Western Separatism and the Future of Canadian Unity

LOLEEN BERDAHL & LISA YOUNG

Dr. Loleen Berdahl, Professor of Political Studies, University of Saskatchewan, and **Dr. Lisa Young**, Professor of Political Science, University of Calgary, are co-investigators on a SSHRC-funded study of populism in Alberta and Saskatchewan.[1]

Separatist impulses, rhetoric, and movements have long challenged Canadian national unity. While the ink was drying on the 1867 British North America Act, Nova Scotians elected Anti-Confederate MLAs and MPs and sought to repeal the colony's endorsement of Confederation.[2] 'Western separatism' – the secession of Alberta, possibly along with the succession of Saskatchewan, British Columbia, and/or Manitoba – had flashpoints of rhetoric and at times modest political organization since the mid-1930s.[3] From the 1960s to the 1990s, Quebec separatism was a dominant force in Canadian federal politics, with separatist provincial and federal political parties and two referendums on Quebec secession.

While Quebec separatism has presented a real threat to the unity of Canada, western separatism has regularly been dismissed as a fringe movement. In contrast to the robust Quebec nationalism movement, western separatism has had lower levels of public support and political party mobilization. Based on long-standing grievances about federal policy and politics, commonly referred to as 'western alienation',[4] western separatism is often seen as a political tactic within a competitive federal system rather than a legitimate desire for self-determination.[5]

However, recent dynamics have transformed western separatism into a true concern. The primary focus has been in Alberta, but sentiments are also present in Saskatchewan. The re-election of the Justin Trudeau Liberal government in 2019 spawned the "Wexit" movement in both provinces. Although the movement waned during the pandemic, the extended period of federal-provincial policy conflict centered on federal policies intended to reduce greenhouse gas emissions exacerbated conflict between conservative governments in the two provinces and the federal Liberal government. This prompted a series of defiant intergovernmental relations behaviours by the Alberta and Saskatchewan governments,[6] reinforcing provincial narratives questioning the value of Canadian federalism.

[1] This paper draws on research supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, Insight Development Grant 430-2024-00068.

[2] Colin D. Howell, "Repeal Movement," The Canadian Encyclopedia, December 11, 2014.

[3] Craig Baird, "Western Separatism Movements in Canadian History," Canadian History Ehx, October 30, 2019.

[4] Loleen Berdahl. The Persistence of Western Alienation, Essay no. 9 (Montreal: Institute for Research on Public Policy, 2021).

[5] Daniel Béland and André Lecours, "Nationalism, Regionalism, and Strategic Learning in Federal Systems: Drawing on the Quebec Model in Alberta," American Review of Canadian Studies 53, no. 2 (2023): 156–171, https://doi.org/10.1080/02722011.2023.2195259

[6] Berdahl, Loleen, Lisa Young and Bianca Jamal. "Defiance: hasAlberta, Saskatchewan, and the Shifting Dynamics of Canadian Federalism." American Review of Canadian Studies 55 (2025): 155 - 169.

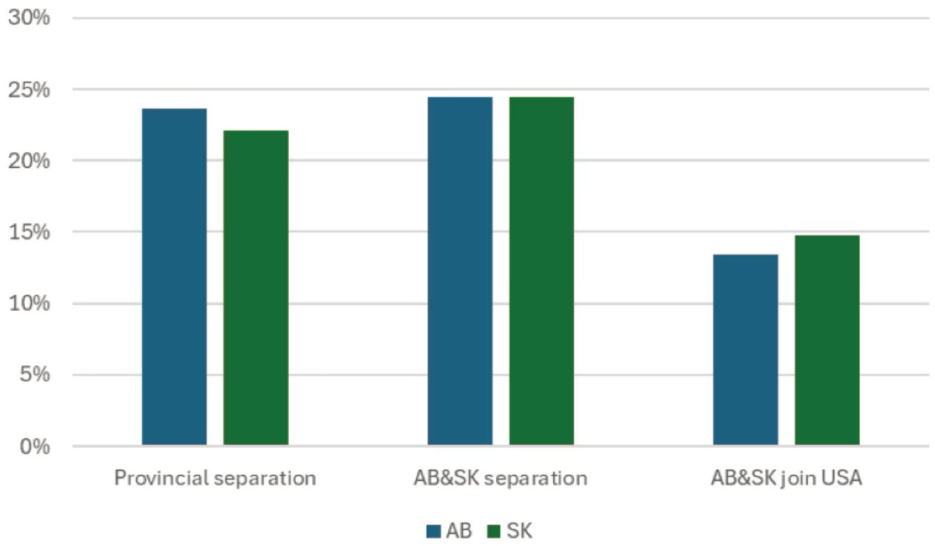


Figure 1: Support for Separation (September 2025)[7]

The re-election of a federal Liberal government in 2025 sparked further talk of separation. As Figure 1 demonstrates, support for separation in the two provinces is similar, and support for the two provinces separating together is slightly higher than for the provinces seceding independently.

Although rates of public support for separation are similar in the two provinces, only Alberta is anticipated to put the question to a public vote. Premier Smith of Alberta have been unwilling to take a strong position opposing separation, and has acted to facilitate a referendum by lowering the threshold for citizen-initiated referenda in the province and removing a requirement that the Chief Electoral Officer refer any potentially unconstitutional referendum question to the courts.[8] The separatist group "Stay Free Alberta" has reportedly collected the signatures required under the Alberta Citizen Initiative Act to trigger a referendum[9]. The Saskatchewan threat, to the extent that one exists, lies in the actions of Alberta, as a positive Alberta referendum potentially mobilizes a Saskatchewan separatist Pandora's box.

[7] Source: Alberta and Saskatchewan Populism Survey. "Separatists" are those respondents who ranked the idea of Alberta and Saskatchewan together separating from Canada as a 5, 6 or 7 on a 7 point scale. Non-separatists are those who ranked this at 1, 2, 3 or 4. Bars indicate means.

[8] Elections Alberta, "Citizen Initiative" https://www.elections.ab.ca/recall-initiative/initiative/; accessed April 22 2026. Saskatchewan's Referendum and Plebiscite Act, last updated in 2024, allows for petitions for plebiscites, with a 15% of electors being the minimum threshold to trigger a plebiscite.

[9] Fakiha Baig, "Alberta separatists say they've already collected enough signatures for referendum," CBC News March 31, 2026. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/alberta-separatists-referendum-signatures-9.7149138 At time of writing, it remains possible that a court injunction may impede the referendum. Jason Markusoff, "First Nations' court challenge may block Alberta separatism itself, not just petition drive," CBC News April 11, 2026. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/analysis-alberta-separation-indigenous-treaty-rights-court-9.7160026

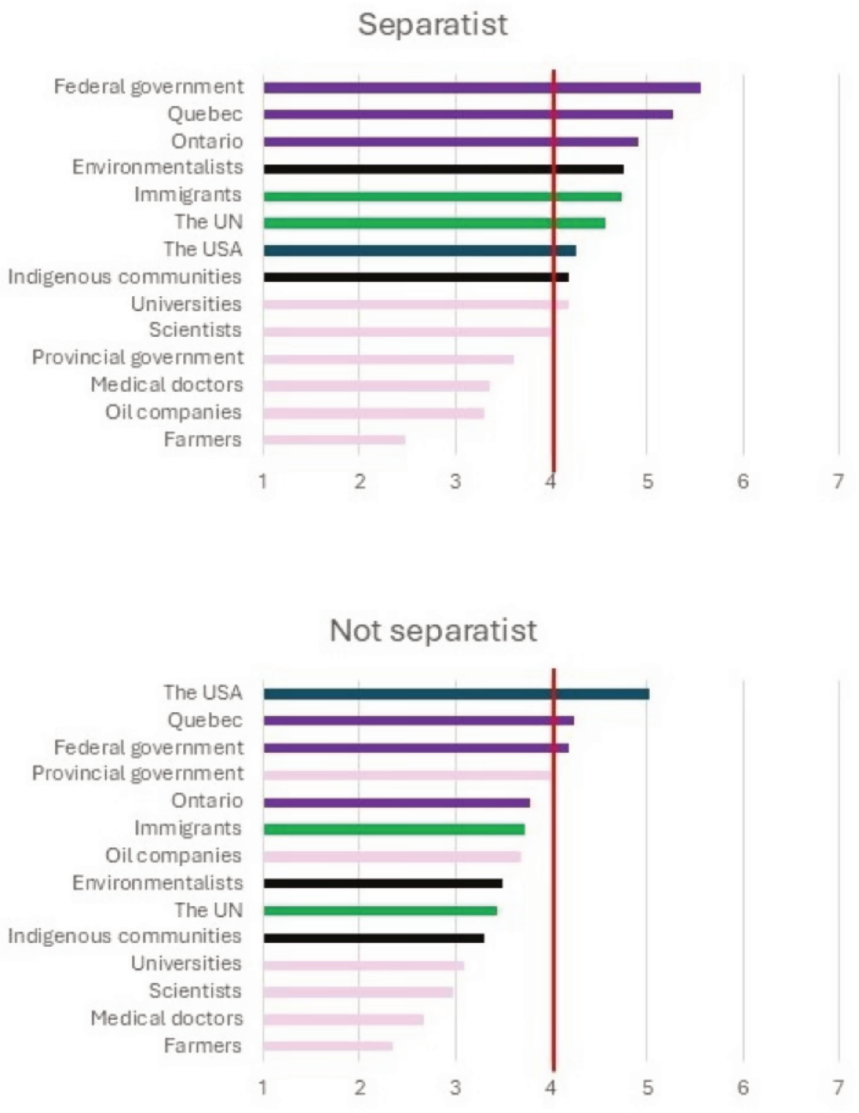


Figure 2: Friends/Enemies by Separatism[10]

The apparent openness of the Trump administration to the prospect of Alberta's separation also makes Alberta separatism a pressing concern. Separatist movements gain credibility when they can point to states that might recognize or otherwise facilitate secession. Leaders of the Alberta movement have reported positive reception on visits to the American capital[11]. In addition, there is considerable risk of foreign interference in provincial political discussions. [12]

To better understand separatists' worldviews, we analyzed data from the September 2025 Alberta and Saskatchewan Populism Survey. The survey asked respondents to rate various organizations and entities on a scale from 1 (friend of) to 7 (enemy of) in relation to the people of Alberta/Saskatchewan. This question is grounded in an understanding of populism as a construction of a virtuous "people" in moral conflict with a self-interested elite. Responses to the question shed light on participants' conceptions of who is allied with and who is in conflict with "the people." Contrasting the worldviews expressed by

[10] Source: Alberta and Saskatchewan Populism Survey. "Separatists" are those respondents who ranked the idea of Alberta and Saskatchewan together separating from Canada as a 5, 6 or 7 on a 7 point scale. Non-separatists are those who ranked this at 1, 2, 3 or 4. Bars indicate means.

[11] Evan Dyer, "U.S. interest in Alberta separatism raises red flags over what might come next" CBC News 5 February 2026. https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/alberta-separatism-trump-administration-9.7068999

[12] Patrick Lennox, "Can Alberta Protect Its Secession Vote from Trump?" The Walrus, April 14, 2026.

separatists and non-separatists demonstrates the challenges to Canadian unity embedded not only in the rise of separatism but also in the attitudes of non-separatists in these two provinces.

Figure 2 shows that separatists are more inclined to perceive many "enemies of the people," just as one might expect of adherents to a populist movement. For nine of the 14 entities, the mean score was above the neutral position (four on the seven-point scale); only the provincial government, doctors, oil companies, and farmers were perceived as "friends."

Separatists' perceptions of enmity reflect traditional western alienation, with the federal government, Quebec and Ontario as the greatest enemies of the people of their province. As Figure 3 illustrates, separatists are more likely to perceive the federal government as an enemy than the United States – a striking finding given the Trump government's approach to Canada-US relations. In contrast, non-separatists were more likely to perceive both as neither friend nor enemy, or see the US as a greater threat.

Policy disputes with Ottawa over GHG emissions have driven the current wave of regional resentment, so it is not surprising to see that separatists see environmentalists as enemies of the people. Taken together with separatists' views of Indigenous communities and scientists as enemies, albeit at a lower rate, this speaks to the role of extractive populism in animating support for secession. The separatist view of oil companies as friends of the people is further evidence of this.

Finally, the separatist perception that immigrants and the United Nations are enemies of the people of the two provinces suggests that the secessionist movement is grounded to some extent in contemporary right-wing populist movements in Europe and the United States, which are characterized by their antipathy toward immigration and international organizations.

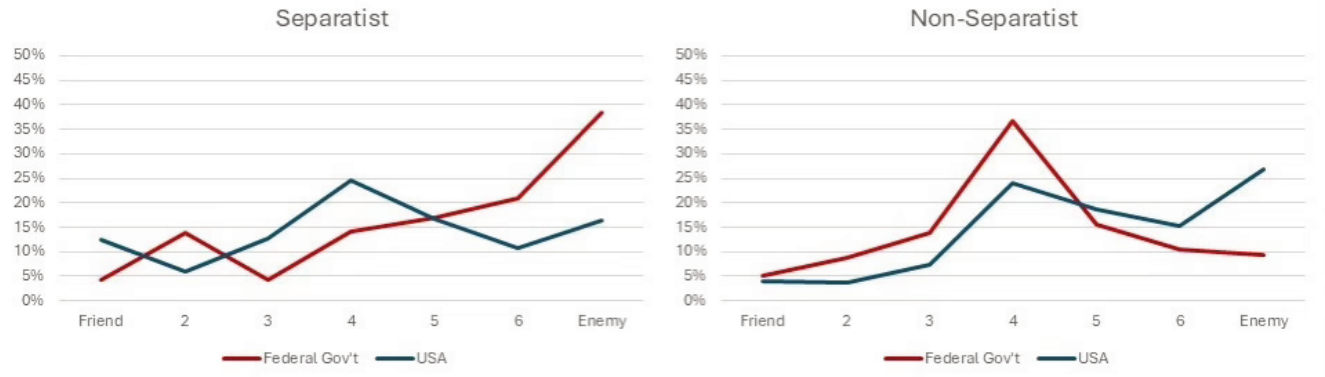


Figure 3: Evaluation of the Federal Government and USA (Friend or Enemy) by Separatism

Comparing the worldviews of separatists and non-separatists, it is clear that traditional western alienation is present for both groups. It is the other sets of perceived enemies – including environmentalists, immigrants, the United Nations, and Indigenous communities – that signal the right-wing populist worldview infusing the separatist movement. Because of this, separatists' populist worldview is likely to insulate them from efforts to address their grievances.

While separatists are unlikely to change their positions based on appeals to national unity, there is opportunity to address the ambivalence of non-separatist residents of the two provinces toward the federal government. We have three main recommendations.

Focus on the American threat.
The emergence of the United States as a potential threat to Canada creates an opportunity for federalists to make both an emotional and pragmatic appeal to residents of Alberta and Saskatchewan. As Figure 3 demonstrates, non-separatists in these provinces are inclined to express ambivalence toward the federal government, but to perceive the United States as a threat. Articulation of a Canadian nationalism defined in opposition to an American threat has the potential to shift ambivalent westerners to see the federal government as a positive force. Of particular note, the threat of American efforts to influence an Alberta separatism referendum has the potential to galvanize public opinion. The idea that secession is only the first step toward becoming American might be a powerful argument. Even among supporters of separatism, the idea of joining the United States is substantially less popular than the notion of independence (see Figure 1).

Address irritants.
Supporting the Alberta and Saskatchewan economies – and being seen by the public to be doing so – is critical. This involves addressing policy irritants that emerged under the Trudeau government – something that the Carney government is already doing – and carefully avoiding creating new ones. Equalization has long been a source of resentment in Alberta and, to a lesser extent, Saskatchewan. In our survey, 47% of Alberta respondents indicated they thought the current equalization system was unfair to their province and another 27% were neutral; for Saskatchewan respondents, the figures were 45% and 32%, respectively. Equalization is foundational to contemporary Canadian governance and tends to be poorly understood. A citizens' assembly tasked with examining the system and recommending changes, if warranted, might offer a mechanism to increase public understanding and confidence in the system.

Strengthen the case for the Canadian federation. Strengthening the case for federation requires a strong articulation of Canadian values – both in contrast to and independent of American values - and deliberate efforts to foster connections across the country. It requires bolstering Canadian identity, building citizen connections, and supporting Canadian cultural

content. It requires increasing the federal presence in provinces through dedicated offices such as PrairiesCan and decentralizing more civil service positions from the Ottawa/Gatineau national capital region to locations across Canada (including Alberta and Saskatchewan[13]). It requires advancing credential recognition and mutual internal trade recognition to support internal trade and interprovincial/territorial economic integration, and strengthening east-west-north infrastructure and economic relationships. It requires strengthening intergovernmental connections through ministerial councils, joint cabinet meetings, first ministers' conferences, and other mechanisms that support regular dialogue and trust-building amongst government leaders.

Alberta and Saskatchewan have benefited from federalism. Fiscally, both provinces have been recipients of equalization payments since the federal program was established in 1957 and are recipients of federal transfer payments through other programs. Economically, both provinces benefit from labour mobility, international trade, and immigration. Socially, both provinces benefit from strong interpersonal and familial ties from coast to coast to coast, shared liberal democratic values, and concurrent and complementary national and provincial identities[14].

A united Canada has a strong case to make for itself, and it is a case worth making. While the arguments and actions might not sway dedicated separatists, there is an audience for them among the majority of residents of the two provinces who are concerned by the threat posed by the United States but uncertain of the federal government's commitment to the region.

[13] Loleen Berdahl, "Is it time to move Ottawa out of Ottawa?" The Conversation Canada, May 24, 2021.

[14] See Lisa Young, Bianca Jamal and Loleen Berdahl, "Regionalism in Canada" in Jared Wesley and JP Lewis (eds), Small Worlds: Politics and Elections in the Canadian Provinces and Territories, 2nd ed. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2026, 279-298.