

VALIDATION OF TIME-OF-VOTING- DECISION RECALL

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In recent elections, a substantial number of individuals typically report having decided how to vote during the campaign itself. In Great Britain, approximately a quarter of voters say they made their final choice during the campaign (Norris et al. 1999).¹ In most American presidential elections, about a third of respondents indicate they decided after the conventions, during the weeks leading up to the election (Flanigan and Zingale 1994).² In Canadian federal elections, over half of the respondents say they made up their minds during the campaign. There is also evidence that the proportion of people who say they decided during the campaign has been increasing over the past few years (Archer and Kanji 1998; Flanigan and Zingale 1994, table 7-3; Norris et al. 1999). Can we believe these figures on time of decision?

Two studies have found respondents' reported time-of-voting decision to be unreliable (Chaffee and Rimal 1996; Plumb 1986). They show that answers to the recall question do not closely match the pattern of vote intentions revealed by panel interviews. These previous validation attempts examined American data. This study adds to the body of evidence by presenting data

1. The British question about time-of-voting decision probably discourages the expression of late decisions by proposing the following list of answers: a long time ago, sometime last year, sometime this year, or during the campaign.

2. The proportion of campaign deciders is higher when a third candidate enters the race. In 1992, e.g., 45 percent say they decided after the conventions (Flanigan and Zingale 1994).

from Canada. In this analysis, recall of the time-of-voting decision turns out to be highly reliable.

The Context

The quality of information provided by individuals in response to recall questions can be influenced by several factors, notably, the complexity of the question, the deficiencies of memory, and the inclination to give socially acceptable answers. If people do not understand what they are being asked about, if they are asked to recall a piece of information that they consider trivial or that concerns something that happened a long time before the interview, or if they believe that they will be more favorably perceived if they respond in a certain way (tolerantly, altruistically, democratically, responsibly, or consistently), then they are more likely to provide inaccurate answers.

We should, thus, expect a substantial amount of inaccurate recall of political attitudes that the respondent held 9 years before the interview (Markus 1986); of socially desirable behaviors like voter registration, participation, and turnout (Anderson and Silver 1986; Pierce and Lovrich 1982; Silver, Abramson, and Anderson 1986; Silver, Anderson, and Abramson 1986; Traugott and Katosh 1979; Volgy and Schwarz 1984); and of past vote choices where the desire to appear consistent with current voting preferences favors misreporting (Himmelweit, Biberian, and Stockdale 1978; Weir 1975).

Intuitively, we would expect time-of-voting-decision recall to be relatively reliable. The social pressures to answer a particular way would seem to be weak. Some individuals may be inclined to inflate their decisiveness by indicating that they made their vote decision very early, but the desire to appear to have made a careful and thoughtful decision pushes in the opposite direction. The question could, nevertheless, be problematic for respondents who view the time-of-voting decision as a trivial matter.

Empirically, the reported time-of-voting decision appears to be plagued by a substantial quantity of misreporting (Chaffee and Rimal 1996; Plumb 1986). Plumb (1986) uses the panel design of the 1980 American National Election Study to examine whether the reported time of decision corresponds with the pattern of vote choice across panel waves. Plumb compares the reported time of decision with the moment when a respondent's vote intention starts exhibiting consistency over time. Few respondents begin to show consistent vote intentions exactly at their reported time of decision. Only 40 percent of respondents are classified similarly by responses to the recall question and by the behavioral indicator. Using the same technique with 1992 California data, Chaffee and Rimal (1996) report a similarly low concordance rate of 58 percent.

This study evaluates whether American findings are generalizable by as-

sessing the validity of time-of-voting-decision recall within the context of Canadian parliamentary elections.

The Analysis

This study draws on data that allow for a precise test of the validity of responses to time-of-voting-decision recall. The 1997 Canadian Election Study (CES) contains a rolling cross-sectional component and a panel component.³ A representative sample of 80–140 respondents was interviewed each day of the 36-day campaign to track the dynamics of vote intentions. Respondents from the campaign wave were reinterviewed after the election.⁴ By combining these two components, we can identify who is deciding when, and also whether behavior coincides with reported time of decision.

A time-of-voting-decision question was included in the postelection wave. The exact wording of the question was: “When did you decide that you were going to vote X (e.g., Liberal, Conservative, NDP, Reform, Bloc Québécois, or other)?” A split-sample experiment was applied to the question’s response alternatives to verify that responses were not influenced by the proposed list of answers. For half the respondents, the question was open-ended, giving respondents the opportunity to answer in their own words. For the other half of the sample, respondents were offered a list of possible answers: “Was it before the campaign began, before the T.V. debates, during or just after the debates, in the last two weeks of the campaign, or election day?” Answers to the open-ended question were recoded to match the categories of the close-ended question.⁵ The distributions of responses are presented in table 1. The close- and open-ended questions exhibit very similar distributions. About half the respondents claim to have made up their mind prior to the beginning of the official campaign, but more than 40 percent of respondents claim to have decided during the last 3 weeks of the campaign, between the leaders’ debates and election day.⁶ The distributions of the two question formats only differ

3. The 1997 Canadian Election Study was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The survey was conducted by the Institute for Social Research at York University. Copies of the questionnaires, technical documentation, and data can be obtained at www.isr.yorku.ca/ISR and through the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR).

4. A total of 3,949 eligible voters were interviewed during the campaign, and 3,170 of them were reinterviewed in the postelection survey. The response rate for the campaign survey was 59 percent. The average daily sample is about 110 respondents. The average daily sampling error is about 11 percentage points.

5. The following are the open-ended answer categories and the close-ended categories to which they were matched: “never had to make up mind,” “years ago,” “year prior to the call of the election,” and “when the election was called” matched with “before campaign”; “before May 12/13th” matched with “before debates”; “time of debates” matched with “during/after debates”; “after May 12/13th” and “last/second to last day” matched with “last 2 weeks”; and “election day” matched with “election day.”

6. The 1988 and 1993 Canadian Election Studies also produce similar distributions.

Table 1. Distribution of Reported Time-of-Decision Variables (Percentage)

	Open-Ended Question	Close-Ended Question	Combination of the Two
Before campaign	49.0	49.9	49.5
Before debates	8.0	7.2	7.6
Around debates	3.2	10.0	7.0
Two last weeks	24.2	20.0	21.9
Election day	15.6	12.9	14.1

in the proportion of individuals who say they decided around the time of the debates. When they are not explicitly mentioned (i.e., in the open-ended question), the debates are cited by fewer people. Apart from this, there is no indication that responses to the close-ended question were affected by the proposed answer alternatives.

The central research question here is: Were people able to identify with relative accuracy when they made up their minds? Table 2 reports the stability of vote choice between the pre- and the postelection waves according to reported time-of-voting decision (see the appendix for details on the construction of the variables and the survey questions from which they are drawn). Individuals are categorized as stable if they report having voted for the party they were intending to support in the campaign survey.⁷ Individuals are categorized as unstable if they report having voted for a party other than the one indicated by their campaign vote intention, or if they were undecided during the campaign and report that they voted in the postelection interview.⁸ Since the preelection interview occurred anywhere from 36 days to 1 day prior to election day, respondents could report having decided before or after their preelection interview. To accurately capture the differences in stability between groups, we split respondents for each time-of-decision period according to the moment of the preelection interview, that is, by whether respondents were interviewed before, during, or after their reported time of decision.⁹ If responses to the time-of-voting-decision question are reasonably accurate, then we should expect to find instability in vote choice before the reported time of decision and stability afterward.

The results for both close- and open-ended questions display an impressive degree of consistency (see table 2). There is evidence of great stability (84 percent) among individuals who claim to have decided before the campaign.

7. Refusals and abstainers are excluded from the analysis.

8. Vote changers form slightly more than 25 percent of unstable respondents.

9. Notice that some categories are missing. For instance, all those who say they decided before the campaign began were interviewed after the reported time of decision.

Table 2. Percentage of Stable Vote Choice According to Reported Time of Decision and Time of Interview

Time of Interview	Reported Time of Decision					Total
	Before Campaign	Before Debates	Around Debates	Election – 2 weeks	Election Day	
Close-ended question:						
Before time of decision	...	...	39.0	26.3	21.1	25.6
During time of decision	...	59.3	48.1	44.1	...	47.4
After time of decision	83.8	74.5	73.5	...	...	82.5
Open-ended question:						
Before time of decision	...	...	42.9	22.9	28.2	25.9
During time of decision	...	61.8	54.5	36.4	...	45.1
After time of decision	83.2	81.1	91.7	...	...	83.2
Two questions combined:						
Before time of decision	...	...	37.5	24.4	24.5	25.5
During time of decision	...	61.3	50.0	40.8	...	46.6
After time of decision	83.5	77.4	78.3	...	...	82.8

But similarly stable vote choices are also evident among all groups interviewed after their reported time of decision (total stability of 83 percent). By contrast, there is little stability (26 percent) among respondents who say they decided after their preelection interview. Furthermore, as one would expect, we find moderate levels of stability during the transitional periods when people are making up their mind. This is attributable to the fact that the “during time of decision” group contains both individuals who have already decided and others who have not yet decided.

To put a summary statistic on these findings, we can estimate the proportion of respondents whose behavior and reported time of decision coincide. All in all, the behavioral pattern of some 80 percent of the respondents turns out to be consistent with their reported time of decision.¹⁰ Some people do respond

10. We exclude from this tabulation respondents who decided during the period of their campaign interview, because we cannot confidently ascertain whether or not their reported time of decision had occurred when they were interviewed.

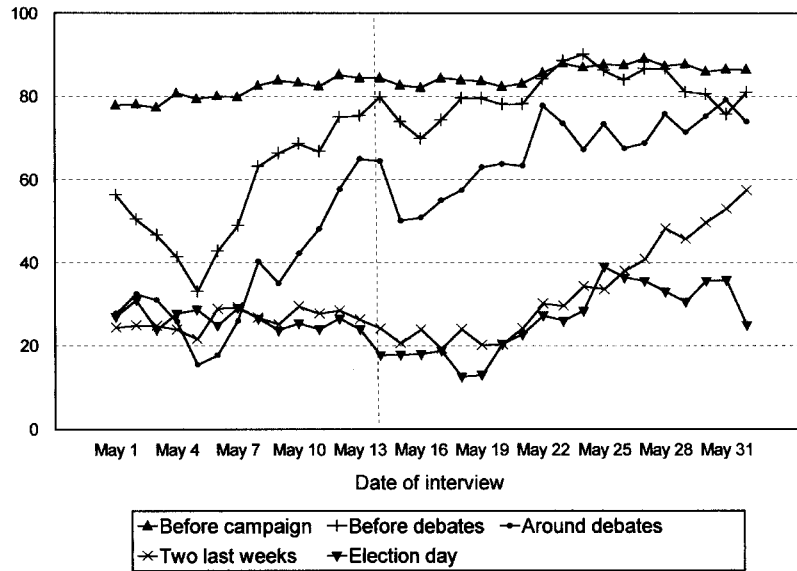
erroneously. But overall, the recall question seems to provide a good approximation of the time-of-voting decision. This estimate is much higher than the estimates provided by other validation studies that found concordance rates of only 40 percent (Plumb 1986) and 58 percent (Chaffee and Rimal 1996). It is important to underscore the fact that our level of concordance is derived from a strict coding scheme. We require respondents to have unstable vote intentions before their reported time of decision and to be stable thereafter. Predecision instability is a strict requirement, considering we ask respondents, in the preelection interview, who they “think” they will vote for. People who said they intended to vote for Party X before “decision time” and report having voted for that same party were classified as having an invalid reported time of decision, even though some of these individuals could have been leaning toward that choice but had not yet made their final decision.

The central conclusion to emerge from the data is that most people accurately recall their time of voting decision. The evidence indicates that most voters really do move from indecision to decision, and from one choice to their final decision, during the period that they report as their time of decision.¹¹ Figure 1 indicates how the level of stability of vote choice moves during the campaign among each group. The pattern is clear across all groups: low stability before the reported time of decision, steady rise in stability around the time of decision, and high stability afterward.¹²

Does this strong link between reported time of decision and stability of vote choice hold when we control for strength of partisan identification, political sophistication, and various sociodemographic characteristics? Table 3 reports the results of three logistic regressions of the stability of vote choice across the pre- and postelection waves. People who were interviewed later in the preelection wave, those who identify strongly with a party, those who pay greater attention to the media, and those who get their election information from family and friends all turn out to be more stable in their vote choice. Nevertheless, reported time of decision retains an independent and decisive effect. Individuals who say they decided late in the campaign are significantly less likely to reveal the same vote choice before and after the election (Model A). Those who claim to have decided around the time of the televised leaders’ debates, during the last 2 weeks of the campaign, and on election day are particularly prone to exhibit instability (Model B). The last specification (Model C) follows the logic of table 2. Again, we expect instability of vote choice before reported time of decision, and stability afterward. Model C

11. Because both question formats exhibit similar levels of validity, the following analyses use the combined scale of time of voting decision. The open-ended question appears to outperform the close-ended format in table 2 (e.g., compare “after time of decision” stability of “before debates” and “around debates” across both question formats). But the two formats perform similarly in separate multivariate estimations like those of table 3.

12. There is a slight drop in stability among the individuals who say they decided before the debates during the first few days of the campaign. This minor aberration is due to a small number of cases and the anchoring effect of moving averages.



Note: The combined scale is used for time of decision. The vertical dotted line indicates the time of the English leaders' debate, the French debate occurred the following day.

Figure 1. Percentage of stable vote choice according to reported time of decision and date of interview (7-day moving averages).

confirms that respondents who say they decided before their preelection interview display greater stability, while those who say they made their final decision after their preelection interview are substantially more likely to have changed their vote choice.¹³ Analyses of 1988 and 1993 Canadian Election Study data (not reported here) reveal a similar pattern of results.

Discussion

While our findings do not challenge those of American studies, the discrepancy between the American results and ours deserves an explanation.¹⁴ There are several potential explanations. On the one hand, there are those explanations that pertain to differences in political context. Canada is a parliamentary system in which the start of the campaign does not become public knowledge until the government decides to call an election and campaigns last less than

13. The reference group is made up of those who say they decided whom to vote for around the time they were interviewed.

14. The comments of three anonymous referees were essential to the development of this section.

Table 3. The Determinants of Stability of Vote Choice (Logistic Unstandardized Coefficients and Standard Errors) for Three Different Specifications

	Model A	Model B	Model C
Time of decision:			
Ordinal variable (0–1)	–2.90 (.18)***		
Four dichotomies:			
Before debates (0/1)		–.44 (.26)	
Around debates (0/1)		–1.39 (.26)***	
Last 2 weeks (0/1)		–2.24 (.16)***	
Election day (0/1)		–2.77 (.21)***	
Two dichotomies:			
After campaign interview (0/1)			–.89 (.20)***
Before campaign interview (0/1)			1.70 (.18)***
Day of campaign interview (1–36)	.03 (.01)***	.03 (.01)***	.01 (.01)
Strength of party identification (0–1)	1.55 (.21)***	1.56 (.21)***	1.57 (.21)***
Campaign political information (0–1)	.43 (.26)	.44 (.26)	.41 (.26)
General political information (0–1)	.46 (.28)	.46 (.28)	.42 (.28)
Interest in the election (0–1)	–.37 (.35)	–.37 (.35)	–.30 (.34)
Interest in politics (0–1)	–.08 (.36)	–.12 (.36)	–.12 (.36)
Media attention (0–1)	.86 (.37)*	.87 (.37)*	.80 (.37)*
Talked about election with relatives, friends, or other people (0–1)	–.05 (.28)	–.04 (.28)	–.03 (.28)
Most important source of election information:			
Family and friends (0/1)	.75 (.32)*	.78 (.32)*	.70 (.32)*
Radio (0/1)	.36 (.20)	.36 (.20)	.36 (.20)*
Newspapers (0/1)	–.19 (.17)	–.19 (.17)	–.18 (.17)
Age (18–101)	–.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)
Gender: Woman (0/1)	–.07 (.14)	–.08 (.14)	–.09 (.14)
Education (0–1)	.34 (.36)	.35 (.36)	.45 (.37)
Income (0–1)	.19 (.24)	.19 (.24)	.17 (.24)
Region:			
Atlantic (0/1)	–.16 (.26)	–.14 (.27)	–.22 (.27)
British Columbia (0/1)	.09 (.26)	.10 (.26)	.08 (.26)
Prairies (0/1)	.10 (.20)	.10 (.20)	.08 (.20)
Quebec (0/1)	.02 (.17)	.03 (.17)	–.01 (.18)
Constant	–.63 (.44)	–.68 (.44)	–1.88 (.47)

Table 3. (Continued)

	Model A	Model B	Model C
Percent predicted correctly	79.0	78.6	78.7
Chi-square (<i>df</i>)	545.2 (20)	547.4 (23)	547.4 (21)
Number of cases	1,475	1,475	1,475

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

2 months. In contrast, American presidential elections start rolling in the first months of the electoral year, remain intense through the primary season and the convention season, and stretch all the way to November. With such wide boundaries for the time of decision making, the American case amplifies the likelihood of impaired memory affecting recall. The shorter electoral time frame in parliamentary systems could explain the greater reliability of time-of-decision recall in Canada.

Furthermore, in parliamentary systems, citizens generally vote for a representative associated with a well-established party whose leader is known well in advance of the start of the campaign.¹⁵ For a substantial part of the American presidential campaign, there is uncertainty as to who the candidates will be. This may create a certain amount of confusion in respondents' minds about what the time-of-decision question is asking. If a respondent knew all along that he or she would vote for the Democratic candidate if the right one was nominated, did he or she decide after the convention, or did he or she know all along? Perhaps the question simply works better when it refers to a set of choices that are clear and fixed throughout the campaign, such as is the case in a parliamentary system.

On the other hand, methodological differences could account for the discrepancy between previous findings and our own. The studies of Chaffee and Rimal (1996) and Plumb (1986) contain more panel waves than does our analysis.¹⁶ The greater is the number of interviews, the greater consistency respondents have to demonstrate since they are required to exhibit instability of vote choice before their reported time of decision, and stability afterward. It should be noted, however, that the studies do not significantly differ in other

15. There are always exceptions. For instance, in 1997, Gilles Duceppe was chosen as leader of the Bloc Québécois just a few months prior to the election.

16. Plumb (1986) uses the four-wave panel of the 1980 American National Election Study (ANES), and Chaffee and Rimal (1996) use a four-wave panel of four California counties during the 1992 election year (but the validation analysis only relies on the last three waves). We use the panel component of the Canadian Election Study, which contains two waves. The time span between panel waves in the American studies is, on average, longer than the one between our two waves.

aspects: the questions and the set of proposed answers are similar, though not identical.¹⁷

While it is not possible to conclusively sort out these competing explanations here, an analysis of the postconvention period of two American presidential elections based on an approach similar to our own yields comparable results.¹⁸ Our findings suggest that the question is relevant in the context of a limited temporal horizon with clearly defined alternatives. Further research should be conducted on the validity of time-of-voting-decision recall in different countries with a common methodology.

Conclusions

Replication is an essential part of the scientific process. Verifying whether previous findings apply to different contexts, different time frames, or different methodologies can often yield surprises. Previous validation attempts had found time-of-voting-decision recall to be an unreliable indicator of the behavior of American voters. This study reveals that Canadians' answers to the time-of-decision question are consistent with the time when their vote choice became stable. During the span of a short campaign with clearly defined alternatives, most voters really do move from indecision to decision, and from one choice to their final decision, at the time when they say they made up their mind. Our results and their potential implications for the explanation of electoral campaigns and outcomes certainly warrant a close examination of the question in other settings.

Appendix

Description of Variables and 1997 Question Numbers

Stability of vote choice (0/1) [cpsa4, pesa4]:

0 = respondent moved from indecision to a choice or from one party to another between the two waves.

17. For instance, the 1980 ANES question used by Plumb (1986) asks: "When did respondent reach vote decision?" The proposed answers, like ours, mostly refer to time markers (e.g., "during the primaries," "after the conventions," "2 weeks before the election"), rather than to dates or time points (e.g., "6 months ago").

18. We replicate the analysis of table 2 with the two postconvention panel waves of the 1980 and 1996 ANES. All time-of-decision categories that precede Labor Day are collapsed into "before campaign." By concentrating on the last 2 months of the campaign, after the parties have nominated their candidates, we find an average concordance rate of 85 percent between reported time of decision and behavior. Stability of vote choice across the two panel waves averages 49 percent before time of decision, 80 percent during time of decision, and 94 percent after time of decision.

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1 = respondent specified same party choice in pre- and postelection interviews.
Abstentions, refusals, and nonvoters were excluded.

Reported time of decision, ordinal (0-1) [pesa4c, pesa4d]:

0 = decided before campaign, .25 = decided before the leaders' debates, .50 = decided during or after the debates, .75 = decided during the last 2 weeks of the campaign, 1 = decided on election day.

Reported time of decision, four dichotomies [pesa4c, pesa4d]:

Before debates (0/1), 1 = decided before the leaders' debates, 0 = decided at other time.

Around debates (0/1), 1 = decided during or after the debates, 0 = decided at other time.

Last 2 weeks (0/1), 1 = decided during the last 2 weeks of the campaign, 0 = decided at other time.

Election day (0/1), 1 = decided on election day, 0 = decided at other time.

Missing dummy: Before campaign (0/1), 1 = decided before campaign, 0 = decided at other time.

Reported time of decision, two dichotomies [pesa4c, pesa4d, cpsdate]:

After campaign interview (0/1), 1 = decided after time of preelection interview, 0 = decided at other time.

Before campaign interview (0/1), 1 = decided before time of preelection interview, 0 = decided at other time.

Missing dummy: During campaign interview (0/1), 1 = decided during time of preelection interview, 0 = decided at other time.

Day of interview (1-36) [cpsdate]:

1 = first day of campaign fieldwork, (...) 36 = last day of campaign fieldwork (day before election).

Strength of party identification (0-1) [cpsk1, cpsk2]:

0 = no identification, .33 = not very strong, .67 = fairly strong, 1 = very strong identification.

Campaign political information (0-1) [cpsf13, cpsf14, cpsf15]:

Knowledge of the source (political parties) of three main campaign promises (lower income taxes by 10 percent, cut unemployment in half by 2001, against distinct society status for Quebec), 0 = three incorrect or Don't Know responses, (...) 1 = three accurate answers.

General political information (0-1) [cpsl6, cpsl11, cpsl12, cpsl13]:

Knowledge of four political actors (current American president, current federal minister of finance, current provincial premier, and first woman Canadian prime minister), 0 = four incorrect or Don't Know responses, (...) 1 = four accurate answers.

Interest in election (0-1) [cpsb4]:

0 = no interest at all in this election, (...) 1 = a great deal of interest in this election.

Interest in politics (0–1) [cpsb5]:

0 = no interest at all in politics generally, (...) 1 = a great deal of interest in politics generally.

Media attention (0–1) [cpsb1, cpsb2, cpsb3]:

0 = no attention at all paid to election news on television, in newspapers, and on the radio, (...) 1 = a great deal of attention paid to election news on television, in newspapers, and on the radio.

Talked about election with relatives, friends, and other people (0–1) [cpsb8, cpsb8a]:

0 = did not talk at all about the election with relatives, friends, or other people, (...) 1 = often talked about the election with relatives, friends, and other people.

Most important source of election information, three dichotomies [cpsl4]:

Family and friends (0/1), 1 = family and friends were most important source of election information, 0 = other.

Radio (0/1), 1 = radio was most important source of election information, 0 = other.

Newspapers (0/1), 1 = newspapers were most important source of election information, 0 = other.

Missing dummy: Television (0/1), 1 = television was most important source of election information, 0 = other.

Age in years (18–101) [cpsage].

Gender, woman (0/1) [cpsrgen]:

0 = male, 1 = female.

Education, highest level completed (0–1) [cpsm3]:

0 = no schooling, .1 = some elementary, .2 = complete elementary, .3 = some secondary/high school, .4 = complete secondary/high school, .5 = some technical college, .6 = complete technical college, .7 = some university, .8 = B.A., .9 = M.A., 1 = Professional/Ph.D.

Income, total household (0–1) [cpsm16, cpsm16]:

0 = <\$20,000, .11 = \$20,000–\$29,999, .22 = \$30,000–\$39,999, .33 = \$40,000–\$49,999, .44 = \$50,000–\$59,999, .55 = \$60,000–\$69,999, .67 = \$70,000–\$79,999, .78 = \$80,000–\$89,999, .89 = \$90,000–\$99,999, 1 = >\$100,000.

Region, four dichotomies (province):

Atlantic (0/1), 1 = resident of Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, or New Brunswick, 0 = resident of other province.

British Columbia (0/1), 1 = resident of British Columbia, 0 = resident of other province.

Prairies (0/1), 1 = resident of Alberta, Saskatchewan, or Manitoba, 0 = resident of other province.

Quebec (0/1), 1 = resident of Quebec, 0 = resident of other province.

(Missing dummy: Ontario (0/1), 1 = resident of Ontario, 0 resident of other province.)

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