

**Confederation
of Tomorrow**
SURVEY OF CANADIANS

**The Evolution of Prairie
Discontent**

May 2022

**Environics
Institute**
For Survey Research

**Confederation
of Tomorrow**
SURVEY OF CANADIANS

**La Confédération
de demain**
MENÉ AUPRÈS DES CANADIENS

The Confederation of Tomorrow surveys are annual studies conducted by an association of the country's leading public policy and social research organizations: the Environics Institute for Survey Research, the Centre of Excellence on the Canadian Federation, the Canada West Foundation, the Centre D'Analyse Politique – Constitution et Fédéralisme, and the Brian Mulroney Institute of Government. The surveys give voice to Canadians about the major issues shaping the future of the federation and their political communities. The 2022 study consists of a survey of 5,461 adults, conducted online in the provinces between January 18 and February 10; and by telephone in the territories between January 6 and 30. For more information about the survey, contact info@environicsinstitute.org.

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Executive summary

Canadians living in the three Prairie provinces are among those most dissatisfied with the way Canadian federalism works. For instance, Albertans, Saskatchewanians and Manitobans are among those most likely to feel that they have too little influence on important national decisions. But Prairie residents often distinguish themselves from other Canadians by the extent of their dissatisfaction with their provincial governments as well.

Manitobans and Albertans are currently the least likely in Canada to say that their provincial government best represents their interests. And in all three Prairie provinces, the proportions saying that their provincial government best represents their interests has declined since this series of surveys began in 2019. Some of this may be a reaction to how the region's provincial governments have managed the COVID-19 pandemic. Approval of the provincial government's approach is lower in the three Prairie provinces than elsewhere in Canada. But declining approval of Prairie provincial governments is evident in other areas again, such as climate change and health care. On the issue of climate change, where federal policies have been a focal point for criticism from Prairie premiers, Prairie residents are now three times more likely to say they trust the federal government more, than they are to say they trust their provincial government more.

The concept of "Western alienation" remains relevant as a means of highlighting the distinctive attitudes in the region toward Ottawa. At the same time, an exclusive focus on Western alienation risks obscuring the fact that, in recent years, frustration with the federal government has ebbed, while dissatisfaction with the approach of Prairie provincial governments to key issues has grown.

Sommaire

Les Canadiennes et Canadiens qui vivent dans les trois provinces des Prairies sont parmi les plus insatisfaits de la façon dont le fédéralisme fonctionne au Canada. Notamment, les habitantes et habitants de l'Alberta, de la Saskatchewan et du Manitoba sont parmi les plus susceptibles d'être d'avis qu'ils ont trop peu d'influence sur les décisions nationales importantes. Toutefois, les habitantes et habitants des Prairies se distinguent aussi souvent des autres Canadiennes et Canadiens par leur degré d'insatisfaction envers leur gouvernement provincial.

Les habitantes et habitants du Manitoba et de l'Alberta sont actuellement les moins susceptibles au Canada de dire que leur gouvernement provincial représente le mieux leurs intérêts. De plus, dans les trois provinces des Prairies, la proportion de répondantes et répondants qui disent que leur gouvernement provincial représente le mieux leurs intérêts a diminué depuis que cette série d'enquêtes a commencé, en 2019. Ces résultats pourraient en partie être le reflet d'une réaction à la façon dont les gouvernements provinciaux de ces régions ont géré la pandémie de COVID-19. L'approbation de l'approche du gouvernement provincial est plus faible dans les trois provinces des Prairies qu'ailleurs au Canada. Cependant, l'approbation de plus en plus faible envers les gouvernements provinciaux des Prairies est aussi observée dans d'autres domaines, comme les changements climatiques et les soins de santé. Pour ce qui est des changements climatiques, sujet pour lequel les politiques fédérales ont été au cœur de critiques de la part des premiers ministres des Prairies, les habitantes et habitants des Prairies sont maintenant trois fois plus susceptibles de dire qu'ils font plus confiance au gouvernement fédéral qu'à leur gouvernement provincial.

Le concept de « l'aliénation de l'Ouest » demeure pertinent pour souligner l'attitude distinctive dans cette région envers Ottawa. Cela dit, une attention exclusive accordée à l'aliénation de l'Ouest pourrait embrouiller le fait que, au cours des dernières années, la frustration envers le gouvernement fédéral a diminué, alors que l'insatisfaction envers l'approche des gouvernements provinciaux des Prairies à l'égard d'enjeux clés a augmenté.

Background

Discussions of the state of national unity in Canada over the past several decades have tended to have two main focuses: Quebec nationalism and Western alienation. Western alienation generally refers to the view among those living in the Western provinces that their interests are systematically ignored by a federal system dominated by Central Canada. It is “a critical response to the centre-periphery dynamics of Canadian politics” that “calls attention to how that Canada, in theory and practice, privileges central Canadian interests and worldviews over those of others.”¹

The Confederation of Tomorrow surveys have, since 2019, reported on the extent of dissatisfaction in the Western provinces with the workings of Canadian federalism. For instance, in 2019 [the survey found that](#) agreement in the region that “Western Canada gets so few benefits from being part of Canada that they might as well go it on their own” had reached the highest level recorded since the question was first asked in 1987. Each year, the survey also reports that residents in a number of Western provinces are among those most likely to feel that their province is not treated with the respect it deserves in Canada, does not have its fair share of influence on important national decisions, and does not receive its fair share of federal spending.

The latest survey, conducted in January 2022, confirms that, while feelings of discontent in the region have ebbed somewhat since 2019, they remain relatively high. It also confirms, however, that over time, attitudes in British Columbia have become increasingly dissimilar from those in the three Prairie provinces: unlike in the Prairies, discontent with federalism in B.C. has been steadily declining. For this reason, this report will shift its focus from “Western alienation” to “Prairie discontent.”²

The focus on Prairie discontent, however, brings into view not only perennial frustrations with federalism, but also growing dissatisfaction with provincial governments in the region. It might have been expected that, in the wake of the 2019 and 2021 elections – which saw the federal Liberal government twice re-elected with little representation in the region – Prairie residents would rally around their provincial governments. Instead, in several key areas, dissatisfaction with the region’s provincial governments has grown. Prairie discontent has thus become less singularly focused on Ottawa and more focused on governments in general. This is a significant development which, to some extent at least, calls into question the traditional framing of Western alienation.

¹ Loleen Berdahl, *The Persistence of Western Alienation*, (Montreal: Centre for Excellence on the Canadian Federation, 2021); <https://centre.irpp.org/research-studies/the-persistence-of-western-alienation/>.

² Developments in British Columbia will be examined in a separate report.

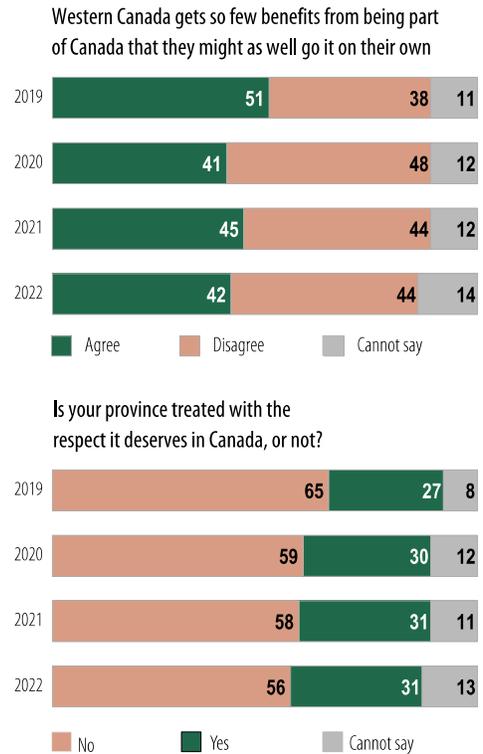
Measures of Prairie discontent

Two in five residents of the three Prairie provinces agree that Western Canada gets so few benefits from being part of Canada that the region might as well go it on its own. And more than one in two say they their province is not treated with the respect it deserves in Canada.

The Confederation of Tomorrow surveys track several measures of discontent with the workings of the Canadian federation. In the Prairies, this discontent appears to have peaked in 2019; but while it has ebbed somewhat since then, it remains relatively high. In 2022, two in five (42%) residents of the three Prairie provinces agree with the statement that “Western Canada gets so few benefits from being part of Canada that they might as well go it on their own.” And more than one in two (56%) say their province is not treated with the respect it deserves in Canada. Looking at the provinces individually, residents of Alberta and Saskatchewan are among the most likely in Canada to say their province is not respected – surpassed only by residents of Newfoundland and Labrador. Residents of the three Prairie provinces are also among the most likely to say their province has less than its fair share of influence on important national decisions in Canada, and receives less than its fair share of federal spending.

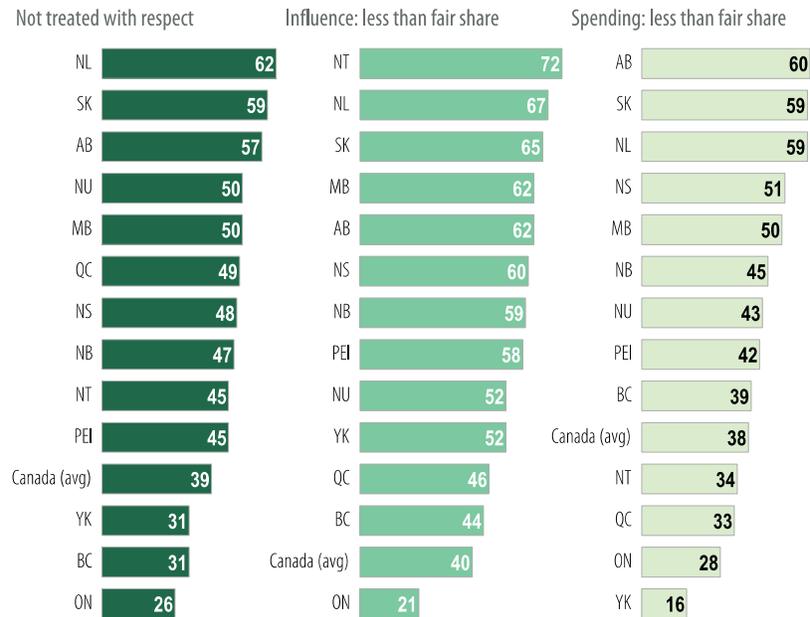
Measures of Prairie discontent

2019 - 2022 Prairie provinces



Respect, influence and federal spending

2022 Prairie provinces



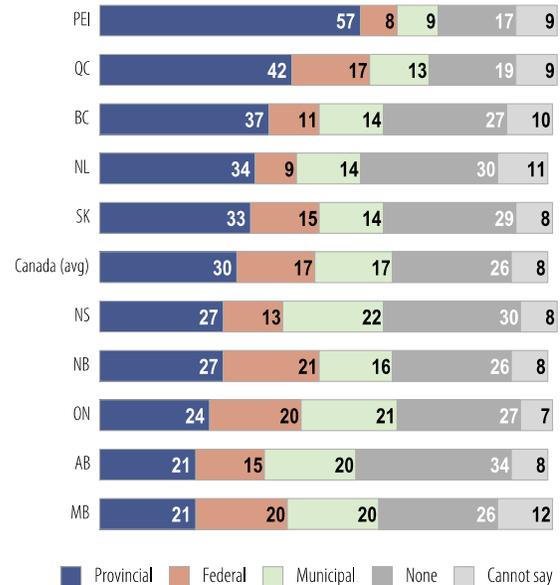
Which government best represents your interests?

In each of the three Prairie provinces, the proportions saying that their provincial government best represents their interests has declined significantly over the past two years.

Overall, Canadians are more likely to say that their provincial or territorial government is the one that best represents their interests: 30 percent hold this view, compared to 17 percent who say the federal government best represents their interests, 17 percent who choose their

Which government do you believe best represents your interests?

2022



Q.15

Which government do you believe best represents your interests?

municipal government, and 26 percent who say that none of these governments do.³

The proportion of Canadians that say their provincial government best represents their interests varies, from highs of 57 percent in Prince Edward Island and 42 percent in Quebec (47% among Quebec francophones), to lows of 21 percent in Manitoba and Alberta. It is notable that residents of two of the three Prairie provinces are the least likely to say that their provincial government best represents their interests. Saskatchewan differs from its Prairie neighbours in this regard, as the proportion that takes this view (33%) is closer to the national average.

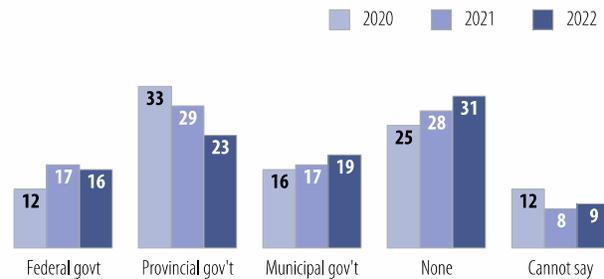
In Manitoba and Alberta, pluralities say that no government best represents their interests. In Alberta, this proportion reaches one in three. This is also the case in the Prairies as a whole: combining responses for all three provinces, 31 percent say that no government best represents their interests, compared to 23 percent who say it is their provincial government.

In each of the three Prairie provinces, the proportion saying that their provincial government best represents their interests has declined significantly over the past two years: it has declined by 10 points in Manitoba, 15 points in Saskatchewan and nine points in Alberta. In the region as a whole, the proportion has declined by 10 points. In no other province has there been a similar steady decline.⁴

Despite this decline, residents of the Prairies are still more likely to say their provincial government best represents their interests than they are to say it is the federal government. But the gap between the two has narrowed, from 21 points in 2020 to seven points in 2022 (in Saskatchewan, the gap

Which government do you believe best represents your interests?

2020 - 2022 Prairie provinces

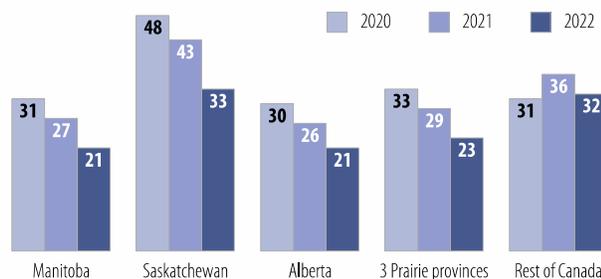


Q.15

Which government do you believe best represents your interests?

The provincial government best represents my interests

2020 - 2022



Q.15

Which government do you believe best represents your interests?

³ Respondents who identify as Indigenous could also choose their Indigenous government as the one that best represents their interests. Indigenous governments are selected by 26 percent of Indigenous respondents as the one that best represents their interests, a higher proportion than selected any other government. However, as this preference constitutes only one percent of the preferences from the total sample, the charts in report does not show these responses. They will be reported in detail in a separate report.

⁴ In many other provinces, the proportions saying that their provincial government best represents their interests increased in 2021 during the first year of the pandemic, and then ebbed; however, only in Quebec is the figure for 2022 lower than in 2020, and in this case the decline is very slight (by only 2 percentage points).

narrowed from 39 points to 18). And while in 2020, Prairie residents were more likely to say their provincial government best represents their interests than to say that no government does, this is no longer the case.

In short, while support for Ottawa in the region is relatively low, the change over the past two years has been toward less support for provincial governments, and growing discontent with all governments.

Managing the COVID-19 pandemic

Residents of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta are among the least likely to approve of their own provincial government’s handling of the pandemic. And in Alberta and Manitoba, approval levels for the provincial government’s handling of the crisis is notably lower than those for the federal government.

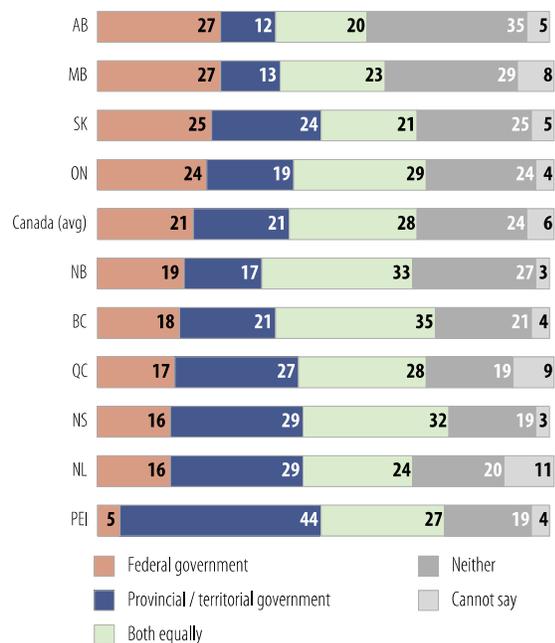
The decline in the proportion of Prairie residents who see their provincial governments as their best representative occurred since early 2020 – that is, since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Is this coincidental, or is the change related to perceptions about how Prairie provincial governments have performed in managing the pandemic?

The 2022 Confederation of Tomorrow survey shows that satisfaction with the performance of provincial governments during the pandemic is somewhat lower in the Prairies. For instance:

- Only 15 percent in the region trust their provincial government more to manage the COVID-19 pandemic, compared to 22 percent outside the region, and higher figures of 26 percent in Atlantic Canada and 27 percent in Quebec.
- More specifically, among all provinces, the proportion trusting their provincial government more to manage the pandemic is lowest in two of the three Prairie provinces: Manitoba (13%) and Alberta (12%) (it is higher in Saskatchewan, at 24%).

Which government do you trust more to make the right decisions in managing the COVID-19 pandemic?

2022



Q.25f

Which government do you trust more to make the right decisions in the following areas: Managing the COVID-19 pandemic?

- Residents of the three Prairie provinces, along with Ontarians, are also more likely than the Canadian average to trust the federal government more in this regard.
- Prairie residents are also more likely than average to trust neither government to manage the pandemic. Albertans stand out in this regard, with 35 percent trusting neither government, compared to the Canadian average of 24 percent.

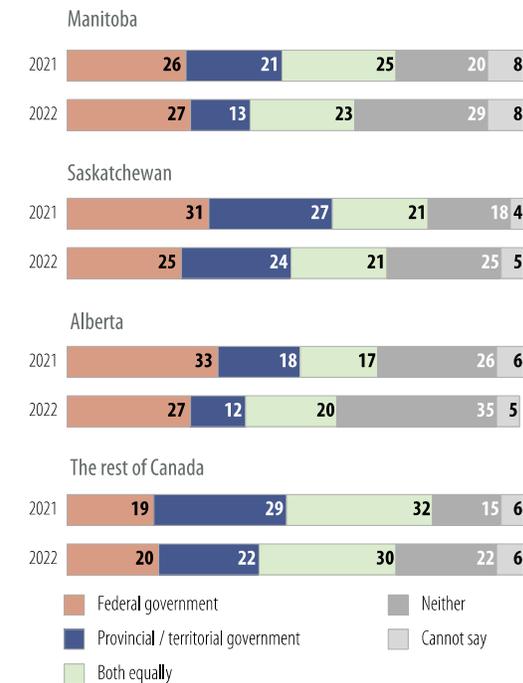
In each of the three Prairie provinces, the proportions trusting their provincial government more to manage the pandemic also declined over the past year, as the Omicron wave dampened the hopes that had built up in the summer of 2021. In this regard, however, the Prairie provinces mirror the national trend: the proportion trusting their provincial government more declined in Canada as a whole, as well as in most individual provinces. It declined by larger margins in Quebec (down 13 points) and B.C. (down 11 points) than in the Prairies (down 5 points). The smaller decline in the Prairies, however, is partly explained by the fact that the proportion in the region trusting their provincial government more to manage the pandemic was already lower in 2021 than that in most other provinces (with the exception of Ontario).

The survey also asked Canadians about the extent to which they approve or disapprove of both the federal government's, and their provincial or territorial government's, handling of the COVID-19 pandemic so far.

What is most notable is that the levels of approval are lowest in the three Prairie provinces in each case: residents of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta (along with those in Ontario) are the least likely to approve of the federal government's handling of the pandemic, but also the least likely to approve of their own provincial government's handling of the pandemic.

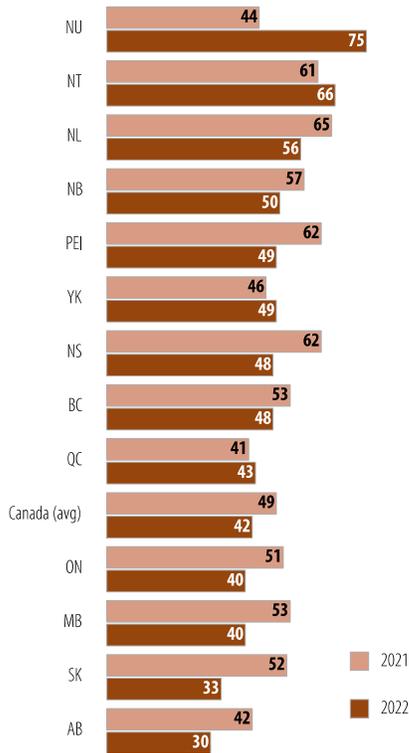
In Canada as a whole, approval of how both the federal government, and provincial or territorial governments, have handled the pandemic was lower in 2022 compared to 2021 – and this is true in each of the Prairie provinces as well. But both this year and last, in each of the three Prairie provinces, approval levels for the provincial government's handling of the crisis is lower than those for the federal government. In 2022, the margin is small in Saskatchewan (4 points), but more significant in the case of Alberta (10 points) and Manitoba (13 points).

Which government do you trust more to make the right decisions in managing the COVID-19 pandemic?
2021 - 2022



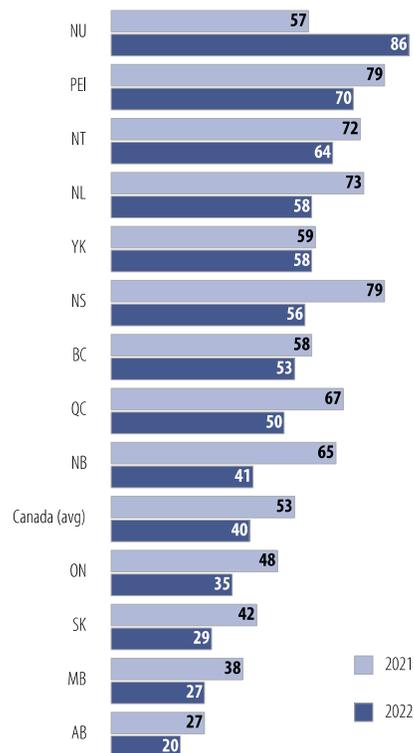
Q.25f
Which government do you trust more to make the right decisions in the following areas: Managing the COVID-19 pandemic?

Approval of the **federal government's** handling of the COVID-19 pandemic so far?
2021 - 2022 Approve (strongly or somewhat)



Q.COV4A
To what extent do you approve or disapprove of the federal government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic so far?

Approval of the **provincial/territorial government's** handling of the COVID-19 pandemic so far?
2021 - 2022 Approve (strongly or somewhat)



Q.COV4A
To what extent do you approve or disapprove of your provincial [territorial] government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic so far?

The politics of pleasing no one

In much of Canada, provincial governments gained more trust and higher approval among citizens favouring a more cautious approach to the reopening of the economy in the wake of the Omicron wave of the pandemic. But in the Prairies, trust and approval for provincial governments remained comparatively low among both those who favoured a faster reopening, and those who preferred the more cautious approach.

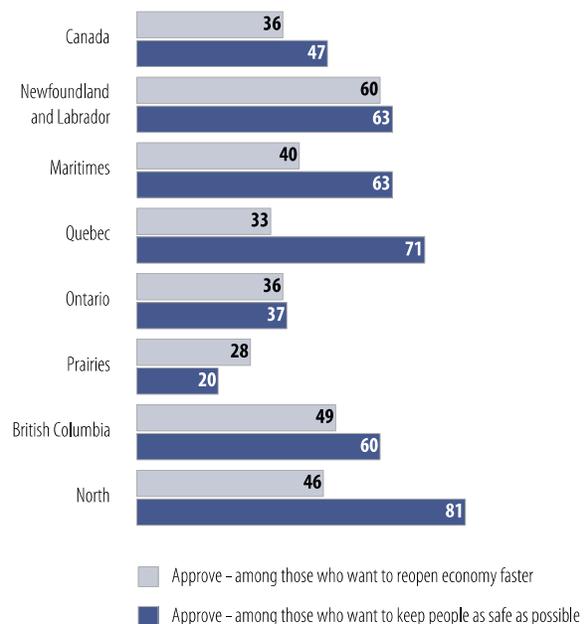
Across Canada as a whole, views on how well governments have managed the pandemic are, not surprisingly, linked to views on the seriousness of the threat posed by COVID-19. For instance, in January 2022, those who believed that governments should move faster to reopen the economy, even if that might mean that COVID cases would rise, were less likely to approve of the way both the federal government and their provincial or territorial government were handling the pandemic. Those who favoured a more cautious approach to reopening the economy, in order to keep people as safe as possible from the virus, were more likely to approve of the approach of each government.⁵

While this pattern applies for Canada as a whole, it varies significantly among regions. Overall, Canadians who favour a more prudent approach are 11 points more likely to approve of their provincial government's handling of the pandemic, compared to those who favour a faster reopening of the economy. However, this gap is much larger in Quebec (plus 38 points) and the Maritimes (plus 23 points); is at the national average in B.C. (plus 11 points); and is almost absent in Ontario (plus 1 point). And in the Prairies, the gap is in the other direction (minus 8 points), as those who favour a more prudent approach are less likely than those who favour a faster reopening to approve of their provincial government's handling of the pandemic.

In the Prairies, approval of the provincial government's handling of the pandemic is

Strongly/somewhat approve of provincial government's handling of pandemic

2022 By preference on how quickly to reopen the economy



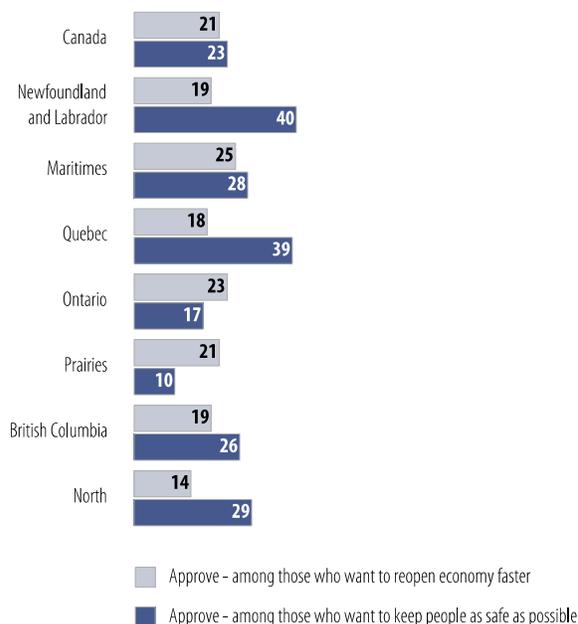
⁵ These results are based on the following survey question: "As you know, governments in Canada are trying to find the right balance between the need to keep people safe from the spread of the COVID-19 virus, and the need to reopen the economy and get people back to work. Which of the following do you think is the best approach? (a) Governments should reopen the economy faster than they are doing now, even if that means that more people might end up getting sick from COVID-19; or (b) governments should keep people as safe as possible from the spread of the COVID-19 virus, even if that means re-opening the economy more slowly."

lower than average among both groups, that is, among both those who favour a faster reopening of the economy, and among those who favour a more prudent approach. But the difference from the national average is much greater in the latter case than in the former. Residents of the Prairies who favour a faster reopening of the economy are eight points less likely than average to approve of their provincial government's handling of the pandemic; but the level of approval among those who favour a more prudent approach is 27 points lower than average.

In general, these same patterns hold when looking at the proportion that trusts their provincial government more to manage the COVID-19 pandemic. In provinces such as Newfoundland and Labrador, and B.C., those who favour a more prudent approach to reopening the economy are *more likely* to trust their provincial government more to manage the pandemic. But in the Prairies (as well as in Ontario), this group is *less likely* to trust their provincial government more.

It appears, then, that the approach to managing the pandemic followed by provincial governments in the Prairies was unable to please either group (either those who favour of a faster reopening of the economy, or those who favour a more prudent approach). Outside the Prairies, and also Ontario, provincial governments may have frustrated those hoping for a faster reopening, but were able to gain more trust and higher approval among those favouring a more prudent approach. Within the Prairies, trust and approval remained comparatively low among both constituencies.

Trust provincial government more to manage pandemic 2022 By preference on how quickly to reopen the economy



Managing other issues

Prairie residents are almost three times more likely to say they trust the federal government more to address climate change than they are to say they trust their provincial government more. Moreover, the proportion in the Prairies that trusts the federal government more is higher today than it was in 2019.

If discontent among Prairie residents with governments in general, and provincial governments in particular, is prompted by government response to the pandemic, then it may not be enduring. The extent of public frustration may subside as COVID-19 case numbers decline.

The findings of the Confederation of Tomorrow surveys, however, suggest that in the three Prairie provinces, the public’s approval of their provincial governments’ handling of other issues has declined as well.

Climate change

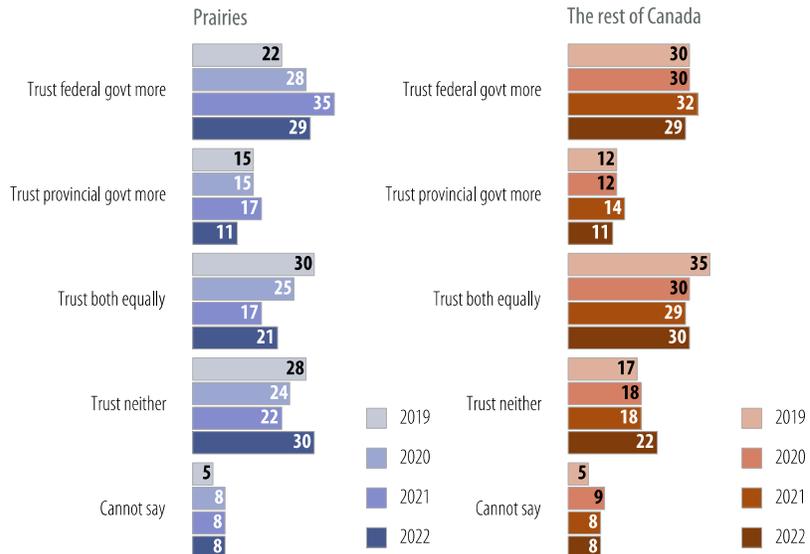
The most notable trend relates to climate change. Each of the three Prairie governments have been vocal in opposition to the federal government’s approach to addressing climate change, which involves applying [a charge on the use of fossil fuels](#) (or a “carbon tax”) in provinces that do not have their own similar program in place. Opposition to the federal approach in the region has been framed as a defence both of provincial rights and of the region’s economy, which is more reliant on the oil and gas sector.

Like Canadians outside the region, however, Prairie residents are almost three times more likely to say they trust the federal government more to address climate change than they are to say they trust their provincial government more. Moreover, the proportion in the Prairies that trusts the federal government more is higher today than it was in 2019, while the proportion that trusts their provincial government more is slightly lower. The proportion in the region trusting both governments equally is also lower today than it was three years ago.

The magnitude of these changes in opinion is relatively modest. What is important, in the context of a high-profile issue that pitted each of Prairie provincial governments against the federal position, is that there has been no shift in the opposite direction: no rallying of support in the region around provincial governments at the expense of support for Ottawa. In fact, in the Prairies, the gap in trust in Ottawa’s favour (that is, the difference between the proportion trusting the federal government more, and the proportion trusting their provincial government more) has widened (from 7 to 18 points).

Which government is trusted more to make the right decisions in addressing climate change?

2019 - 2022



Q.25c
Which level of government do you trust more to make the right decisions in the following areas:
addressing climate change

The economy

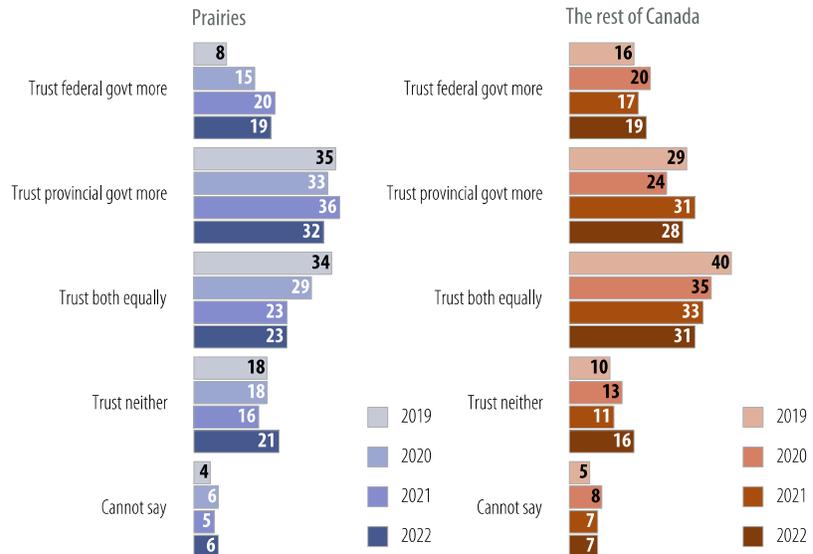
The situation is somewhat different when it comes to promoting economic growth and job creation. Prairie residents continue to be more likely to trust their provincial government more in this area (32%) than they are to trust the federal government more (19%). The proportion in the region trusting their provincial government more is relatively unchanged since 2019.

At the same time, since 2019, the proportion trusting the federal government more has increased (by 11 points), while the proportion trusting both governments equally has declined (by 11 points). Over a three-year period, there has been a gradual shift away from the middle ground, as Prairie residents are now somewhat more likely to look to Ottawa. The result in this case is that the gap in trust in the province's favour (that is, the difference between the proportion trusting their provincial government more, and the proportion trusting the federal government more) has narrowed (from 27 to 13 points).

Health care

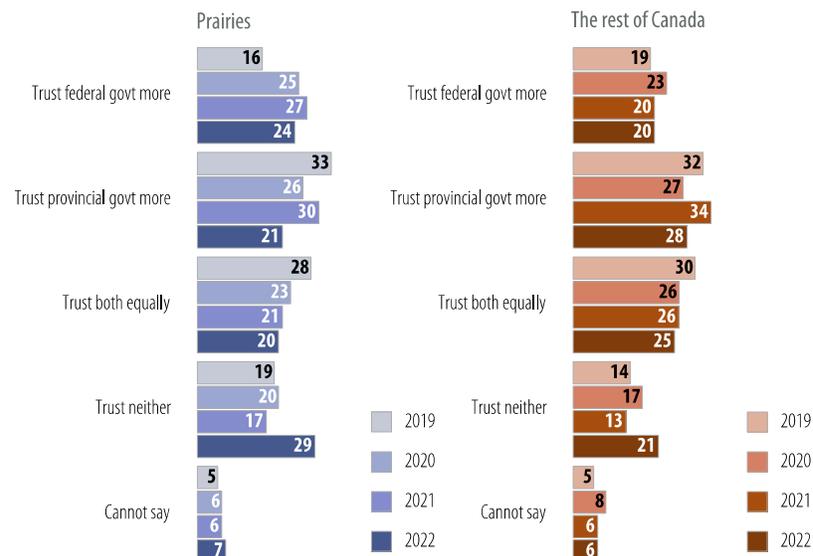
A similar shift has occurred in the area of health care. In the Prairies, the proportion trusting their provincial government more to manage the health care

Which government is trusted more to make the right decisions in promoting economic growth and job creation? 2019 - 2022



Q.25b
Which level of government do you trust more to make the right decisions in the following areas:
Promoting economic growth and job creation

Which government is trusted more to make the right decisions in managing the health care system? 2019 - 2022



Q.25a
Which level of government do you trust more to make the right decisions in the following areas:
Managing the health care system

system is lower today than in 2019, while the proportion trusting the federal government more has risen. In 2019, residents of the Prairies were more likely to trust their provincial government more to manage the health care system than they were to trust the federal government more. Today, the reverse is true (although by a smaller margin).

This shift may be partly a reaction to the management of the pandemic. Across the country as a whole, the proportion of Canadians trusting their provincial government more to manage the health care system rose between 2020 and 2021, toward the end of the first year of the pandemic, but declined between 2021 and 2022, as the Omicron wave took hold. This general pattern is evident within the Prairie region as well. But in the Prairies, the decline in the proportion trusting their provincial government more in this area, and the increase in the proportion trusting the federal government more, began prior to the onset of the pandemic.

The more recent effect of the pandemic in the region – in terms of a change between 2021 and 2022 – is a jump in the proportion trusting neither government (from 17 to 29 percent).

Conclusion

It is beyond a doubt that Canadians living in the three Prairie provinces are among those most dissatisfied with the way Canadian federalism works. As noted in this report, Albertans, Saskatchewanians and Manitobans are among those most likely to feel that they have too little influence on important national decisions. And, as [previous reports in this series](#) have highlighted, residents of Alberta and Saskatchewan are the most likely to support a transfer of powers from Ottawa to the provinces, and the least likely to support the way the country's wealth is shared through the equalization program.

This report, however, has sought to widen the lens by noting that Prairie residents often distinguish themselves from other Canadians by the extent of their dissatisfaction with their provincial governments as well. Manitobans and Albertans, for instance, are currently the least likely in Canada to say that their provincial government best represents their interests. And in all three Prairie provinces, the proportions saying that their provincial government best represents their interests has declined since this question was first asked in 2020.

Some of this trend may be explained by dissatisfaction in the region with the way that the provincial governments have managed the COVID-19 pandemic. Approval of the provincial government's approach is lowest in the three Prairie provinces, and is notably lowest both among residents in the region who favour a faster reopening of the economy in the wake of the Omicron wave, and those who favour a more prudent approach.

On other key issues, however, the recent trend in the region has not been an increase in anger toward the federal government, but a decrease in support for provincial positions (and in some cases, growing frustration with all governments). On the prominent issue of climate change, the gap in trust in Ottawa's favour has widened. On the economy, Prairie residents continue to be more likely to trust their provincial government more than they are to trust the federal government more. But, over the past few years, the gap in trust in the province's favour has

narrowed. And while residents of the Prairies were previously more likely to trust their provincial governments more to manage the health care system than they were to trust the federal government more, today the reverse is true (although by a smaller margin).

These trends do not override the notion of “Western alienation,” but suggest that the concept is not sufficient to capture the current mood in the three Prairie provinces. The notion of Western alienation implies a politics of regionalism that emphasizes the extent to which Westerners feel overlooked by federal government decision-making. But in some key areas, Prairie residents are currently less satisfied with their provincial government than with Ottawa. And in other areas, where provincial governments continue to enjoy greater support, the extent of that support is waning.

It is important not to lose sight of the extent of dissatisfaction in some regions of the country, such as the Prairies, with the federal system. But it is also important not to allow the traditional framing of politics in Canada to obscure other, no less important, developments.