

What unites & defines the “West”? In a complicated confederation, less than one might think

A region often divided finds itself united by the belief that the federal government treats it unfairly

January 30, 2019 – The concept of “Western Canada” may be one borne of geography and history, but where does it start and end? How much do Canada's four most western provinces actually have in common? What unites and divides them? And what assumptions do eastern provinces make about the west?

The answers to these deceptively simple questions have been the subject of nearly a century of debate in this country, and new data from the Angus Reid Institute – part three of a four-part study on western identity and opinion – aims to add to the discussion.

The poll finds a large majority of residents in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba – and a majority of Canadians, overall – inclined to believe “the west” is a unique region within Canada. That said, fewer than half of all Canadians can agree on a single definition of which provinces constitute “the west.”

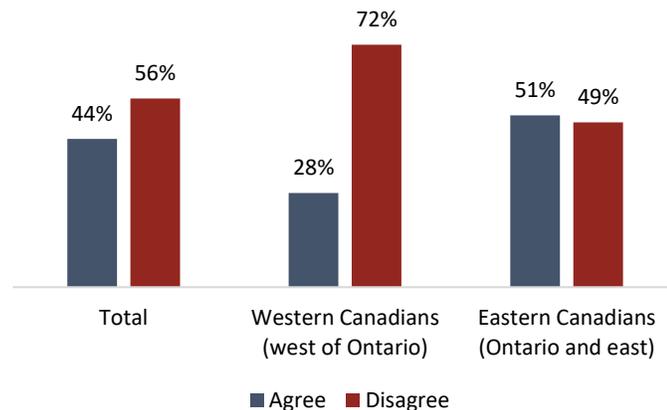
This lack of consensus may reflect a larger truth: while Western Canada may be a “unique” region, it is far from a united one. The four western provinces have major disagreements on questions of politics and identity, with the rift between British Columbia and Alberta and the closeness between Alberta and Saskatchewan particularly notable.

That said, the west is united by its belief that it is not treated fairly by the federal government, and a sense it is poorly represented by Canada's national institutions.

More Key Findings:

- British Columbians see themselves as having more in common with Washington State (54% say this) and California (18%) than Alberta (15%) or any other Canadian province

"My province is treated fairly by the national government"



METHODOLOGY:

The Angus Reid Institute conducted an online survey from December 21, 2018 – January 3, 2019, among a representative randomized sample of 4,024 Canadian adults who are members of the [Angus Reid Forum](#). The sample plan included large oversamples in some regions that were then weighted back to provide a national snapshot. For comparison purposes only, a probability sample of this size with this sample frame would carry a margin of error of +/- 2.5 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. Discrepancies in or between totals are due to rounding. The survey was self-commissioned and paid for by ARI. Detailed tables are found at the end of this release.

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- Among those in the four westernmost provinces who feel their region has been treated unfairly by the federal government, two-thirds (66%) feel this treatment has been worsening in recent years, while only 12 per cent feel it has been improving (21% say it has not changed)
- Fewer than three-in-ten respondents in each of the four western provinces say the federal government in Ottawa reflects and represents their province well
- Most residents of Alberta (69%) and Saskatchewan (58%) favour their provincial governments taking a hard line with the federal government, while majorities in B.C. (63%) and Manitoba (52%) say they want their provincial leadership to be “firm,” but not play hardball

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Part 1: A unique region within Canada?

What is the West?

For basically as long as Canada has had western provinces (Manitoba became a province in 1870, British Columbia joined Canada in 1871, and Saskatchewan and Alberta were created in 1905), the western provinces have had complaints about their place within confederation. In the late 19th Century, these complaints tended to focus on the National Policy of John A. Macdonald’s government, which was viewed as protecting eastern manufacturing to the detriment of western agriculture.

More recently, western frustrations have focused on natural resources – especially oil and gas – and the west’s perceived lack of political clout in Ottawa relative to its economic contribution to the country.

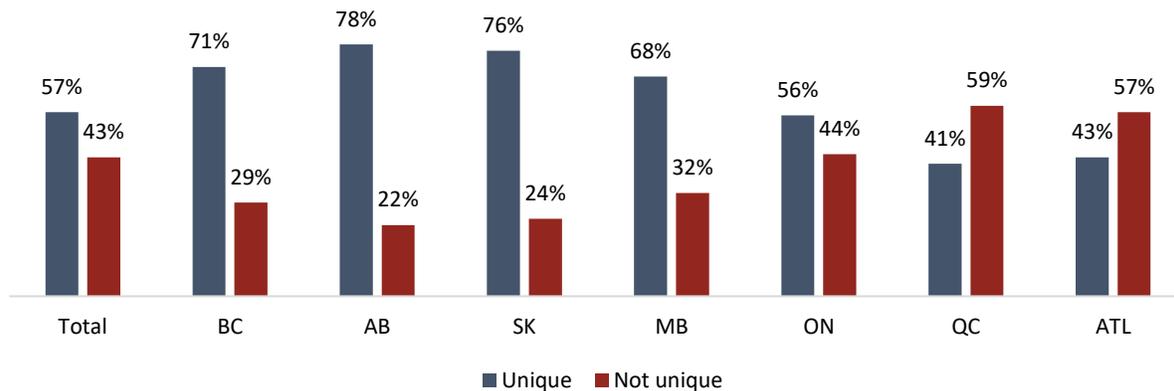
Even these complaints are longstanding. Consider this 1969 CBC interview, in which Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau is asked to respond to western grievances more than a decade before the debut of his famously loathed National Energy Policy.

Given this history, it’s perhaps not surprising that most Canadians consider the west a unique region within Canada. This view is most widely held in the four westernmost provinces, but it is also the majority view in Ontario. As seen in the graph that follows, only in Quebec and Atlantic Canada do majorities believe the west is not a unique region.

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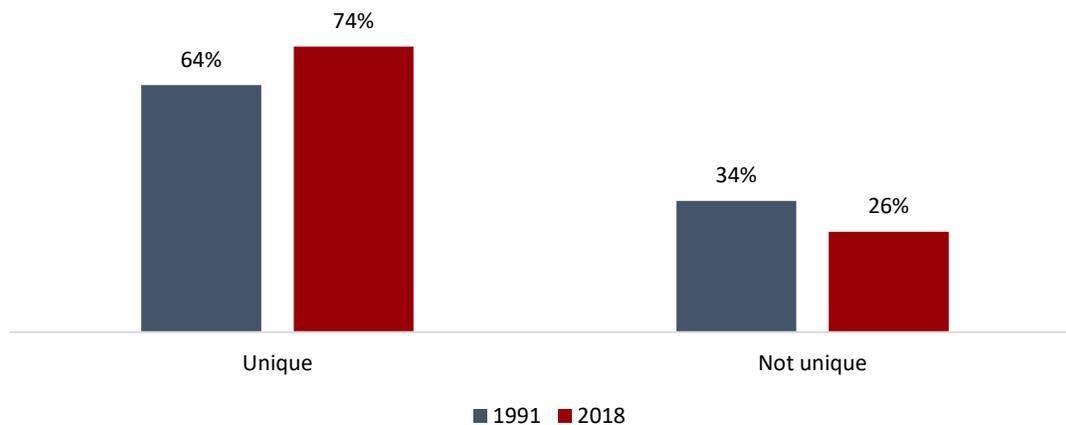
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Some people think that the West should be thought of as a unique region in Canada. Other people do not think the West is a unique region. What do you think?



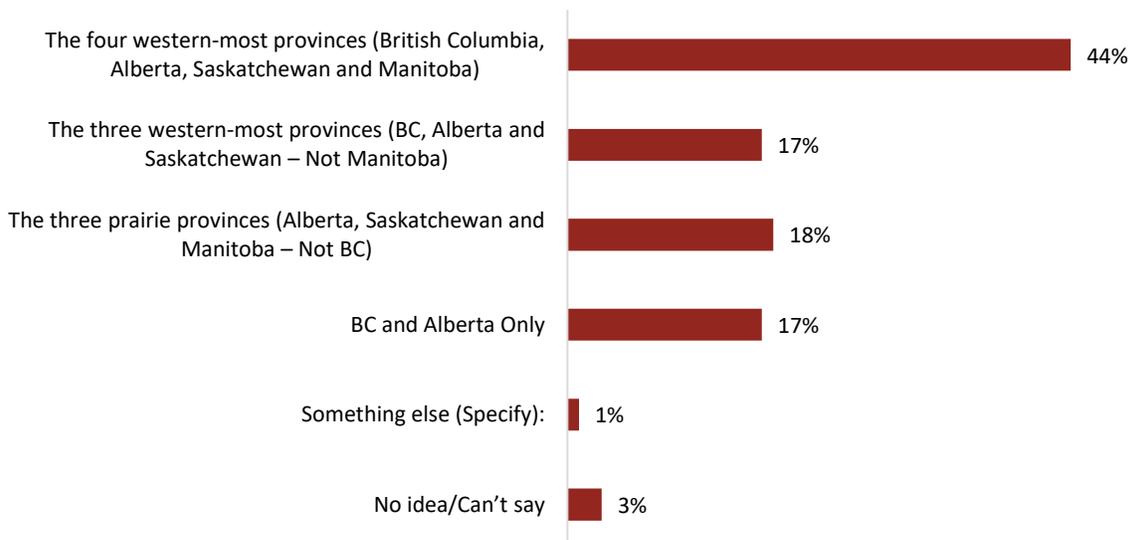
The view among westerners that their region is unique has grown more widely held over time. When the Angus Reid Group asked residents of British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba this question in 1991, 64 per cent felt the west had a unique identity. Today, it's nearly three-in-four (74%):

Some people think that the West should be thought of as a unique region in Canada. Other people do not think the West is a unique region. What do you think? (Among residents of BC, AB, SK, and MB, only)



But what do Canadians mean when they say “Western Canada?” Some 44 per cent think of the term as meaning the four provinces west of Ontario (which is the definition used throughout this four-part study), but that means that a majority (56%) have some other definition in mind, as seen in the following graph:

When you see or hear a reference to "Western Canada", which provinces would you say that typically includes?



There is notable variation within Western Canada on this question. While more than half in Saskatchewan and Manitoba say the four westernmost provinces constitute the west, fewer than half in Alberta and B.C. believe this is the case.

British Columbians almost universally consider themselves part of the west, while Prairie residents – especially in Alberta and Saskatchewan – are more likely to exclude B.C. from their definition. Meanwhile, 30 per cent of B.C. residents take the view that provinces that don't touch the Rocky Mountains do not constitute Western Canada:

When you see or hear a reference to "Western Canada", which provinces would you say that typically includes?								
	Total	Region						
		BC	AB	SK	MB	ON	QC	ATL
The four western-most provinces (British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba)	44%	37%	40%	53%	58%	40%	50%	49%
The three western-most provinces (BC, Alberta and Saskatchewan – Not Manitoba)	17%	23%	17%	10%	6%	21%	12%	14%
The three prairie provinces (Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba – Not BC)	18%	6%	35%	33%	25%	17%	14%	18%
BC and Alberta Only	17%	30%	4%	3%	8%	19%	16%	15%

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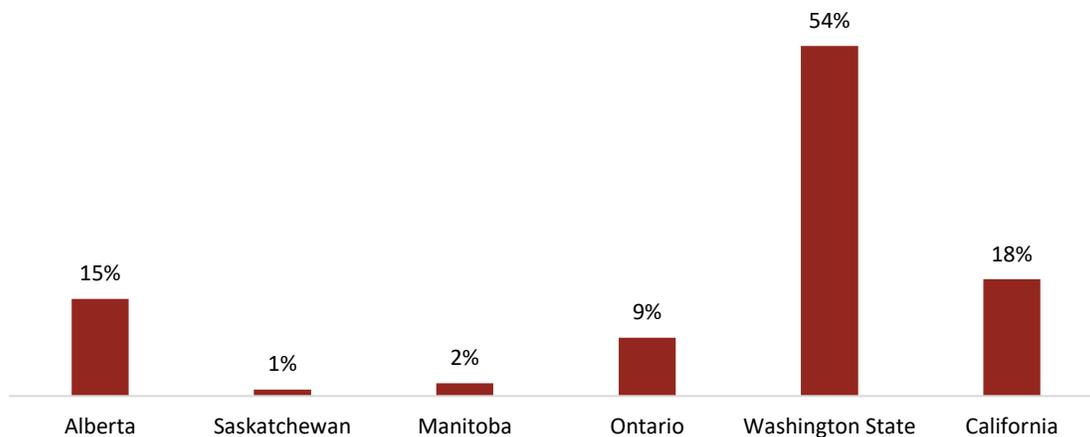
How westerners see themselves

Asked to pick a nearby region most similar to their own, residents of the four western provinces differ greatly in their assessments. Alberta and Saskatchewan residents see a great deal of similarity in each other's provinces, with 70 per cent of Albertans saying their province has the most in common with Saskatchewan, and 61 per cent of Saskatchewan residents saying the same of Alberta.

By this measure, Manitobans appear to have an "unrequited love" for Saskatchewan. While 70 per cent in Manitoba say they have the most in common with their Prairie neighbour, just one-in-four Saskatchewan respondents choose Manitoba.

British Columbians stand out the most on this question, however, because they view themselves as most similar to Washington State, and are more likely to see commonalities with California than with any of the other Western provinces:

Thinking of the values and lifestyles of the people in your province, which of the following geographic areas would you say British Columbia has most in common with? (Asked of BC residents, n=706)



Notably, British Columbia's preference for Washington over any of its fellow Canadian provinces is not new. In 1991, fully half of B.C. respondents told the Angus Reid Group they had the most in common with Washington.

That said, 1991 saw a much greater degree of mutual recognition between British Columbia and Alberta. Fully one-in-three Albertans in that survey said they had the most in common with B.C., more than chose any other province. Today, only 7 per cent of Albertans think their province has the most in common with B.C.

Similarly, in 1991, Saskatchewan identified more closely with Manitoba than Alberta. This 2018 survey suggests that Alberta and Saskatchewan have moved toward each other, socially, and away from their other neighbours, over the last three decades:

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Thinking of the values and lifestyles of the people in your province, which of the following geographic areas would you say your province has most in common with?

	BC		AB		SK		MB	
	1991	2018	1991	2018	1991	2018	1991	2018
British Columbia	-	-	33%	7%	3%	0%	2%	1%
Alberta	23%	15%	-	-	42%	61%	6%	6%
Saskatchewan	1%	1%	28%	70%	-	-	67%	70%
Manitoba	-	2%	2%	2%	35%	25%	-	-
Ontario	8%	9%	6%	2%	2%	0%	4%	5%
Washington State	50%	54%	-	-	-	-	-	-
California	13%	18%	-	-	-	-	-	-
Montana	-	-	15%	14%	5%	5%	-	-
Colorado	-	-	9%	5%	-	-	-	-
North Dakota	-	-	-	-	11%	8%	13%	10%
Minnesota	-	-	-	-	-	-	4%	7%
Unsure	5%	-	6%	-	2%	-	4%	-

These differences in perceived closeness across the west reflect some of the findings noted in [part two](#) of this four-part study. While Western Canadians perceive their region as unique and distinct from the rest of Canada, they also hold nuanced views about the region’s component provinces. In particular, this study finds consistently positive, fraternal feelings between Alberta and Saskatchewan, while it shows a growing rift between Alberta and British Columbia on many issues.

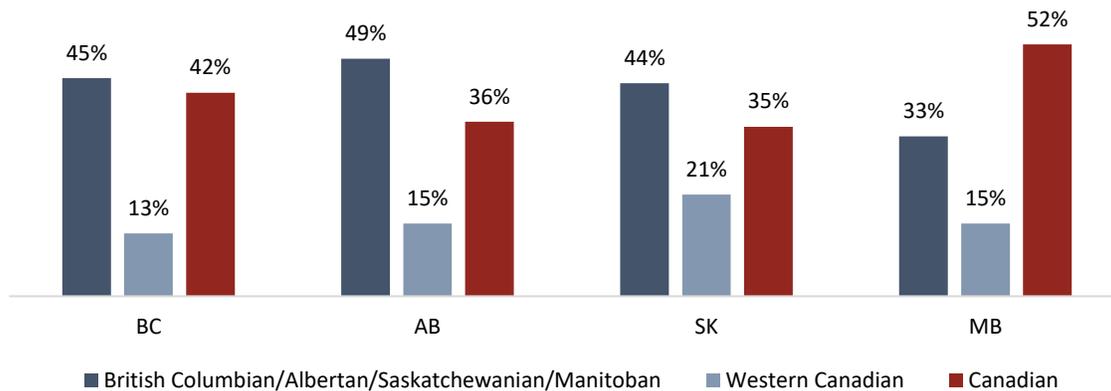
On an individual level, Western Canadians tend not to think of themselves by that name. Tellingly, residents of Alberta, Saskatchewan and British Columbia are more likely to think of themselves Albertans, Saskatchewanians and British Columbians, respectively, than Canadians. More than half of Manitobans identify as Canadian first, but it’s notable that relatively few respondents in any of the four provinces consider themselves westerners first and foremost.

The west is a unique region, but it is composed of distinct and separate provinces.

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**When you think of yourself and your own personal identity, would you say you identify yourself MOST as ...
(Asked of the four western provinces only)**

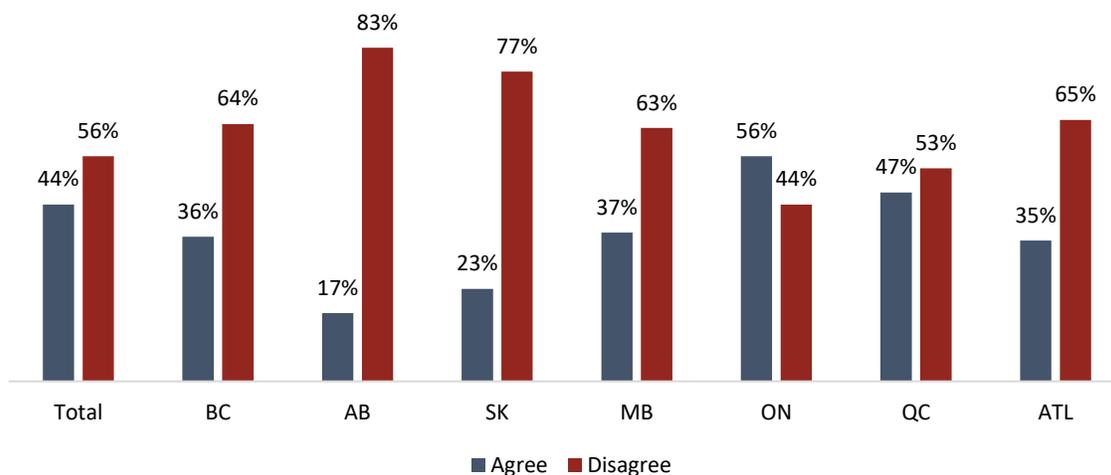


Part 2: The similarities (and differences) that make the West unique

Respect and fairness

More than anything else, the issue that unites Western Canada is each province's sense that it isn't treated fairly by the federal government. While Atlantic residents also feel hard-done by Ottawa, it's notable that Central Canada – i.e. Ontario and Quebec – is generally more content with the way it is treated:

"My province is treated fairly by the national government"



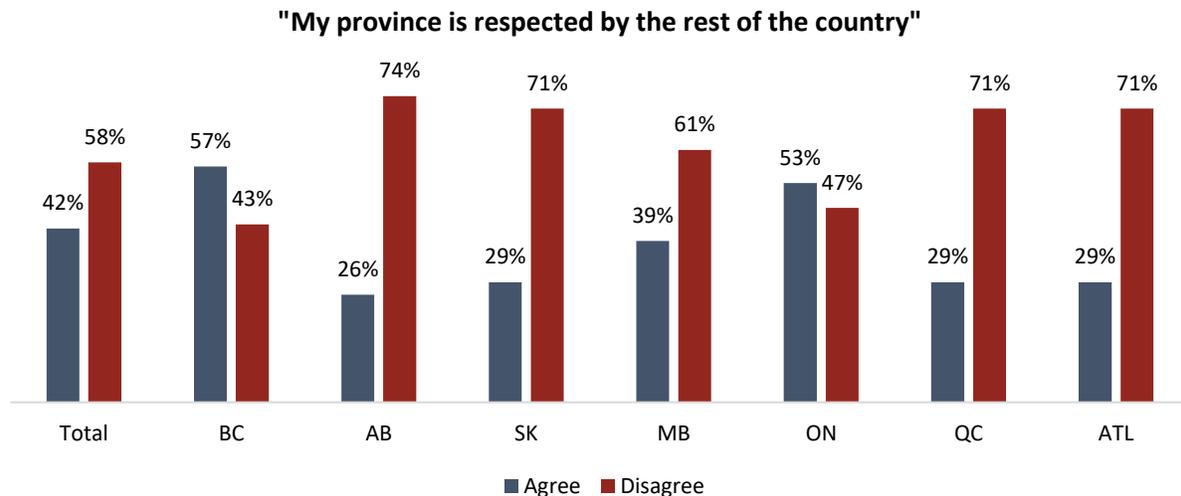
While all four western provinces feel they receive unfair treatment from the federal government, they differ on the broader question of "respect" from the rest of Canada.

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A full majority of British Columbians (57%) agree with the statement, “My province is respected by the rest of the country.” B.C. and Ontario are the only places where more than half of the population agrees with this sentiment.

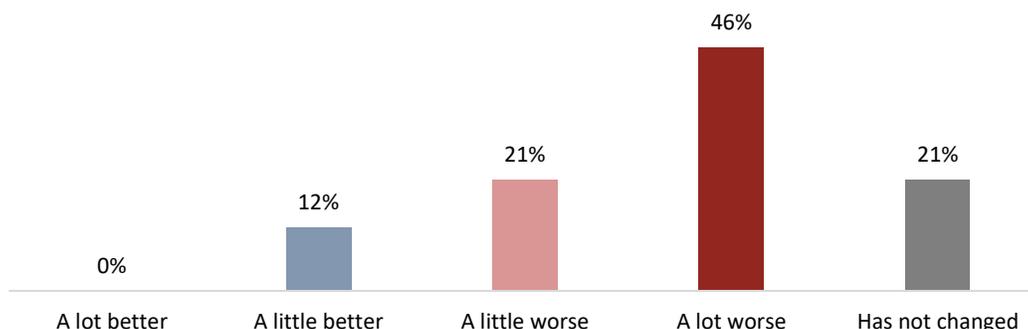
In Quebec, more than seven-in-ten residents (71%) feel *disrespected* by the rest of the country – about the same number as those in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Atlantic Canada:



The varied reactions to these two questions help to illustrate the nuances of public opinion within Western Canada. While the various provinces have differing opinions on the question of respect, they are united in their feeling of mistreatment at the hands of the national government.

Asked whether the federal government’s treatment of the west has improved or worsened over the last few years, those westerners who believe the treatment has been unfair tend to see it worsening:

Would you say that over the past few years the treatment of the West by the rest of the country, including Ottawa, has been better, worse, or has not changed? (Asked of Western respondents who feel their region is treated unfairly, n=1940)

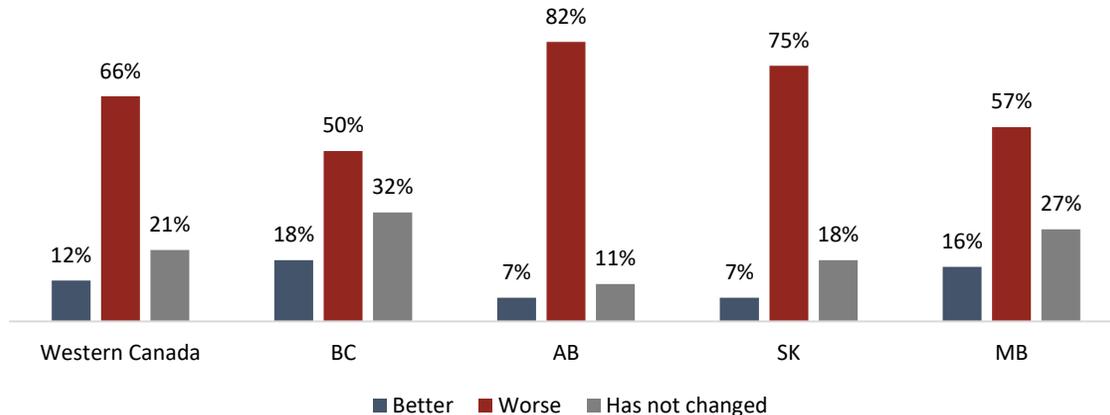


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This sentiment is held most strongly by Albertans and Saskatchewan residents, though residents of every western province feel the region’s treatment is worsening, rather than improving.

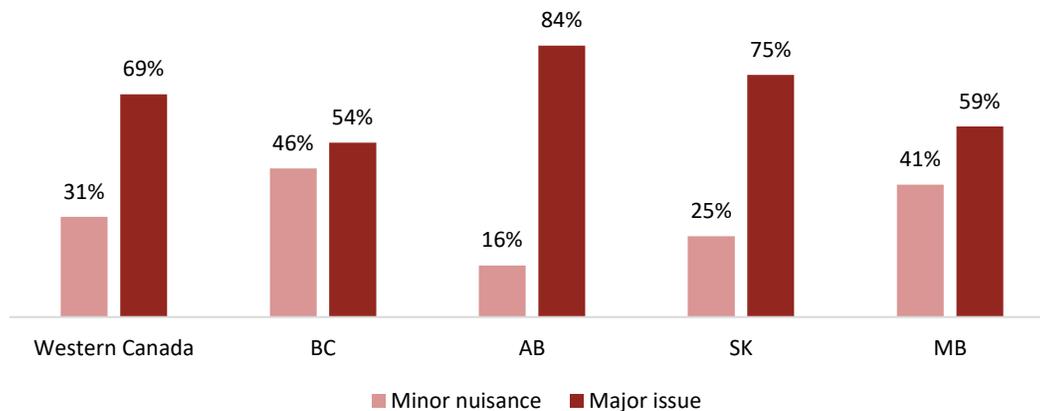
Would you say that over the past few years the treatment of the West by the rest of the country, including Ottawa, has been better, worse, or has not changed? (Asked of Western respondents who feel their region is treated unfairly, n=1940)



This problem tends to be viewed as a major issue, especially in Alberta and Saskatchewan, where more than three-quarters of respondents who see the west as a victim of unfair treatment believe the problem is significant.

Residents of B.C. and Manitoba are more likely to see the issue as a minor nuisance, though this is still not a majority view in either province:

Is this unfair treatment a minor nuisance or a major issue? (Asked of Western respondents who feel their region is treated unfairly, n=1940)



Representation in national institutions

A key component of how the west perceives its role in Canada is whether or not it feels represented by national institutions.

Residents of Ontario are much more likely to say that they feel represented by three key federal institutions – the federal government in Ottawa, the Parliament of Canada, and the Supreme Court of Canada.

Quebecers are less likely to say they feel well represented, but still do so at higher levels than all four western provinces. The federal government receives its poorest scores in the West, with just one-quarter of British Columbians (25%), and fewer than one-in-five Albertans (15%) and Saskatchewanians (17%) saying they feel well represented:

How well would you say each of the following reflects and represents your province?									
		Total	Region						
			BC	AB	SK	MB	ON	QC	ATL
The federal government in Ottawa	Very/Fairly well	37%	25%	15%	17%	29%	50%	38%	30%
	Not very well/Poorly	57%	66%	83%	78%	65%	43%	57%	64%
	Net score (Positive minus Negative)	-20%	-41%	-68%	-61%	-36%	7%	-19%	-34%
The Supreme Court of Canada	Very/Fairly well	47%	40%	31%	37%	42%	54%	50%	42%
	Not very well/Poorly	32%	32%	48%	38%	36%	23%	34%	39%
	Net score (Positive minus Negative)	15%	8%	-17%	-1%	6%	31%	16%	3%
Parliament of Canada	Very/Fairly well	40%	30%	20%	21%	33%	54%	39%	37%
	Not very well/Poorly	52%	57%	74%	70%	58%	39%	54%	56%
	Net score (Positive minus Negative)	-12%	-27%	-54%	-49%	-25%	15%	-15%	-19%

An interesting trend unfolds when looking at national media and how Canadians feel it represents their provinces. Overall, both the CBC's national programming and that of private networks – such as CTV and Global – are viewed as representative by half of Canadians. However, the CBC is buoyed by significant enthusiasm from Quebec (60%) and Ontario (55%), while fewer than half in each of the four western provinces feel they are being fairly represented. This drops to just 28 per cent in Alberta and 34 per cent in Saskatchewan.

Private national network programming receives considerably higher scores in the West compared to the CBC's programming, but it suffers significantly in Quebec, where many feel they are too-often ignored:

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How well would you say each of the following reflects and represents your province (percentage saying “very” or “fairly well” shown)									
		Total	Region						
			BC	AB	SK	MB	ON	QC	ATL
The CBC’s national programming	Very/Fairly well	51%	45%	28%	34%	44%	55%	60%	54%
	Not very well/Poorly	38%	38%	63%	52%	45%	35%	30%	38%
	Net score (Positive minus Negative)	13%	7%	-35%	-18%	-1%	20%	30%	16%
National programming of private networks (CTV, Global)	Very/Fairly well	50%	57%	42%	44%	51%	60%	34%	52%
	Not very well/Poorly	37%	29%	48%	43%	38%	29%	46%	38%
	Net score (Positive minus Negative)	13%	28%	-6%	1%	13%	31%	-12%	14%

One national institution which receives near-uniform levels of praise in its reflection of the nation is the Canadian Armed Forces. Nearly two-thirds of Canadians believe they are well represented by the CAF, and this opinion is held by a majority in every region.

Notably, the RCMP is viewed positively by two-thirds in all of the regions where it provides provincial policing services, while the provinces where it only provides federal law enforcement – Ontario and Quebec – are less inclined to feel well-represented by that enforcement body.

How well would you say each of the following reflects and represents your province (percentage saying “very” or “fairly well” shown)									
		Total	Region						
			BC	AB	SK	MB	ON	QC	ATL
The Canadian Armed Forces	Very/Fairly well	64%	58%	66%	66%	66%	69%	56%	71%
	Not very well/Poorly	18%	18%	14%	14%	15%	10%	33%	17%
	Net score (Positive minus Negative)	46%	40%	52%	52%	51%	59%	23%	54%
The RCMP	Very/Fairly well	55%	65%	68%	75%	67%	51%	39%	72%
	Not very well/Poorly	30%	23%	20%	16%	21%	29%	45%	20%
	Net score (Positive minus Negative)	25%	42%	48%	59%	46%	22%	-6%	52%

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Feelings about Bilingualism

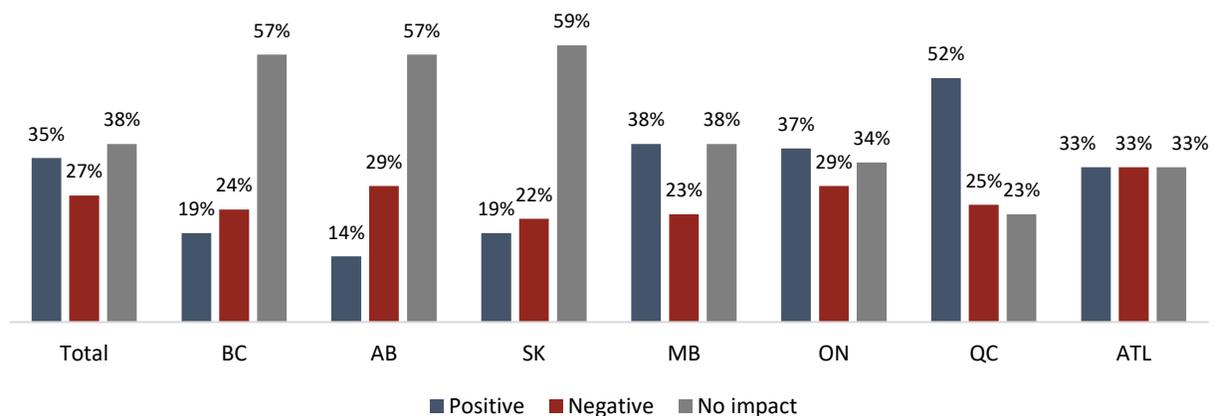
One of the key points of contention in national institutions has been official bilingualism. Conducting business and offering services in both official languages – English and French – has been a mandate at the federal level for decades, after Canada adopted the Official Languages Act in 1969 (the act has since been updated).

Some in the west have contended that it is unfair to create the condition of bilingualism for many of the nation’s top political positions, given that only approximately 17 per cent of the population is fluently bilingual.

While this has been a continual debate in Canada (even since the first day of parliament in 1867), most in the west do not seem concerned about it in 2019.

Majorities in B.C., Alberta, and Saskatchewan say the policy has had “no impact” on their provinces, and nearly four-in-ten Manitobans say it has been a net positive for their region. In fact, the region most likely to say that bilingualism has been negative is Atlantic Canada:

Overall, do you feel that official bilingualism has had a positive impact on your province, a negative impact, or no impact one way or the other?

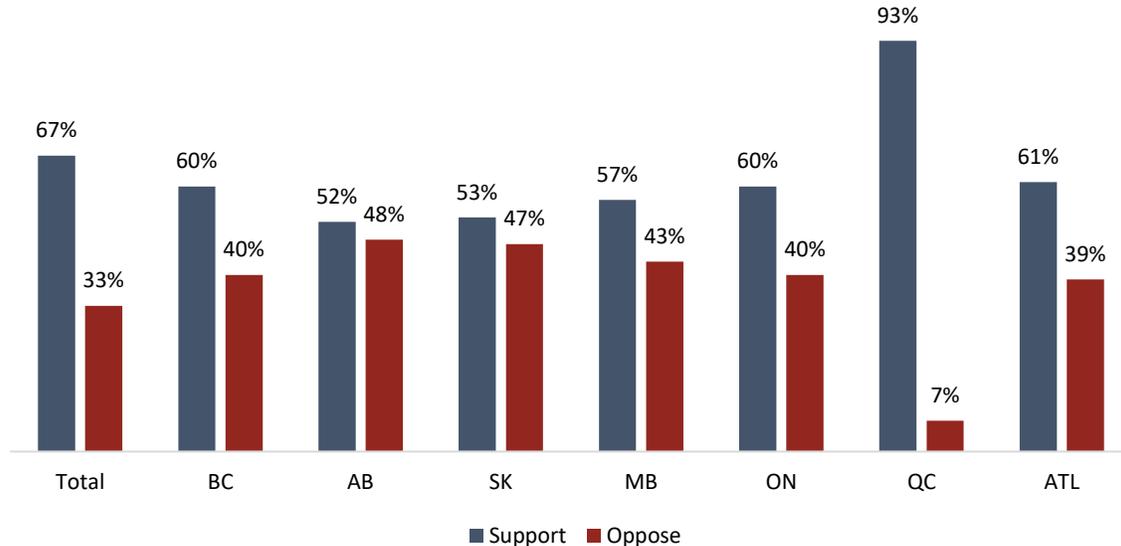


Lester B. Pearson famously referred to himself as Canada’s last unilingual Prime Minister. That prediction has, thus far, remained accurate. More than half in every province support the established – though still unwritten – practice of having candidates for Prime Minister be fluently bilingual, though Prairie respondents are more divided. This practice is supported near-unanimously in Quebec:

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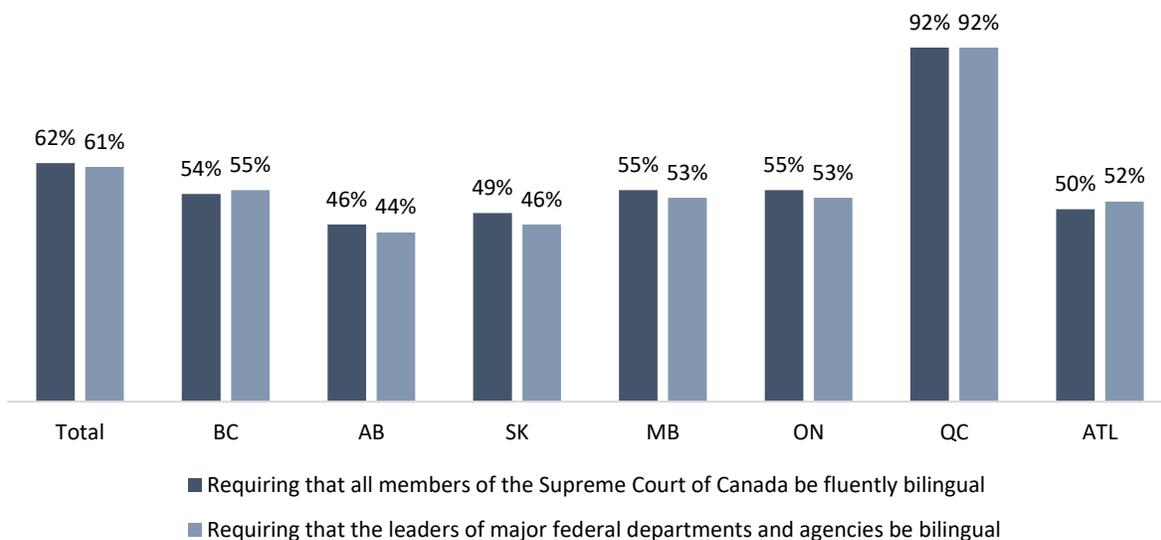
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Do you support or oppose the established practice of having all candidates for Prime Minister be fluently bilingual?



The country is more divided on whether to require justices of the Supreme Court of Canada and leaders of major federal departments to be bilingual. Both of these requirements meet with near-unanimous support in Quebec (92%). But while residents in B.C., Manitoba and Ontario lean slightly toward supporting bilingualism for each institution, those in Alberta and Saskatchewan lean the other way by a small margin:

Percentage who support each of the following:



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How should western provinces approach Ottawa?

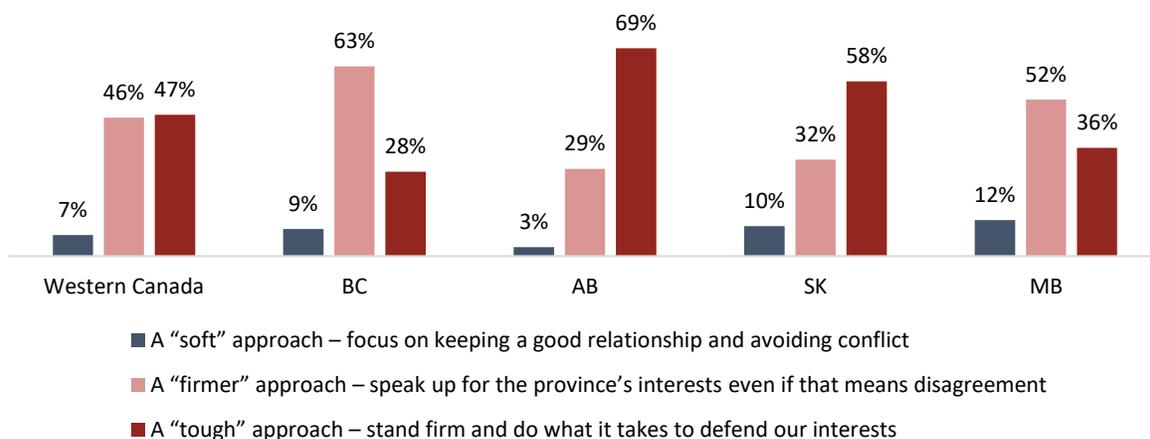
Given that they feel they're receiving poor treatment from the federal government, it's worth contemplating how Western Canadians would like their provincial governments to deal with Ottawa.

Overall, very few westerners favour a cozy relationship between their provincial government and the federal one. Only 7 per cent want their province to take "a soft approach" that aims to avoid conflict.

The vast majority are split between favouring "a firmer approach" that doesn't shy away from disagreement (46%) and "a tough approach" that would see their provincial government "do what it takes" to defend regional interests (47%).

As seen in the graph that follows, B.C. and Manitoba residents mostly favour the middle, "firmer" option, while majorities in Alberta and Saskatchewan prefer to get tough with Ottawa:

Which of these three overall approaches would you say your own provincial government should take when dealing with the federal government?



Coming up next

Western Canada's feelings toward the federal government make for some challenging political dynamics. As the west's most alienated province, Alberta may feel it has cause to leave Canada altogether. How widespread is this sentiment? And if Alberta left, would other western provinces join it? What about placing a greater emphasis on western provincial independence and self-determination within Confederation? What would that look like, and how much appetite is there for a federal political party that would advocate for such an approach? These questions, and more, will be considered in the final part of this four-part study, to be released next week.

*The **Angus Reid Institute (ARI)** was founded in October 2014 by pollster and sociologist, Dr. Angus Reid. ARI is a national, not-for-profit, non-partisan public opinion research foundation established to advance education by commissioning, conducting and disseminating to the public accessible and impartial statistical data, research and policy analysis on economics, political science, philanthropy, public*

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administration, domestic and international affairs and other socio-economic issues of importance to Canada and its world.

For detailed results by age, gender, region, education, and other demographics, [click here](#).