

Albertans' opinions on climate change, energy and the environment

Bernard Rudny | September 2015

The Pembina Institute recently commissioned EKOS Research Associates to conduct a survey of Albertans' opinions on climate change, the energy sector and environmental policy. A total of 1,855 Albertans were surveyed and the margin of error for the full sample is ± 2.3 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. More details about the methodology are available at the end of this document.

Key findings

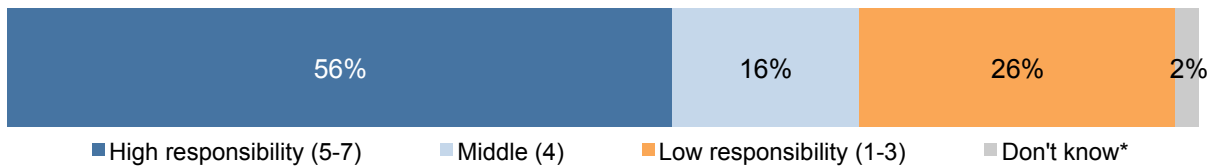
- Most Albertans (56%) think the province is responsible for reducing its carbon emissions to address climate change, while only 26% disagree.
- A majority (53%) support stronger climate change policies, even if that means higher production costs for oilsands companies.
- Half of Albertans (50%) would support an economy-wide carbon tax, with 38% opposed.
 - Support for a carbon tax is greater when the revenue is directed to specific sources, such as infrastructure and community projects that reduce carbon emissions (72%) or protecting low-income households from increased energy prices (60%).
- Most Albertans (66%) think the government should prioritize diversifying the province's economy over making the oil and gas industry more competitive (29%).
- A large majority of Albertans (70%) want stricter enforcement of the existing environmental rules and safeguards in the oilsands.
 - Roughly half of that group (36%) want the government to be "much more" strict.
 - 60% think the previous Progressive Conservative government was not strict enough when enforcing environmental rules in the oilsands.
- Substantial majorities of Albertans favour stronger environmental regulations tied to the oilsands.
 - 95% support a one-for-one approach to wetlands mitigation offsets and conservation.
 - 67% support protecting more of the boreal forest as parkland.
- A majority of Albertans (70%) support investing in renewables to reduce coal use, and want the province to increase support for clean energy and clean technology (86%).
- A plurality (48%) of Albertans think oilsands production should stay at current levels or be reduced. A minority think the oilsands should be slightly larger (25%) or much larger (18%).

Climate change

Alberta will be announcing a new climate change action plan leading up to the international climate negotiations in Paris later this year. In June, the provincial government announced the creation of an advisory panel to provide recommendations for that plan. Among other things, the panel has been soliciting public input and opinions. Given this context, we asked a number of questions about climate change, and what kind of action Albertans think the province needs to take.

A majority of respondents (56%) believe that Alberta is responsible for cutting carbon emissions in order to meet its climate targets, and as part of Canada's national effort. Roughly one-quarter of respondents (26%) disagree with this assessment.

On a scale of 1 to 7 (where 1 represents no responsibility at all and 7 represents very responsible) to what degree do you think Alberta is responsible for reducing its overall carbon emissions in order to meet its climate change targets, and to help Canada keep its international climate change commitments?

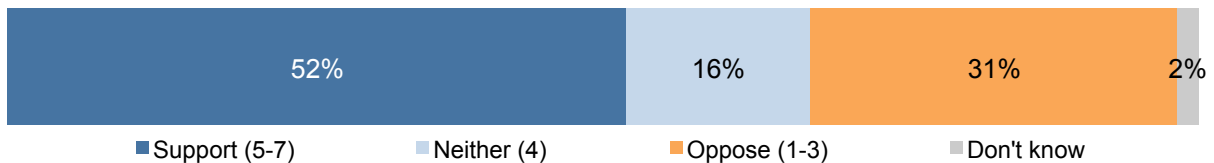


*Also includes respondents who did not answer when used throughout this document

The international community has coalesced around the goal of limiting global warming to two degrees Celsius, in order to avoid the most dangerous impacts of climate change. Alberta’s carbon emissions have grown rapidly over the last two decades, largely due to the expansion of the oilsands sector, and the province’s current climate target is not consistent with the global reductions needed to achieve less than two degrees of warming.¹

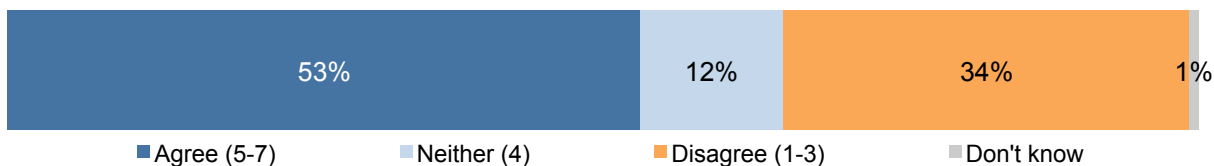
When presented with this information, most respondents (52%) believe Alberta should adopt climate policies in line with a global two-degree target. Less than one-third (31%) oppose this level of ambition.

On a scale of 1 to 7 (where 1 represents strongly oppose and 7 represents strongly support) to what degree do you support Alberta adopting climate change regulations that, if adopted globally, would keep warming from exceeding two degrees Celsius?²



Respondents don’t believe that costs to the oilsands industry should stand in the way of stronger climate policies. We asked about support for these policies, while explicitly saying that oilsands companies would face higher production costs as a result. Even with that caveat — and in the midst of an economic slowdown with low oil prices — Albertans maintain the same support for action: 53% are in favour of stronger climate policies, with 34% opposed.

On a scale of 1 to 7 (where 1 represents strongly disagree and 7 represents strongly agree) do you think Alberta should adopt stronger climate change policies, even if that means oilsands companies have to pay higher costs to produce oil?

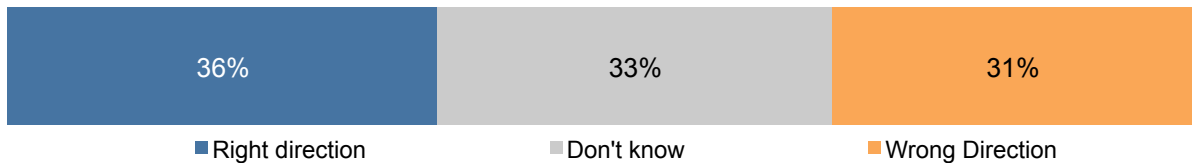


¹ P.J. Partington, “Big shiny trends: Canada’s new emissions numbers,” *Pembina Institute*, April 17, 2014. <http://www.pembina.org/blog/789>

² This question was introduced with the following preamble: “Canada has joined the international community in affirming the need to keep global warming from exceeding two degrees Celsius, in order to avoid the worst impacts of climate change. So far, Alberta has not been able to reduce carbon emissions or meet its climate change targets, largely due to the expansion of the oilsands sector.”

Of course, Alberta recently saw a change in government and the New Democrats have begun updating the province’s climate policies. When asked to evaluate the new government’s approach to climate change so far, we see an interesting three-way split: 36% of respondents say the government is heading in the right direction, 31% say the wrong direction and one-third don’t yet have an opinion. This suggests that public opinion has not yet crystallized on this issue, with a substantial number of Albertans taking a “wait-and-see” approach.

All things considered, would you say the new provincial government in Alberta is moving in the right direction or the wrong direction on climate change?

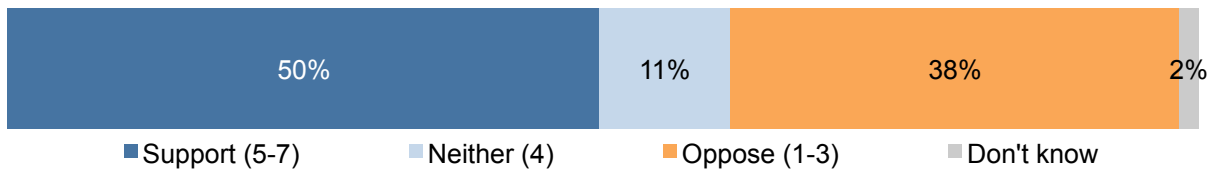


Carbon pricing

Making polluters pay for their carbon emissions is a key step in addressing climate change. Since 2007, Alberta has put a price on some carbon emissions from the province’s largest industrial emitters. However, this Specified Gas Emitters Regulation has not been effective at reducing carbon emissions in the province.³ A higher effective price on carbon is necessary to drive emissions reductions in Alberta.⁴

Half of Albertans (50%) support an economy-wide carbon tax, with 38% opposed. This level of support is expressed even with a question that highlights the cost to individuals, and that uses terminology with less positive connotations (i.e. a “carbon tax” instead of a price or fee).

On a scale of 1 to 7 (where 1 represents strongly oppose and 7 represents strongly support) to what degree do you support Alberta adopting a carbon tax that applies to all polluters, including both individuals and companies?



Building on previous research by the Pembina Institute and the Pacific Institute for Climate Solutions, we also asked about support for a carbon tax depending on how the revenue would be used.⁵

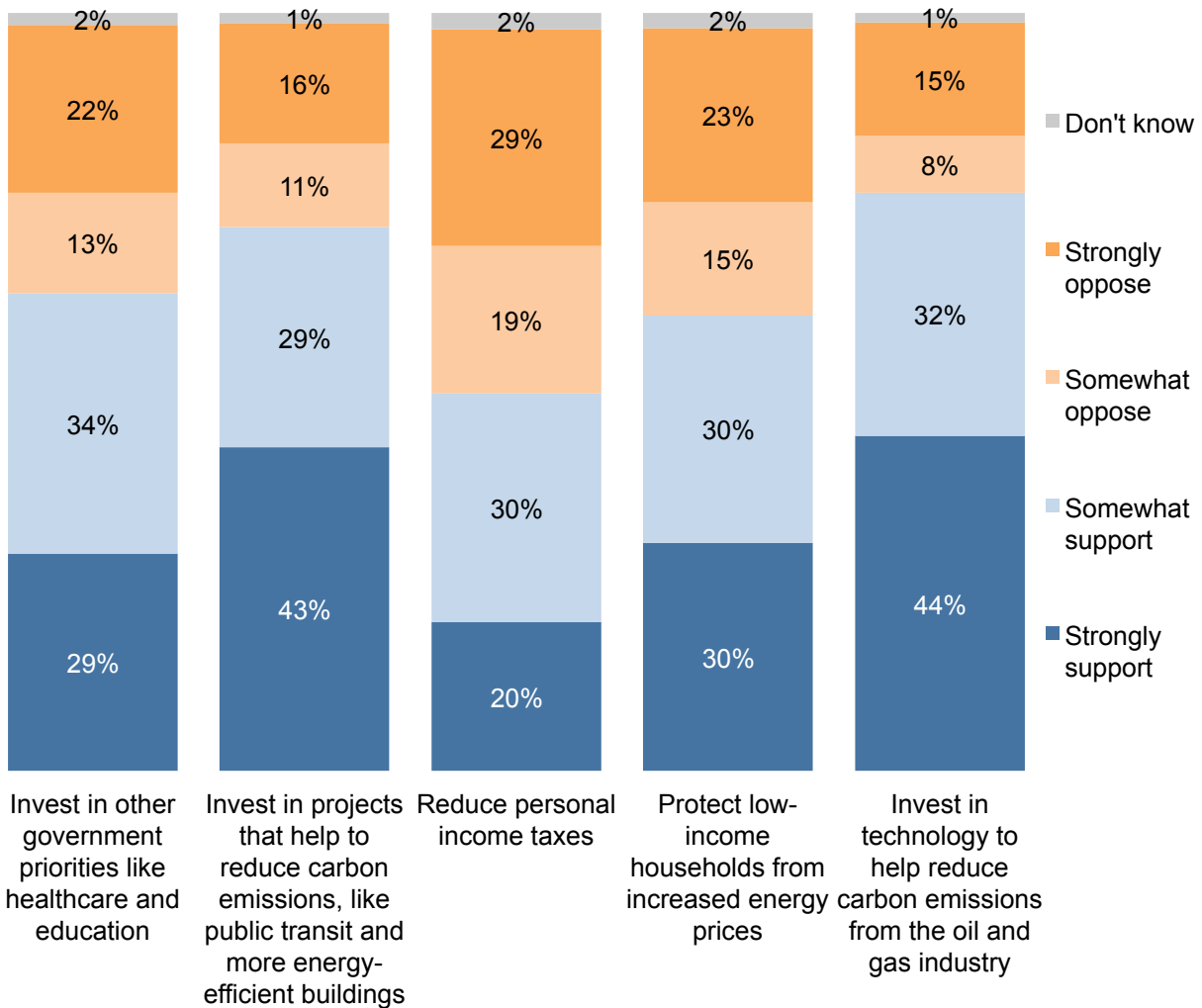
Support was highest when the revenues are directed to technologies that cut emissions from the oil and gas sector (76%) or infrastructure and community projects that cut emissions (72%). There was slightly weaker support for directing revenues to social services (63%) or reducing energy costs for low-income Albertans (60%). The lowest level of support was for directing revenue to income tax cuts, with roughly equal numbers in favour (50%) and opposed (48%).

³ Pembina Institute, *Background on Alberta’s climate strategy* (2014). <http://www.pembina.org/pub/background-on-albertas-climate-strategy>

⁴ Chris Severson-Baker, “Alberta’s carbon pricing not best-in-Canada example,” *Pembina Institute*, December 19, 2014. <http://www.pembina.org/blog/albertas-carbon-pricing-not-best-in-canada-example>

⁵ Matt Horne, Kevin Sauvé and Tom Pedersen, *British Columbians’ perspectives on global warming and the carbon tax*, Pembina Institute (2012). <http://www.pembina.org/pub/2376>

Please indicate if you would support or oppose a carbon tax in Alberta if the revenue was used to...

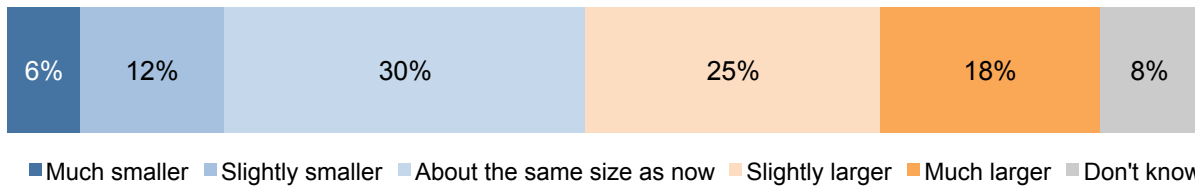


Oilsands and the economy

There has been substantial public discussion of the environmental and economic impacts of oilsands development, and what is the appropriate pace and scale for development. Although the industry and previous Alberta governments have typically favoured rapid expansion of the oilsands, this goal does not appear to be shared by most Albertans.

Roughly half (48%) of Albertans believe that oilsands production should either stay at current levels, or be reduced. Of the remainder, 25% believe the oilsands should be slightly larger and 18% believe they should be much larger. The remaining 8% are undecided.

The oilsands currently produce 2.3 million barrels of oil per day, and the industry hopes to expand. To maintain a healthy environment and healthy economy, do you think there is an appropriate limit to the size of the oilsands? Going forward, the overall size of the oilsands should be...



The survey also presented respondents with two “forced choice” questions, where they must choose between opposing viewpoints. This question format doesn’t gauge the depth of support for either viewpoint, or how respondents respond to something outside of the dichotomy. Rather, these questions are best interpreted in the context of a debate: they identify which position seems more compelling.

First we asked what the Alberta government should prioritize: making it easier for Alberta’s oil and gas industry to compete, or shifting the province’s economic orientation away from fossil fuels. Albertans favoured the latter approach by a margin of more than two-to-one.

Which of these statements comes closest to your own views?

- **The provincial government should focus on making it easier for the oil and gas industry to do business in Alberta.**
- **The provincial government should focus on diversifying the economy, so that Alberta is less dependent on the oil and gas industry in the future.**



Next, we presented respondents with two explanations for Alberta’s economic situation: that the province’s economic downturn is due primarily to a lack of economic diversification, or that it is due to the new government’s approach to the oil and gas sector. Both are simplifications of opposing viewpoints in the current public debate.⁶ Respondents favoured the latter explanation by more than two-to-one.

Which of these statements comes closest to your own views?

- **The new Alberta government, by increasing corporate taxes and by planning to review royalty rates for the oil and gas industry, is the key factor leading to the province's recent economic downturn.**
- **A long-term lack of economic diversification has left Alberta susceptible to global declines in the price of oil, and this is the key factor leading to the province's recent economic downturn.**



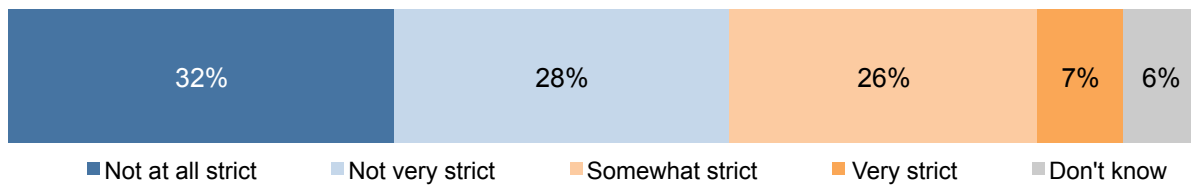
⁶ Bill Graveland, The Canadian Press, “Alberta government’s decision to hike taxes made recession worse, Harper says,” available at *Global News*, September 26, 2015. <http://globalnews.ca/news/2222761/alberta-governments-decision-to-hike-taxes-made-recession-worse-harper-says/>

Environmental regulations and enforcement

Alberta Premier Rachel Notley recently commented that “the record of the previous [provincial] government, when it comes to their environmental stewardship, has not been one about which we can be proud.”⁷ As part of this survey, we asked respondents to evaluate the previous Progressive Conservative government’s performance when it comes to enforcing environmental rules in the oilsands.

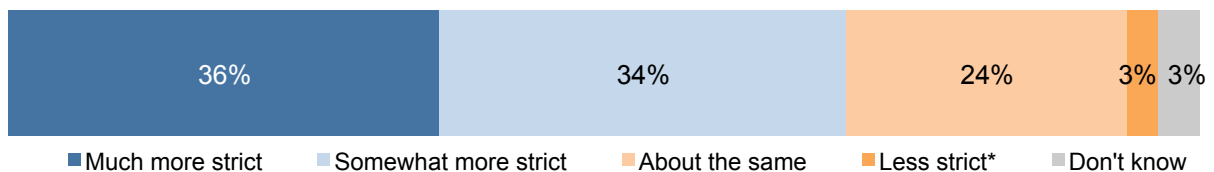
Most respondents (60%) said the PC government did not strictly enforce existing regulations, compared with 33% who thought it had been strict. Almost one-third of respondents (32%) opted for the most critical answer, saying the previous government was “not at all strict,” compared with only 7% who chose the “very strict” characterization.

How strict do you think the previous Progressive Conservative government was about enforcing environmental rules and safeguards in the oilsands?



A large majority (70%) of Albertans want to see stricter enforcement of environmental rules in the oilsands, with “much more strict” enforcement being the most popular option (36%). Only 2% of respondents believe enforcement should be less stringent, while 24% think the previous government’s approach should be maintained.

Compared with the previous Progressive Conservative government, how strict do you think the new provincial government should be about enforcing environmental rules and safeguards in the oilsands?



*Includes respondents who answered either “somewhat less strict” or “much less strict”

The survey also asked about two local environmental issues related to oilsands development: wetlands and land use in the boreal forest.

Alberta has regulated wetland development in the settled portion of the province for many years: anyone who drains or destroys an area of wetlands must “offset” those impacts by preserving or conserving three times as much wetland habitat elsewhere. However, no such requirement exists for the forested parts of Alberta where oilsands development happens.⁸ We asked about the idea of a one-for-one wetlands offset requirement for the oilsands, where an equal area must be conserved or restored.

⁷ Jodie Sinnema, “Premier stands by comments criticizing Alberta's past response to environmental protection,” *Edmonton Journal*, September 16, 2015. <http://edmontonjournal.com/news/politics/premier-stands-by-comments-criticizing-albertas-past-response-to-environmental-protection>

⁸ Simon Dyer, “Will Alberta finally protect wetlands, or will the oilsands continue to get a free pass?,” *Pembina Institute*, January 25, 2010. <http://www.pembina.org/blog/367>

Wetland protection is almost universally popular in Alberta. An overwhelming majority of respondents (95%) support one-for-one wetland offsets, with three-quarters expressing strong support.

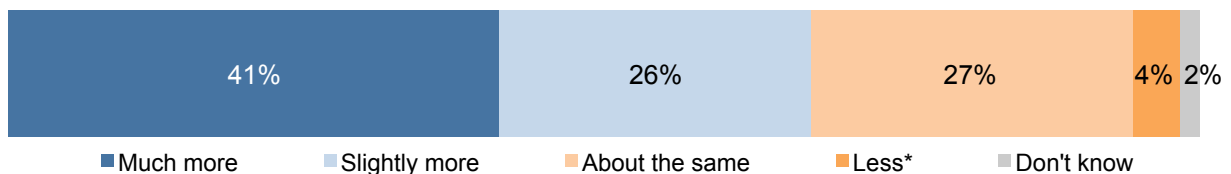
Some wetlands are destroyed by oilsands development. To what extent do you agree or disagree that oilsands companies should be required to conserve or restore an area of wetlands equal to what was disturbed by their operations?



*Includes respondents who answered either “somewhat disagree” or “strongly disagree”

About 14% of Alberta’s boreal forest is currently designated as parkland, which means it can’t be used for industrial development.⁹ Two-thirds of respondents (67%) support designating more of the forest as parkland — even with the explicit caveat that this reduces development opportunities — and 41% support designating “much more” of the forest as parkland. There is very little support (4%) for a reduction in parkland and moderate support (27%) for the status quo.

About 14% of Alberta's boreal forest is currently protected as parkland. Most of the remainder is open for industrial development. How much of Alberta's boreal forest do you think should be protected for wildlife and environmental reasons, even if this reduces opportunities for industry?

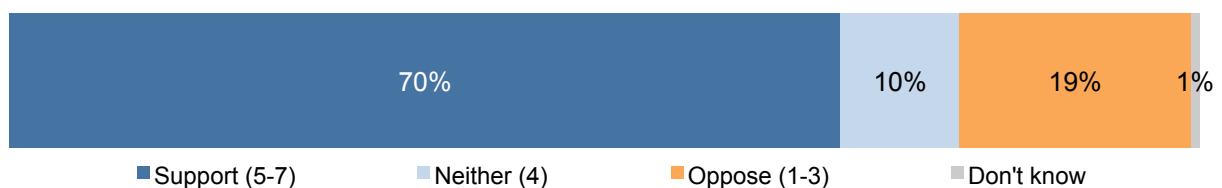


*Includes respondents who answered either “slightly less” or “much less”

Electricity and clean energy

The current Alberta government has committed to an accelerated phase-out of coal-fired electricity in the province, and some of this generation capacity will have to be replaced by other sources. A large majority of respondents (70%) support investments in renewable energy to reduce the province’s reliance on coal, with only 19% opposed.

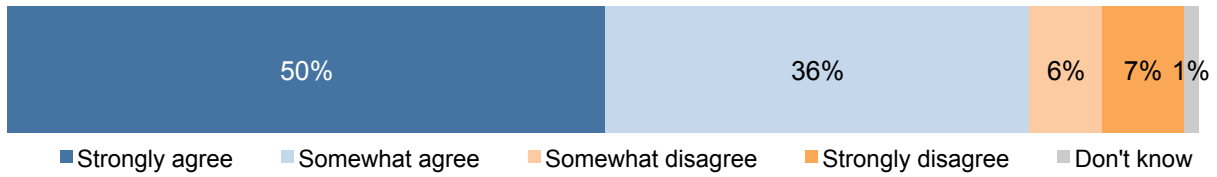
More than half of Alberta's electricity is currently produced by coal-fired generating plants. On a scale of 1 to 7 (where 1 represents strongly oppose and seven represents strongly support) to what degree would you support or oppose investing in renewable energy — like wind and solar power — as a way to reduce Alberta's use of coal for electricity?



⁹ Nature Conservancy of Canada and Global Forest Watch Canada, *Northern Alberta Conservation Atlas* (2014). http://www.globalforestwatch.ca/files/publications/20140903A_NAB_ConsAtlasW.pdf

Looking beyond the question of electricity, Albertans clearly favour more support for the clean energy and clean technology sectors: 86% think the province should do more to grow these industries.

To what degree do you agree or disagree with the following statement? "Alberta should do more to support the development of a clean energy and clean technology industry in the province."



Methodology

A total of 1,855 residents of Alberta aged 18 or older were surveyed from August 28 through September 10 by EKOS Research Associates. They were surveyed using a combination of live-caller telephone interviews, including both landlines and cell phones, and an online probability panel.

The margin of error for the full sample is ± 2.28 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. The online sample was randomly recruited and is representative, as with a telephone sample, unlike the samples from opt-in “convenience” web panels. This allows for margin of error reporting for the full survey sample.

The data have been statistically weighted by age, gender, region and educational attainment to ensure the sample’s composition reflects that of the actual population of Alberta according to 2011 Census data. Telephone interviews account for 49% of respondents, with the other 51% completing the survey online. The percentages cited in descriptions and figures may not always add up to 100% due to rounding.