

# EcoA Research Nutshell

## Regional Deep Dive: Alberta

### Key details

**Key terms:**

Alberta, Saskatchewan and climate change, biodiversity, knowledge, misinformation, accountability, demand for action, preferred frames, solutions, communication guidelines

**Demographic profile:**

Residents of Alberta 18 years and older

**Sources from EcoAnalytics:**

Environmental Policy and Efficacy: Communications strategies (2023), Climate of Change National Survey 2021 and 2022 (CoC), National Omnibus Survey 2022

**Other sources:**

CPAWS/Nanos National Survey 2022, Climate Outreach: Alberta Climate Narratives (ANP), Abacus, Nature Conservancy of Canada/IPSOS national polling, Re.Climate 2023: *Re.Climate*, Thomas, Melanee, et al., *Great expectations: Public opinion about energy transition 2022*, Pembina Institute/Janet Brown Alberta Omnibus 2021, Climate Action Network National Omnibus Canada/Abacus 2023, Wesley, J., Maroto, M., Young, L. (2023). Viewpoint Alberta Survey 2023.

EcoAnalytics research aims to understand the opinions of Canadians to build support for action on climate change and the protection of biodiversity. This often reveals regional differences. This second regional “deep-dive” *Nutshell* examines how the views of Albertans differ from those of other Canadians. Like the first, on Quebecers, it draws on research by EcoA since 2016, and other sources (see Key details).

### Alberta: Overview

Albertans are often depicted as holding strong right-wing political views and opposed to climate policies, especially those for transitioning to renewables. In other words, on the other side of a rift of opinion from everyone else in the country. But are Albertans really that different? Several recent studies, along with EcoA’s recent research, reveal a more nuanced picture, one in which many Albertans have perspectives on the need for action on climate action, and biodiversity that are not so unlike those of other Canadians, though this *actual* landscape of opinion may be one that few Albertans recognize.

Like most other Canadians, Albertans currently rank climate change behind the cost of living, health, and the economy as their greatest concern. And, as with other Canadians, climate concern has not increased significantly in the last year, nor have perceptions of the personal risk associated with climate change. More Albertans are *not at all concerned* about the impacts of climate change. However, the percentage who are *somewhat concerned* is growing and more aligned, on this matter, with the views of other Canadians (CoC22).

Albertans are community-minded and have loyalties to the oil and gas industry, owing to the well-paid jobs and tax revenue generated by this sector, and other contributions to local communities. They also have faith in technology as a generator of climate solutions, and are concerned about the efficacy of shifting to renewable energy and the time this will take. Rather than being required to transition away from fossil fuels, they prefer to be able to choose from diverse energy options, but do on average support an energy transition (Thomas et. al, 2022). They shy away from expressions of Albertan exceptionalism, but feel personally under attack, and reject criticism, when opponents blame the oil and gas industry for all environmental problems (ANP).

Albertans also tend not to recognize the diversity of viewpoints in their province, and that *the people next door* may be more progressive than they appear to be. One poll found that 46% of Albertans think Canada needs to transition away from oil and gas, but Albertans responding to a recent survey estimated that just 27% in their province held this point of view (Wesley, 2023). Politicians and media take advantage of this common misconception, and promote misleading and divisive narratives about so-called Albertan values that solidify a sense of us and them (Thomas et. al, 2022). This gap likely plays a role in Alberta’s uncertainty about the efficacy and implementation of an energy transition.

## How do Albertans differ?

Note: Some EcoA surveys treat Alberta and Saskatchewan as one region, hence the combining of these provinces in some of the references that follow (all data here comes from the EcoA [CoC22](#)).

- Negative weather experience:** As of 2022, residents of AB/SK were least likely among Canadians to report having experienced significant changes in the weather, though 63% said they believed other Canadians were already experiencing negative impacts of changing weather patterns. In light of these findings, note:
  - When asked about specific weather experience, 43% of Albertan respondents said they had experienced smoke (from wildfires), and 42% had experienced extreme heat. At the time, only BC had higher levels of experience with these types of extreme weather effects.
  - About a quarter of AB/SK respondents say extreme weather events have caused a moderate or great deal of harm to their mental health, finances and mobility.
  - 30% of those in AB/SK connect extreme weather and climate change, compared to 41% in other provinces.
- Awareness:** Respondents in AB/SK were the least aware of Hurricane Fiona and the destruction it wrought in Atlantic Canada and most likely not to attribute its strength to climate change. They were more likely to say climate change had no impact (30%) or to be unsure (20%) about the impact of climate change on what was the most intense and costly hurricane ever to hit Canada.
- Skepticism:** AB/SK respondents had the lowest levels of belief that the Earth is warming (59%, compared to 78% in other provinces) and highest levels of uncertainty about this fact (21% vs 12% elsewhere in the country).
- Perceived Risk:** 12% of AB/SK respondents don't think climate change will ever harm Canadians and 23% just don't know (compared to 16% in the rest of Canada).

### A note about political partisanship in Alberta:

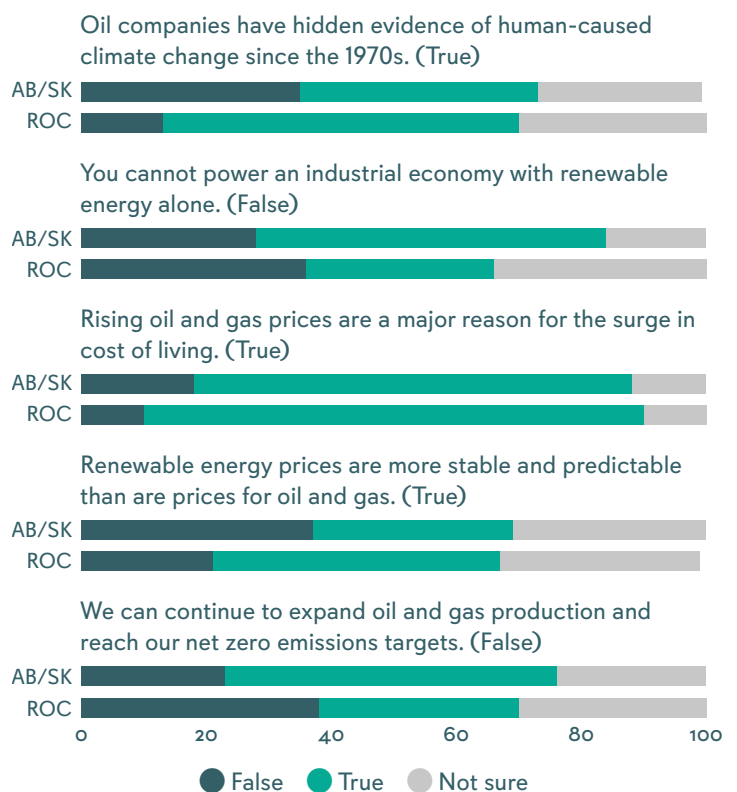
Partisanship and geography overlap considerably in Alberta, eastern BC, Saskatchewan and southern Manitoba, with many in these regions identifying as federal Conservative-voters at the federal level. So some regional differences described here, may or may not also be attributed to partisanship, rather than just location. For instance in the skepticism section above, 72% of non-conservative voting Albertans perceive solid evidence of a warming planet compared to just 42% of conservative voting Albertans.

Partisanship in Alberta has grown with the current provincial government fuelling grievances with the federal government — for example, by stating that federal policies in support of a “just transition” of workers to more sustainable jobs would hurt the province’s oil and gas sector, and claiming that the proposed federal Clean Electricity Regulations were “simply unworkable.” This has helped the ruling party activate its most loyal supporters.

## Knowledge and Misinformation

Climate misinformation, including industry greenwashing, is widespread and resonating in Alberta. On a battery of questions designed to reveal levels of belief in misinformation, residents of AB/SK were the least successful at seeing through some of the more common climate myths. Thirty-five percent believe that the oil and gas industry had misled us, compared to 12% in the rest of Canada. But like other Canadians, folks from these two provinces strongly agree that surging oil and gas prices are to blame for the rising cost of living. Most significant though were the high levels of uncertainty expressed in response to all of these questions among AB/SK residents ([CoC22](#)). The infographic on the next page shows other common myths and how residents of AB/SK compare to other Canadians in terms of their beliefs.

### Responses of residents of Alberta and Saskatchewan compared with those of people in other Canadian provinces (ROC), with correct answers in parentheses.



## Assigning blame

You need to be careful if trying to build support in Alberta and Saskatchewan for blaming oil and gas companies for climate change. Loyalty to the industry and appreciation of the support these companies offer communities figures prominently in conversations around blame. Albertans and Saskatchewanans are a good 30 points behind other Canadians when it comes to attributing *a great deal of* blame to the fossil fuel industry, no matter how it is framed. When confronted with an assertion that the oil and gas industry has misled the public, residents of AB/SK are more likely to attribute no blame at all to oil and gas companies. They are also the least likely to blame climate change on slow action by government (CoC22). When levelling blame at industry, Albertans prefer a more balanced, yet critical evaluation of the industry, recognizing both the benefits and costs of the industry, especially the over-dependency, insecurity and vulnerability created by the boom and bust cycles of the volatile fossil-fuel energy markets (ANP).

Unsurprisingly, fewer residents of AB/SK support suing Big Oil for climate damages, though nearly 30% of people in these provinces do support or somewhat support this action (compared with 50% in other provinces). Another 24% say they are not opposed to such a blame campaign, and 8% are unsure. Asked why they do not support campaigns such as Sue Big Oil, people in AB/SK are inclined to say that the industry is not fully to blame and/or that it will harm the economy and kill jobs (CoC2022).

“*Contrary to the assertions of its government, Albertans do want a just (or fair) transition to renewable energy.*”

## Demand for action

The provincial government has repeatedly stated that Albertans would never accept a federal cap on carbon emissions in the oil and gas sector. Polls suggests otherwise. The primary audience for the Alberta government in this matter may be its electoral base, rather than the more diverse provincial electorate, and in fact the majority of Albertans actually do support an emissions cap, as these recent studies show. Also, contrary to the assertions of its government, Albertans overwhelmingly do want a just (or fair,

specifically) transition to renewable energy. They understand that things need to change and need to change now (Omni 22). Resistance to the transition comes from a sense of what’s “not realistic” (timeframes, technologies, economics) as well as a fear of uncertainty (ANP). Transition in general is not necessarily concerning, as there was little resistance to transitioning off coal, yet the attachment to oil and gas as economically irreplaceable, persists.

Demand among residents of AB/SK for government action on climate change fluctuates significantly depending on the frame. Only 22% wanted the government to do more, compared to 41% in other provinces (CoC22); but when framed around job transitioning there was strong support. No less than 71% of Albertans strongly agreed that the government should help oil and gas workers transition to clean energy jobs and 86% agreed when the term “fair transition” was used instead of “just” (Omni 22). A “prosperous transition” is also now emerging in Alberta as a frame that could help assuage economic concerns.

When asked whether a clean electricity grid would be more affordable, Albertans were fairly divided, as shown in this infographic. They recognized that transitioning off fossil fuels is in their best interest, yet were still loyal to the industry and believe it will still be Alberta’s most important industry in 25 years.

### Aspects of AB support for fair transition

Governments in Canada should help oil and gas workers and their communities make a **fair transition** to new jobs opportunities in a clean, more sustainable economy



Governments in Canada should help oil and gas workers and their communities make a **just transition** to new jobs opportunities in a clean, more sustainable economy



Canada should invest now in a transition while helping people/businesses lower energy use and save money



Canada should invest now in a transition rather than face higher costs if we have to undertake a faster transition later



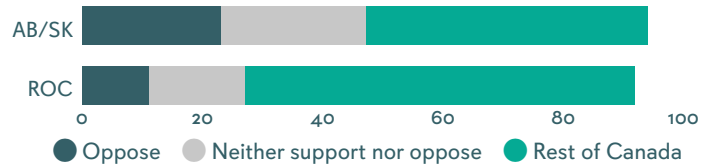
Despite their faith in oil and gas, Albertans are supportive of renewables and significant investment in solar, wind and other renewable sources, with over 74% wanting more investment in clean energy, according to [research by Abacus](#) in March 2023 on behalf of Climate Action Network Canada. However, they may be skeptical that the transition will succeed. Skepticism often takes the form of narratives about the ill-effects of mining for materials needed in batteries and supposedly high emissions in the manufacture of solar panels (a common piece of misinformation). These can often hinder productive conversations ([ANP](#)).

## Preferred frames

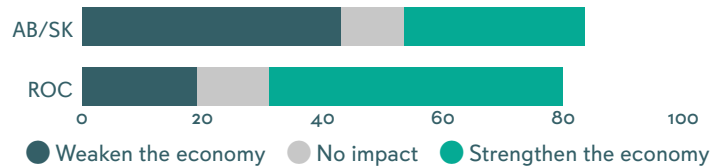
There is not a lot of variation across provinces in terms of preferred frames for talking about an emissions cap and a clean electricity grid. Albertans, like those elsewhere in the country, prefer frames that focus on a better future: affordability, quality of life and jobs. However, there are marked differences in frames that appeal more to Albertans. Like [Pembina's recent polling](#), an [EcoA study \(by Environics\)](#) found that frames that emphasize innovation and lower costs were more effective in Alberta. Pembina's study shows that of the 64% of Albertans who supported 2050 net-zero targets, 81% think that technology will get the industry there, versus 16% that believe a phase-out of oil and gas production will allow the industry to reach net-zero by 2050. The [Alberta Narratives Project](#) found that narrative frames emphasizing a responsible, prepared government, diversifying the economy, innovation and working together resonated better than those focused on blame, vilification, exceptionalism and calling climate change an emergency. A growing number of Albertans remain skeptical about overly optimistic framing, not believing that renewables will ever truly be able to replace O&G and not liking references to clean energy vs dirty energy. Economic frames that focus on preparing to be competitive in a post-carbon global economy, however, may resonate well in Alberta, as they do in the rest of Canada ([Omni 22](#)).

**“ When talking to Albertans about an emissions cap or clean electricity grid, frame your messages around a better future: affordability, quality of life and jobs.**

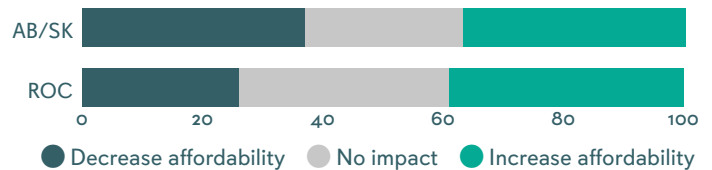
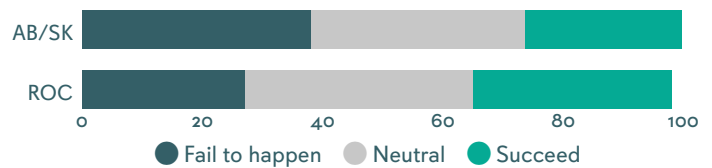
**Do you support or oppose investing heavily in electricity technologies like wind, solar and hydro with storage options, ensuring a reliable transition to a 100% renewable electricity system by 2035?**



**In your opinion, what impact will transitioning to a 100% renewable electricity system by 2035 make on Canada's economy?**



**To what extent do you think this energy transition will...**



## Biodiversity

There is generally less opposition to protecting nature than taking action on climate change among Albertans. Polling by [CPAWS](#) found that 86% were supportive of the federal conservation target to protect 30% of lands and waters by 2030, and 81% support increased government spending on land and marine conservation. *Strong support* for creating more Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs) is lower than in other provinces (16% vs 25%) but goes up to 40% for those who show *some support* for IPCA ([Environmental Policy and Efficacy 2023](#)).

Concern for biodiversity loss is high, with 89% worried about the population decline of many wildlife species. No less than 88% feel nature conservation is an effective way to address climate change and biodiversity loss ([NCC 2022](#)).

## Takeaways and opportunities

- Know which type of Albertan you are talking to and choose your narratives carefully. Donors and other loyal supporters of the ruling party have different views and perspectives than many other Albertans (see also Takeaway about diversity of opinion).
- Focus on common ground and concerns: costs, health, community, fairness, jobs, nature. When engaging *conservative* Albertans in discussions of policies, you don't need to focus on climate change, above all.
- Avoid vilifying industry: Recognize the loyalty many Albertans feel, and the benefits companies have provided to communities. Validate their identity and the important role played by oil and gas in the past, and add that this has led to an unhealthy dependence on the sector and environmental problems. Then assert that we now need to diversify and further develop Alberta's great renewable resources for a brighter future.
- Build on Albertans' deep concern for community, using frames that emphasize working together, taking care of each other and fairness.
- Build on AB residents' connection to nature, the virtue of protecting the places they love.
- Stress the risks of over-reliance on oil and gas. Emphasize that we need to prepare for a different economic future — more diversification, less *boom-and-bust* — and the need for leadership on this ([ANP](#)).
- Recognize that *transition* is much more of an existential concern for Albertans than it may be for many others ([Re.Climate](#)).
- If you use the transition frame, talk about a fair (rather than *just*) transition; Better still talk about a prepared, responsible government: e.g., “There are some troubling issues on Alberta's horizon that require a serious, dependable government to tackle them. Albertans are focused on ensuring high-quality healthcare and education, dealing with inflation and rising consumer prices, and diversifying the economy. 80% of Albertans want to get away from boom and bust cycles” ([Re.Climate](#).)
- When discussing solutions to climate change, focus on tangible details, a concrete vision of how this could happen, future jobs and opportunities, etc. In doing so address Albertans' uncertainty and concerns about the efficacy of renewable energy sources.

“Remind Albertans of the diversity of opinion in their province, with numbers and evidence. There are more progressives here than residents realize.”

- Emphasize economic opportunities to allay fears. Remember that support for renewable energy, and transitioning away from fossil fuels, depends on the ability of Albertans to imagine a future in which they could thrive ([Re.Climate](#)).
- Remind Albertans of the diversity of opinion in their province, with numbers and evidence. There are more progressives in this province than residents often realize. Buzzwords and divisive political rhetoric, along with a loyalty to industry contribute to this misperception and get in the way of effective climate communications. ([Re.Climate](#)) Deconstruct the myth that Alberta is opposed to climate action.
- Find and use trusted messengers to engage specific Albertan audiences, who may be receptive to progressive policy solutions.
- Help Albertans connect the dots between extreme weather and its effects (fire, floods, drought, etc.) and climate change. More and more Albertans are experiencing these phenomena and research shows that experience of extreme weather does crystallize demand for climate action ([Coc 2021](#)); the dots just need to be connected.
- Levels of uncertainty are high in Alberta. Research shows widespread support for a transition off fossil fuels, but aggressive misinformation campaigns are working against this. Understanding [Alberta's audience segments](#) and key issues of concern will help communicators get in front of receptive audiences with frames that resonate.