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For Survey Research



Spotlight on Alberta

2023 SERIES





Confederation of Tomorrow

The Confederation of Tomorrow surveys are annual studies conducted by an association of the country's leading public policy and socio-economic research organizations. The surveys give voice to Canadians about the major issues shaping the future of the federation and their political communities.

The 2023 study consists of a survey of 5,300 adults, conducted online in the provinces between January 26 and February 9; and by telephone in the territories between January 24 and February 26.

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The Environics Institute for Survey Research was established by Michael Adams in 2006 with a mandate to conduct in-depth public opinion and social research on the issues shaping Canada's future. It is through such research that Canadians can better understand themselves and their changing society.

For more information about the survey, contact us at:

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Introduction

In Alberta, the level of discontent with the federation remains high, but has been declining gradually since 2019. This overall change, however, masks two distinct trends. On the one hand, those who support the provincial government continue to express high levels of dissatisfaction with federalism. On the other hand, among those who support the official opposition, levels of discontent have declined significantly. It appears that the championing of the cause of “Western alienation” by the provincial government, while popular among its own supporters, has lessened the appeal of that cause for other Albertans.

Observers of Alberta politics should note that the recent decline in discontent among Albertans may be less a reflection of a province-wide improvement in views on how federalism is currently practised, and more a reflection of the political dynamics internal to the province.

This report covers the opinions of Albertans on how their province is treated within the Canadian federation. Since 2019, the annual Confederation of Tomorrow surveys have documented relatively high levels of dissatisfaction in the province with Canadian federalism and the treatment of their province by Ottawa. This report updates this information, and looks more closely at the political dynamics within the province that underlie recent trends.

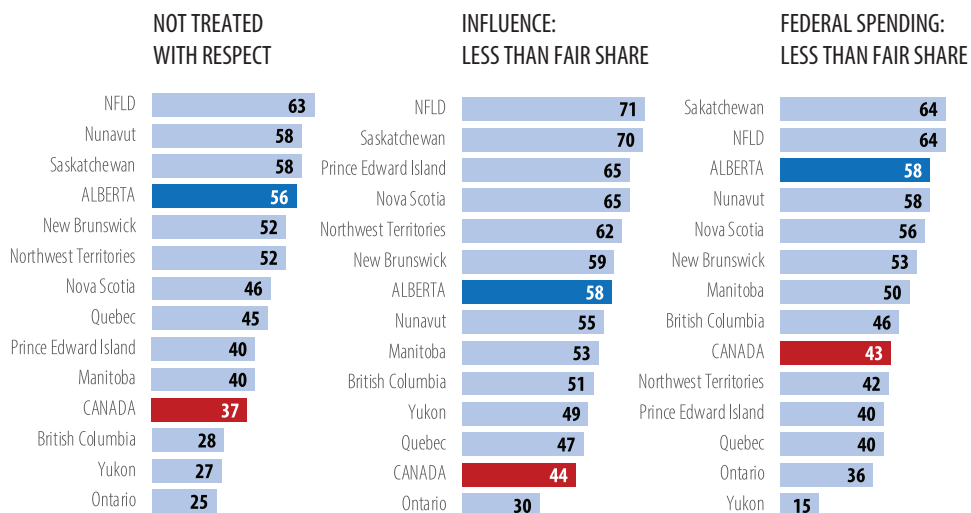
Measures of regional discontent

The Confederation of Tomorrow surveys track several measures of discontent with the workings of the Canadian federation. Three of these cover perceptions of how the province is treated within Canada in terms of the respect it receives, the influence it has and how fairly it is treated by

Ottawa. The 2023 survey finds that a majority of Albertans say their province receives less than its fair share of federal spending, has less than its fair share of influence on national decisions, and is not treated with the respect it deserves in Canada.

Respect, influence and fairness

2023 By province/territory

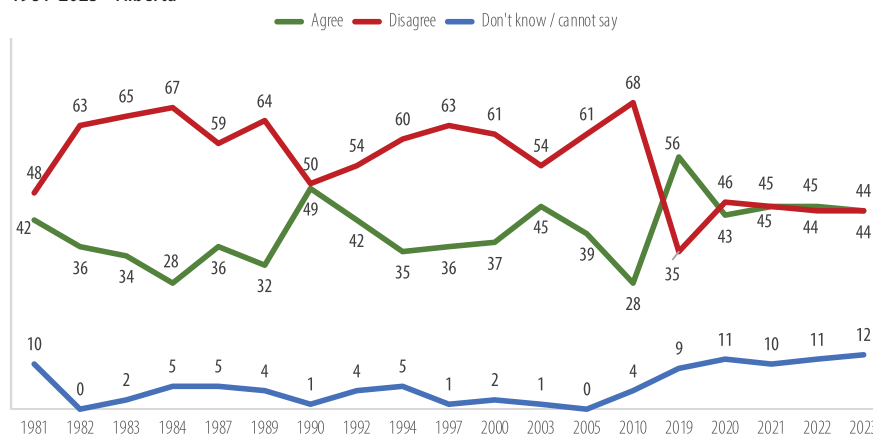


On two other questions, opinions in the province are more evenly divided. Forty-four percent of Albertans agree that “Western Canada gets so few benefits from being part of Canada that they might as well go it on their own,” but an equal proportion (44%) disagrees (12% do not take a position either way). Similarly, forty percent agree that “Canadian federalism has more advantages than disadvantages for Alberta,” but almost as many (36%) disagree (in this case, 25% do not take a position either way).

What’s notable, however, is that all of these five survey questions show an improvement in the opinions about the province’s place in the federation since 2019. The proportion of Albertans who say their province is not treated with the respect it deserves, for instance, is 15 percentage points lower in 2023 than it was in 2019. Over the same period, there has been a 12-point drop in agreement that Western Canada gets so few benefits from Canada that it should go it alone.

Should the West go it alone?

1981-2023 Alberta



Source for 1981 to 2005: Environics Focus Canada

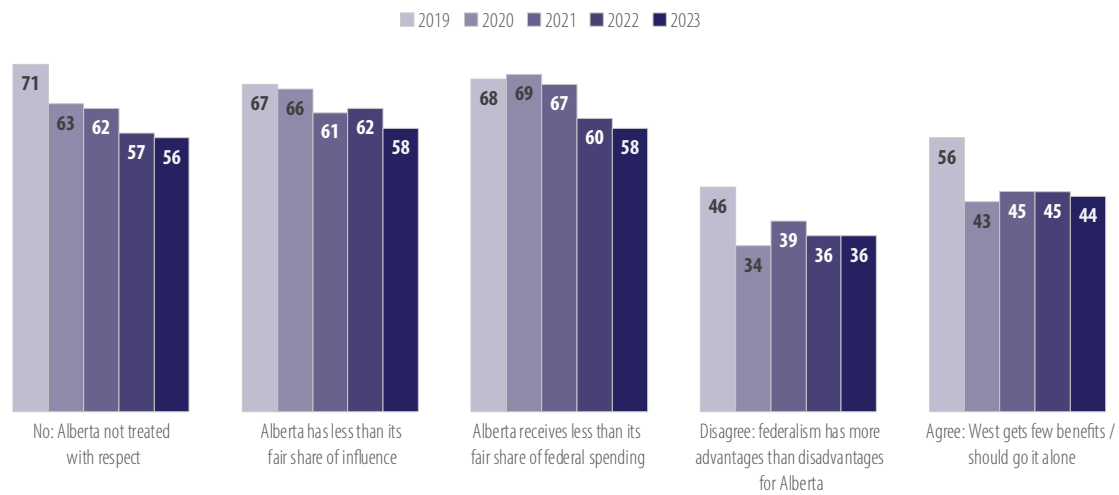
Q.22b

Agree/Disagree: Western Canada gets so few benefits from being part of Canada that they might as well go it on their own

At first glance, these trends point to an improvement in Albertans' evaluation of their province's treatment within the Canadian federation. Such a conclusion, however, would appear contrary to political developments within the province. Since 2019, the provincial and federal governments have continued to appear at odds with one another on prominent issues such as energy and climate change. And

the selection by the governing United Conservative Party of a new leader and premier in 2022, and the subsequent passage of that premier's signature *Alberta Sovereignty Within a United Canada Act*, appeared to signal a heightening rather than a relaxation of tensions. In this context, how can the apparent decline of feelings of regional alienation in Alberta be explained?

Regional discontent in Alberta 2019-2023



The growing divide within Alberta

The answer lies in the increased extent of political polarization in the province.¹

Consider again how Albertans answer the questions relating to the respect the province receives in Canada, its influence on national decisions, and its share of federal spending.

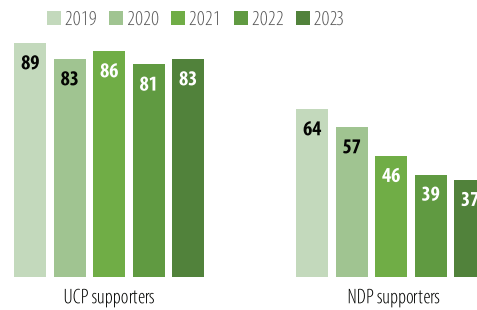
In the case of these three survey questions, supporters of the governing United Conservative Party consistently express very high levels of dissatisfaction. Every year from 2019 to 2023, over 80 percent of UCP supporters say that the province is not treated with the respect it deserves. The same is true for the proportion saying that Alberta gets less than its fair share of federal spending. In the case of the province's influence, the proportion of UCP supporters saying the province has less than its fair share hovers close to 80 percent throughout this period. In each case, the level of discontent expressed by UCP supporters in 2023 is close to that expressed in 2019, indicating no significant change in opinions over the last five years.

The patterns are very different in the case of supporters of the opposition New Democratic Party. At the beginning of this period, in 2019, NDP supporters were much less likely than UCP supporters to say their province was not treated with the respect it deserves in Canada, has less than its fair share of influence on national decisions, and receives less than its fair share of federal spending. But from 2019 to 2023, the proportion of NDP supporters holding these views declined noticeably, widening the gap between the two groups of partisans. In 2019, the difference between the proportion of UCP and NDP supporters saying that Alberta is not treated with respect was 25 percentage points; in 2023 that difference is 46 points. In the case of a lack of influence, the gap widened from 23 to 38 points; in the case of Alberta receiving less than its fair share of federal spending, the gap widened from 24 to 36 points.

In the case of the two other survey questions, about whether the West should go it alone, and whether federalism has more advantages than disadvantages for the province, supporters of the governing and opposition parties are also far apart, though the gaps have not widened over time. UCP supporters are over twice as likely as NDP supporters to agree that "Western Canada gets so few benefits from being

No: Alberta is not treated with the respect it deserves

2019-2023 By provincial party support

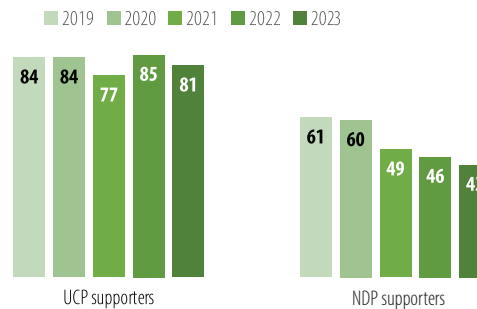


Q.9

In your opinion, is Alberta treated with the respect it deserves in Canada or not?

Alberta has less than its fair share of influence on national decisions

2019-2023 By provincial party support

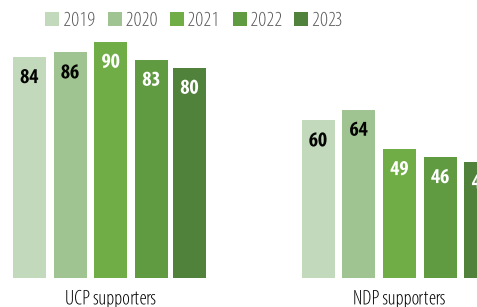


Q.10

In your opinion, how much influence does Alberta have on important national decisions in Canada? More than its fair share, less than its fair share, or about its fair share?

Alberta receives less than its fair share of federal spending

2019-2023 By provincial party support



Q.13

Thinking about all the money the federal government spends on different programs and transfers to the provinces and territories, do you think Alberta receives more than its fair share, less than its fair share, or about its fair share?

¹ The samples sizes for UCP supporters are: 2019 = 218; 2020 = 177; 2021 = 148; 2022 = 126; 2023 = 166. The sample sizes for NDP supporters are: 2019 = 119; 2020 = 133; 2021 = 211; 2022 = 181; 2023 = 173.

part of Canada that they might as well go it on their own” (in 2023, 67% of UCP supporters agree, compared to 24% of NDP supporters). There is a smaller, but still significant, gap between the two groups in the proportions that disagree that “Canadian federalism has more advantages than disadvantages for Alberta” (in 2023, 52% of UCP supporters disagree, compared to 28% of NDP supporters).

Taken together, these findings provide a more complete picture of how Albertans perceive their place in the Canadian federation; more specifically, they demonstrate why no single summary is sufficient to describe recent trends. Albertans are either intensely dissatisfied, with no real change over the past five years, or only somewhat dissatisfied with signs of significant improvement – depending on whether one focuses on the views of those siding with the government or the opposition. Moreover, the distance between these two groups is widening, meaning that the average response for the province has become less of a meaningful indicator over time.

This raises an important point about how to interpret the findings of public opinion surveys, especially when they pertain to issues of regionalism and nationalism within the Canadian federation. There is a natural tendency to ascribe average opinions to an entire community by observing, for instance, that Ontarians are more satisfied than Albertans, or that Quebecers are more supportive than other Canadians of a transfer of powers from Ottawa to the provinces. These

shortcuts are understandable, yet sometimes obscure more than they reveal. Public opinion research should push beyond the more familiar differences, such as those between provincial averages, and explore other potential cleavages, such as those between age, language or ethnic groups, or – as in this case – between supporters of different political parties.

In the case of Alberta, emphasizing the moderate decline in the average proportion of residents who say their province is treated unfairly within Canada masks two more important findings: that supporters of the government remain very dissatisfied with the federation; and that there is a growing divide in the province, as the government’s championing of the issue of Western alienation has had the effect of pushing its political opponents further away from its position.

This latter finding is important to take into account when considering the significance of the general trend within the province. At first glance, the decline in the proportion of Albertans who feel their province is treated unfairly within Canada suggests that regional discontent within the province has eased somewhat since 2019. But in reality, it may be less a signal of waning discontent with Canada, and more a reflection of political dynamics within the province, wherein those who are not supporters of the UCP government are growing more discontented with that government’s position. It would therefore be premature and unwise for observers of Alberta politics to draw overly reassuring conclusions from the trend.

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