

CURRENTS/QUESTIONS D'ACTUALITÉ

The Electoral Politics of Alberta's Sovereignty Act

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Abstract

The Alberta Sovereignty within a United Canada Act is a strategic wedge aimed at raising the salience of western alienation, an issue on which the United Conservative Party and its leader, Danielle Smith, believe they can dominate their opponents and so win the May 2023 provincial election. The act signals the unprecedented circumstances in which the governing party finds itself. It is running neck-and-neck with a formidable opponent and a party leader who previously held the office of premier. Alberta has never experienced such an election.

Résumé

La Loi sur la souveraineté de l'Alberta concerne au moins autant la politique électorale que les relations fédérales-provinciales. Le gouvernement du Parti conservateur uni espère qu'en revigorant l'aliénation de l'Ouest comme dimension sur laquelle les Albertains font leur choix de vote, il pourra surmonter ses récents troubles internes et améliorer ses chances de vaincre un Nouveau Parti démocratique renaissant lors des élections provinciales de 2023.

Keywords: Alberta; political behaviour; western alienation; Sovereignty Act; political parties

Mots-clés: Alberta; comportement politique; aliénation de l'Ouest; Loi sur la souveraineté; partis politiques

Introduction

Discussion of Alberta's Sovereignty Act¹ has focused on its constitutionality and its effect on federal–provincial relations. Yet the act's prime objective may lie elsewhere: helping the United Conservative Party (UCP) win the provincial election scheduled for May 2023. It is the court of public opinion, rather than the Supreme Court, that will determine whether the act fulfills its objectives.

Danielle Smith faces three intertwined challenges in winning the next election. The first is to settle a fractious caucus led by a premier no more popular than

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her predecessor. The second is to distract caucus from this unpopularity. And the third is to fashion a ballot question that helps it defeat a resurgent New Democratic Party (NDP) that recent opinion polls have as the preferred choice of Alberta voters (Leger, 2022a).

Given that opinion polls suggest that the Sovereignty Act is not popular in Alberta, its introduction seems, on the surface, an odd way of going about winning an election (Leger, 2022b). Yet as strategic political rhetoric aimed at building a winning electoral coalition—heresthetics, as Riker (1986) calls it—the act may help the government by taking back control of the political agenda it lost during the pandemic, forcing political choice onto an issue dimension that favours it and encouraging strategic voting on this dimension to enhance its electoral fortunes (Alcantara et al., 2014; Riker, 1986; Walgrave et al., 2020; Wesley, 2011).

The hope is that conflict with the federal Liberal government drives politics onto the western alienation dimension of Alberta politics. This will rally UCP Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) and supporters to Danielle Smith as defender of Alberta against federal intrusion. By linking the provincial New Democrats to the federal Liberal government, Smith aims to damage the NDP's electoral fortunes. More than anything, the Alberta Sovereignty Act signals the challenging circumstances confronting the UCP in the lead-up to the 2023 provincial election.

The Partisan Context

The exit of sitting premiers as the result of unhappy caucuses has been a striking feature of Alberta politics over the last four decades. The list is long and includes every non-interim premier of Alberta since 1985, save New Democrat Rachel Notley: Don Getty, Ralph Klein, Ed Stelmach, Alison Redford, Jim Prentice and, most recently, Jason Kenney. Managing caucus is an often overlooked but central pillar of retaining government and the premiership in majoritarian, Westminster-style parliaments (Epstein, 1964; Godbout and Høyland, 2017; Kam, 2009; Kornberg, 1966).

Like many of its conservative forebears in Alberta, the UCP caucus has been rambunctious since its inception (Bratt and Foster, 2019, 2021). The caucus had little time to smooth out internal differences before the stresses of the pandemic hit in 2020, leading some to wonder whether it was “ungovernable” (Bratt, 2021). In early April 2021, 16 rural backbenchers signed a public letter complaining about restrictions related to COVID-19 (Johnson, 2021). Two more would add their support later. Caucus members attacked Premier Kenney for favouring masks, vaccines, and vaccine passports but also for failing to pursue stricter lockdown measures (Stewart and Sayers, 2023).

In May of that year, senior backbencher Todd Loewen wrote an open letter calling on Mr. Kenney to resign. He and Drew Barnes (“a prolific critic of Premier Jason Kenney”) were expelled from the party on May 13 after a marathon caucus meeting (Bellefontaine, 2021b). The final straw for the premier came a year later when, on May 18, 2022, only 51.4 per cent of voting party members indicated approval of his leadership. Mr. Kenney immediately announced his resignation as leader, prompting the contest that selected Danielle Smith to lead the UCP (Bellefontaine, 2021a; Thomson, 2022).

Dissensus Index Scores

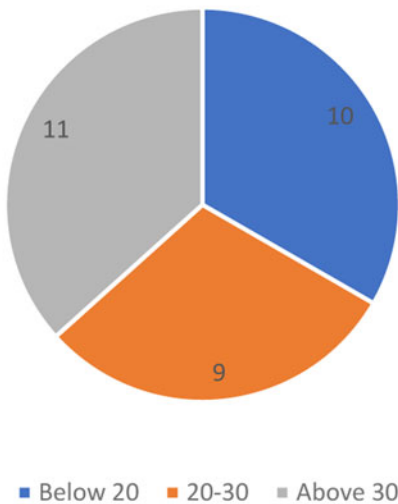
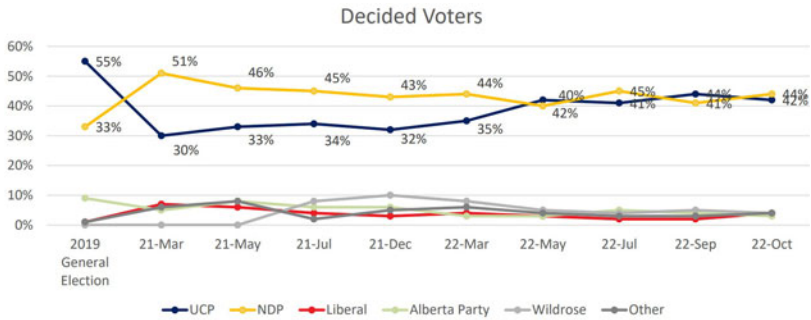


Figure 1 Policy disagreement among UCP members, 2020
 Source: Stewart and Sayers (2023)

We have no direct measure of the nature of opinion within the UCP caucus, but we do have voting information from its 2020 policy convention as a guide to dissent within the party. [Figure 1](#) presents Dissensus Index (DI) scores that capture the level of policy disagreement among party members who voted on policy resolutions in 2020. Perfect consensus for or against a policy generates a score of 0. Perfect dissensus, a 50–50 split, equates to a DI of 50. The higher the DI score, the more dissensus that exists within the party on that issue. There is a good deal of policy dissent within the UCP. The mean score across the 30 resolutions was 26. On average, a quarter of members disagreed with the majority. Over a third of the resolutions had scores greater than 30, and for 13 per cent, more than a third of voters disagreed with the majority. The issue that generated the greatest cohesion was the proposal to hold a referendum on a more equitable federal equalization arrangement (Stewart and Sayers, 2023). The referendum has since taken place.

The 2022 UCP leadership contest parachuted Smith into the premiership in a manner rarely seen in a major Canadian party. She had no direct history with the UCP and enjoyed limited initial support from within caucus, with most other leadership candidates strongly opposed to her sovereignty strategy (Bennett, 2022). Yet the contest remade the party, attracting new members with little or no history of party politics and not obviously representative of provincial voters (Markusoff, 2022b). As the leadership vote approached, Smith became the candidate to beat (Bennett, 2022). Once victorious, there was little time to build unity, reset the UCP's fortunes and prepare for an election against a formidable opponent. One of Smith's first moves was to appoint most of the other leadership contenders to cabinet. This appears to have helped silence internal opposition to the Sovereignty Act (Johnson, 2022).



Base: Albertans who are decided or leaning on who they would vote for in a Provincial election (n=865)
 Q1. If a Provincial election were held today, for which political party would you be most likely to vote? Would it be for...?
 Q2. Even if you have not yet made up your mind, for which of the following political parties would you be most likely to vote?

Figure 2 Voting intentions of Albertans
 Source: Leger, “Danielle Smith and Provincial Voting Intentions” report, October 2022 (Leger, 2022a)

The Electoral Context

As seen in [Figure 2](#), the pandemic was a disaster for Premier Kenney and the UCP. Kenney’s approval rating dropped from 61 per cent in 2019 to 31 per cent in June 2021. He was the least popular premier in the country. From a remarkable 55 per cent of the vote in 2019, support for the UCP declined to 30 per cent in opinion polls by March of 2022. While it has since recovered lost ground, the selection of Danielle Smith as leader is not an obvious win for the party. She is about as unpopular as Jason Kenney was at the low point of his tenure as premier. Opinion polls suggest that less than 30 per cent of voters think her arrival would be good for Alberta, and she trails Rachel Notley by about 14 percentage points as preferred premier (Markusoff, 2021; Melgar, 2022).

The Strategy

Feelings of alienation within the federation—that Ottawa, particularly an Ottawa run by the Liberals, is unresponsive to Albertans—is one of two powerful themes that help drive much Alberta politics. The other is populism (Sayers and Stewart, 2019).² Smith must build and sustain caucus cohesion and demonstrate her capacity to be an effective leader if she is to have a reasonable chance of staying on as premier and of defeating the NDP in May. These drivers of Alberta politics provide her with the raw material for doing so.

As seen in [Figure 3](#), not only is alienation widespread in Alberta, but it has become more so since the collapse of oil and gas prices in 2014. Compared with other parties, and like its conservative predecessors, the UCP tends to disproportionately attract strongly alienated voters (Sayers and Stewart, 2019). Enter the Sovereignty Act. It gives the government a way to use alienation to control the political agenda, shape the ballot question to its advantage, and damage the electoral fortunes of the NDP (Aragonès et al., 2015).

Assisted by the anti-Alberta tone of recent federal Liberal comments on energy policy (Braid, 2023), the act provides for a rhetoric that can help Smith and the

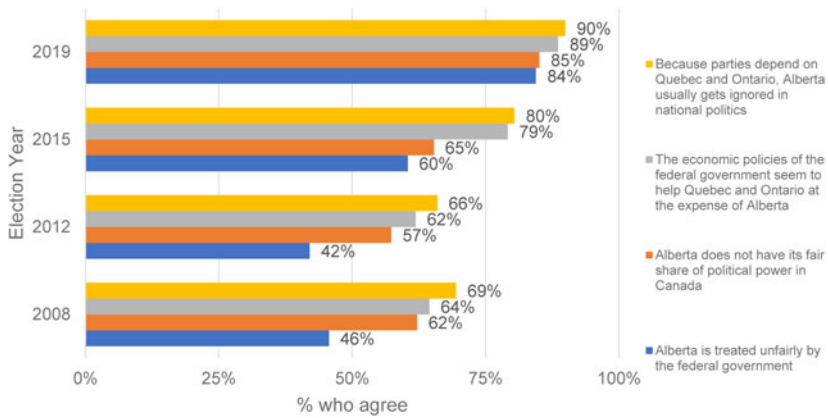


Figure 3 Western alienation in Alberta, 2008–2019

Source: Alberta Election Study (Sayers and Stewart, 2008, 2012, 2015; Sayers and Tuxhorn, 2019)

UCP (see Wesley, 2011). It binds caucus to central pillars of Alberta politics—western alienation and populism—that are likely to favour it at election time. It encourages caucus members to focus outward and to rally behind their leader as the defender of Alberta’s interests. And it prompts Albertans to focus on their place in the federation and a ballot question like “how Albertan are you?” Recent UCP advertising attempts to link the provincial New Democrats to the federal Liberals—pointing out that the NDP is an integrated party and that Rachel Notley’s “boss,” federal leader Jagmeet Singh, has a confidence agreement with the Liberals—in the hope of prying provincial voters away from the NDP (Schulz, 2022).

This strategy presents the New Democrat opposition with the delicate task of resisting the act without appearing to be anti-Albertan and running afoul of the populist impulse to join together to oppose Ottawa (CBC, 2023). It also places the federal government in an interesting position. It has shown a reluctance to confront provincial legislation in Quebec, and to a lesser extent, Ontario, that is at odds with its predilections. Opposing the Sovereignty Act would likely be seen by Albertans as evidence that it favours central Canada over Alberta. This would inflame alienation and likely help the UCP while hurting provincial New Democrats with whom the federal Liberals may have more policy overlap. Yet it might also bolster Liberal support outside Alberta and help the federal government manage its own electoral challenges.

Conclusion

Federations are designed to be fractious. Unwilling to accept the constraints of the constitution, Ontario led the early charge against Ottawa’s powers (Vipond, 1991). Quebec rails against Ottawa to protect its cultural distinctiveness. Alberta rails against Ottawa because its growth across the twentieth century—its provincial society and economy have grown faster than any other since 1950—has created an anomaly. Its political influence does not match its economic heft. It has the

third largest provincial economy, but its population and share of federal seats is the fourth largest. It produces nearly all of Canada's most valuable export (oil and gas) yet feels constrained by the federal government in expanding this advantage. There is no role for it in the dominant Liberal electoral coalition that is sustained by central Canada; joining that coalition would deliver Albertans little or no bargaining power within the party or government.

The Alberta Sovereignty within a United Canada Act signals the electoral challenges facing the UCP. Invoking alienation for electoral advantage is a time-honoured strategy in Alberta. The local expression of this alienation is populism: the drawing together of Albertans against the external threat, Ottawa. This is how alienation is operationalized to deliver votes and government. Danielle Smith's reluctance to invoke the act to this point is consistent with the view that heresthetics are central to its purpose (Dryden, 2023; Gunter, 2023; Markusoff, 2022a; Riker, 1986). It also sets the stage for a tit-for-tat bargaining strategy with the federal government that mimics the logic of many interactions between governments in federations (Axelrod, 1980).

In establishing Alberta in 1905 as a vassal province lacking full provincial powers, did Sir Wilfrid Laurier have any inkling that it, more than any other province, would give truth to his claim that "the next 100 years would belong to Canada"?

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Notes

1 Formally, Alberta Sovereignty within a United Canada Act. <https://www.assembly.ab.ca/assembly-business/bills/bill?billinfoid=11984&from=bills>.

2 According to Mudde (2004: 543), populism is an ideology that divides society into two "homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite,'" which, for Alberta, is Albertans versus the Liberal elite in Ottawa.

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