



Support for federal parties in Alberta in the 2019 Canadian federal election

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Introduction

The Conservative Party of Canada (CPC) had very impressive results in the 2019 federal election in Alberta, winning 69% of the popular vote and all but one of the province's 34 seats. By contrast, the other two major federal political parties had quite disappointing results: while the Liberal Party of Canada (LPC) was unable to secure a seat despite winning 14% of the popular vote, the New Democratic Party (NDP) retained one Edmonton riding, winning 12% of the popular vote. This research brief breaks down the support for three major federal parties in Alberta in the 2019 federal election to better understand the Conservative dominance of the province's politics.

Overall, we see evidence of polarization between the right and left in Alberta politics, but it is polarization that strongly favours provincial and federal conservatives. In politics, the term "polarization" generally conjures up an image of a stark differences of opinion between two groups of roughly equal size. In Alberta, there are two groups of voters with quite different political opinions, but the group with conservative political opinions is significantly larger than the group with progressive opinions. There also appears to be a group of disengaged voters who are pessimistic about politics as whole. They seem to either not care about politics or, alternatively, do not identify either with conservatives or progressives.

Based on our analysis, the three key groups amongst the Alberta electorate can be summarized as follows:

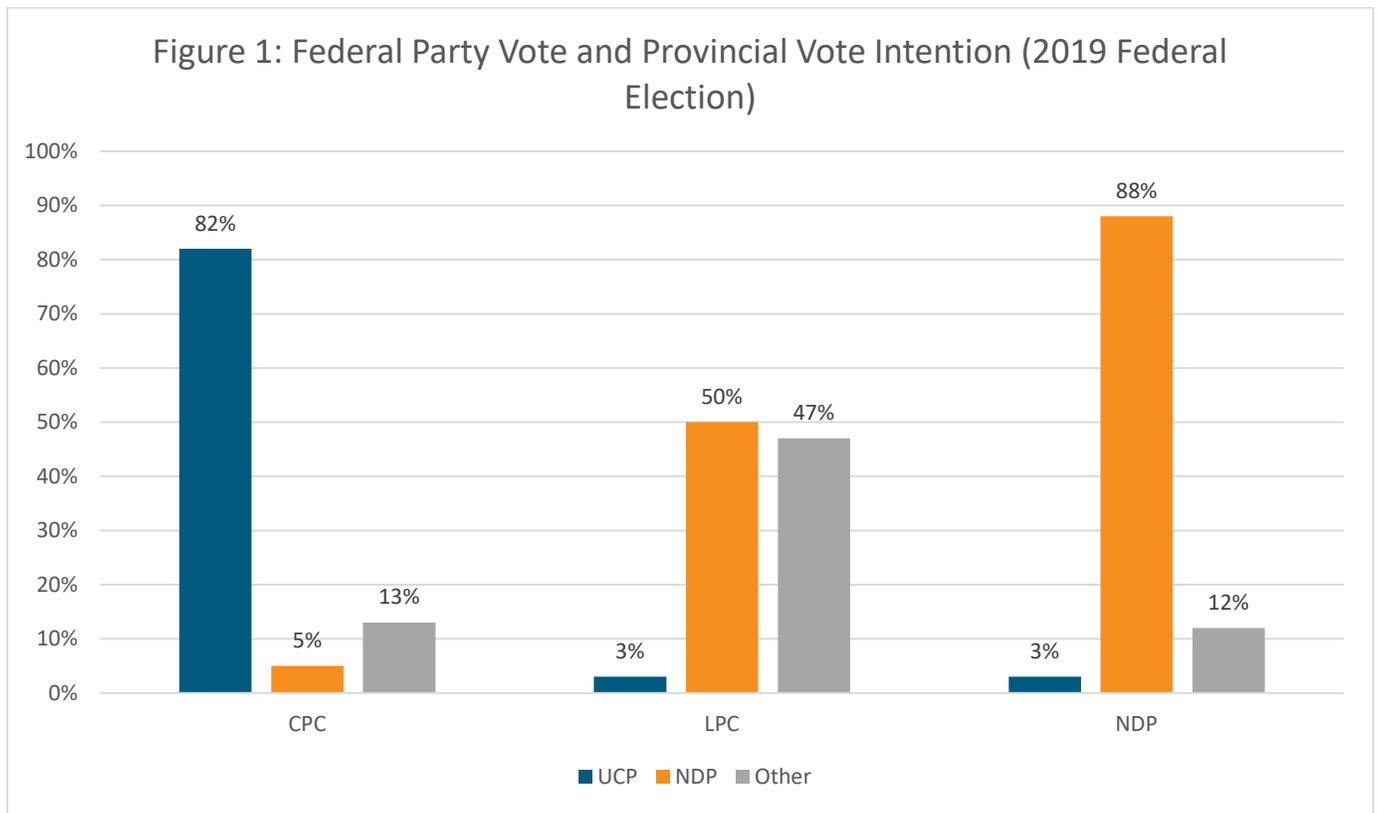
- **Solid conservatives:** These Albertans vote Conservative in federal elections and United Conservative Party (UCP) in provincial elections, and display emotional attachments to both the CPC and UCP. We estimate that these solid conservatives make up about 45% to 50% of the Alberta electorate. Solid conservatives like Andrew Scheer and Jason Kenney and strongly dislike Justin Trudeau, Jagmeet Singh, and Rachel Notley. They situate the economy, especially energy, as the most important issues in politics. Solid conservatives come from socio-demographic groups that have a higher likelihood to vote: they tend to be older, married, and have higher incomes.
- **Solid progressives:** These Albertans are the polar opposite of the solid conservatives. Solid progressives vote Liberal or NDP in federal elections and vote NDP in provincial elections, and have an emotional attachment to either the LPC or the NDP at the federal level and to the NDP at the provincial level. We estimate these voters make up about 25% to 30% of the electorate. Strong progressives like Justin

Trudeau, Rachel Notley, and Jagmeet Singh while disliking Andrew Scheer and Jason Kenney, and they think that environment and social issues are the most important in politics. Solid progressives are more likely to live in urban areas, be immigrants, come from racialized groups, and to find religion unimportant in their lives. Generally, the solid progressives are from socio-demographic groups that have a lower voter turnout.

- **Disengaged:** These Albertans do not have an emotional attachment to any political party at the federal or provincial level. They appear to make up about 20% of eligible Albertan voters. Disengaged Albertans are likely not to vote, likely to dislike all party leaders, and are split over the question of whether the most important issues in politics are economic issues or social/environmental issues. If they do vote, disengaged people vote for a range of parties, from the major parties to minor parties like the federal Greens, the People’s Party, the Alberta Party, or the Liberal Party of Alberta.

Is there a crossover of support between federal and provincial parties in Alberta?

In the weeks immediately following the federal election, the Alberta Viewpoints survey measured both federal voting and provincial voting intentions (Figure 1). As we can see, four-fifths (82%) of Conservative voters in the 2019 federal election also supported the provincial UCP. These are the voters we call solid conservatives. The voters who supported either the federal Liberals or the federal NDP in the 2019 federal election coalesce behind the Alberta NDP. These are the voters we call solid progressives.



Overall, there is considerable crossover between federal and provincial voting in Alberta when it comes to the UCP and CPC as well as the federal and provincial NDP, while federal Liberal voters split their support between the provincial NDP and the provincial Liberals.

What types of people support the different political parties in Alberta politics?

We examined support for the three major federal parties in Alberta during the 2019 federal election within 12 different socio-demographic categories,¹ and examined the vote intention in provincial politics for the UCP and the NDP across these same groups.

The strongest bases of support for the Conservatives and UCP are older, high/middle- income voters who were married and lived in rural or suburban areas. The socio-demographic bases of support for the federal and provincial NDP and the Liberals share more similarities than differences, confirming the existence of a group of solid progressive voters in Alberta. The federal Liberals and the NDP (federally and provincially) voting bases include people from urban areas, immigrants, members of racialized groups, and those who find religion less important in their lives.

These differing sociodemographic bases of support are politically important: The Conservatives and the UCP benefit at the polls because their support base groups are very likely to vote. The federal NDP, provincial NDP, and federal Liberals do not enjoy the same benefit, as their support bases include the socio-demographic groups that are less likely to vote: immigrants, Canadians from racialized groups, young people, and low-income people.

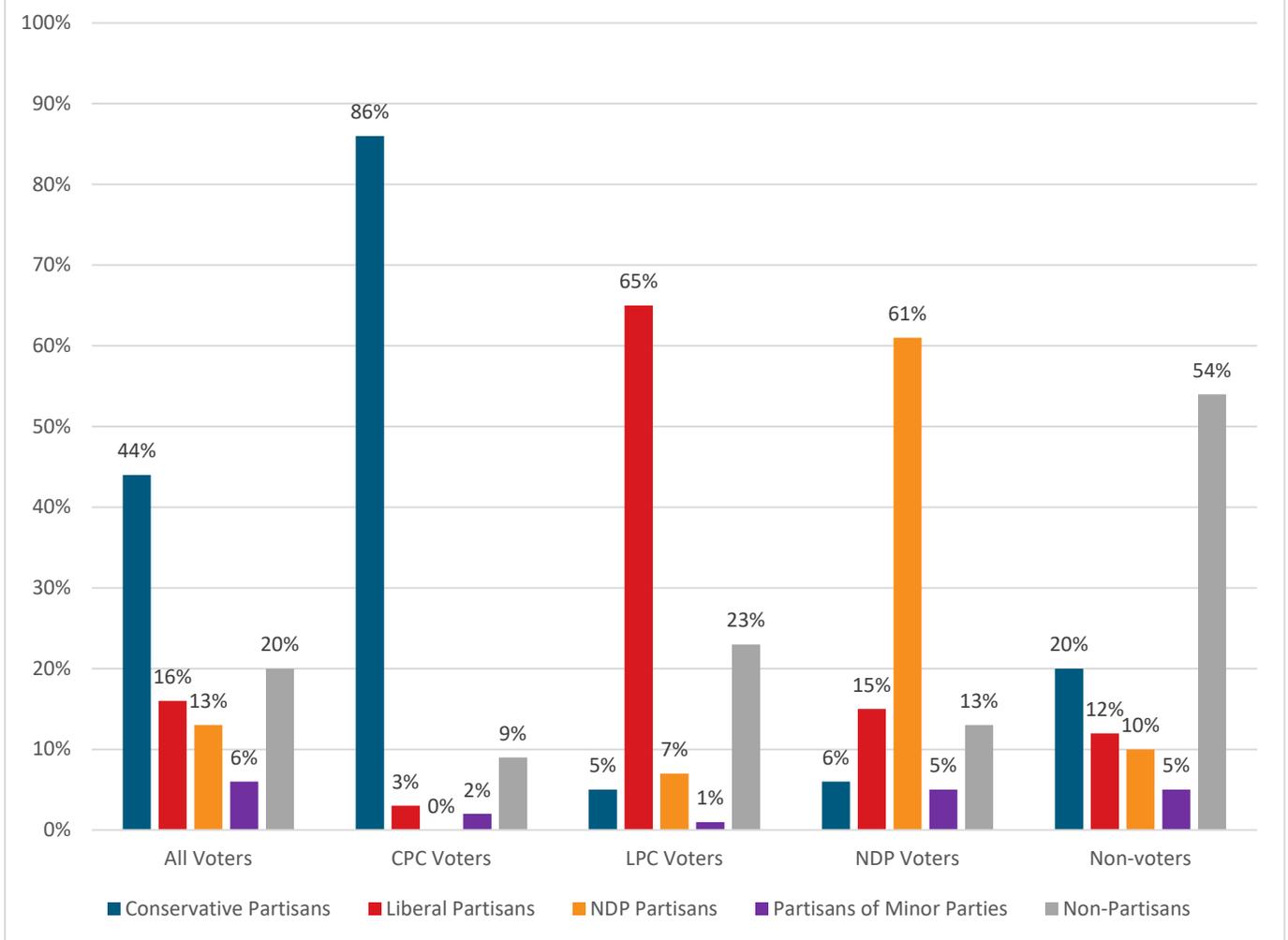
How do people's emotional attachment to parties affect who they vote for?

Partisanship refers to the emotional attachment voters develop with certain parties.² While most voters come to identify themselves with a party to the extent that they think of themselves as a "Conservative," "Liberal," or "New Democrat," a minority of voters do not develop such identifications and generally think of themselves as "non-partisan." Partisans identify as such on surveys, while non-partisans do not identify themselves with a particular party in surveys. Interestingly, partisans do not always vote for the party with which they identify. Figure 2 illustrates how federal partisanship related to voting in Alberta in the 2019 federal election. (Note: in this and future figures, the category of "all voters" includes those who reported they did not vote.)

¹ The 12 categories were based on gender; age; race; immigrant status; subjective identification of being an urban, rural, or suburban resident; education; amount of time the voter had lived in Alberta; union membership; employment status; marital status; income; and religiosity (how important the voter feels religion is in their life).

² The Alberta Viewpoints survey measured federal partisanship using the following question: "In Canadian federal politics, do you usually think of yourself as a: Liberal, Conservative, New Democrat, Green, or People's Party, or none of these?"

Figure 2: Federal Partisanship in Alberta in the 2019 Canadian Federal Election



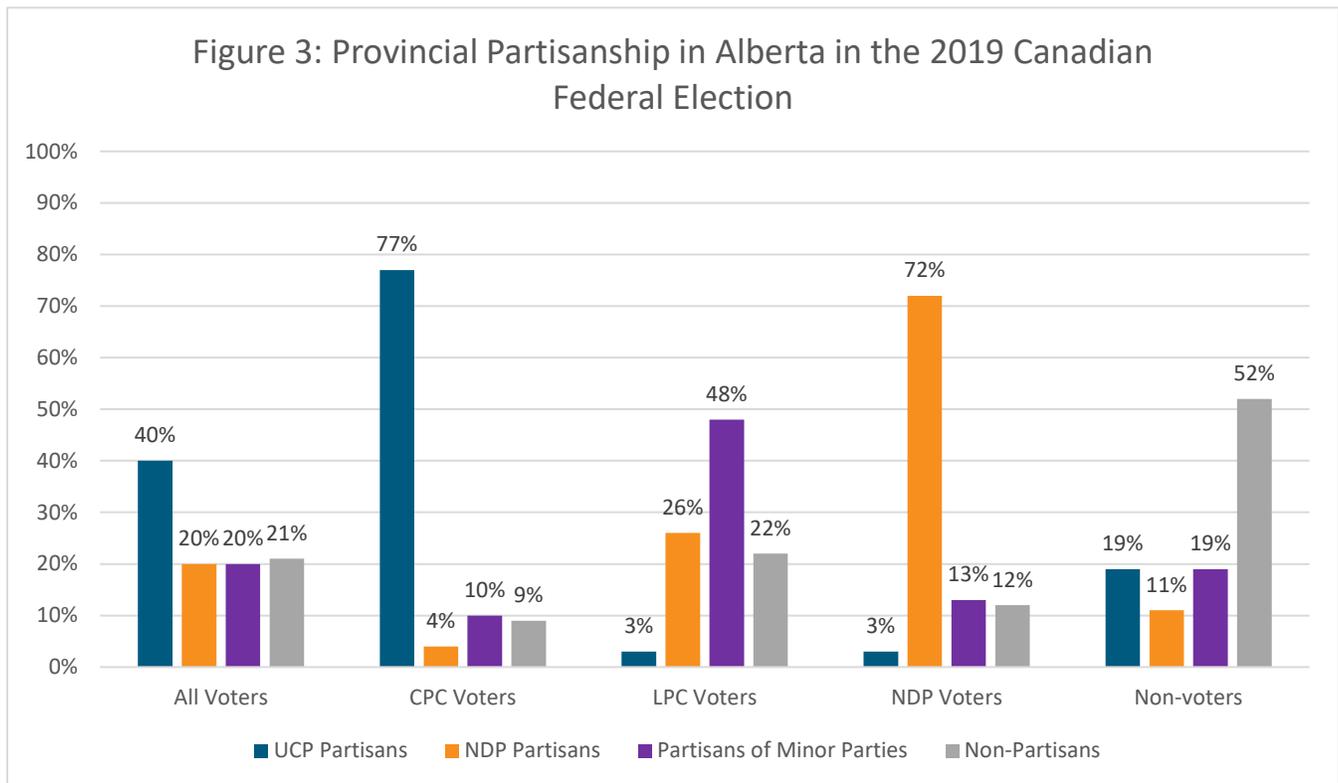
Conservatives had the largest number of partisans in the Albertan electorate during the 2019 federal election. We refer to these voters as solid conservatives. With nearly half of the Alberta electorate identifying as “Conservative” in federal politics, the Conservative party had a significant advantage over the other parties. The Conservatives also did a good job of ensuring that their partisans voted for them: only 5% of Conservative partisans voted for the LPC and 6% for the NDP. What the Conservatives were not able to do in Alberta’s polarized political environment was to attract partisans from other parties to vote for them, as only 5% of their vote came from partisans of other parties.

As Figure 2 also illustrates, NDP partisans and Liberal partisans were likely to cross over to each other’s parties, which lends support to our claim that there is a solid progressive block of voters within Alberta. The tendency to crossover is especially evident with federal Liberal partisans, who made up 15% of the federal NDP vote, while federal NDP partisans made up 7% of the federal Liberal vote. The federal Liberals were much more successful with non-partisans than the federal NDP, with 23% of the Liberal vote coming from non-partisans.

Non-partisans made up 54% of non-voters in the Albertan electorate. Their lack of attachment to any party makes it easier for them to decide to not vote altogether and illustrates their political disengagement.

How do provincial partisans vote in federal elections?

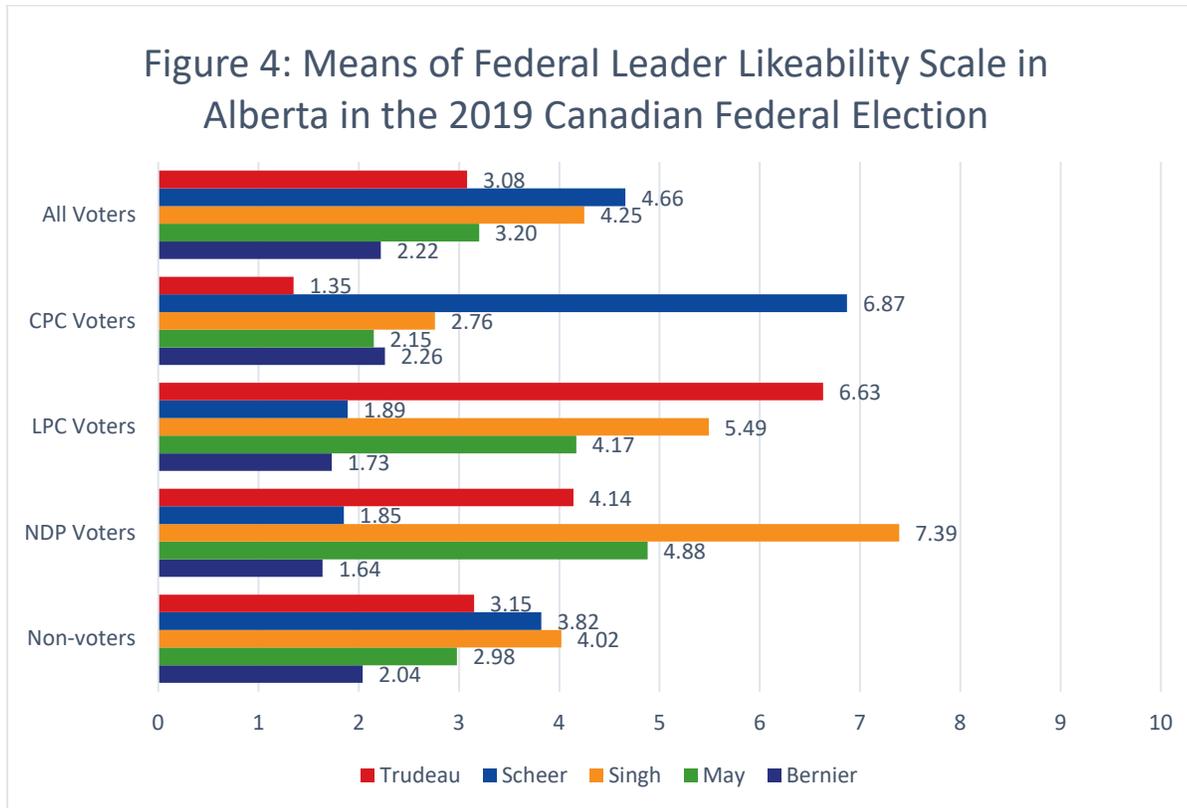
The Alberta Viewpoints survey asked about provincial partisanship³ (Figure 3). Figures 2 and 3 together demonstrate that provincial and federal partisanship in Alberta are very similar. Forty percent of the Alberta electorate identifies as UCP partisans, which is similar to the 44% that identify as CPC partisans. Both provincial and federal non-partisanship are at about 20%, constituting a large disengaged group of voters in the Alberta electorate. And again, there is crossover and interchangeability in the solidly progressive group of voters: The Liberal Party of Canada’s vote in Alberta in the 2019 federal election was made up of 26% of voters who identified with the Alberta NDP. This is solid evidence that provincial New Democrats in Alberta voted Liberal at the federal level. Indeed, the federal NDP in Alberta was hurt by the federal Liberal party attracting provincial NDP partisans.



³ The Alberta Viewpoints survey measured provincial partisanship using the following question: In Alberta provincial politics, do you usually think of yourself as a: New Democrat, United Conservative Party, Alberta Party, Liberal, Green, Freedom Conservative, or none of these?

How much did Albertans like the federal leaders?

Leadership evaluations are obviously an important element to explaining vote choice. The Alberta Viewpoints survey asked respondents to rate the federal leaders on a scale of zero to ten (0=really dislike and 10=really like; see Figure 4).

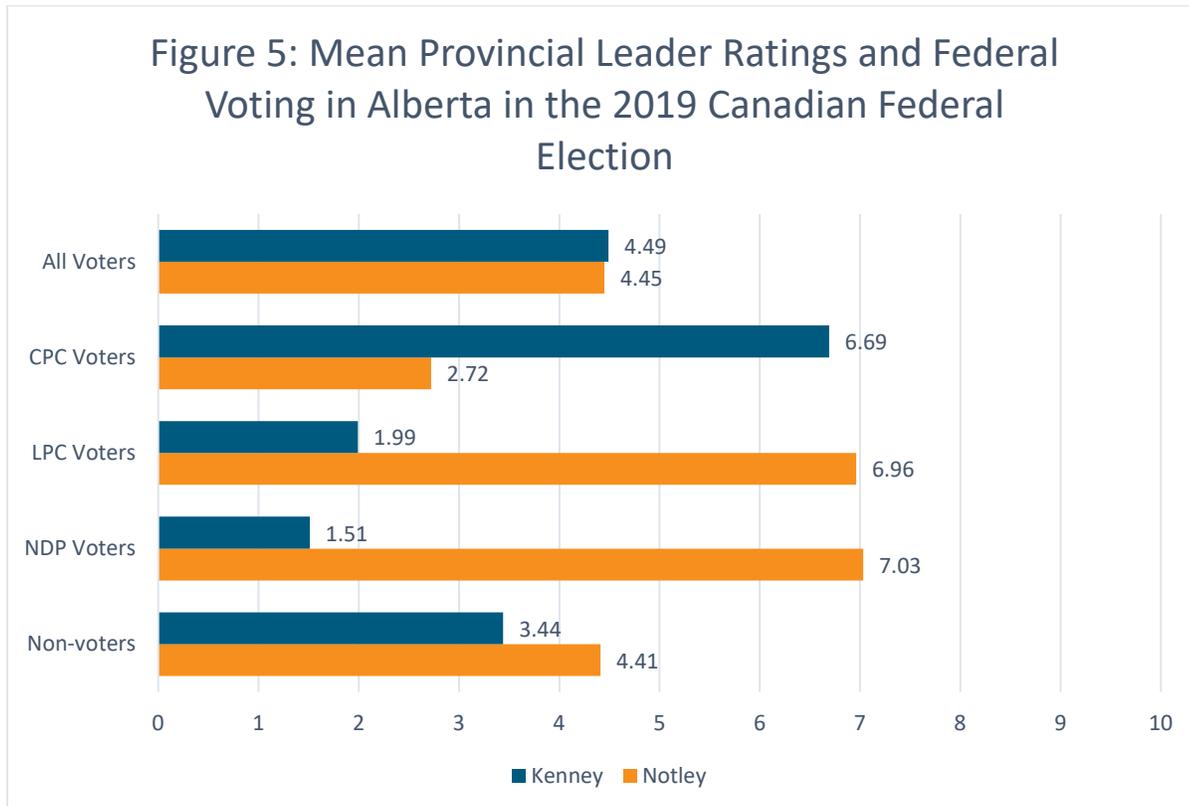


None of the federal leaders was overwhelmingly popular with all Alberta voters. Despite the Conservatives attracting nearly 70% of the popular vote in the 2019 federal election, the mean on Andrew Scheer’s likeability scale was only 4.66 out of 10. Jagmeet Singh had a likeability score close to Scheer’s, at 4.25 out of 10. Justin Trudeau was quite unpopular. Green Party Leader Elizabeth May was more popular than Trudeau, and Trudeau was only just slightly more popular than People’s Party Leader Maxime Bernier.

The leadership evaluation scores illustrate the polarization of Albertan politics. Among the nearly 70% of Albertan voters who voted Conservative, Scheer was well-liked (if not exceedingly popular) at 6.78 out of 10 and Trudeau was viscerally disliked. On the other hand, the progressive NDP and Liberal voters had generally warm feelings toward Trudeau, May, and Singh but really disliked Scheer. Finally, the disengaged non-voters did not really like any leader, which may have made the choice to abstain from voting easier for them to make.

How did Albertans feel about their provincial leaders during the federal election?

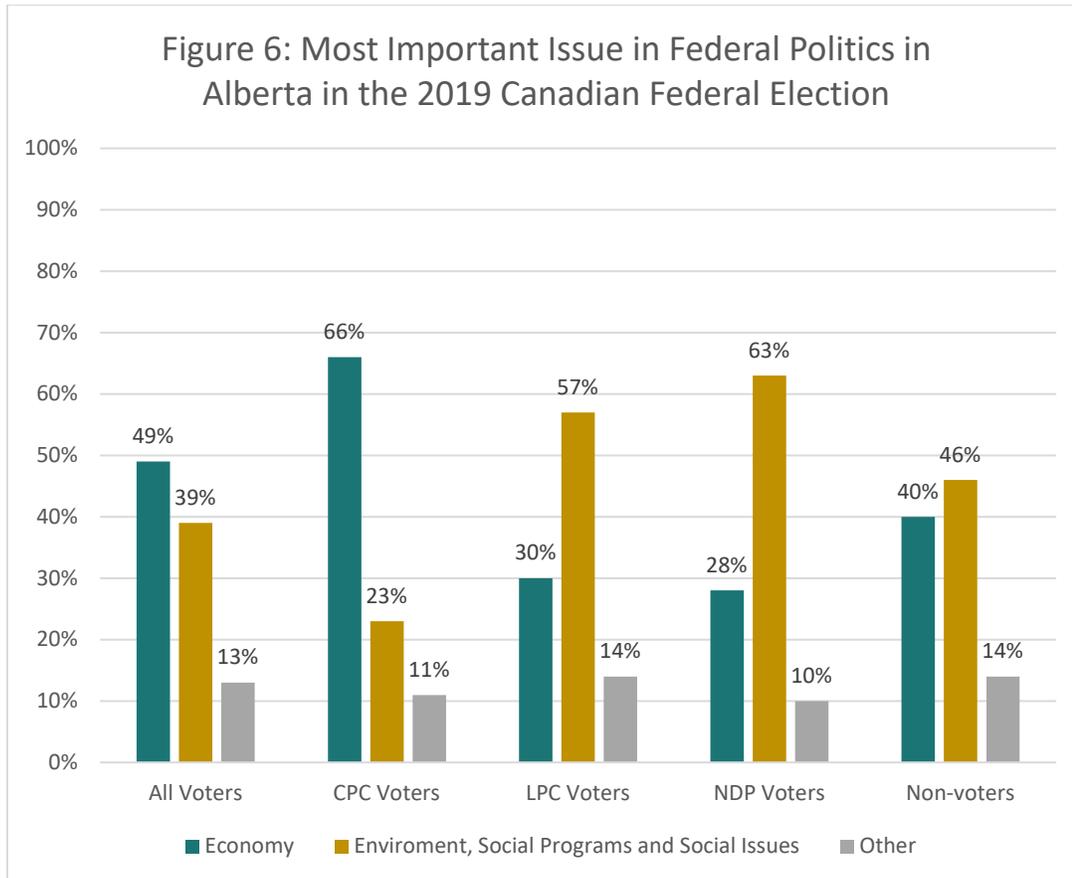
A similar likeability scale was used for two key provincial leaders in Alberta, Premier Jason Kenney and Official Opposition Leader Rachel Notley, to ascertain their popularity in the weeks immediately following the 2019 Canadian federal election (Figure 5). Among all voters, there was a tie in Kenney and Notley's popularity, with each of these leaders' likeability scores hovering just below the mid-point of the likeability scale.



Federal voting patterns again indicate polarization. Kenney is reasonably well-liked by federal Conservative voters (6.69 out of 10) but he is very disliked by federal Liberal voters and federal NDP voters. In contrast, Notley is popular among both federal Liberal voters and federal NDP voters, but she is disliked by federal Conservative voters (2.72 out of 10). Similar to their feelings toward federal party leaders, disengaged non-voters do not like either leader. In short, feelings toward provincial party leaders show the division of the Alberta electorate into solid conservatives (who like Kenney and dislike Notley); solid progressives (who like Notley and dislike Kenney); and disengaged voters (who do not like either Kenney nor Notley).

What was the “top of mind” issue for voters in the federal election?

In the Alberta Viewpoints survey, voters were asked “What is the SINGLE most important issue to you personally in Canadian FEDERAL politics?” and then given a list of 24 issues to choose from. For our analysis, the 24 issues were collapsed into two broad categories, “economy” and “environment, social programs, and social issues,” with the category “other” capturing issues that did not fit well into one of the broader categories (Figure 6).⁴



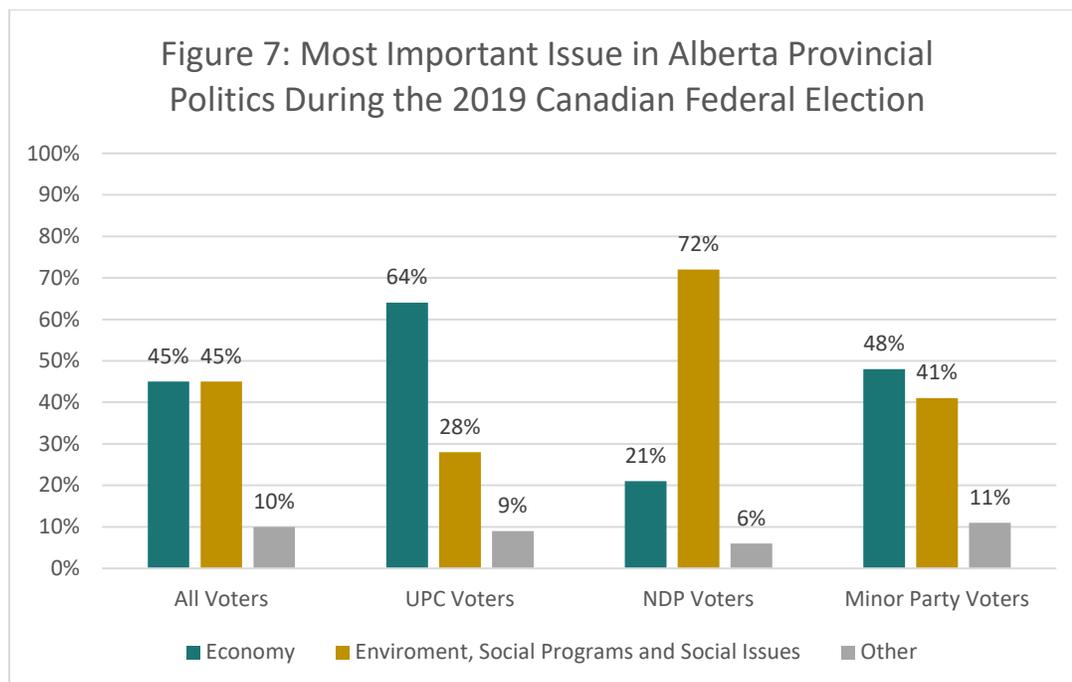
Issues relating to the economy were most important for nearly half of voters in Alberta in the 2019 federal election while social and environmental issues were important for about 40% of the electorate. Unsurprisingly, federal Conservative voters felt that the economy was very important to them, with 66% of those voters identifying an economic issue as their most important issue. Only 23% of Conservative voters identified an environmental or social issue as very important to them. Once again, we see the remarkable similarity of federal NDP and federal Liberal voters who together form the progressive block of voters in Alberta politics. Approximately 60% of these voters identified environmental and social issues as their most important issue

⁴ The category of “economy” encompassed the following issues: economy, agriculture and fisheries, energy, transportation, banking and finance, science and technology, foreign trade, and public lands and water management. The category of “environment, social programs and social issues” encompassed the following issues: environment, civil rights, health care, labour, education, social affairs, housing and community development, arts, culture, and entertainment, and democracy. The category of “other” included the following issues: immigration, crime and law, sports and recreation, church and religion, natural disasters, national defence, and other.

while only 30% stated that an economic issue was most important. Non-voters were split on the types of issues that were most important to them: 40% identified economic issues while 46% identified what could be classified as an environmental or social issue.

What was the “top of mind” issue for voters in provincial politics during the federal election?

The Alberta Viewpoints survey replicated the question on the most important issue for Alberta provincial politics. It asked voters “What is the SINGLE most important issue to you personally in PROVINCIAL Alberta politics?” and gave them the same 24 issues to choose from. These 24 issues were collapsed into two broad categories along with the category “other” in Figure 7.



There is one interesting difference between Figures 6 and Figure 7. Due to the greater importance that Alberta voters accorded to the issues of health and education in provincial politics, the two categories of issues are more evenly matched to each other. However, a similar pattern repeats itself. Like federal Conservative voters, UCP voters are much more concerned with economic issues than with environmental and social issues. Similar to federal NDP and federal Liberal voters, provincial NDP voters place more emphasis on environmental and social issues as opposed to economic issues. Like non-voters in the federal election, voters for the minor parties are split evenly between environmental/social issues and economic issues when asked about the issue that is most important to them. Once again, these results show the division of the Alberta electorate into solid conservatives (economic issues are most important); solid progressives (environmental and social issues are most important); and disengaged voters (split on whether economic or environmental/social issues are most important).

Methodology of the Viewpoint Alberta Survey

The Viewpoint Alberta Survey was conducted between October 22 and November 21, 2019. The survey was deployed online by Qualtrics. A copy of the survey questions can be found here: <https://bit.ly/2PvQV2C>. Qualtrics coordinates the survey with an online panel system that targets registered panelists who meet the demographic criteria for the survey. Survey data are based on 820 total responses (number varies across questions) with a 17-minute average completion time. The Viewpoint Alberta Survey was led by co-principal investigators Jared Wesley and Loleen Berdahl. It was funded by an Alberta-Saskatchewan Research Collaboration Grant from the Kule Institute for Advanced Study at the University of Alberta and the College of Arts and Science at the University of Saskatchewan.