliamentary Information and Research Service*.

https://bdp.parl.ca/sites/PublicWebsite/default/en_CA/ResearchPublications/200820E

Lindquist, E. A., et al. (2022). Policy success in Canada: exploring Canadian experiences with policy success. *Oxford University Press*.

Locke, W., & Hobson, P. (2004). An examination of the interaction between natural resource revenues and equalization payments: Lessons for Atlantic Canada (IRPP Working Paper No. 2004-10). *Institute for Research on Public Policy*. <https://irpp.org/research-studies/working-paper-no2004-10/>

Mackenzie, H. (2006). The Art of the Impossible: Fiscal Federalism and Equalization in Canada. *Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives*.

MacNevin, A. S. (2004). The Canadian federal-provincial equalization regime: An assessment. *Canadian Tax Foundation*.

Milnes, A. (2016, December 13). Sixty years later, Diefenbaker has lessons for both Tories and Grits. *Ottawa Citizen*.

Mintz, J. M. (2021, October 15). Albertans should vote 'yes'. *Financial Post*.

<https://financialpost.com/opinion/jack-mintz-albertans-should-vote-yes>

Payne, L. (2008). The Harper record: the \$10 billion broken promise. *Canadian centre for policy alternatives*. https://www.policyalternatives.ca/wp-content/uploads/attachments/Newfoundland_and_Labrador_and_the_Harper_Government.pdf

Perry, D. B. (1997). Financing the Canadian federation 1867 to 1995: setting the stage for change. *Canadian Tax Foundation*.

- Roberts, T., & Cowan, P. (2024, January 22). With N.L. on the financial brink, Crosbie targets Ottawa with promise to 'fight for fairness'. *CBC News*.
- Roberts, D., & Cowan, P. (2024). *Equalization Formula Court Challenge*. *CBC News*. Retrieved from
- Robson, W. B. P., Drummond, D., & Laurin, A. (2025, March 18). Putting Canada's economy first: The C.D. Howe Institute's 2025 Shadow Budget (Commentary No. 679). *C.D. Howe Institute*.
- Simeon, R. (1972). *Federal-provincial diplomacy: the making of recent policy in Canada*. *University of Toronto Press*.
- Smiley, D. V. (Ed.). (1963). *The Rowell-Sirois report: an abridgement of book I of the royal commission report on dominion-provincial relations (Carleton Library Series)*. *McGill-Queen's University Press*.
- Smith, D. E. (2010). *Federalism and the constitution of Canada*. *University of Toronto Press*.
- Statistics Canada. (2024, May 14). GDP and Gross Domestic Product. Retrieved from <https://www160.statcan.gc.ca/prosperity-prosperite/gdp-pib-eng.htm>
- Statistics Canada. (2025, March 19). *Canada's population estimates, fourth quarter 2024*. The Daily. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/250319/dq250319a-eng.htm>
- Stevenson, G. (2007). Fiscal federalism and the burden of history. In R. Young & C. Leuprecht (Eds.), *Canada: The state of the federation 2006/07: transitions: fiscal and political federalism in an era of change* (pp. 27–52). *McGill-Queen's University Press*.
- TD Economics. (2008, April 29). Ontario headed for equalization-receiving status. *TD Bank Financial Group*. www.td.com/document/PDF/economics/special/td-economics-special-db0408-equal

- Théret, B. (2002). Canada's equalization formula: A political economy perspective. In H. Lazar (Ed.), *Canada: The State of the Federation 2001: Canadian Political Culture(s) in Transition* (pp. 77–106). *McGill-Queen's University Press*.
- Tombe, T. (2017, October 21). Don't blame equalization for Alberta's fiscal mess. *The Globe and Mail*.
- Tombe, T. (2021, February 23). A new tool to understand equalization payments in Canada. *Finances of the Nation*.
- Tombe, T., & Winter, J. (2021). Fiscal integration with internal trade: Quantifying the effects of federal transfers in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Economics*, 54(2), 337-354.
- Wardhaugh, R., & Ferguson, B. (2021). *The Rowell-Sirois Commission and the remaking of Canadian federalism*. *UBC Press*.