



PROVINCES APART?

COMPARING
CITIZEN
VIEWS
IN
ALBERTA
AND
BRITISH
COLUMBIA

—
Trevor Harrison
and Harvey Krahn



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Trevor Harrison and Harvey Krahn
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The past year has seen intense political fighting between Alberta and British Columbia centred on pipeline development, the actions of protesters, and environmental issues more broadly. Given the importance of the issues involved, the authors re-examined the results of a survey of residents of Alberta and BC, conducted between February 9, 2017 and March 9, 2017 by the Population Research Laboratory at the University of Alberta. Specifically, the authors wanted to know whether, prior to the current dispute and the media attention it has attracted, the opinions and beliefs of residents of the two provinces really were all that different concerning political influence, carbon-based extraction, the environment, free markets, and the role of protests in a democracy.

The survey results suggest that many residents in both Alberta and BC at the time understood and supported a nuanced approach that involved having more voices heard, that was wary of the claims of big business and the oil industry, and that recognized the need to substantially reduce the use of carbon-based energy. There was, at the time the survey was conducted, not widespread disapproval of protesters, not even in Alberta. Where statistically significant provincial differences were found, they involved the relative strength of agreement or disagreement, not highly polarized opposing positions, for example regarding global warming and the need to move away from fossil fuels.

The authors suggest that the heated rhetoric over the past year is the result primarily of the respective politics of the Alberta and British Columbia governments.

1. INTRODUCTION

The past year has seen intense political fighting between Alberta and British Columbia centred on pipeline development, the actions of protesters, and environmental issues more broadly. The dispute has sparked bemusement in some quarters since two NDP provincial governments are at loggerheads. But even where governments share the same party name, significant differences may exist between and within their respective electorates. While polarization is apparent on some issues, confusion and complexity also exists, as reflected in numerous polls conducted over the past year (Anderson and Coletto, 2018; Babych, 2018; CBC, 2018; Ipsos, 2018; Johnston, 2018).

Given the importance of the issues involved, the authors re-examined the results of a survey of residents of Alberta and BC, conducted between February 9, 2017 and March 9, 2017 by the Population Research Laboratory at the University of Alberta. Specifically, we wanted to know whether, prior to the current dispute and the media attention it has attracted, the opinions and beliefs of residents of the two province really were all that different concerning political influence, carbon-based extraction, the environment, free markets, and the role of protests in democracy.

2. MEASUREMENT OF ATTITUDES IN THE TWO PROVINCES

Drawing from the larger set of survey items, in this report we analyze responses to eight Likert-style questions focusing on attitudes towards market-driven resource development, citizen protest movements, and climate change. Survey participants answered using a five-point scale (1 = Strongly agree ↔ 5 = Strongly disagree). In Table 1, we collapse those responses into three categories (disagree, neutral, agree) and cross-tabulate the responses by province of residence.

We also asked survey participants about their perceptions of how much power and influence nine different groups wielded on government (see Table 2). Respondents commented on each group using a five-point scale (1 = Too little influence ↔ 5 = Too much influence). Table 2 presents these responses, collapsed into three categories (too little influence, neutral, too much influence) and cross-tabulated by province of residence.

Using one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA), we also checked whether responses to these attitudinal questions were correlated with provincial voting preferences (right-wing, left-wing, other) and with several socio-demographic variables (gender, age, education).

In Alberta, those who indicated that they would vote for the Progressive Conservative or Wildrose parties in provincial elections were classified as right-wing voters, while those who said they would vote for the NDP or the Green Party were labelled as left-wing voters. The handful of individuals who preferred other parties, and the larger number who said they did not know who they would vote for, would not vote, or were not eligible to vote, were placed in the “other” category. The same coding decisions were used in British Columbia to identify left-wing voters and those placed in the “other” category, while BC Conservative and Liberal party supporters were labelled right-wing voters.

3. SURVEY RESULTS

Opinions about market-driven resource development, protest movements, and climate change

Table 1 shows residents’ opinions on selected issues relevant to the current political conflict between Alberta and BC. Regarding market-driven resource development, we note that residents of Alberta were significantly more likely than British Columbia residents to agree that “free markets are the best way of regulating oil and gas development.” Nevertheless, even in Alberta only a minority (43%) agreed with this statement. In contrast, three-quarters of survey participants in both provinces agreed that “what is good for markets isn’t always good for communities,” indicating concern in both provinces about unfettered resource development. In fact, almost half the study participants in both provinces agreed that “ordinary people have no control over oil and gas development.”

The data also show that, compared to Alberta residents, British Columbia residents viewed the role of protest groups in democracy more positively (62% agreed, compared to 52% in Alberta). Similarly, BC residents were also more likely to reject the notion of pipeline protesters being opposed to progress (57% disagreed, compared to 47% in Alberta). Despite these statistically significant differences, however, it is important to note that only a minority of respondents in both provinces (one-third or less) agreed that pipeline protesters are against progress.

Table 1: Alberta and BC residents' opinions about selected issues, 2017*

	% Disagree (1 & 2)	% Neutral (3)	% Agree (4 & 5)
<i>Free markets are the best way of regulating oil and gas development.#</i>			
Alberta	23	34	43
British Columbia	39	31	30
<i>What is good for markets isn't always good for communities.</i>			
Alberta	8	19	73
British Columbia	9	17	74
<i>Ordinary people have no control over oil and gas development.</i>			
Alberta	25	28	47
British Columbia	29	23	48
<i>Protest groups are an important part of democracy.#</i>			
Alberta	24	24	52
British Columbia	16	22	62
<i>People who protest pipeline development are against progress.#</i>			
Alberta	47	20	33
British Columbia	57	20	23
<i>Human activity is the main cause of global warming.</i>			
Alberta	22	18	60
British Columbia	20	15	65
<i>We need to move away from using fossil fuels.#</i>			
Alberta	26	21	53
British Columbia	14	17	69
<i>We still don't know whether fossil fuels really cause global warming.</i>			
Alberta	50	16	34
British Columbia	58	16	26

* Respondents answered on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree); weighted data for age and education

Percentage differences between provinces are statistically significant ($p < .05$)

As for opinions about climate change, British Columbia residents were somewhat more likely to agree that “human activity is the main cause of global warming,” but the difference was not statistically significant. Similarly, BC residents were somewhat less likely to agree that “we still don’t know whether fossil fuels really cause global warming,” but, again, the provincial difference was not significant. What is more noteworthy than provincial differences is the fact that 60% or more of residents of both provinces felt global warming was primarily caused by human activity, along with evidence that one-third or less of residents of both provinces were skeptical of the link between fossil fuels and climate change. And while they were significantly less likely than BC residents to agree, over half of the Alberta survey respondents did agree that “we need to move away from fossil fuels” (53% versus 69%).

We observed no statistically significant ($p < .05$) gender differences in responses to these opinion statements in the BC data and only one in the Alberta data (specific results are not shown in the table). In both provinces, university-educated survey respondents were more likely to agree that “human activity is the main cause of global warming,” but we noted very few other significant differences by educational attainment. Age was found to be significant in British Columbia, with younger survey respondents generally more opposed to market-driven resource development, more supportive of citizen protest movements, and more concerned about climate change. While the same general pattern was observed in Alberta, the differences by age were not statistically significant.

In both provinces, however, provincial voting preference was significantly associated with responses to most of these opinion statements. Compared to left-wing voters (NDP and Green Party supporters), right-wing voters (Progressive Conservative and Wildrose supporters in Alberta; BC Conservative and Liberal supporters in BC) were more likely to favour market-driven resource development, less likely to favour citizen protest movements, and less likely to express concern about climate change.

Opinions about who influences the government

Table 2 shows the perceptions of Alberta and British Columbia residents regarding the influence upon government of various groups, ranked by the percentage of respondents stating that a particular group had “too much influence.”

More than two-thirds of survey respondents in both provinces felt that “big business” and the petroleum industry had too much influence.

About one-third of Alberta respondents felt that labour unions and environmentalists had too much influence on government, compared to just one-quarter of BC respondents. Looking at the other end of the scale, BC respondents were significantly more likely than Albertans to say that Indigenous groups had too little influence on government (49% versus 42%). Similarly, BC residents were significantly more likely than Albertans to say that ethnic minorities had too little influence on government (63% versus 54%).

Summing up the data patterns in Table 2, there are some provincial differences in opinions about groups with too much or too little influence on government, but the scope of these differences is small. Much more prominent are the differences across groups. More than two-thirds of survey participants in both BC and Alberta stated that big business and the petroleum industry have too much influence. In contrast, one-third or less in both provinces believed that labour unions, environmentalists, Indigenous

groups, women's groups, and ethnic minorities have too much influence. It is interesting that the latter are groups are frequently labelled as "special interests"; that is, groups depicted as having too much—not too little—influence! Most Alberta and BC residents appear to believe otherwise.

Table 2: Alberta and BC residents' perceptions of who is influencing government, 2017*			
	% Too Little Influence (1 & 2)	% Neutral (3)	% Too Much Influence (4 & 5)
<i>Big business</i>			
Alberta	4	23	73
British Columbia	3	26	71
<i>Petroleum industry</i>			
Alberta	8	16	76
British Columbia	9	23	68
<i>Labour unions[#]</i>			
Alberta	24	39	37
British Columbia	28	44	28
<i>Environmentalists[#]</i>			
Alberta	37	31	32
British Columbia	41	36	23
<i>Indigenous groups[#]</i>			
Alberta	42	33	25
British Columbia	49	24	27
<i>Women's groups</i>			
Alberta	46	39	15
British Columbia	51	32	17
<i>Ethnic minorities[#]</i>			
Alberta	54	26	20
British Columbia	63	24	13

* Respondents answered on a five-point scale (1 = too little influence; 5 = too much influence); weighted data for age and education

Percentage differences between provinces are statistically significant ($p < .05$)

In both Alberta and BC, provincial voting preference was significantly associated ($p < .05$) with opinions about political influence, for each of the groups we asked about (specific results are not shown in the table). Specifically, right-wing voters (Progressive Conservative and Wildrose supporters in Alberta; BC Conservative and Liberal supporters in BC) were *less likely* than left-wing voters (NDP and Green Party supporters) to think that big business and the petroleum industry had too much influence on government. Compared to left-wing voters, right-wing party supporters were also more likely to think that groups labeled “special interests,” as described earlier, had too much influence on government.

Statistically significant differences across socio-demographic groups in responses to these questions regarding influence were fewer, smaller, and far from consistent, compared to party preference differences, so we do not outline them here.

4. SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

Polls conducted over the past year—and the media headlines resulting—have emphasized polarization between Alberta and British Columbia residents over pipeline development, especially the proposed Trans Mountain pipeline expansion, and environmental protection. The conflict has been muddied by differences over economic development generally, the issue of global warming, the role of each province’s respective governments, the actions of protesters, and the legal and moral standing of various communities along the route, especially Indigenous peoples. Viewed from a distance, the conflicts would seem to be intractable; the sides impossibly split.

The results of our survey, conducted at the moment when the conflict over the Trans Mountain pipeline expansion was set to erupt, shows something quite different. To be sure, the current conflict involves serious issues of the economy and the environment, as well as the rights of Indigenous peoples. But our survey suggests that many residents in both Alberta and British Columbia understood and supported a nuanced approach that involved having more voices heard, that was wary of the claims of big business and the oil industry, and that recognized the need to substantially reduce the use of carbon-based energy. Similarly, there was not widespread disapproval of protesters, even in Alberta.

Where statistically significant provincial differences were found, they involved the relative strength of agreement or disagreement, not highly polarized opposing positions (e.g., opinions about global warming and the need to move away from fossil fuels). When asked about groups that had too much or too little influence on government, the large differences were not in responses from Albertans and BC residents. Instead, differences across groups presumed to be too influential or not influential enough were much more prominent. Specifically, a large majority of both Alberta and BC residents felt that big business and the petroleum industry had too much influence on government, while only a minority—and frequently a small one—felt that “special interest groups” (labour unions environmentalists, Indigenous and women’s groups, ethnic minorities) had too much influence.

We acknowledge there are strong attitudinal differences on some issues, but our survey suggests that these differences are larger within Alberta and British Columbia than between them. Within both provinces, we also observed statistically significant differences between right-wing and left-wing voters in responses to most of the examined issues. Beyond these party preference differences and a few additional demographic differences, how do we square the general agreement we found across the two provinces with the heated rhetoric shown in the past year? The answer we suggest lies in the respective politics of the Alberta and British Columbia; that, more specifically, the governing and opposition parties in both provinces have exacerbated this partisan divide.

From the moment of its surprise electoral victory in 2015, and in the midst of a serious drop in oil prices that negatively impacted government revenues, Alberta’s NDP government, headed by Premier Rachel Notley, found itself challenged by right-wing critics to prove its economic credentials. Depicted relentlessly by Alberta’s corporate media and right-wing political parties as “radically socialist” and “anti-business,” and facing internal divisions between pro-environmental and labour supporters, the NDP steadily moved to the political centre. While still espousing support for greater environmental protections and the need to move away from carbon-based energy, the government adopted policies on oil development not dissimilar to those of past provincial governments. These policies have included support for the oil sands and pipelines to get oil more directly to international markets. Of the many possible pipeline routes, the one seemingly most likely to go ahead was Kinder Morgan’s Trans Mountain pipeline expansion through British Columbia, as it had the support of the government of the time, Christy Clark’s BC Liberals.

Shortly after our survey was conducted, however, British Columbia's NDP won its own somewhat-surprising election victory. Like its Alberta counterpart, BC's new government, headed by Premier John Horgan, is supported by an amalgam of environmentalists, labour unions, and social activists. As an initial act, the new government allowed construction of a controversial dam project (Site C) to proceed, despite its environmental and financial costs and questionable utility. Widely criticized by its environmental wing, the Horgan government found itself with little room for political maneuver regarding the Trans Mountain pipeline.

Pushed by supporters and opposition forces, and needing a political "win," the two respective governments quickly resorted to hyperbolic rhetoric (see Bellefontaine, 2018; Schmunk, 2018): the Notley government as pro-economic development and constitutional defenders of the Canadian economy (even as it threatened restrictions on interprovincial trade), the Horgan government as environmental champions (even as it pushed for further LNG development used in Alberta's production of bitumen and dilbit). To understand further the political issues behind the rhetoric, consider that Albertans are going to the polls in 2019, and that BC's NDP—holding a wafer-thin legislative majority that is propped up the BC Green Party—may also find itself in an election in 2019. Against this political backdrop, the shades of complexity on the issues we surveyed in spring 2017 have sadly been lost.

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APPENDIX : Research Design, Sample Characteristics, and Measurement

The main feature of the sampling design was a two-stage selection process: first, based on a selection of households, and second, the selection of a respondent within each household. The survey aimed for an approximate sample size of 400 from each of Alberta and British Columbia. The target population were persons 18 years of age or older. The Alberta sample of 400 was taken from a larger sample of 1,200 households within that province as part of the PRL's annual Alberta Survey. This smaller sample of 400 was randomly chosen and given the additional questions used in this report.

The PRL used a Random-Digit Dialing (RDD) approach for landlines to ensure that respondents had an equal chance to be contacted whether or not their household was listed in a telephone directory. In 2017, the sampling frames of telephone numbers included both landlines and cell phones. The telephone listings were developed from working banks, randomly selected with replacement and randomly generated. Duplicate telephone numbers were purged from the computer list. Businesses and government exchanges were excluded. An outside vendor generated the cell phone listings. When a cell phone was reached and the person preferred not to continue for personal, privacy and/or cost reasons, the interview was terminated.

Within selected households, one eligible adult (age 18 or older) was selected as the respondent. A quota sampling system was used to obtain equal numbers of female and male respondents.

The final sample of 803 respondents consisted of 403 females and 400 males. The table below shows the number of interviews for Alberta and British Columbia by gender.

Gender of Respondent	Alberta	British Columbia	Total
Male	199	201	400
Female	202	201	403
Total Sample	401	402	803

Data collection occurred between February 9, 2017 and March 9, 2017, with the assistance of trained and supervised professional interviewers. The response rate was 16.9% for British Columbia and 20.4% for Alberta. Since previous assessments of Alberta Survey samples (e.g., Bladon, 2009) have shown that both older and more educated Albertans are more likely to respond, and assuming a similar overestimation in samples drawn from the other provinces, the 2017 data used in this report were weighted by

both age (seven categories) and educational attainment (three categories), based on province-level data from the 2016 national census to make the sample representative of the population (age 18 and older) in each province. The estimated sampling error, at the 95% confidence level, for samples with 400 respondents, assuming a 50/50 binomial percentage distribution, is approximately plus or minus five percentage points.



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