

# Whither Western Alienation? Shifting Patterns of Western Canadian Discontent with the Federal Government

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October 2010

## Contents

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- ▶ Key Findings
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Provincial Differences in Western Canadian Attitudes Toward the Federal Government
- ▶ Partisan Differences in Western Canadian Attitudes Toward the Federal Government
- ▶ The West in Context: National Attitudes Toward the Federal Government
- ▶ Conclusion

## THE WEST IN CANADA PROJECT

Canada is a wonderfully diverse country with its people spread across the second largest nation-state in the world. There are many things that tie us together as Canadians, but there is no doubt that each part of the country is unique and brings a different set of characteristics and perspectives to the national table. Understanding and integrating this diversity is a challenge as big as Canada itself.

Western Canada—British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba—forms one of many distinct regions within Canada. The West is no more homogenous than any other region or sub-region, but there is an abundance of features that tie the four western provinces together in special ways. Shedding light on this region, communicating its frustrations and aspirations to the national community, seeking ways to build on the common ground found in the West, weaving the region into the national whole, and highlighting public policy innovation in the West are the goals of the West in Canada Project. The project, like Canada West Foundation, is based on the idea that strong and prosperous regions make for a strong and prosperous Canada.

For more information about the West in Canada Project, please contact Robert Roach (roach@cwf.ca).

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- ▶ Key Findings
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Provincial Differences in Western Canadian Attitudes Toward the Federal Government
- ▶ Partisan Differences in Western Canadian Attitudes Toward the Federal Government
- ▶ The West in Context: National Attitudes Toward the Federal Government
- ▶ Conclusion

## INTRODUCTION

Discussions of western Canada often make reference to the sentiment of regional discontent with the federal government, more commonly referred to as “western alienation.” Surveys have found that many western Canadians feel that their provinces are treated poorly in the Canadian federal system. This regional sense of grievance reflects a larger historical sense of economic exploitation by central Canada, and a desire to increase the influence of the western provinces in national decision-making.

Western Canadian discontent shifts over time: in the 1970s and the early 1980s, regional discontent was high, fueled by policy disputes (notably with respect to energy policy) and limited western electoral representation

## KEY FINDINGS

- Regional discontent in western Canada (as measured by respondents’ perceptions of how their province is treated by the federal government) declined between 2004 and 2008.
- Declining levels of discontent with the federal government are particularly seen in BC and Alberta: in 2004, over half of Albertans and over six in ten British Columbians stated that their province is treated worse than other provinces; by 2008 less than one-quarter of Albertans and less than four in ten British Columbians stated this opinion.
- Among western Canadian supporters of the Conservative Party, discontent with the federal government fell by 37 percentage points between 2004 and 2008. This decline reconfigured the partisan nature of discontent in western Canada: by 2008, New Democratic Party supporters were the most likely to state discontent with the federal government, followed by Liberal Party supporters, while Conservative Party supporters were the most satisfied with their province’s treatment by the federal government.
- Although discontent with the federal government is declining in western Canada, it is rising in Ontario and holding steady in Atlantic Canada.. While western Canadians were the most likely to report discontent in 2004, by 2008 it was Atlantic Canadians who registered the highest levels of discontent.

- ▶ Key Findings
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Provincial Differences in Western Canadian Attitudes Toward the Federal Government
- ▶ Partisan Differences in Western Canadian Attitudes Toward the Federal Government
- ▶ The West in Context: National Attitudes Toward the Federal Government
- ▶ Conclusion

in the governing Liberal caucus. Regional discontent subsided in the mid-1980s when western Canada had strong electoral representation in the Mulroney Progressive Conservative government—only to re-emerge in the early 1990s.

What is the current state of regional discontent in western Canada? Is western discontent subsiding? The Canadian Election Studies of 2004, 2006 and 2008 allow some insight into how regional discontent may be changing in western Canada.<sup>1</sup> Conducted during and immediately after federal elections, the Canadian Election Studies often repeat survey questions to allow for the tracking of changes over time. One survey question repeated across the three election studies taps into feelings of discontent. Respondents were asked, “In general, does the federal government treat your province better, worse, or about the same as other provinces?”<sup>2</sup> Respondents who report that their province is treated worse than other provinces can be seen as expressing discontent with Canadian federalism. It should be noted that the question asks about how the federal government treats one’s *province*, and not how the larger western Canadian region is treated. It should also be noted that other possible dimensions of regional discontent, such as the perception that one’s province does not receive its fair share of federal revenue transfers, are outside the scope of this analysis.

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1 The fieldwork of the 2008 Canadian Election Surveys was conducted by the Institute for Social Research (ISR) at York University and the study was financed by Elections Canada. The principal co-investigators were Elisabeth Gidengil (McGill University), Joanna Everitt, (University of New Brunswick Saint John), Patrick Fournier (University of Montreal) and Neil Nevitte (University of Toronto). Neither the Institute for Social Research, Elections Canada nor the Canadian Election Survey Team are responsible for the analyses and interpretations presented here.

2 This question was asked in the 2004 and 2006 campaign period surveys and in the 2008 post-election survey.

- ▶ Key Findings
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Provincial Differences in Western Canadian Attitudes Toward the Federal Government
- ▶ Partisan Differences in Western Canadian Attitudes Toward the Federal Government
- ▶ The West in Context: National Attitudes Toward the Federal Government
- ▶ Conclusion

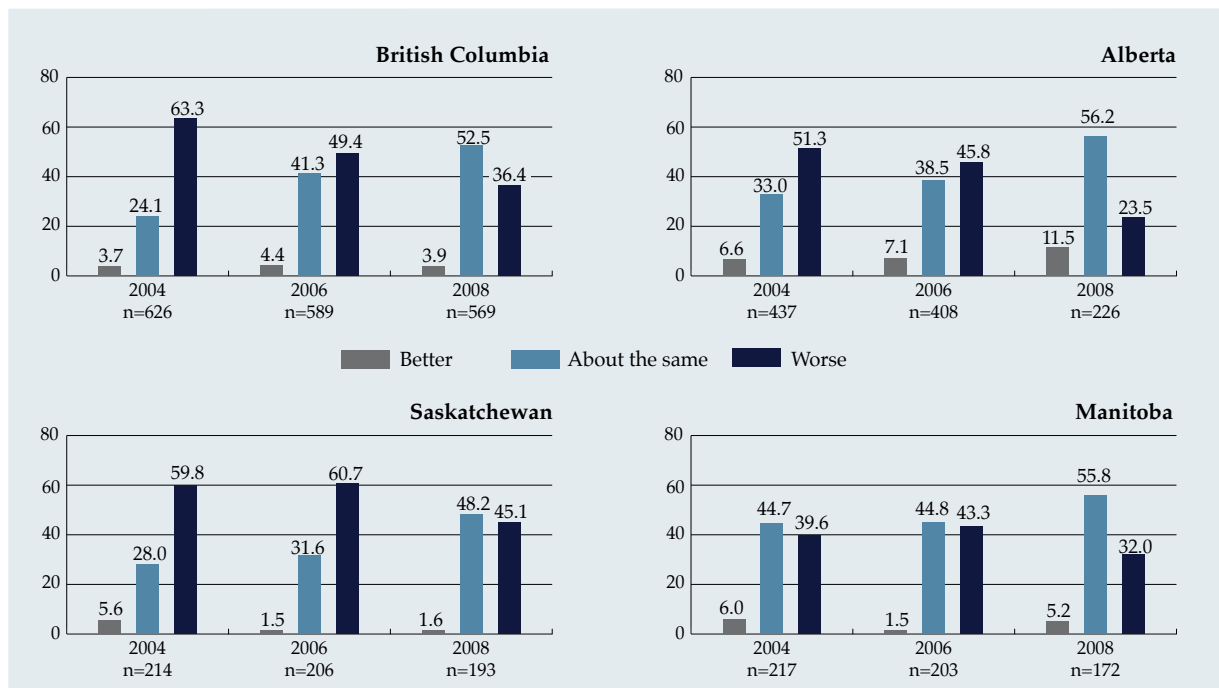
## PROVINCIAL DIFFERENCES IN WESTERN CANADIAN ATTITUDES TOWARD THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

As Figure 1 shows, western Canadian discontent has shifted over time. In 2004, discontent was high in BC, Alberta and Saskatchewan, with over half of all residents in those provinces stating that that federal government treated their province worse than other provinces. Discontent was lower in Manitoba, with four in ten residents stating this opinion.

In less than two years, we see the beginning of changes in western Canadian attitudes. Most significantly, discontent in BC drops by fourteen percentage points from the June 2004 election to the January 2006 election. Discontent falls less dramatically in Alberta (a decline of five percentage points), holds steady in Saskatchewan, and increases very slightly in Manitoba.

**Figure 1: Province Treated by Federal Government, 2004, 2006 and 2008 (%)**

Question: Does the federal government treat your province better, worse, or about the same as other provinces?



Source: Canada Election Studies 2004, 2006, 2008, as derived by author. Results are based on unweighted data.

- ▶ Key Findings
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Provincial Differences in Western Canadian Attitudes Toward the Federal Government
- ▶ Partisan Differences in Western Canadian Attitudes Toward the Federal Government
- ▶ The West in Context: National Attitudes Toward the Federal Government
- ▶ Conclusion

The picture changes again by the October 2008 election. In all four western provinces, discontent is lower in 2008 than it was in 2006 or 2004. For BC and Alberta, discontent fell by 27 and 28 percentage points respectively between the 2004 and 2008 federal elections; these changes indicate very large shifts in public perceptions. For Saskatchewan, the number of residents stating that their province is treated worse by the federal government declined by fifteen percentage points between 2004 and 2008. Discontent also declined by eight percentage points in Manitoba.

The change in Albertans' discontent with the federal government is particularly notable. While in 2004 over half of Albertans reported discontent, by 2008 less than one-quarter of Albertans stated that their province is treated worse than other provinces. Furthermore, Albertans are more likely than residents of the other three western provinces to state that their province is treated *better* than other provinces.

- ▶ Key Findings
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Provincial Differences in Western Canadian Attitudes Toward the Federal Government
- ▶ Partisan Differences in Western Canadian Attitudes Toward the Federal Government
- ▶ The West in Context: National Attitudes Toward the Federal Government
- ▶ Conclusion

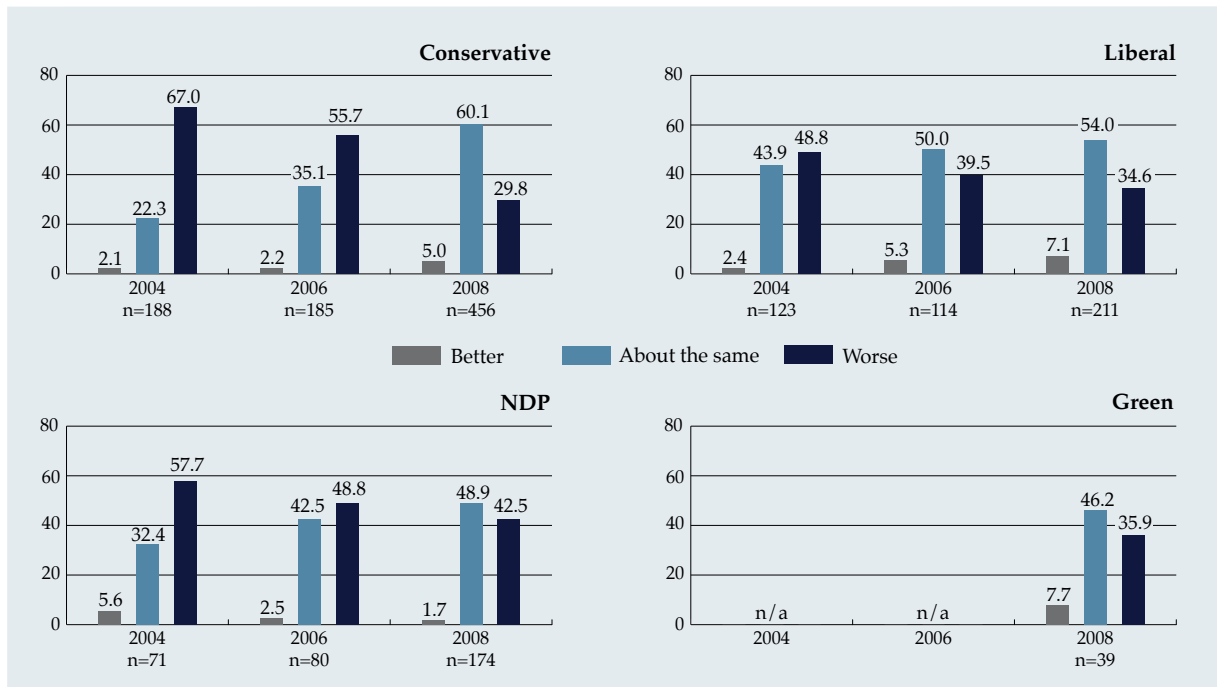
## PARTISAN DIFFERENCES IN WESTERN CANADIAN ATTITUDES TOWARD THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

An important difference between 2004 and 2008, of course, is the political party forming the federal government. In the 2004 election, western Canadians answering the survey question likely reflected not only upon the six month tenure of Paul Martin’s Liberal government, but also on their perceptions of their province’s treatment under Jean Chretien’s Liberal government between 1993 and 2003. In the 2006 election, western Canadians likely considered both their province’s treatment under Martin’s minority Liberal government and the larger issue of the “Sponsorship Scandal,” which concerned the misuse of federal funds in Quebec. In 2008, western Canadians would have reflected on their province’s treatment during the two years of Stephen Harper’s minority Conservative government.

To what extent do changes in discontent reflect partisan differences? The Canadian Election Studies asked respondents, “In federal politics, do you usually think of yourself as a Liberal, Conservative, N.D.P, Bloc Quebecois, or none of these?” As Figure 2 illustrates, in 2004 discontent

**Figure 2: Partisan Differences in Discontent (West as a whole), 2004, 2006 and 2008 (%)**

Question: Does the federal government treat your province better, worse, or about the same as other provinces?



Source: Canada Election Studies 2004, 2006, 2008, as derived by author. Green Party identifiers are not included in the Figure in 2004 and 2006 due to the extremely small number of cases.



- ▶ Key Findings
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Provincial Differences in Western Canadian Attitudes Toward the Federal Government
- ▶ Partisan Differences in Western Canadian Attitudes Toward the Federal Government
- ▶ The West in Context: National Attitudes Toward the Federal Government
- ▶ Conclusion

was seen across supporters of the three major federal parties. Discontent was strongest among Conservative supporters, with two-thirds of western Canadians who identified with the Conservative Party reporting discontent with how their province was treated by the federal government. However, it is also seen that almost six in ten New Democrats and almost half of all Liberals reported discontent in 2004.

In January 2006, after 18 months of Martin's minority Liberal government, discontent was down by roughly ten percentage points for supporters for all three parties. Conservative supporters remained the most discontented, and Liberal supporters remained the least discontented.

A new picture emerges in 2008. After over two and a half years of Harper's minority Conservative government, a large change in Conservative public opinion is evident. By the October 2008 federal election, only three in ten Conservative supporters stated that the federal government treated their province worse than other provinces. This 37 percentage point decline reconfigured the partisan nature of discontent in western Canada: by 2008, New Democrats were the most likely to state discontent, followed by Liberals, while Conservatives were the most satisfied with their province's treatment by the federal government.



- ▶ Key Findings
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Provincial Differences in Western Canadian Attitudes Toward the Federal Government
- ▶ Partisan Differences in Western Canadian Attitudes Toward the Federal Government
- ▶ The West in Context: National Attitudes Toward the Federal Government
- ▶ Conclusion

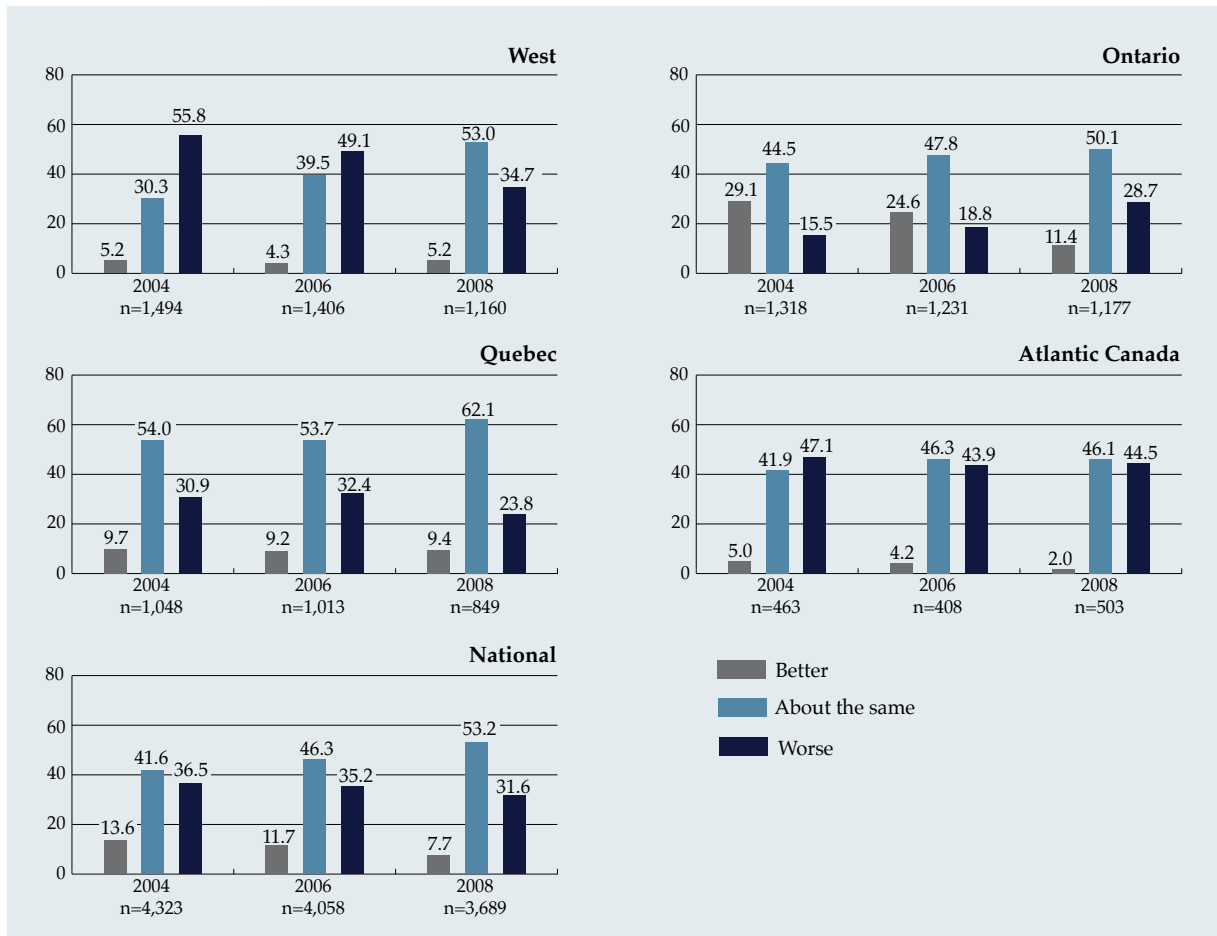
### THE WEST IN CONTEXT: NATIONAL ATTITUDES TOWARD THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

To what extent are western Canadian attitudes toward the federal government reflective of national attitudes? As Figure 3 shows, at the national level there was a modest drop (five percentage points) in feelings of discontent between 2004 and 2008. However, this national picture hides a considerable amount of regional variation.

Looking at the West as a region, we see that discontent declined by over twenty percentage points between 2004 and 2008. Discontent also fell in the province of Quebec, although more modestly than in the West: in 2008,

**Figure 3: Regional Differences in Discontent, 2004, 2006 and 2008 (%)**

Question: Does the federal government treat your province better, worse, or about the same as other provinces?



Source: Canada Election Studies 2004, 2006, 2008, as derived by author.

- ▶ Key Findings
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Provincial Differences in Western Canadian Attitudes Toward the Federal Government
- ▶ Partisan Differences in Western Canadian Attitudes Toward the Federal Government
- ▶ The West in Context: National Attitudes Toward the Federal Government
- ▶ Conclusion

just under one-quarter of Quebeckers felt their province is treated worse than other provinces, compared to close to one-third in 2006 and three in ten in 2004.

However, in Atlantic Canada feelings of discontent remained largely consistent between 2004 and 2008. While western Canadians were the most likely to report discontent in 2004, by 2008 it was Atlantic Canadians who registered the highest levels of discontent. At the same time, discontent in Ontario was on the rise. In 2004, only 15% of Ontarians stated that their province is treated worse than other provinces by the federal government. By 2008, this number had almost doubled.

Overall, then, by 2008 discontent appeared to be declining strongly in western Canada and modestly in Quebec, but holding strong in Atlantic Canada and rising in Ontario. Are these trends continuing into 2010? A recent report by the Mowatt Centre found that, on a number of measures, Ontario discontent is rising over time.<sup>3</sup> The Mowatt Centre report also finds that discontent is increasing in Atlantic Canada, Quebec and the West, with the extent of the changes over time varying with both by the survey question asked and by region.

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3 Matthew Mendelsohn and J. Scott Matthews. 2010. *The New Ontario: The Shifting Attitudes of Ontarians Toward the Federation*. Toronto: Mowatt Centre for Policy Innovation.

- ▶ Key Findings
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Provincial Differences in Western Canadian Attitudes Toward the Federal Government
- ▶ Partisan Differences in Western Canadian Attitudes Toward the Federal Government
- ▶ The West in Context: National Attitudes Toward the Federal Government
- ▶ Conclusion

## CONCLUSION

Does the decline in western Canadian discontent suggest that “western alienation” is disappearing? Probably not: instead, the changes in discontent between 2004 and 2008 simply demonstrate that these attitudes shift over time. Here, the perceptions of former Prime Minister Paul Martin are likely correct: writing about an interview with Paul Martin in 2007, the *Globe and Mail*'s Roy MacGregor reported that “[Martin] has come to feel that Western alienation is something that ebbs and flows. It’s not entirely without merit, but it may also be a permanent part of the Canadian condition.”<sup>4</sup>

Western discontent does indeed ebb and flow, and the Canadian Election Study data suggest that western dissatisfaction with the federal government was at a low point in 2008. But if western discontent is in fact “a permanent part of the Canadian condition,” it is reasonable to assume that these sentiments may resurface.<sup>5</sup>

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4 Roy MacGregor. 2007. “Paul Martin’s New Mission.” *The Globe and Mail*, July 28, 2007.

5 A recently published study suggests that changing demographics may alter attitudes toward the federal government. Specifically, immigrants from “non-traditional source countries” tend to be “more federally oriented than the local populations in their province.” Thus, increased immigration may reduce discontent with the federal government in western Canada, as well as in other regions. See Antoine Bilodeau, Stephen White and Neil Nevitte. 2010. “The Development of Dual Loyalties: Immigrants’ Integration to Canadian Regional Dynamics.” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 43: 3 (September 2010), 515-544.

## About Canada West Foundation

The Canada West Foundation is the only think tank dedicated to being the objective, nonpartisan voice for issues of vital concern to western Canadians. Through our research and commentary, we contribute to better government decisions and a stronger Canadian economy.

The West is in. And the Canada West Foundation helped put it there. Over the past 40 years, our research and commentary has improved government policy and decision making. Today, the West is on the national agenda and is at the forefront of the most important debates that will shape our country.

We give the people of British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba a voice. A voice for their dreams, interests and concerns. As westerners, we understand the people and the places of the West. We know our history and how it influences our future. Whether it is the economy, energy, environment, education, healthcare, taxes, social services, urban issues, provincial-federal relations or any other policy area of importance to the West, we have researched it, commented on it, stimulated debate about it and recommended practical options for improving the policy response. Democracy lives.

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