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COMMUNICATING FOR CHANGE

ENGAGING MAINSTREAM ALBERTANS



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This research brief was prepared by Re.Climate based on newly-commissioned research using focus groups as well as public opinion surveys carried out by Janet Brown Opinion Research and drawing on recent surveys by the Common Ground project at the University of Alberta, led by Dr. Jared Wesley. The focus groups and Janet Brown surveys are proprietary research. The Common Ground survey results have not yet been published. This brief also draws on surveys designed by Dr. Melanee Thomas from the University of Calgary and research by the Canada West Foundation.

Focus groups were conducted by Narrative Research in December 2022, focusing on moderate/mainstream Albertans, emphasizing undecided voters living in Calgary.

Re.Climate is Canada's go-to centre for training research and strategy on climate change communications and public engagement. We provide strategic services to help practitioners reach new audiences, overcome polarization, communicate urgency and motivate change.

Cover image: Albertans report being in nature is an important part of how we spend time. We have a very strong identification with natural spaces—particularly the Rockies, and more generally towards water and land.

Photo: Snowy Hikes in Waterton Lakes National Park by Ali Kazal on Unsplash.com



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Albertans have a distorted perception of our collective identity and opinions on many crucial topics.

This false “social reality” leads many mainstream Albertans to assume—wrongly—that they hold different views than most other Albertans. This is caused by widely-held stereotypes about who Albertans are and what they think.

The result is that people with demonstrably centrist values feel like outliers, often isolated and even embattled. Individuals as well as community and political leaders limit themselves in expressing centrist values. Mainstream views are often silenced by the dominance of outdated narratives in the media, politics and public conversation.

The difference between perception and reality is particularly wide on issues around healthcare, education and the environment. One of the biggest gaps of all is on views about the energy transition.

In reality, most Albertans place themselves as relative centrists on the Left-Right spectrum. Albertans take great pride in our province while the largest segments identify strongly as Canadian. Most want an inclusive province that is economically balanced with a responsible government that defends public healthcare, public education, land and water.

Key findings

- The public’s dominant concerns are health care, inflation/affordability and ensuring quality public education.
- Albertans are extremely proud of our province and report that being in nature is an important part of how they spend time. Albertans have very strong identification with natural spaces—particularly the Rockies, and more generally towards water and land.
- Albertans also express high levels of pride about the province’s oil and gas industry. Most are unsure or do not think they would personally thrive without the industry. Many simply cannot imagine a prosperous Alberta beyond oil.
- Albertans increasingly believe an energy transition is underway—very few focus group participants recommend young people pursue careers in oil and gas. The strongest predictor of support for the transition is whether an individual sees a pathway for themselves and their family to thrive.
- The strongest opposition to an energy transition comes from people who believe the oil and gas industry has a strong future.
- Energy and the economy are very tightly linked for Albertans. Talk of an energy transition is virtually synonymous with economic transition. This creates a high-degree of tension between protecting the economy versus protecting the environment, particularly related to mitigating climate change.
- Resistance to preparing for the energy transition comes from a sense of what’s “not realistic” (timeframes, technologies, economics) as well as a fear of uncertainty.
- There is strong support for economic diversification and getting off boom/bust cycles, but only a minority currently say it should be a major, short-term priority.
- While not a top priority, a large majority of Albertans are concerned that extreme events like forest fires and floods are becoming more common.

Implications for communicators

ADDRESS THE DISTORTIONS IN OUR SOCIAL REALITY

Emphasize the diversity of Alberta, frame values as “moderate,” or “centrist” and use specific numbers when possible, for example: more than eight in ten Albertans (82%) want to get off the boom-bust cycle and diversify our economy.

FRAME THE PUBLIC INTEREST

Focus on the risk of relying on oil and gas. Emphasize that we need to prepare for a different kind of economic future—more diversification and less boom-bust—and the need for leaders that act with these goals in mind.

CLARIFY THE SOLUTIONS PATHWAY

Provide tangible examples of success and leadership in the inevitable, global energy transition. But recognize that Albertans do not believe renewable energy can replace all the jobs or economic productivity generated by oil and gas.

CULTIVATE AND AMPLIFY MESSENGERS

Key audiences are receptive to hearing from scientists, health professionals, small businesses, and university researchers. Focus group participants became skeptical of messengers talking about issues beyond their direct area of experience and expertise.



Photo: Daveblogso07, Flickr



THE MYTH OF ALBERTA

Albertans have a distorted sense of who the “typical Albertan” really is. Most imagine the typical Albertan to be a white male farmer or oil worker. Even an artificial intelligence image generator will produce pictures of cowboys and oil and gas workers when asked to generate a picture of an Albertan (Wesley, 2021).

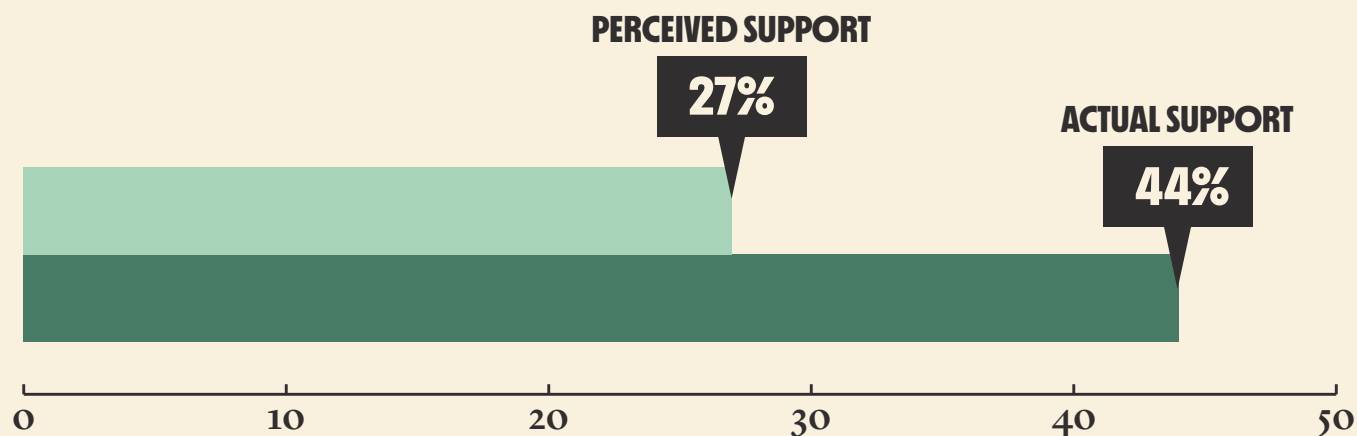
“Albertans are weighted down by false social expectations,” says Dr. Jared Wesley. “They set the expectation for what’s desirable, what’s possible and what’s extreme.”

On many important issues, Albertans think provincial opinion is much more right-wing than it actually is. There are major gaps, 10 to 20 percentage points, between the actual level of support and the perceived level of support for issues ranging from a provincial pension plan to private school funding or the energy transition.

The result of this distorted “social reality” is that entirely mainstream views are minimized or even silenced in the media, politics and public conversation.

The energy transition is among the most distorted topics. While 46% of Albertans think we need to transition the economy away from oil and gas, if you ask Albertans to estimate public opinion at large, perceived support is just 27% (Wesley, 2023).

Support for transitioning Alberta’s economy away from oil and gas



Source: Wesley, 2023

“WE VALUE WHERE WE LIVE AND THE NATURE AND THE BEAUTY OF OUR PROVINCE AND OUR ACCESS TO SERVICES—THE STEREOTYPICAL ALBERTAN IS NOT AS EASY TO IDENTIFY AS IN THE PAST.”

—Focus group participant



THE REALITY OF ALBERTA

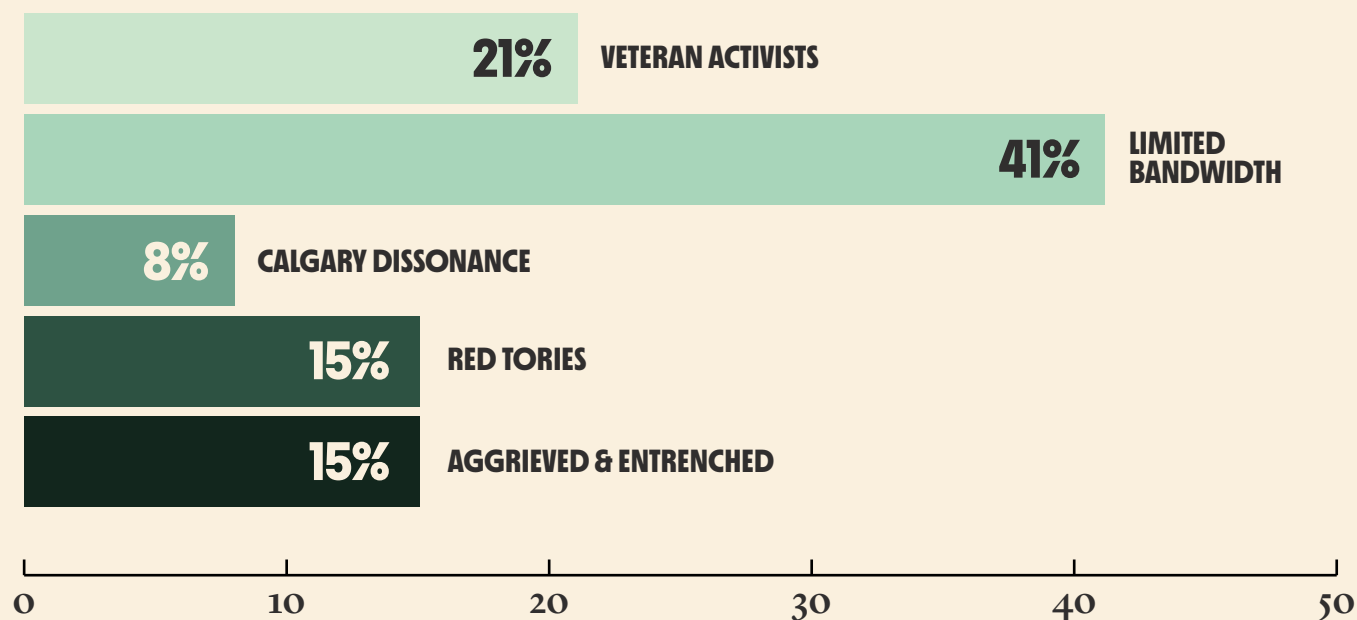
Most Albertans self-identify in a cluster around the centre of the political spectrum. In both polling and focus groups, participants describe themselves as “moderates” or centrists. But because of our false social reality, most think the “typical” Albertan is significantly more ideologically conservative.

Albertans are very proud of our province with a very strong attachment to the outdoors and natural spaces. The Rockies hold a particular grip on our imagination but we identify strongly with water, land and even local parks. Outdoor activities are a major part of many Albertans’ identity and daily lives.

The love of Alberta does not mean antagonism towards Canada. Although Albertans support pushing back against the federal government to gain respect and fairness from the rest of the country, we identify strongly as Canadian. More Albertans say their strongest attachment is to Canada as a whole than say their primary attachment is to Alberta as a province (Brown, 2022).

Grievance and populist politics are far bigger in the media and public discourse than in the actual public. Just 15% of Albertans could be classified as belonging to the “Aggrieved and Entrenched” segment of the public.

Segmentation analysis of Albertans



Source: Brown, 2022

LIMITED BANDWIDTH

The largest segment of the population, by far, is the segment we refer to as “Limited Bandwidth.” More than four in ten (41%) Albertans fit this category and it is a crucial audience for communicators.

Folks in the Limited Bandwidth segment are largely preoccupied with their own lives and communities. They are hard to reach. But they are the largest segment in Calgary, Edmonton (34% and 49% in those cities) and in the rest of the province (41%).

“The most important people to reach are the hardest to reach,” says Janet Brown.

Their priorities are affordability, healthcare and education. They tend to hold socially progressive positions but not stridently. They have environmental values but tend to see the energy transition as a long-term priority.

VETERAN ACTIVISTS

Two out of ten Albertans (21%) fit within the “Veteran Activists” category. They are the second largest cluster. Their views are politically left-wing and they are politically engaged, especially on the environment. They are likely to see the energy transition as a short-term priority.

Veteran Activists represent 20% of Calgary, 26% of Edmonton and 17% across the rest of the province.

RED TORIES

Red Tories are 15% of the population. They hold centre-right positions on most issues. They do not like polarization and want to reframe the public conversation. Red Tories want to maintain government services and are quite right-wing about government management of the economy.

CALGARY DISSONANCE

This segment is relatively small provincially (8%) but crucially makes up 18% of Calgary, especially concentrated in the suburbs. They tend to be younger and right-wing in most respects but lean left on environmental values and are worried about climate change. They’re very tuned in to news media and consider themselves politically engaged.

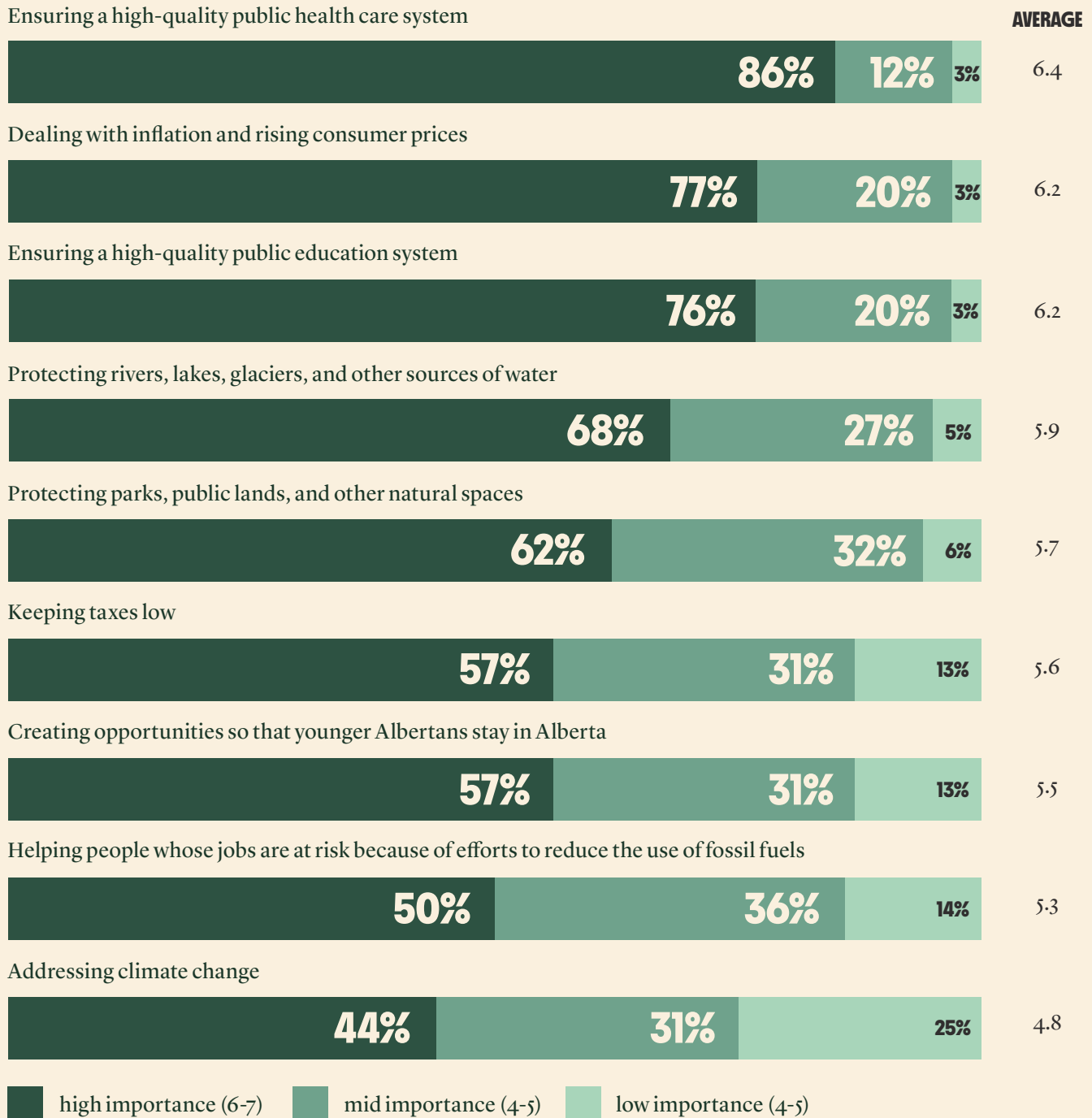
AGGRIEVED & ENTRENCHED

The “Aggrieved and Entrenched” are just 15% of the population but have a much bigger share of voice in politics, media and public discourse. Members of this segment are the most likely to believe climate change is a hoax. They tend to be male, sympathetic to convoy protestors, and think the energy transition will be very negative in the long run.

Priorities

The top concerns for most Albertans are health care, affordability/inflation and education. Members of the Limited Bandwidth segment are most likely to say (69%) they are finding it difficult to meet their monthly expenses (Brown, 2022).

Issue Importance



Due to rounding, totals may not add to 100%

Source: Brown, 2022

Trust and messengers

With the exception of the Aggrieved and Entrenched, Albertans in all other segments are turned off by extremism on the right.

Only the Veteran Activists have high levels of trust in environmental groups. Overall, environmental advocacy organizations are “very trusted” by just 14% of Albertans. Four in ten Albertans say they trust ENGOs “somewhat.” This is marginally above the level of trust in mainstream news media at 51% (Brown, 2022).

All segments, except the Aggrieved and Entrenched, have high levels of trust in:

- Doctors, nurses and other healthcare professionals (trusted by 87%).
- Scientists & academics (trusted by 83%).
- Small businesses (trusted by 82%)

“I TEND NOT TO TRUST ANY ASSOCIATION OR SOCIETY THAT HAS A SINGLE PRIORITY OR FOCUS—THEY ARE NOT TRULY REPRESENTATIVE.”

– Focus group participant



OIL, GAS AND THE ENERGY TRANSITION

Albertans understand an energy transition is underway globally but most think this is a long-term prospect. Albertans are proud of the oil and gas industry and just three in ten people (30%) think they would thrive without it (Wesley, 2023).

A key finding across focus groups and surveys is that the degree of support for the energy transition depends on an individual’s perceived ability to thrive economically in the future.

The false social reality looms over conversations about the importance of the oil and gas industry. “When (young adults were) asked what percentage of Albertans work directly in oil and gas extraction, participants consistently estimated around 40 per cent, about six times higher than reality” (Lane, 2022).

Albertans are focused on what they perceive to be “realistic” in terms of energy. A growing number see the energy transition as inevitable but believe renewable energy is not currently a realistic way to power an entire society and economy.

“Championing the economic benefits of clean energy will not be persuasive with people who continue to have high hopes in the future economic benefits of fossil fuels. Instead, we suggest (focusing) instead on the economic risks that come from continued reliance on fossil fuels” (Thomas et al., 2022).

Focus group participants frequently raised issues they had heard about electric vehicles being bad for the environment as well as the failures and limitations of renewable energy. These skeptical arguments were very effective at shutting down conversation in focus groups. Communicators will need to sharpen their messages on these topics.

SUPPORT FOR THE ENERGY TRANSITION DEPENDS ON YOUR PERCEIVED ABILITY TO THRIVE ECONOMICALLY IN THE FUTURE.

Support for the oil and gas industry

Two out of three Albertans say they are proud of the province’s oil and gas industry while just one in ten (10%) express any level of disagreement (Wesley, 2023).

Only 12% of Albertans “strongly agree” they would personally thrive in an Alberta without an oil and gas industry. Another 18% somewhat agree. In total, less than one-third expect they would thrive economically without the oil and gas industry—roughly the same percentage (31%) that are convinced they would not thrive.

A very large group (38%) simply aren’t sure. This group is a key audience for communicators—over time, they can be persuaded there is an economic future beyond oil and gas.

The future of oil and gas

Albertans are divided over the future of oil and gas. One telling question is how many Albertans believe the industry remains a strong option for young people starting their work lives.

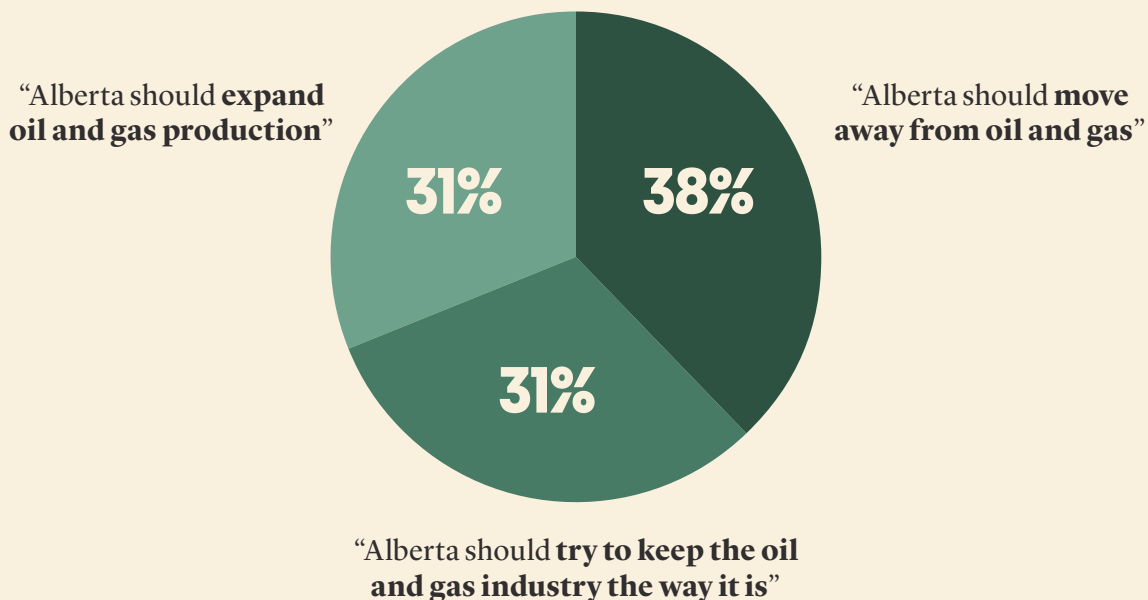
Less than half (43%) of the public say they would encourage young people today to pursue a career in the oil and gas industry (Brown, 2022).

Among young adults, “the oil and gas sector, is now considered one of the most significant liabilities... As a result, when asked about professional pathways in other sectors, many participants simply assumed they would need to leave Alberta to pursue careers in areas ranging from digital, arts and finance” (Lane, 2022).

But on the question of what to do about the industry today, three in ten Albertans (31%) believe in expanding oil and gas production. Another three in ten (31%) say Alberta should try to keep the industry the way it is. Combine those two groups and you find that 62% of Albertans want to expand or maintain the industry as is (Wesley, 2023).

By contrast, almost four in ten Albertans (38%) say the province should move away from oil and gas.

Albertans are divided over the future of oil and gas



Source: Wesley, 2023

Transition or diversification?

Albertans increasingly see the energy transition as inevitable, and over half expect it would be beneficial for the overall provincial economy in the long-term.

But there is a major question around timing: the majority of Albertans (55%) think a transition away from fossil fuels should only be a goal over the long-term. Just 13% of Albertans say it should be a short-term goal (Brown, 2022).

The term “energy transition” is often fraught. For audiences beyond the Veteran Activists, Albertans are much more willing to engage on questions of:

- Diversifying Alberta’s economy: nine in ten Albertans (90%) agree this should be a goal.
- Boom-and-bust: eight in ten Albertans (82%) think getting away from boom-bust cycles should be a goal (Brown, 2022).

Albertans are twice as likely to say that diversification or avoiding boom-bust should be short-term goals compared to the urgency around transitioning away from fossil fuel production.

Members of visible minorities are significantly more personally supportive of economic transition. And some research indicates that men are more personally supportive than women (Wesley, 2023).

There is a dramatic relationship with political party affiliation: NDP voters are two and half times more likely to support an energy transition than UCP voters. While 67% of NDP voters support an energy transition, only 25% of UCP voters feel the same way (Wesley, 2023). The rural-urban divide is less stark but rural Albertans are at least 10 percent less supportive than suburban or urban Albertans.

As noted earlier, the most important indicator of support for transition is whether an individual perceives they would have personal success in an Alberta without oil and gas.

The energy transition

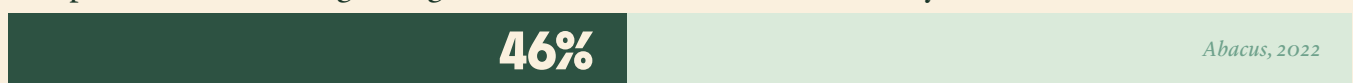
Support goal of net-zero GHG emissions by 2050



Transitioning away from oil and gas would be beneficial for AB’s economy in the long run



The province is not doing enough to shift towards a cleaner economy



Energy transition is certain/likely to happen

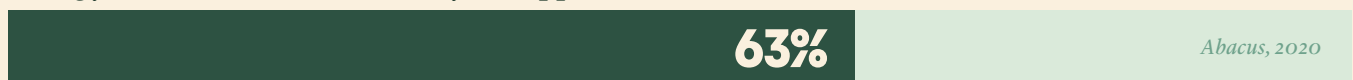


Photo: David Dodge, Green Energy Futures, Flickr



Vulcan County, AB —The Canadian Energy Regulator predicts the total capacity of renewable energy sources in Alberta will reach 26 per cent by 2023. Pictured here: wind turbines from the Blackspring Ridge 300 mW wind farm.

Clean energy

A supermajority of Albertans express high levels of support for building renewables and deploying other clean energy technologies. Almost half say the province is not doing enough on this front.

More than eight in ten Albertans (83%) say the clean energy sector is important to the provincial economy today (Abacus, 2022).

Almost half of Albertans (46%) feel the province is not doing enough to shift towards a cleaner economy (Abacus, 2022).

Despite strong support for deploying clean energy, Albertans do not believe that renewable energy can replace all the jobs generated by oil and gas or replace its role in driving the economy.

It is not effective to position renewable energy as a complete replacement for oil and gas, in fact this positioning generates strong resistance.

Although Albertans are very supportive of cleantech in principle, many skeptical points were raised in focus groups. Albertans are clearly picking up narratives by skeptics of electric vehicles as well as wind and solar power. The points are well-honed and successfully shut down productive conversation in focus groups.

Communicators need to sharpen their talking points about the most common topics from skeptics: the benefits of EVs, batteries, clean energy.

“YOU HAVE ALL THAT MINING FOR THE BATTERIES FOR ELECTRIC CARS... WE DON’T GET A TRUE PICTURE OF RENEWABLES.”

– Focus group participant expressing a common sentiment

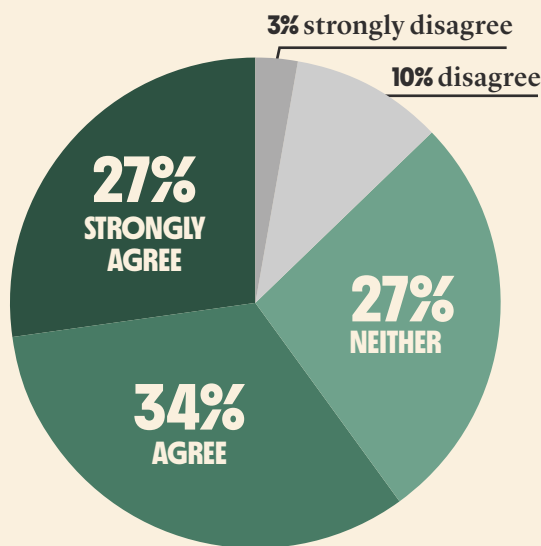
Just transition

The term “just transition” has become politically controversial. But the underlying concept has broad support. In one 2022 survey, seven in ten Albertans (71%) said that governments in Canada should help oil and gas workers and their communities in making a just transition to new job opportunities in a clean, more sustainable economy. When asked about a “fair” transition, support rises to 86% (Ecoanalytics, 2022).

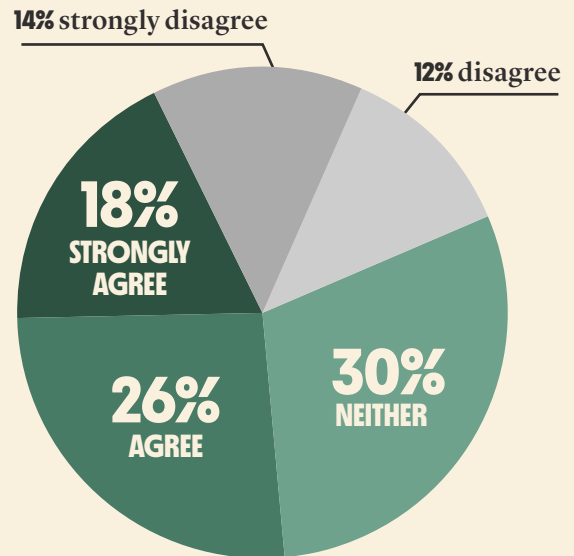
Other surveys find somewhat less support but still a large majority. Six in ten Albertans (61%) think the government should assist workers who choose to leave the oil and gas industry by helping them access training and find new careers (Wesley, 2023).

But support drops significantly if the government is seen to be pushing workers to leave the industry. If transition support is perceived as a mechanism to encourage and incentivize workers to leave the oil and gas industry, then public support drops from 61% to 44% (Wesley, 2023).

Transition support for workers



“The government should assist workers who choose to leave the oil and gas industry by helping them access training and find new careers.”



“The government should encourage and incentivize workers to leave the oil and gas industry by helping them access training and find new careers.”

Source: Wesley, 2023



NARRATIVES THAT WORK

Focus group participants were presented with five narratives for discussion and debate. Here is the most successful, as rated by Albertans in the segments Limited Bandwidth, Red Tories and Calgary Dissonance.

RESPONSIBLE, PREPARED GOVERNMENT

The most successful narrative focused on “responsible, prepared government.” The key portion of that narrative is: “There are some serious 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.” (Narrative Research, 2023).



IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNICATORS

ADDRESS THE DISTORTIONS IN OUR SOCIAL REALITY

Emphasize descriptive norms to help clear up the distortions in social reality and help Albertans recognize their values and views are mainstream. Frame these values as “moderate,” or “centrist” and use specific numbers when possible, for example: eight in ten of Albertans (82%) want to get off the boom-bust cycle and diversify our economy.

CLARIFY THE SOLUTIONS PATHWAY

Give people a bridge to move into the future by providing tangible examples of success and leadership. Show it’s realistic by using local and Canadian examples as well as from the U.S. and Europe. For example, companies like Amazon are moving to Alberta because we’re building clean energy like Travers Solar—the biggest solar farm in Canada. Sharpen talking points about the most common topics from skeptics: EVs, batteries, affordability, renewables.

ACT IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST

Highlight the risk to our province’s economic future caused by overreliance on oil and gas and the need to prepare. Albertans are quick to volunteer and pride ourselves on community spirit. Emphasize that we need to build on what we’re already doing to prepare for a different kind of economic future and pay for the services that we depend on and underpin our quality of life—more diversification and less boom-bust. Present necessary actions as pragmatic, incremental steps in the public interest.

Recognize that “transition” is not just about energy but an existential economic question for many Albertans.

While not a top priority, seven in ten Albertans are concerned that extreme weather is becoming more common. Present preparing communities for impacts and protecting land and water as critical acts in the public interest.

CULTIVATE AND AMPLIFY MESSENGERS

Industry and politicians dominate the provincial conversation. Key audiences are much more receptive to hearing from scientists, health professionals, small businesses, universities and people like themselves. University researchers are consistently trusted across topics and population segments.



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