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Alberta Separatism and the Freedom
Convoy: A New Brand of Western Alienation

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Alberta Separatism and the Freedom Convoy: A New Brand of Western Alienation

Explanatory Note on Shifting Canadian Cleavages and the Convoy Movement

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Introduction

The Freedom Convoy movement has deep roots in Western Canada. Many of its key organizers reside in the region, having coordinated several large protest events in the past five years.² Public opinion polls illustrate that sympathy for the movement is also strongest in the West, especially on the prairies and specifically in Alberta.³

The rise of the Freedom Convoy has coincided with a rise in Western separatism. Alberta has been the epicentre of both movements, with up to one-third of the provincial population supporting the Convoy or provincial independence.

This explanatory note explores the acceptance, intersections, root causes, and implications of these two movements when it comes to the future of Canadian democracy. It traces the sudden rise and sustained popularity of separatism and the Freedom Convoy to a common source: a new form of western alienation that ties together feelings of status loss, political tribalism, and the death of deference to traditional forms of authority. These forces have combined to pose one of the largest threats to national unity today.

¹ This paper benefits greatly from ongoing collaborations with Dr. Feodor Snagovsky (University of Alberta), Dr. Lisa Young (University of Calgary), and the entire Common Ground initiative team. The author thanks Samuel Clark, Enni Leponiemi, Runo Obewho, Denzel Sibanda, and Abel Zeleke for valuable research assistance in the preparation of this paper. Errors and omissions remain the responsibility of the author.

² Nia Williams and Anna Mehler Paperny. 2022. "In protests and politics, Canada's 'Freedom Convoy' reverberates." *Reuters*, August 4.

³ Darrell Briker. 2022. "Nearly Half (46%) of Canadians Say they "May Not Agree with Everything" Trucker Convoy Says or Does, But ..." *Ipsos Factum*. February 11.

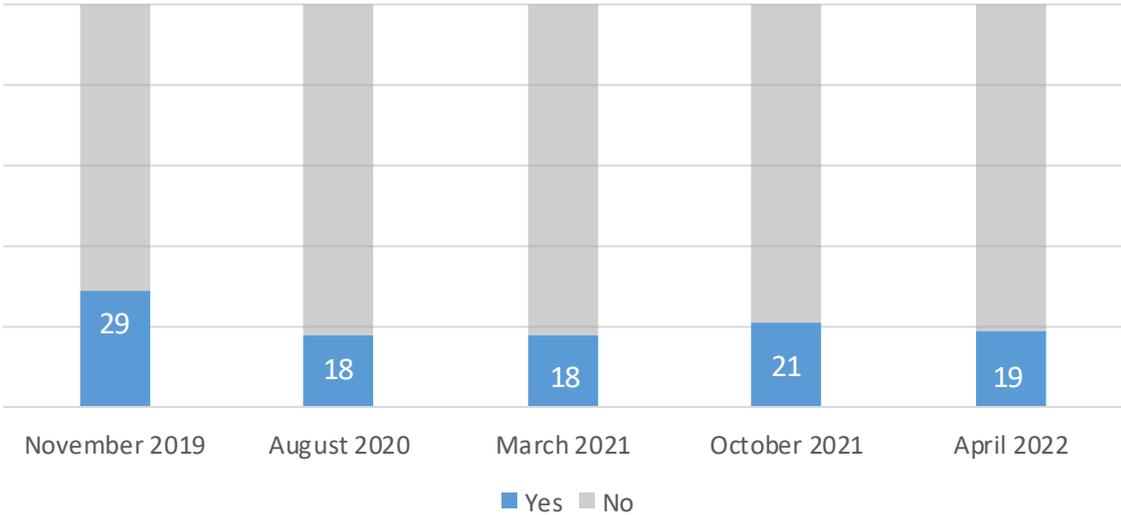
Public Opinion in Alberta, 2020-2022

Separatism

Support for separatism spiked following the federal election in November 2019. The Liberal Party of Canada had won a second consecutive majority government under leader Justin Trudeau. The son of the chief architect of the notorious National Energy Program, Trudeau’s pro-environmental policies and political pedigree made him a lightning rod for western discontent.⁴ The Liberal victory came despite the fact that 69 percent of Alberta voters had cast ballots for Conservative Party of Canada (CPC) candidates, electing Conservatives to 33 of the province’s 34 seats in the House of Commons.

Support for separatism reached nearly one-in-three Albertans (29 percent) according to our Viewpoint Alberta survey following the 2019 federal election. This figure dropped over the first two waves of the pandemic, settling at around one-in-five Albertans; it rests at about 19 percent at the time of writing (Figure 1).⁵

Figure 1. Support for Separatism among Albertans, 2019 to 2022



Source: Viewpoint Alberta Survey 2019 (n=820), Viewpoint Alberta Survey 2020 (n=824); Viewpoint Alberta Survey March 2021 (n=802); Viewpoint Alberta Survey October 2021 (n=877); Viewpoint Alberta Survey April 2022 (n=2151). Weighted data. Numbers represent proportions of respondents who answered “yes” to the following question: “Should Alberta separate from Canada and form an independent country?”

⁴ Andrew McDougall. 2020. “Stuck in the Middle with You: Is the Trudeau Government Really Representative of a Central Canadian ‘Laurentian Elite?’” *Canadian Studies* 89: 11-39.

⁵ Jared Wesley and Lisa Young. 2022. “What the spectre of Alberta separatism means for Canada.” *National Post* July 15.

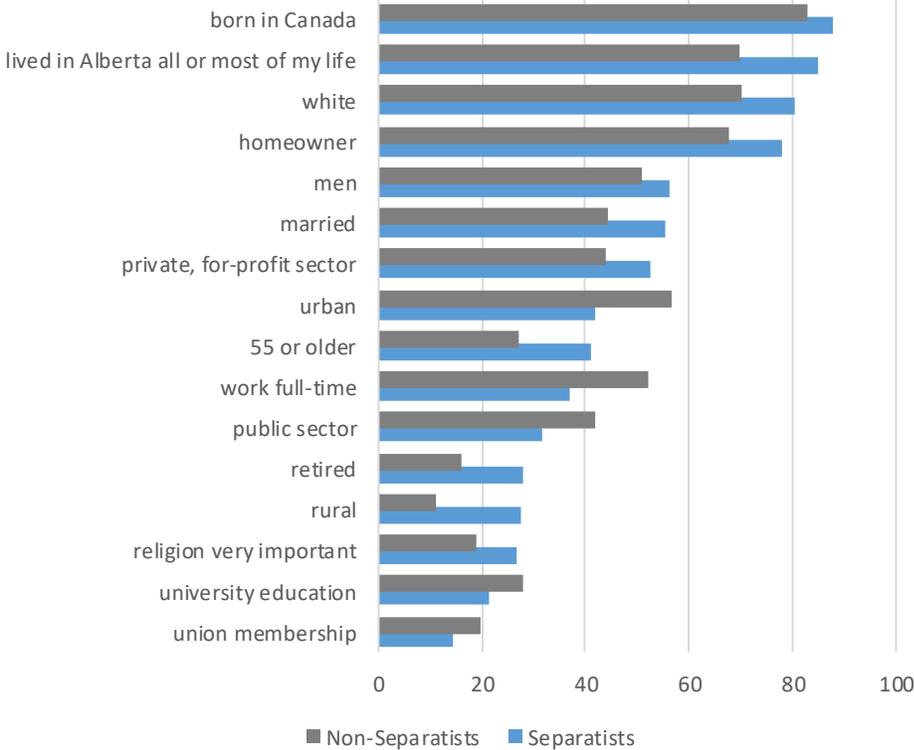
Unless otherwise noted, in the remainder of this paper, findings are drawn from our most recent Viewpoint Alberta survey in April 2022.⁶

Compared to other Albertans, separatists are more likely to:

- have been born in Canada and lived in Alberta all their lives;
- live in rural areas;
- be white, male, married, over 55 years old, and own their homes; and
- work in the private, for-profit sector or to be retired.

Separatists are less likely to live in urban areas, work full-time, work in the public sector, have a university education, or be union members compared to the rest of the Alberta population (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Demographic Characteristics of Separatists and Non-Separatists, 2022



⁶ The Viewpoint Alberta Survey was conducted between April 8 and May 4, 2022. The survey was deployed online by Pollara. A copy of the survey questions can be found here: <https://bit.ly/3LelxQi>. Pollara co-ordinates the survey with an online panel system that targets registered panelists that meet the demographic criteria for the survey. Survey data is based on 2151 responses with a 15-minute average completion time. Split samples were employed for certain survey questions. The Viewpoint Alberta Survey was led by co-principal investigators Michelle Maroto, Feodor Snagovsky, Jared Wesley, and Lisa Young. It was funded in part by a grant from the Kule Institute for Advanced Study (KIAS) at the University of Alberta.

According to our surveys, Alberta separatists are motivated primarily by economic factors. When asked why they feel Alberta “should separate from Canada and form an independent country”, an overwhelming majority of separatists cited economic policy (74 percent), tax policy (82), and the desire to exit the equalization system (88). About two-thirds support separatism to set Alberta’s own social (67 percent) and environmental policy (70 percent). By comparison, only about half of separatists seek to set their own cultural (54 percent) or immigration policy (58). This aligns with the fact that only 54 percent of separatists consider Alberta to be “a culturally distinct society.”

Unsurprisingly, separatists tend to have a higher level of attachment to the provincial rather than the national community. Two important caveats are necessary, however. First, the level of attachment to Alberta is a matter of degree rather than kind. While 86 percent of separatists report feeling somewhat or very attached to Alberta, the same figure is 80 percent among the rest of the provincial population. Second, a majority of separatists (62 percent) report feeling somewhat or very attached to Canada. While that proportion is lower than among non-separatists (88 percent), it is still considerably higher than one would expect among people genuinely committed to separating from the rest of the country.

Indeed, separatists retain a surprising level of affinity for national institutions. While 84 percent of separatists support removing the equalization principle from the constitution, fewer than two-thirds (65 percent) indicate they want to withdraw from the Canada Pension Plan (CPP) in favour of a new made-in-Alberta program. An even smaller proportion (56 percent) want to abandon the RCMP in favour of a new Alberta provincial police force. To be certain: a majority of separatists want to cut ties with federal institutions; but not all of them do.

This apparent contradiction might be explained in several ways. For one, respondents who say they want Alberta to form an independent country may view that position as a tactical expression of grievance -- as a means of gaining the attention of the rest of Canada and exerting leverage to better the province’s standing in Confederation.⁷ National and provincial conservative leaders have referred to this strategy as part of “the Quebec Playbook,” in reference to their view that threatening separation has helped boost that province’s standing in Confederation.⁸ Compared to Quebec, few Alberta separatists are optimistic when assessing the likelihood that their own province will become an independent country. Only nine percent of separatists think that independence is very likely or will happen, compared to 47 percent who feel it is unlikely or will never happen.

⁷ Wesley and Young.

⁸ Peter McKenna. 2021. “Alberta steals page from Quebec’s playbook.” *Winnipeg Free Press*, August 2.

This low level of optimism suggests that, for some Albertans, separatism is less a realistic objective than a means to other ends.

Support for Alberta separatism may also reflect deep dissatisfaction with the current face of the federal government, rather than a wholesale rejection of Confederation. Separatists demonstrate an exceptionally high level of antipathy towards Ottawa, in general, and Prime Minister Trudeau, in particular. When asked how much faith they had in the federal government, for instance, a full 97 percent of separatists say they have not much or no confidence at all in Ottawa to “do the right thing.” This is double the share among Albertans who want to remain part of Canada. Nearly all separatists feel that Alberta receives less than its fair share of federal transfers (97 percent), that the province is not treated with the respect it deserves (91), and that the federal government treats Alberta worse than other provinces (90). These figures are over 30 percentage-points lower among non-separatists. When asked to rate Prime Minister Trudeau on a scale of 0 (really dislike) to 10 (really like), four-in-five separatists assigned him a zero. Trudeau’s mean score among separatists was less than 1 (0.7), compared to 3.6 among other Albertans.

Taken together, these findings suggest that -- outside a vocal but very small core of committed separatists -- outright independence is neither a desired nor a realistic goal for the vast majority of Albertans. Discussed later, this is not to diminish the influence of the separatist movement on provincial and national politics.

Convoy Support

Given widespread criticism of it as a “fringe movement,” it is easy to dismiss the popularity, reach, and impact of the Freedom Convoy. Our April 2022 Viewpoint Alberta survey offers one of the most comprehensive examinations of the movement, including the perspectives of over 2000 Alberta respondents.

A majority of Albertans opposed the Freedom Convoy, according to our study. Only 18 percent of Albertans said they felt positive emotions about the protest (e.g., pride, excitement, happiness, inspiration), compared to 40 percent who felt anger, anxiety, frustration, or other negative emotions.

Nearly half of Albertans (48 percent) “strongly opposed this protest and how it was done,” for instance, with an additional 15 percent indicating they “somewhat opposed it.” Sizeable majorities of Albertans felt the Freedom Convoy took its protest measures too far. Smaller pluralities felt the prime minister was right when he chose not to meet with

the protesters (41 percent) and that the government did the right thing by invoking the Emergencies Act (47 percent).

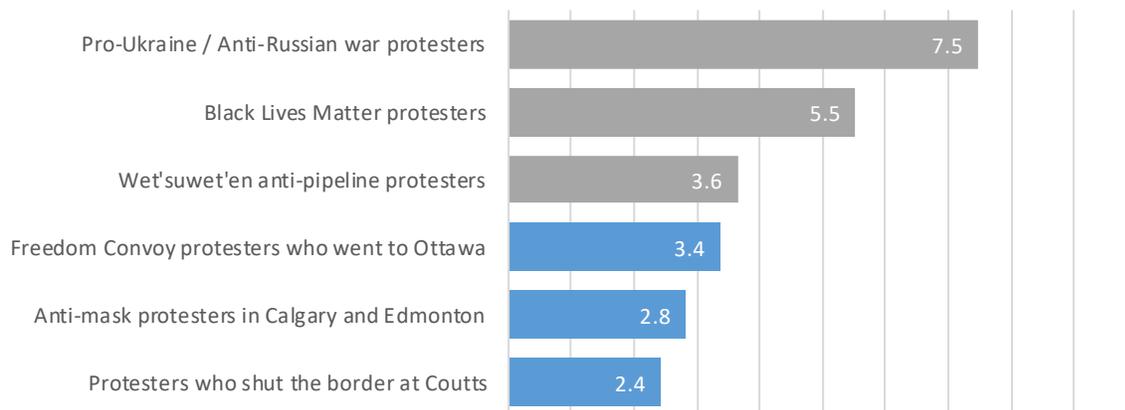
Very few Albertans took overt steps in support of the Freedom Convoy. Only 4 percent indicated they participated in a protest or rally or flew a Canadian flag in support; 2 percent indicated they donated money to the organizers. Only 16 percent reported speaking out in support of the movement with family, friends, or coworkers; this compared with 30 percent of Albertans who spoke out *against* the Convoy with people they knew.

Overall, most Albertans hold a negative view of the outcomes of the Convoy (see Table 1). We asked respondents to rate various elements of the Freedom Convoy protests, comparing them with those of other movements. Using a scale of 0 (strongly oppose) to 10 (strongly support), Albertans were more likely to oppose the protests in Coutts (average of 2.4) and Ottawa (3.4), as well as anti-mask protests in Calgary and Edmonton (2.8). All three protests were less popular than the Wet’suwet’en (3.6), Black Lives Matter (5.5), and pro-Ukraine movements (Figure 3).

Table 1. Albertans’ Opinions on the Outcomes of the Freedom Convoy, 2022

	%		%
Convoy was a success.	23	Convoy was a failure.	58
Convoy revealed strengths of Canadian democracy.	25	Convoy revealed weaknesses of Canadian democracy.	47
Protests made most Canadians’ lives better.	18	Protests made Canadians’ lives worse.	55
The protesters are right and worthy of our sympathy.	27	The protesters are wrong and do not deserve our sympathy.	57
The protests made me prouder to be a Canadian.	23	The protests made me less proud to be a Canadian.	59

Figure 3. Albertans' Support for Various Protester Groups



Figures represent averages based on the question: "On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 is strongly oppose and 10 is strongly support, how do you feel about the following groups?"

Our Viewpoint data allows us to divide the Alberta public into three groups:

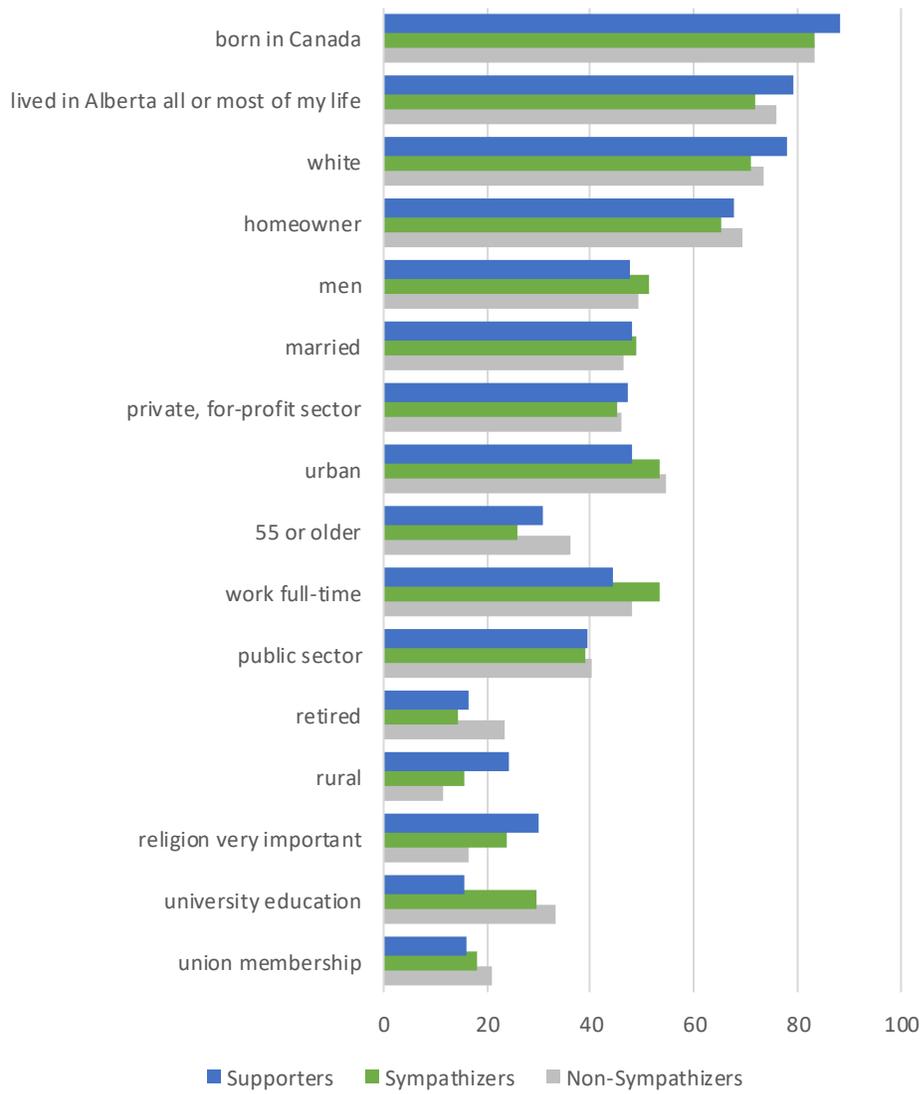
- *supporters* who both sympathize with and share the views of the Freedom Convoy protesters (24 percent of the population);
- *sympathizers* who appreciate but do not share their views (18 percent); and
- *non-sympathizers* who neither sympathize with nor share their views (51 percent).⁹

As with separatists, Convoy supporters in Alberta are more likely to be white, to live in rural areas, to be born in Canada, and to have lived in Alberta most of their lives. Religion is also more likely to be very important in their lives. By comparison, non-sympathizers are more likely to live in urban areas, to be 55 years or older, to work in the public sector, to be a union member, to be retired, and to have a university education (Figure 4).

Two-thirds of Convoy supporters deemed the protests a success, compared with 21 percent of sympathizers and 4 percent of non-sympathizers. Convoy supporters were also more likely to see the protests as improving the lives of most Canadians (57 percent) and showing the strengths of Canadian democracy (45 percent).

⁹ An additional 7 percent of Albertans aren't sure about the Freedom Convoy, and 1 percent have never heard of it. These respondents are excluded from the following analysis. Proportions reflect the share of respondents responding to the following question: "In January-February 2022, a protest started by a convoy of truck drivers and supporters occupied Ottawa for several weeks and blockaded border crossings. Thinking about this, which of the following best represents your view of the trucker convoy protest? I sympathize with the challenges/issues raised by the protesters and I share their views. I sympathize with the protesters, but I do not share their views. I do not sympathize with the protesters and do not share their views. I don't know / unsure."

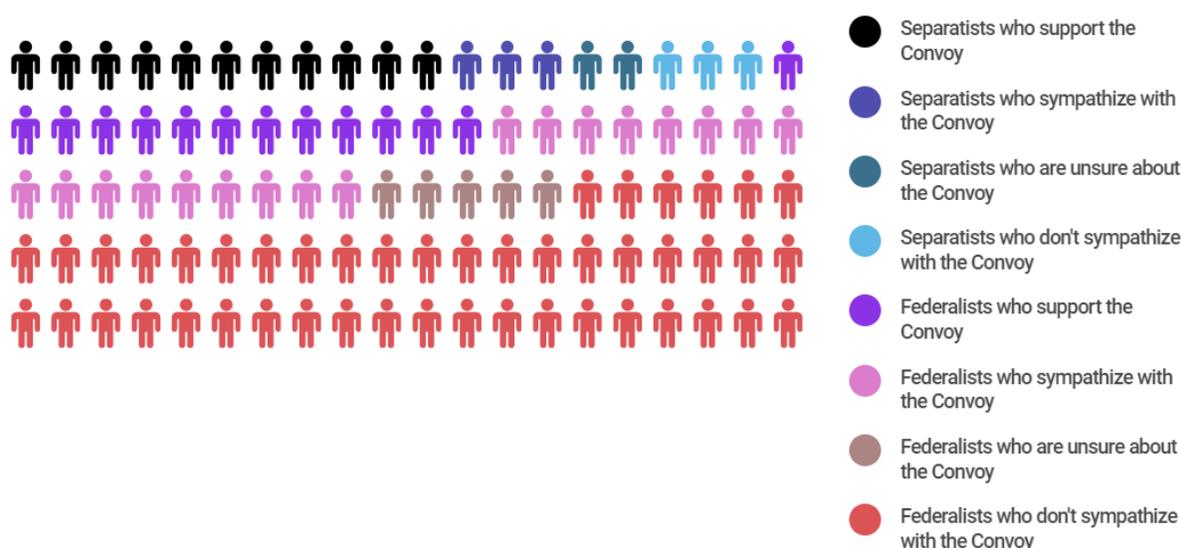
Figure 4. Demographic Characteristics of Convoy Attitude Groups, 2022



The Confluence of the Separatist and Convoy Movements

Given they look so similar demographically and both promote animosity towards the federal government, it is tempting to assume that the separatist and Convoy movements share a common pool of followers. This is not entirely the case. Only 11 percent of the Alberta population supports both movements. Nearly half (46 percent) are neither separatists nor Convoy sympathizers (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Shares of the Alberta Population who Support the Separatist and Convoy Movements, 2022



Icons represent 1 percent of the adult Alberta population.

While nearly two-thirds of all separatists either support (58 percent) or sympathize with (15) the Convoy, only 46 percent of all Convoy supporters are separatists. Separatist support drops to 15 percent among Convoy sympathizers.

These findings reveal an odd tension between anti-government sentiment, on one hand, and allegiance to the broader Canadian community, on the other. This is demonstrated by Convoy protesters waving Canadian flags during their rallies, and Convoy organizers branding their core organizing group “Canada Unity.”

Indeed, many Convoy supporters felt a deep sense of patriotism in their cause. Seven-in-ten Convoy supporters feel “very” (36 percent) or “somewhat attached to Canada” (34). While this sense of connection to country is lower than among Convoy sympathizers (44 / 38) and non-sympathizers (63 / 26), most Convoy supporters retain a certain allegiance to Canada.

Nearly three-quarters (72 percent) of Convoy supporters reported that the protests made them feel prouder to be Canadian, compared with just 18 percent of sympathizers and 2 percent of non-sympathizers. Some separatists also viewed the Convoy movement as a symbol of Canadian pride; 48 percent of them said the protests made them feel prouder to be Canadian.

These differences aside, the separatist and Convoy movements share common roots in conservative populism. This is evident when supporters and sympathizers array themselves on a left-right spectrum (Figures 6 and 7). Three-quarters of separatists consider themselves to be to the right of centre, as do 65 percent of Convoy supporters and 50 percent of Convoy sympathizers. This suggests that allegiance to both movements may be embedded, to an extent, in conservative identity in Alberta.

Figure 6. Position on the Left-Right Spectrum, Separatists and Non-Separatists, 2022

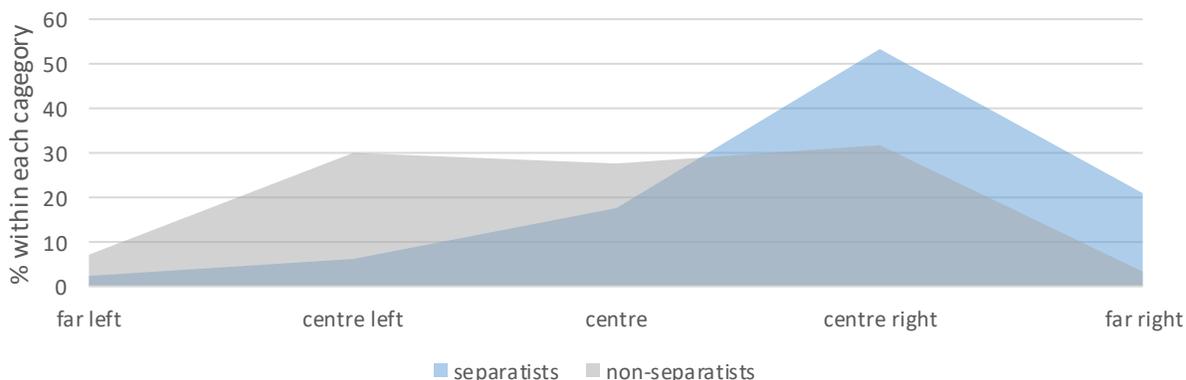
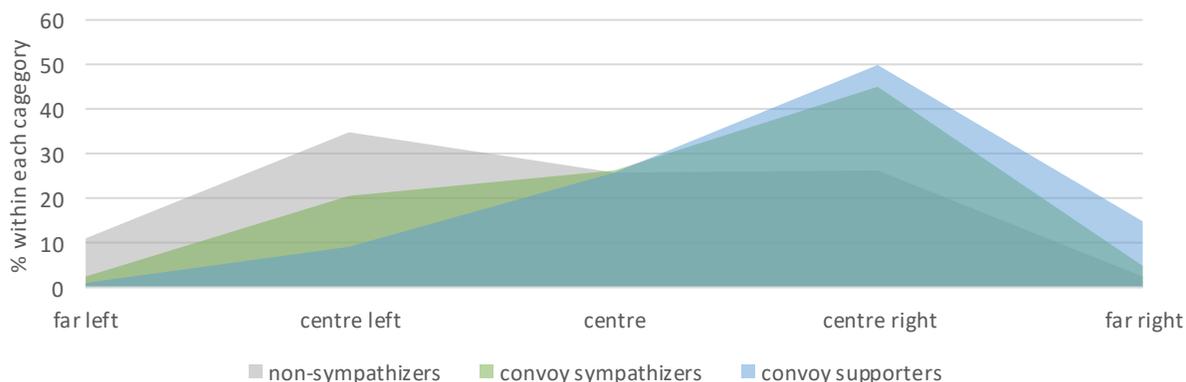


Figure 7. Position on the Left-Right Spectrum, Convoy Attitude Groups, 2022



Self-placement based on the question: "In politics, people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means very left-wing, and 10 means very right-wing?" Groups were coded: far left (0 to 2), centre left (3 to 4), centre (5), centre right (6 to 7), far right 8 to 10.

These patterns correspond to voting behaviour, as well. Three-quarters of Alberta separatists cast ballots for the UCP (76 percent) and CPC (75) candidates in the 2019 provincial and federal elections. Separatists made up over one-third of each party's voting base in those campaigns (36 percent of UCP voters, 33 percent of CPC voters).

Likewise, two-thirds of Convoy supporters (67 percent) and 62 percent of sympathizers voted for CPC candidates in the 2019 federal election. In that campaign, Convoy supporters made up 34 percent of CPC voters, with sympathizers making up another 24 percent. These numbers were somewhat lower in the 2019 provincial election, with 64 percent of Convoy supporters and 50 percent of sympathizers voting for the UCP. The United Conservative voting base consisted of 38 percent Convoy supporters and 23 percent sympathizers.

The fact that politicians, including high-profile leadership contestants, have made overtures to Alberta "independence," "autonomy," and "sovereignty" while pushing back against vaccine mandates is a testament to the movements' combined influence within mainstream conservative parties.

Looking beyond ideology and partisanship, we find other ties binding the separatist and Convoy movements. Separatists and Convoy supporters are far more negative about Alberta's prospects over the next 10 years. Nearly half (49 percent) of separatists and 40 percent of Convoy supporters feel "angry" when they think about Alberta's future. This compares with 31 percent of non-separatists and 35 percent of non-sympathizers. Fewer than half of separatists and Convoy supporters feel that "Alberta is headed in the right direction, and sizeable shares feel that "Alberta's best days are behind it" (Figure 8).

Separatists and Convoy supporters are even more pessimistic about Canada's future. Nearly three-quarters of each group feel that "Canada's best days are behind it," and less than a quarter feel that "Canada is headed in the right direction."

These levels of pessimism are magnified at the individual level (Figure 9). Significant majorities of separatists (76 percent) and Convoy supporters (70) feel that "people like me are falling behind in society" -- compared to less than half of non-separatists and non-sympathizers. Majorities of separatists and Convoy supporters are also more likely to feel that it "is harder to move up the income ladder compared to [their] parents," that their household situation has worsened compared to a year ago, and that it is difficult to meet monthly expenses. Compared to other Albertans, separatists and Convoy supporters are also more likely to predict that their "household financial situation will be worse one year from now."

Figure 8. Attitudes about the Future of Alberta and Canada, by Group, 2022

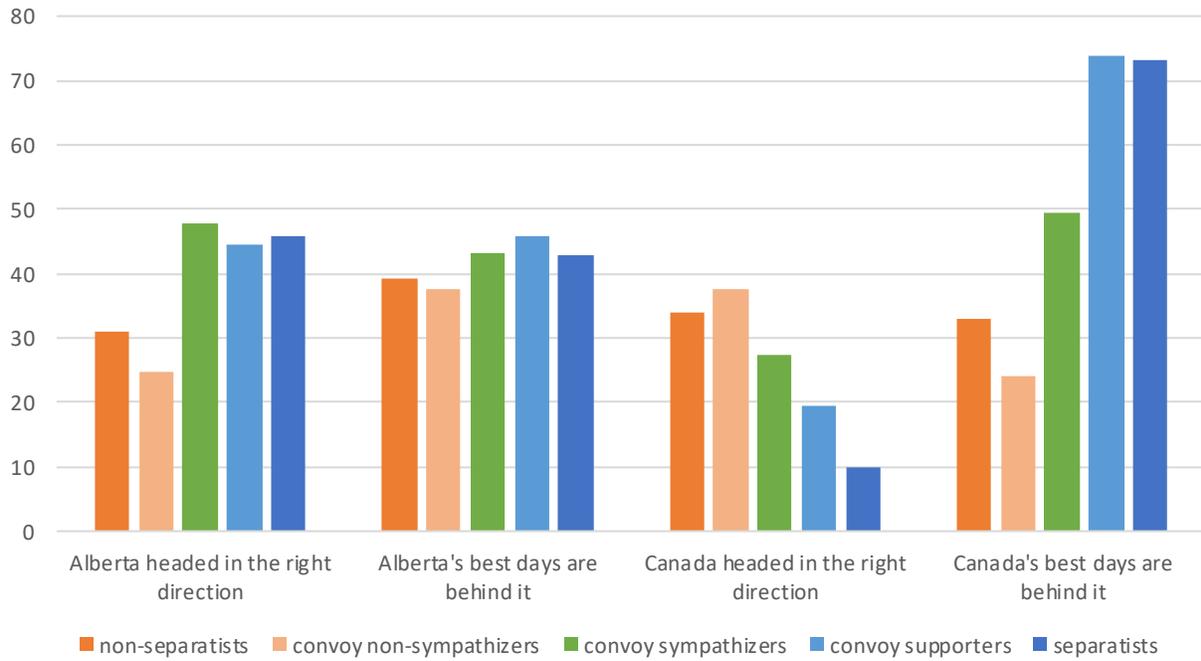
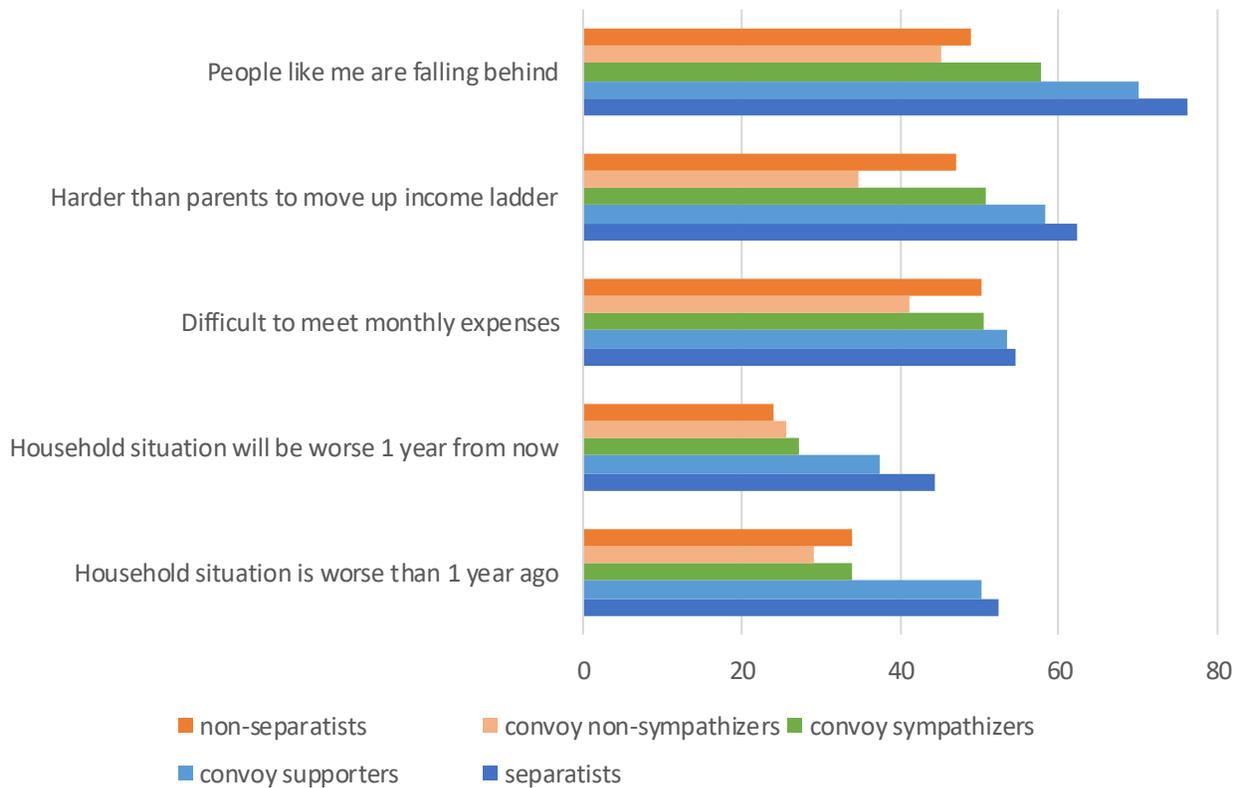


Figure 9. Personal Economic Attitudes by Group, 2022



Explaining the Rise of Separatism and the Freedom Convoy in Alberta

Three inter-related forces appear to be driving support for both separatism and the Convoy movement in Alberta:

1. A significant minority of the Alberta population is experiencing a sense of *status loss*. Felt at the provincial and individual level, they feel like they are falling behind -- and in some cases, being left behind -- the rest of society.
2. Supporters of the separatist and Convoy movements are animated by *tribalism*: an insular form of community solidarity that treats outsiders as threats and opponents as enemies.
3. Supporters of the separatist and Convoy movements have very low levels of trust in mainstream sources of authority and democratic institutions. This *death of deference* threatens the legitimacy of governments and the outcomes of elections.

These three forces have combined to produce a new form of western alienation that poses one of the biggest threats to national unity in Canada today.

Status Loss

Many separatists and Convoy supporters feel that their place in society is being threatened or diminished. This may be due to the sense that other groups are getting ahead, or forging ahead more quickly; that their lives are not markedly improved compared to their parents'; or that their livelihoods and way of life are being denigrated due to shifting economies or cultural norms. This status loss provides a sort of emotive trigger. Political entrepreneurs may cultivate in-group affinities and outgroup animosities by appealing to reconstructed notions of the past, promising to "make their countries great again" by returning a sense of pride and honour to those who feel like they are "falling behind" in today's economy and society.¹⁰ This perceived loss of status has been connected to the rise of populist movements throughout the world, contributing in part to the emergence of the Yellow Vests in France,¹¹ Brexit in the United Kingdom,¹² and Trumpism in the United States.¹³

¹⁰ Moran Mandelbaum. 2020. "Making Our Country Great Again': The Politics of Subjectivity in an Age of National-Populism." *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law* 33: 451-476.

¹¹ Doron Shultziner and Irit S. Kornblit. 2020. "French Yellow Vests (Gilets Jaunes): Similarities and Differences With Occupy Movements." *Sociological Forum* 35(2): 535-542.

¹² Lindsay Richards, Anthony Heath and Noah Carl. "Not just 'the left behind'? Exploring the effects of subjective social status on Brexit-related preferences." *Contemporary Social Science* 16(3): 400-415.

¹³ Diana C. Mutz. 2018. "Status threat, not economic hardship, explains the 2016 presidential vote." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science (PNAS)*, 115(19): 1-10.

In the case of Alberta, this perceived loss of status is felt on multiple levels. As individuals, separatists and Convoy supporters are more likely than others to feel that they are falling behind in society and that their economic prospects are grim. At the provincial level, they are more likely to think Alberta's best days are behind it, that the province is being treated unfairly at the hands of the federal government, and that other Canadians fail to give Alberta the respect it deserves.

At a time when the oil and gas industry was under duress (from a decline in commodity prices and opposition from a strengthened global environmental movement), activist leaders in the separatist and Freedom Convoy movements were able to tap into these sentiments, particularly among blue-collar workers in the energy industry. But the reach was much greater than one sector. As the health of the oil and gas sector has become embedded in Alberta's political culture, threats to the industry are felt as attacks on the province as a whole; this means even Albertans with an indirect connection to oil and gas nonetheless feel their province's status is being diminished.¹⁴ Survey results above demonstrate that most Albertans feel their province is not given the respect or resources it deserves. Separatist and Convoy leaders targeted the federal government in general, and Prime Minister Trudeau in particular, as the villains who had robbed Albertans of their status in society and Confederation.

This combination of status loss at the individual and collective levels has contributed to a new form of western alienation in Alberta. For generations, many Albertans have felt that the province was being *held back* by the federal government and the rest of Canada.¹⁵ But, for the most part, Albertans still felt that they were ahead of other provinces, thanks to the "Alberta Advantage."¹⁶ In the last decade, an increasing number of Albertans now feel that the province is being *left behind* others in Canada. This sentiment provides fuel for reactionary, "backlash politics," as separatist and Convoy leaders promise to restore Alberta's autonomy prestige on the national and global stage, and Albertans' rights and freedoms at the individual level.¹⁷

¹⁴ Jared Wesley. 2021. "Who is 'Average Joe' Albertan?" *Common Ground Research Brief*. <https://www.commongroundpolitics.ca/joe-albertan>

¹⁵ Loleen Berdahl and Roger Gibbins. 2014. *Looking West: regional Transformation and the Future of Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

¹⁶ Geoff Salomons and Daniel Béland. "The Presence of an Absence: The Politics of Provincial Sales Tax in Alberta." *American Review of Canadian Studies* 50(4): 418-435.

¹⁷ Satnam Virdee and Brendan McGeever. 2018. "Racism, Crisis, Brexit." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 41(10): 1802-1819.

Tribalism

A second new element has emerged to distinguish today's form of western alienation from years' past. Long labeled "tribalism"¹⁸ by political scientists, this deep-seated feeling involves a "self-identity of a group or society with a common territory, common traditions, and common values and interests."¹⁹

More recent research has focused on the out-group animosity embedded in tribalism.²⁰ While individuals' attraction to others like themselves may foster in-group unity, a propensity for "reactance" tends to wall-off social worlds and make opinions more extreme and exclusionary.²¹ The advent of social media has only exacerbated these trends,²² contributing to even more "sectarian bitterness" in countries like the United States.²³

A growing number of scholars have engaged tribalism within this framework of inter-group difference, describing a "politics of resentment"²⁴ concentrated not on constructive compromise, but on "binary, ideological groupthink."²⁵ Most often, these discussions centre around partisanship and the related concept of "affective polarization".²⁶ As Krekó and Juhász summarize, more broadly "tribalism means the triumph of moral relativism and particularism over moral universalism; in other words, it adopts an 'our tribe can do it, yours cannot' type of approach."²⁷ In this way, regional forms of tribalism -- like Alberta separatism -- pose threats to national unity.

¹⁸ Some scientists avoid the term due to its perceived pejorative connotations for people in Indigenous and Black communities. As a Black scholar, I use the term conscientiously as a means of reclaiming its original definition, which comes from the Latin term "tribus". For the debate over the term, see: James Fallows. 2017. "A Nation of Tribes, and Members of the Tribe." in *The Atlantic*, November 4.

¹⁹ David Landy. 1958. "Tuscarona Tribalism and National Identity." *Ethnohistory* 5(3): 250-284. See also: Stevan E. Hobfoll. 2019. *Tribalism: The Evolutionary Origins of Fear Politics*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

²⁰ Daniel Balliet, Wu Junhui and Carsten K. W. De Dreu. 2014. "Ingroup Favoritism in Cooperation: A Meta-Analysis." *Psychological Bulletin*, 140(6): 1556.

²¹ Miller McPherson, Lynn Smith-Lovin and James M. Cook. 2002. "Birds of a Feather: Homophily in Social Networks." *Annual Review of Sociology*, 27(1): 415-444.

²² Chris Bail. 2021. "Breaking the Social Media Prism: How to Make Our Platforms Less Polarizing." New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

²³ Robert Putnam. 2021. "The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again." New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc: pp. 72.

²⁴ Katherine J. Cramer. 2016. "The Politics of Resentment." Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

²⁵ Bradley Jersak. 2018. "Transcending the tribalism of the culture wars spectrum." *An Interdisciplinary Journal of Current Affairs and Applied Contemporary Thought*, 8(4): 685-704, pp. 685.

²⁶ Elisabeth Gidengil, Dietlind Stolle, and Olivier BergeronBoutin. 2021. "The partisan nature of support for democratic backsliding: A comparative perspective." *European Journal of Political Research*.

²⁷ Péter Krekó & Attila Juhász. 2019. "Beyond Populism: Political Tribalism in Poland and Hungary." *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, 18(3): 69-81, pp. 71.

Michael Ignatieff warned about the perils of tribalism during the rise of the Tea Party movement in the United States. “For democracies to work,” he wrote in 2013, “politicians need to respect the difference between an enemy and an adversary. An adversary is someone you want to defeat. An enemy is someone you have to destroy”.²⁸ Among adversaries, Ignatieff argued, compromise is honourable, trust is mutual, dialogue is respectful, and debate is within the bounds of well-respected rules and norms. Among enemies, negotiation is traitorous, the democratic system is viewed as “rigged,” conflicts surround identity, and victory is the product of conviction instead of persuasion or consensus. While it is often associated with right-wing populism, factionalism is not theoretically confined to one particular side of the political spectrum.^{29 30}

The separatist and Convoy movements are grounded in a series of reinforcing partisan and regional cleavages that have helped foster this sort of tribalism in Alberta. The demise of Canada’s regional brokerage parties has coincided with the rise of province-first parties in several jurisdictions, including Alberta. Whereas federal parties like the Liberals and Progressive Conservatives may have once drawn support from all regions of the country, and had closer connections with their provincial cousins, the realignment of Canadian party politics along regional lines has made bridge-building among provinces, and between provinces and the federal government, even more challenging. In this atmosphere, “inter-regional conflict spills outside the confines of internal party politics and becomes the subject of intense partisan and intergovernmental debate.”³¹ Partisan fights become regional, and vice versa. This transforms intergovernmental relations into a partisan arena, and party conflict into matters of national unity.

This atmosphere has helped nurture an “us versus them” mentality in parts of the country, particularly in Alberta where the United Conservative Party has been pursuing a fair deal agenda meant to build a firewall around the province. The separatist and Freedom Convoy movements have drawn on these ideas and the momentum generated by them.

As political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt argue, “When societies divide into partisan camps with profoundly different worldviews, and when those differences are viewed as existential and irreconcilable, political rivalry can devolve into partisan hatred. Parties come to view each other not as legitimate rivals, but as dangerous enemies.

²⁸ Michael Ignatieff. 2013, October 13. “Enemies vs. Adversaries.” Retrieved from The New York Times: <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/17/opinion/enemies-vs-adversaries.html>

²⁹ Justin E. Lane, Kevin McCaffree and F. LeRon Shults. 2021. “The moral foundations of left-wing authoritarianism: On the character, cohesion, and clout of tribal equalitarian discourse.” *arXiv:2102.11009*: 1-33.

³⁰ Robert J. Antonio. 2019. “Reactionary tribalism redux: Right-wing populism and de-Democratization.” *The Sociological Quarterly*, 60(2): 201-209.

³¹ Jared Wesley. 2020. “Building Bridges: Toward a Reform of Canadian Intergovernmental Relations.” *IRPP Centre of Excellence on the Canadian Federation Essay Series*, Paper No. 7.

Losing ceases to be an accepted part of the political process and instead becomes a catastrophe.”³²

Such tribalistic sentiments align well with the objectives of the separatist and Freedom Convoy movements, and with the attitudes of their supporters. Albertans in these camps tend to denigrate the Liberal Party of Canada and the prime minister, for instance, using charged language to label Trudeau a “traitor,³³” chanting “lock him up”³⁴ during protests, throwing gravel at him at campaign stops,³⁵ and even carrying nooses to rallies.³⁶ This imagery draws parallels to events surrounding the insurrection at the US Capitol in January 2021.

Death of Deference

When directed at a governing group by people who remain alienated from power, tribalism can lead to the third element of today’s western alienation: the death of deference to traditional sources of authority. Among separatists and Convoy supporters, trust in government, political actors, and experts is extremely low. This, plus their libertarian outlook, makes it exceptionally difficult to involve them in collective action.³⁷ This becomes particularly problematic in times of crisis, as trust in public institutions is key to fostering community mobilization and repressing the spread of misinformation and authoritarianism.³⁸

Separatists, Convoy organizers, and sympathetic party leaders have explicitly challenged the legitimacy of experts and democratic actors during the COVID-19 pandemic. Examples include UCP leadership candidate Danielle Smith³⁹ and People's Party of

³² Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt. 2018. “How Democracies Die”. New York: Crown.

³³ Arthur C. Green. 2022. “‘Trudeau you’re a traitor’ Calgary Stampede crowd heckles PM.” *Western Standard*, July 11.

³⁴ Elizabeth Racz. 2021. “Ontario Protesters Chant ‘Lock Him Up’ at Justin Trudeau, Throw Gravel”. *Storyful*, September 7.

³⁵ Nathan Denette. 2021. “Trudeau hit by gravel as protesters surround campaign bus in London, Ont.” *CBC News*, September 6.

³⁶ Tonda MacCharles. 2022. “Justin Trudeau cancels B.C. appearance after protesters gather carrying noose” *Toronto Star*, May 25.

³⁷ Timothy C. Earle and Michael Siegrist. 2008. “Trust, Confidence and Cooperation model: A framework for understanding the relation between trust and Risk Perception.” *International Journal of Global Environmental Issues*, 8(1): 17-29.

³⁸ K. U. Menon and K. T. Goh. 2005. “Transparency and trust: risk communications and the Singapore experience in managing SARS.” *Journal of Communication Management*, 9(1): 375-383.

³⁹ Anthony Murdoch. 2022, June 25. “Alberta Premier hopeful pledges to ‘never’ allow COVID lockdowns, mandates to ‘happen again’”. Retrieved from *USSA News*: <https://ussanews.com/2022/06/25/alberta-premier-hopeful-pledges-to-never-allow-covid-lockdowns-mandates-to-happen-again/>

Canada leader Maxime Bernier⁴⁰ repeating commitments to “never again” go back to “lockdowns,” despite considerable scientific consensus around the importance of social distancing to controlling the spread of the disease.

This politicization of COVID-19 has threatened cross-partisan consensus on Canadians’ trust in science and the democratic system. This has been amplified by Convoy demands for “freedom” from restrictions deriving from science-informed, democratically-imposed policies, such as mask mandates and vaccine requirements. Hence, while at the start of the pandemic Canadians’ responses to the pandemic were “not structured by partisanship,” this common ground has shrunk considerably.⁴¹ Many people have become weary, and some outright angry, at adhering to measures recommended by scientists and imposed by governments, and the literature suggests the trend of rising distrust seen in large parts of the US seems to be seeping into Canada.⁴²

This sort of decline of trust in authority is not confined to the separatist and Convoy movements, nor is it particularly new. Late last century, political scientist Neil Nevitte published a seminal work on the shifting values of Canadians away from respectful obedience to authority toward a more libertarian mindset. He called this shift *The Decline of Deference*, and he attributed it to a combination of forces including rising levels of education and the emergence of new, emancipatory political ideologies.⁴³

At the time he wrote nearly three decades ago, Nevitte noted that the decline of deference was found at both ends of the political spectrum. In recent years, people on the political right have been more likely to lose faith in mainstream democratic institutions, however. This has coincided with their deep sense of political alienation and resentment, particularly those who work blue collar jobs and live rural areas.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Kraig Krause. 2021. “Coronavirus: Sloan, Bernier, Hillier among 'end the lockdown caucus'” *Global News*, February 9.

⁴¹ Erik Merkley, Aengus Bridgman, Peter John Loewen, Taylor Owen, Derek Ruths and Oleg Zhilin. 2020. “A rare moment of cross-partisan consensus: Elite and public response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada.” *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 53(2): 311-318, pp. 316.

⁴² Cary Wu, Alex Bierman and Scott Schieman. 2022, June 28. “Canada’s trust divide is growing, and that could spell bad news for the future.” Retrieved from Canadian Manufacturing: <https://www.canadianmanufacturing.com/features/canadas-trust-divide-is-growing-and-that-could-spell-bad-news-for-the-future/>

⁴³ Neil Nevitte. 1996. *The Decline of Deference*. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press.

⁴⁴ Arlie Russell Hochschild. 2016. *Strangers in their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. New York: The New Press.

In other words, those most likely to experience status loss have become tribalistically motivated to challenge government, experts, and other forms of traditional authority. The separatist and Convoy movements have led this type of activation. And it has produced some worrying results.

This includes a loss of faith in the legitimacy of elections. According to our April 2022 Viewpoint Alberta survey, over half of all separatists (60 percent) and Convoy supporters (56) thought that the 2021 federal election was conducted unfairly.⁴⁵ This is over double the proportion of the general population, and it threatens the principle of “losers’ consent” that underpins our democratic system.⁴⁶ Put simply, when members of certain political “tribes” no longer view their opponents as legitimate political actors, and/or they no longer feel they have the opportunity to win power -- they refuse to acknowledge election victories or the authority to be governed.

As Rissa Reist and I have written elsewhere, “This lack of losers’ consent has been at the forefront of the Convoy movement from the beginning. Some convoy leaders raised money and collected more than 300,000 signatures based on their explicit intent to overthrow a democratically elected government — a position they withdrew only as the protests entered their third week.”⁴⁷ This is a fundamental rejection of the rule of law, which once again draws parallels to the January 6, 2021, insurrection in the United States.

Similarly, UCP leadership contender Danielle Smith has framed her campaign around promising to ignore federal laws that she feels go against Alberta’s interests.⁴⁸ Her proposed *Alberta Sovereignty Act* is a reflection of her refusal to provide losers’ consent to a democratically elected federal government. Should she win the UCP leadership and become premier, the introduction of that legislation could spark one of the deepest constitutional crises we’ve seen in decades.⁴⁹ This is intentional. According to the “Free Alberta Strategy” on which Smith’s strategy is based, initial moves like the *Alberta Sovereignty Act*, the usurping of banking and judicial appointment powers from the federal government, and more conventional and constitutional firewall measures (pensions,

⁴⁵ Recall that conservative parties in Alberta had combined to receive more votes than the victorious NDP in the 2015 provincial election; and the Conservative Party of Canada had garnered all but 3 of Alberta’s seats and a larger proportion of the popular vote than the victorious Liberals in the 2021 federal election.

⁴⁶ Christopher J. Anderson, André Blais, Shaun Bowler, Todd Donovan, and Ola Listhaug. 2005. *Losers’ Consent: Elections and Democratic Legitimacy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁴⁷ Jared Wesley and Rissa Reist. 2022. “Three deep-seated drivers of the convoy, and what we can do about them.” *Policy Options*, February 18.

⁴⁸ Dean Bennett. 2022. “Alberta UCP leadership candidate Danielle Smith promises immediate sovereignty act.” *Canadian Press*, June 23.

⁴⁹ Andrew Coyne. 2022. “Alberta is on the verge of the constitutional abyss.” *Globe and Mail*. August 16.

policing, tax collection) are meant to provoke the rest of Canada and set the stage for “the final resort: national independence” for Alberta.⁵⁰

Next Steps

Several outstanding questions surround the future of the separatist and Convoy movements in Alberta. Primary among them: Will the movements lose momentum if public health protections are lifted and/or new conservative governments assume power in Ottawa and Edmonton? And what steps, if any, should be taken to address the underlying grievances and forces that animate these movements?

Our Common Ground team has been researching Alberta public opinion and political culture for the past three years.⁵¹ We intend to continue to conduct surveys and convene focus groups over the next four years. This will include experimental research into the activation of tribal identities and extremism.

At present, two of our working papers are under development for publication. The first focuses on the role of white identity in western alienation.⁵² The second explores the role of gender in Canadian regionalism.⁵³

We are in the process of combining six of our Viewpoint Alberta surveys into a single dataset. This will allow us to conduct more rigorous multivariate analyses of western alienation in Alberta.

⁵⁰ Rob Anderson, Barry Cooper, Derek From. *Free Alberta Strategy*. freealbertastrategy.com/the_strategy

⁵¹ For more information, please visit our website: commongroundpolitics.ca.

⁵² Feodor Snagovsky, Michelle Maroto, and Jared Wesley. 2022. “White Identity and Western Alienation in Alberta.” Paper for presentation at the Annual Meeting of the Prairie Political Science Association. Banff, AB. September 17.

⁵³ Jared Wesley, Lisa Young, Loleen Berdahl, and Lauren Hill. 2022. “Western Alienation and Gender.” Paper for presentation at the C-Dem Forum on Election Democracy. Toronto, May 13.