

## REALITY CHECK

# Separatist Sentiment

## Polling comparisons in the West and Quebec



**Mark Milke and Ven Venkatachalam**  
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### Introduction: Underestimating Western frustrations would be a mistake

In the recent federal election, a plethora of commentary arose vis-à-vis the possibility of Western separation should the federal Liberal party re-enter Parliament with a fourth term. In early April, Preston Manning, founder of the Reform Party, wrote a partisan column asserting that the re-election of a Liberal government under its new leader, Prime Minister Mark Carney, would result in a threat to national unity given frustrations in Western Canada.

Manning did not endorse separation. He was clear that he thought it a real possibility, arguing that “bottom-up support for Western secession—another one of those populist movements that central Canada has never anticipated or understood—” had the potential to spread to BC and Manitoba from where it is “currently centered,” in Alberta and Saskatchewan.<sup>1</sup> In response, among others, several columnists and politicians took the former Opposition leader to task.

- *National Post* columnist Jamie Sarkonak argued that, based upon Alberta’s landlocked reality and poll numbers (37 percent Alberta support for the “idea” of separation with 25 percent when asked if a referendum were held today),<sup>2</sup> Western separation was a “fantasy” that “shouldn’t be taken seriously.”<sup>3</sup>
- *The Globe and Mail’s* Andrew Coyne, noting other polling with similar results and lower support for separation in other Western provinces, opined that “Mr. Manning does not offer much evidence for his thesis that ‘support for Western secession is growing.’”<sup>4</sup>

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- *Toronto Star* columnist David Olive said Alberta was “giving me a headache.” He argued that the federal government’s financing of “a \$34.2-billion expansion of the Trans Mountain pipeline (TMX) built by Ottawa to get Alberta oil to non-U.S. markets for the first time” should have made Albertans grateful and that perhaps it’s time for Albertans to “wave goodbye” to Canada.<sup>5</sup>
- Prime Minister Mark Carney labelled Manning’s column “dramatic” while Opposition Leader Pierre Poilievre said he disagreed with the opinion piece and that “We need to unite the country.”<sup>6</sup> In mid-April, former British Columbia premier Gordon Campbell noted that Mark Carney’s dismissal of Preston Manning’s concerns as unhelpful “reflects the dismissal the West has known for too long” and that Manning’s warning was enunciated “because he cares about a unified Canada.”<sup>7</sup>

## **A caution from the polls: Western separatist sentiment is nearing historic-Quebec levels**

Western separatist sentiment should not be underestimated. In at least two provinces, support for separation exceeds current Quebec support for separation (though the range from low to high should be noted) and is nearing percentages achieved in the 1976 election of the Parti Québécois and support for separatism in the 1980 referendum.

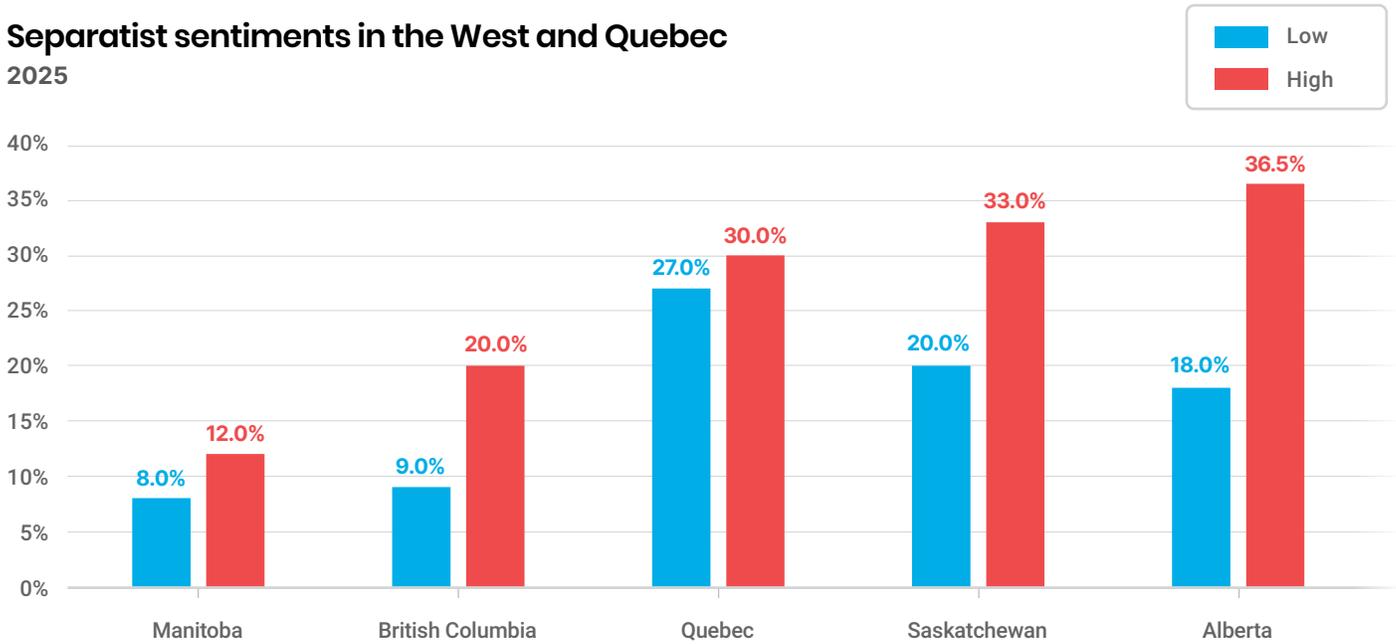
Mid-election polling data from the Angus Reid Institute found that between 25 percent and 30 percent of Albertans and between 20 percent and 33 percent of those in Saskatchewan favoured becoming an independent country (if the Liberal government was re-elected). In BC, support for separatism ranged from 9 percent to 17 percent, while in Manitoba, the range was 8 percent to 12 percent.<sup>8</sup>

Innovative Research found that between 18 percent (pre-election) and 34 percent of Albertans (post-election) would “probably” or “definitely” vote for separation. In BC, support ranged from 14 percent to 17 percent. On the Prairies (Manitoba and Saskatchewan combined) the figures were 18 percent pre-election and 13 percent post-election.<sup>9</sup> Leger found that the range of Albertans favouring independence was between 29 percent (if Alberta alone was independent) and 34 percent (if in conjunction with other Western provinces).<sup>10</sup> Mainstreet Research found that 36.5 percent of Albertans—the highest poll result—would “somewhat” or “strongly support” an independent Alberta on its own or with other Western provinces.<sup>11</sup> In late May, Janet Brown found that 30 percent of Albertans somewhat or strongly favoured separation.<sup>12</sup>

Recent polls from the various polling firms place Quebec support for separation between 27 percent and 30 percent.<sup>13</sup>

Figure 1

**Separatist sentiments in the West and Quebec  
2025**



Sources: Angus Reid Institute, Innovative Research Group, Leger, Mainstreet Research.

## Western sentiment and historic-Quebec support for separation

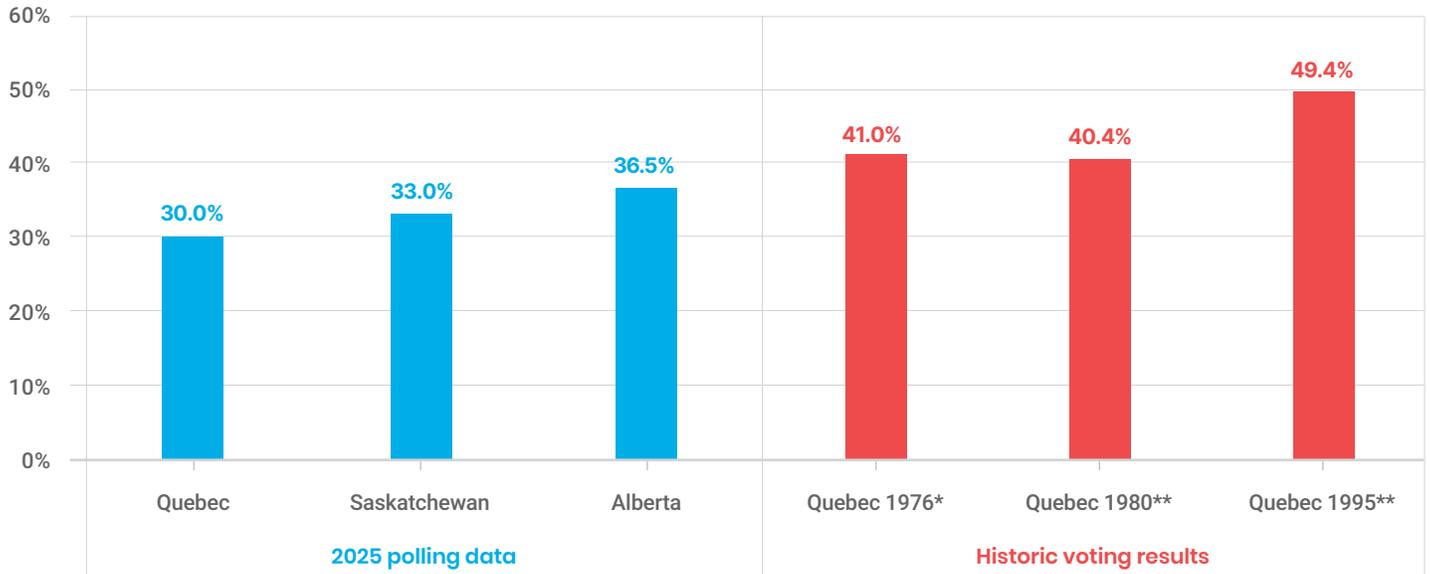
With Western support for separation as high as 33 percent (Saskatchewan) and 36.5 percent (Alberta), such responses mirror Quebec. Between a fifth (British Columbia) and a third or more (Saskatchewan and Alberta respectively) of respondents would consider separation. Such support might better be seen as a potential floor and not necessarily a ceiling.

A comparison of Western separatist sentiment with historic-Quebec votes for separation is also instructive (Figure 2). The 1976 election of the separatist Parti Quebecois in Quebec occurred with just over 41 percent of the vote.<sup>14</sup> In the 1980 Quebec referendum on separation, “only” 40 percent voted for sovereignty association with Canada, a form of separation loosely defined.<sup>15</sup> In 1995, the vote for separation was much closer with 49.4 percent voting for separation/sovereignty association.<sup>16</sup>

In discussions over Western separatist sentiment, grievances combined with charismatic figures—such as then Parti Quebecois leader René Levesque (later Quebec premier as of 1976) and Lucien Bouchard, founder of the Bloc Quebecois—played a significant role in fanning sparks of discontent into separatist flames. It is a mistake to assert that same dynamic is absent or could not exist in Western Canada.

Figure 2

**Separatist sentiments today vs historic separatist vote**



\*Actual Quebec election results in 1976 for the Parti Québécois. \*\*Actual Quebec results in 1980 referendum and 1995 referendum.  
Sources: Angus Reid Institute, Élections Québec, Innovative Research Group, Leger, Mainstreet Research.

**Chronic Quebec demands and Western responses**

Another element to ponder in analyzing whether Western separatist sentiment should be taken seriously is the impact that Quebec’s ongoing political and economic demands have on Canada and on public opinion in the West.

It is instructive to recall that British Columbians opposed a package of constitutional amendments, the Charlottetown Accord, in a 1992 referendum in greater proportion (68.3%) than did Albertans (60.2%)<sup>17</sup> or Quebecois (56.7%).<sup>18</sup> Part of the opposition in British Columbia and in other provinces was driven by proposals for special status for Quebec. As one academic noted in a post-mortem on the Charlottetown Accord referendum, “Citizens in provinces outside of Quebec resented being told that a deal had to be reached or Quebec would separate and the Canadian economy would be destabilized.... The public residing outside of Quebec also questioned the Yes side’s argument that the deal was necessary to redress Quebec’s grievances.”<sup>19</sup>

This particular issue, special status for Quebec, has not been headline news in recent years. However, it would be a mistake to assume that any existing or new policies seen as uniquely favourable to Quebec would not exacerbate separatist sentiment in Western Canada. An example is what appears to be a potential Quebec veto on cross-country pipelines offered up by Prime Minister Mark Carney. In February, the prime minister said he favours national projects including pipelines if a consensus exists.<sup>20</sup> However, both the Quebec premier, Francois Legault,<sup>21</sup> and the leader of the separatist Bloc Quebecois, Yves-François Blanchet, have stated they oppose more oil development, including oil pipelines.<sup>22</sup> Given the April 28, 2025 election results—the governing Liberals are three seats short of a majority, and the Bloc Québécois hold 22<sup>23</sup>—it is conceivable that demands from a Quebec-centric party will increase, and with it, potential opposition to Quebec-centered demands in other parts of Canada (and not just from the West), as occurred in the 1980s and 1990s.

## Western wealth might tempt fracturing

If the polling is accurate, separatist sentiment is highest in Canada's wealthiest province, Alberta. Unlike Quebec voters who, in separatist referendums, must consider how to finance provincial government services absent federal transfers from the rest of Canada, Albertans might be more easily tempted to cast a vote for separation on the calculation that provincial wealth now and in the future would allow their province and their own finances to continue with little downside and potentially a fiscal upside. Some Canadians in other Western provinces may also make that calculation, even if their province has not been a net contributor to Confederation. Downplaying or dismissing Western Canadian sentiment at this juncture would be in error.

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