

Decades after Reform's rise, voters open to a new 'Western Canada Party'

Most Canadians, including westerners, say it's unlikely the west would separate from the rest of Canada

February 5, 2019 – As Canada's federal party leaders woo voters from coast to coast in this election year, the latest public opinion survey from the Angus Reid Institute finds that in the country's four westernmost provinces, many of those voters may be looking for a new alternative altogether.

The fourth and final chapter of the Institute's comprehensive study on identity, politics and policy in Western Canada looks at two potential consequences of the west's [dissatisfaction](#) with the federal government: Separatism, which most westerners think is unlikely; and the rise of a hypothetical western regional political party, which appears to have considerable support.

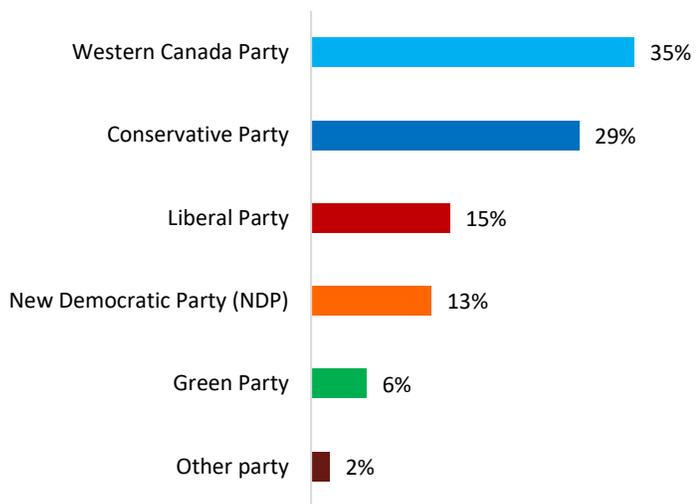
While this part of the country is not a monolith – the four provinces have disparate identities and interests – they are united primarily by two key commonalities: their agreement that the west is a unique region within Canada and their belief the region is treated unfairly by the federal government in Ottawa.

These sentiments manifest themselves in an openness to a different option at the ballot box. When asked how they would vote in a federal election involving all of the current federal parties, plus a new, hypothetical "Western Canada Party," a plurality of respondents across British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba (35%) say they would vote for the Western Canada Party.

More Key Findings:

- More than six-in-ten Canadians (63%) say they think the number of Western Canadians angry about the treatment their region receives from the federal government is on the rise. This includes more than seven-in-ten (73%) across Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and B.C.

If a Western Canada Party were an option in the coming federal election... vote intention (BC,AB,SK,MB) n = 1921



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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- That said, two-thirds of Canadians (68%) think Alberta separating from the rest of Canada is unlikely or “would never happen.” In Alberta, half of respondents (50%) see separation as a real possibility
- Alberta is also the place where the idea of a Western Canada Party enjoys its greatest support (40% in the province say they would vote for such a party)

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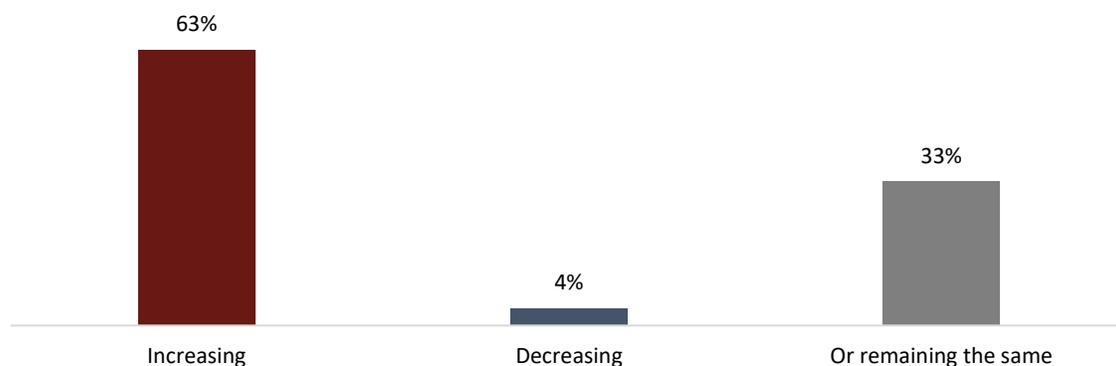
- **Westerners say anger with Ottawa on the rise**
- **Strong support for a Western Canada Party**
- **Is separatism a real possibility?**
- **How to deal with the discord?**

Westerners say anger with Ottawa on the rise

As [the first three parts](#) of this Western Canada study have shown, the four provinces of Western Canada are distinct and often in disagreement with each other, but they are united in their belief that their region is unique and that it has been mistreated by Ottawa.

This [well-chronicled frustration](#) with the federal government is not new, but most Canadians perceive it as increasing. Only 4 per cent think the number of angry westerners is in decline:

Based on what you’ve seen, heard or read, do you feel that the number of Western Canadians who are angry about Ottawa’s treatment of the West is:



In the four westernmost provinces – the perception that anger at the federal government is on the rise tops seven-in-ten (73%).

The historical data bears out a sense of increasing resentment. The Angus Reid Group asked this same question in 1991, and while a perception of anger has grown, it has not grown evenly across each western province.

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In Alberta, 86 per cent of respondents say anger at the federal government has been increasing, up from 63 per cent in 1991. The percentage saying this also tops eight-in-ten in Saskatchewan, but it has increased more modestly in British Columbia, and remained statistically unchanged among Manitobans since the early 1990s:

Based on what you have seen, heard or read, do you feel that the number of western Canadians who are angry about Ottawa’s treatment of the West is:

	Western Canada		BC		AB		SK		MB	
	1991	2018	1991	2018	1991	2018	1991	2018	1991	2018
Increasing	62%	73%	57%	63%	63%	86%	66%	81%	69%	66%
Decreasing	3%	3%	3%	5%	3%	3%	3%	2%	2%	4%
Remaining the same	33%	23%	38%	33%	32%	12%	31%	18%	27%	30%
Unsure	2%	-	2%	-	1%	-	1%	-	2%	-

Strong support for a Western Canada Party

As will be discussed later in this report, a “separatist” movement involving all four western provinces appears unlikely. And, although [many Albertans may feel](#) their province should “go it alone,” it’s unclear whether they constitute a majority of the province, or whether their provincial leaders would follow through on such a threat.

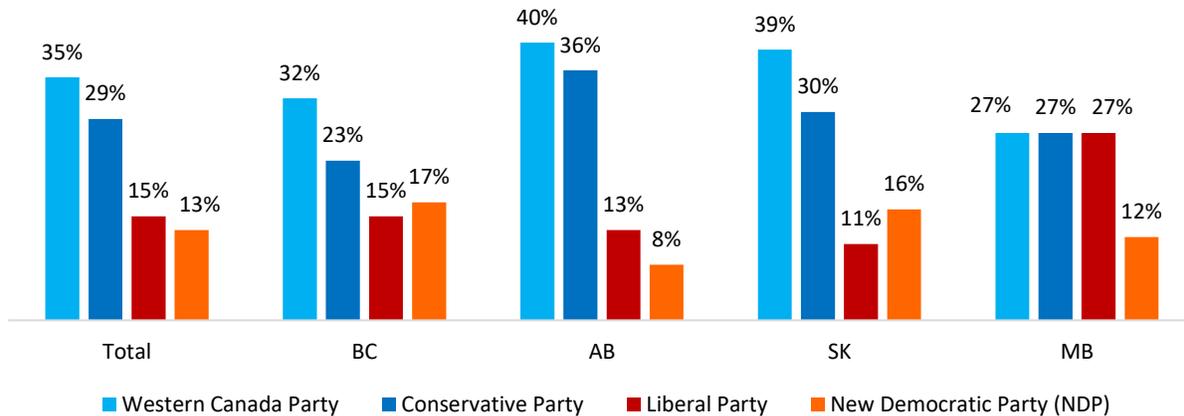
A more likely alternative, which sees significant support across Western Canada, is the possible formation of a new regional political party that would advocate for the interests of the west within Canadian confederation.

Such a party could hypothetically draw inspiration from the Reform Party, which began its life [as an explicitly western party](#), even as it harboured national ambitions. This poll finds a hypothetical “Western Canada Party” leading or tied for the lead in vote intention in each of the four western provinces:

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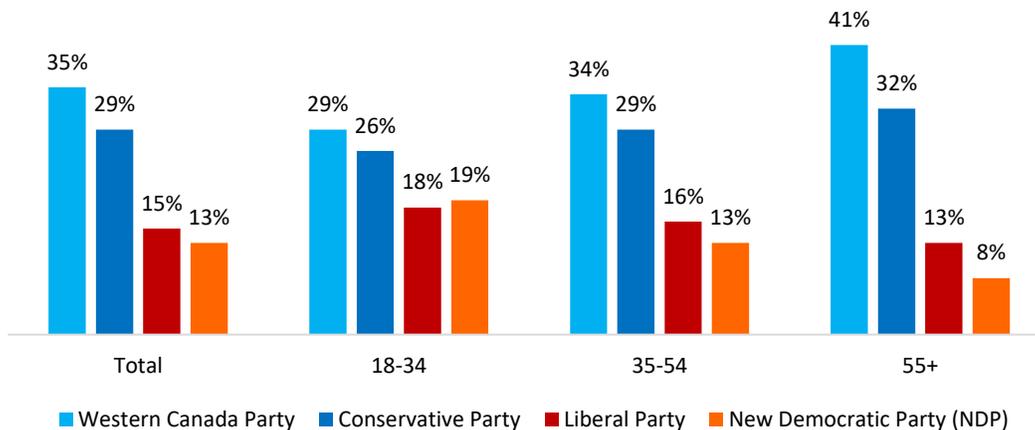
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**Vote intention if a Western Canada Party were an option
(BC,AB,SK,MB) n = 1921**



A hypothetical Western Canada Party leads among all age groups in the four provinces canvassed, but might do particularly well with older respondents, as seen in the graph that follows.

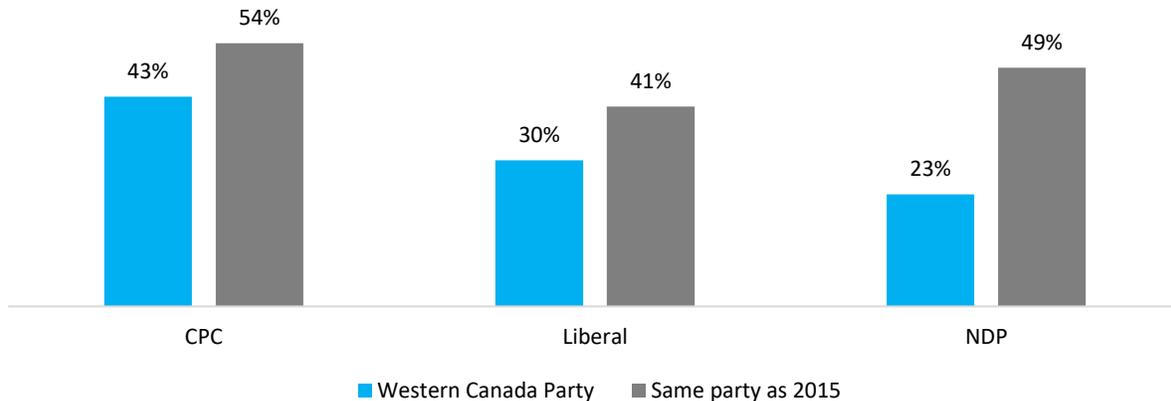
**Vote intention if a Western Canada Party were an option
(BC,AB,SK,MB) n = 1921**



Interestingly, such a party might also draw support from across the political spectrum, with more than one-in-five who voted for of each of the three main federal parties in 2015 saying they would switch to a party like this in a future election if it existed.

While there is no way to presently gauge how an actual “Western Canada Party” with a leader and platform would perform, these findings show an openness among western residents of all political stripes to consider voting for a party that campaigns only in Western Canada and presents itself explicitly as a voice for western interests:

**Vote intention among 2015 voters if a Western Canada Party were an option
(BC,AB,SK,MB) n=1921**



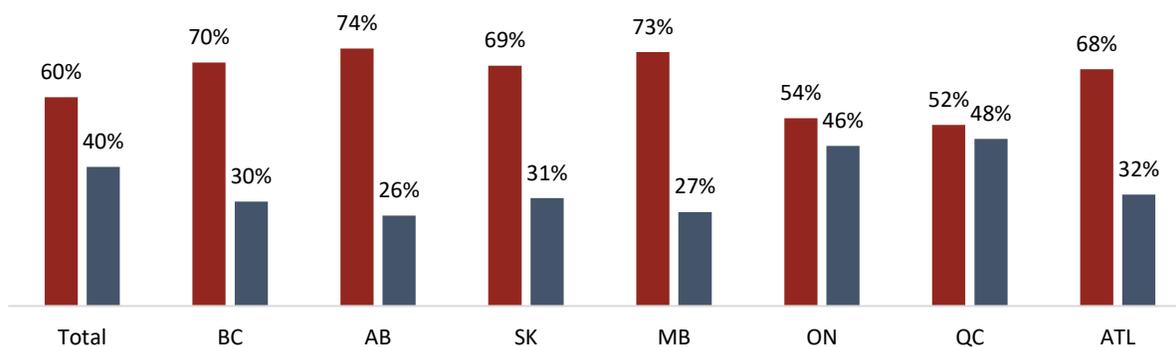
What sort of platform could an eventual Western Canada Party run on that would play well across the four western provinces? One component of such a platform would likely be greater representation of the west in national institutions.

In [part three](#) of this study, westerners reported feeling poorly reflected by and represented in Parliament, the Supreme Court of Canada, and the federal government as a whole.

Similarly, large majorities in the four western provinces say they would favour relocating federal departments, Crown corporations, museums, and other institutions of national significance out of the capital region, with the goal of distributing them more evenly across the country.

This idea is also supported by a significant proportion of Eastern Canadians, as seen in the graph that follows.

Which of the following is closer to your view?

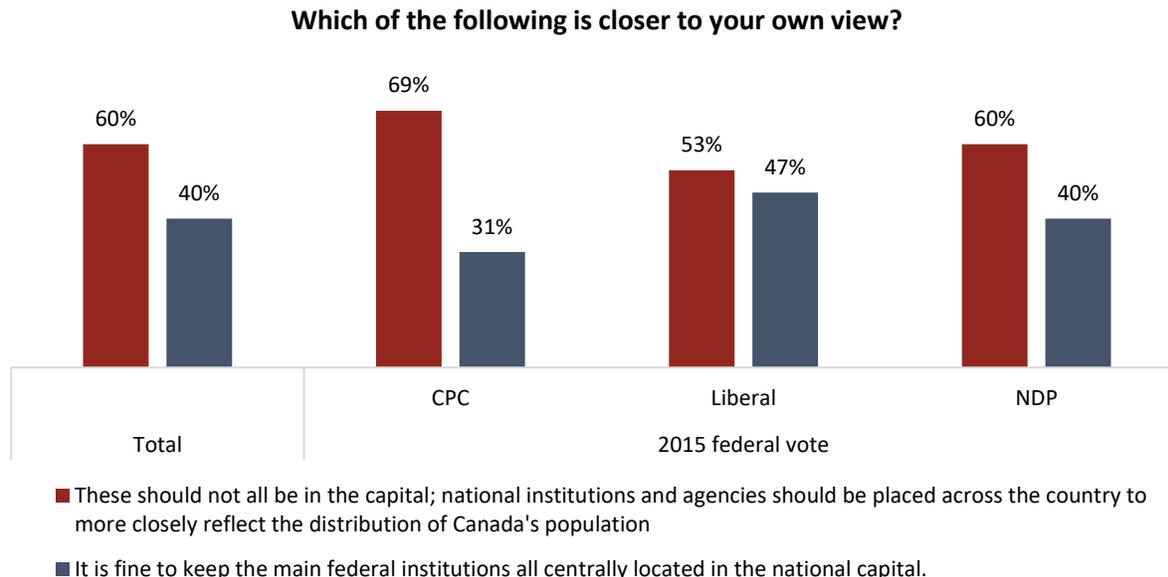


- These should not all be in the capital; national institutions and agencies should be placed across the country to more closely reflect the distribution of Canada's population
- It is fine to keep the main federal institutions all centrally located in the national capital.

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Moving major federal institutions to locations outside of Ottawa and Gatineau, Que., is also an idea that resonates across party lines. More than half of those who supported each of the three main parties in the 2015 federal election choose the “these should not all be in the capital” side of this face-off question:



Is separatism a real possibility?

As mentioned in [part three](#) of this ARI Western Canada study, 83 per cent of Albertans feel their province is treated unfairly by the national government.

This near-unanimity with which Albertans express frustration with the federal government – along with their strong conviction that this frustration is rising – leads inexorably to a question: Would Alberta seriously consider separating from the rest of Canada?

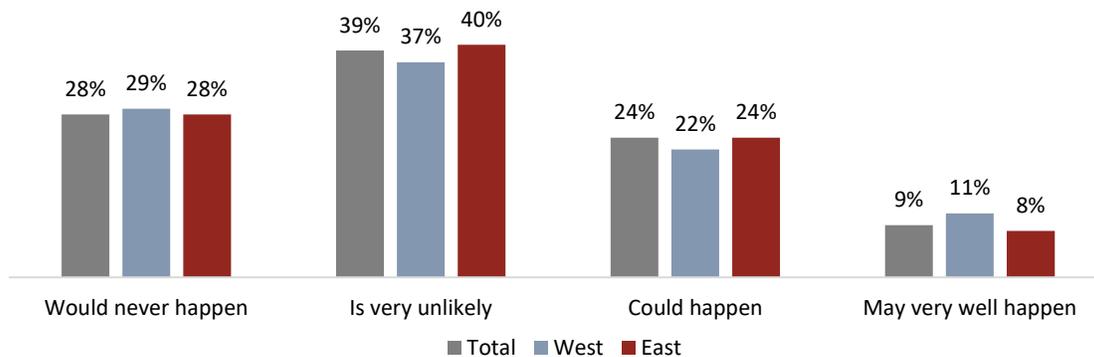
People across the country perceive anger rising in the west, but they tend not to view Alberta separatism as especially likely.

Three-in-ten Canadians (28%) say Alberta separation “would never happen,” and another four-in-ten (39%) are confident that it “is very unlikely.” Notably, western and eastern respondents react to this question in roughly the same proportions, overall:

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To what extent do you consider Alberta separatism to be a real possibility?

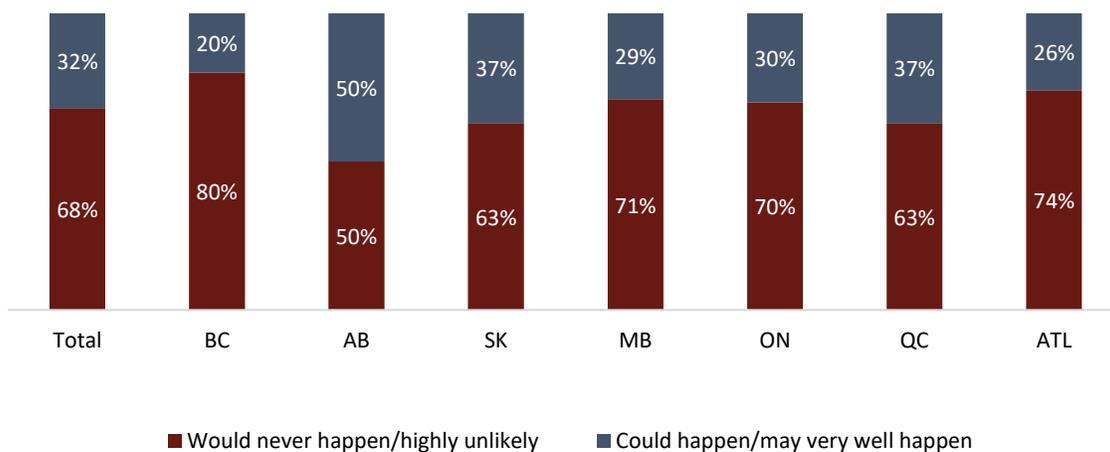


That said, underlying this apparent consensus between east and west is a significant amount of variation within each region.

Separatism finds the most purchase in Alberta itself, where half of residents (50%) say it could happen. Alberta’s western neighbour B.C., meanwhile, is the province most adamant that separation is not really on the table. Fully eight-in-ten British Columbians say Alberta leaving Canada would never happen or is very unlikely.

In Eastern Canada, Quebec is the province most likely to see Alberta separatism as a serious possibility, a finding that likely reflects Quebecers’ long history of debating their own province’s potential departure from Canada.

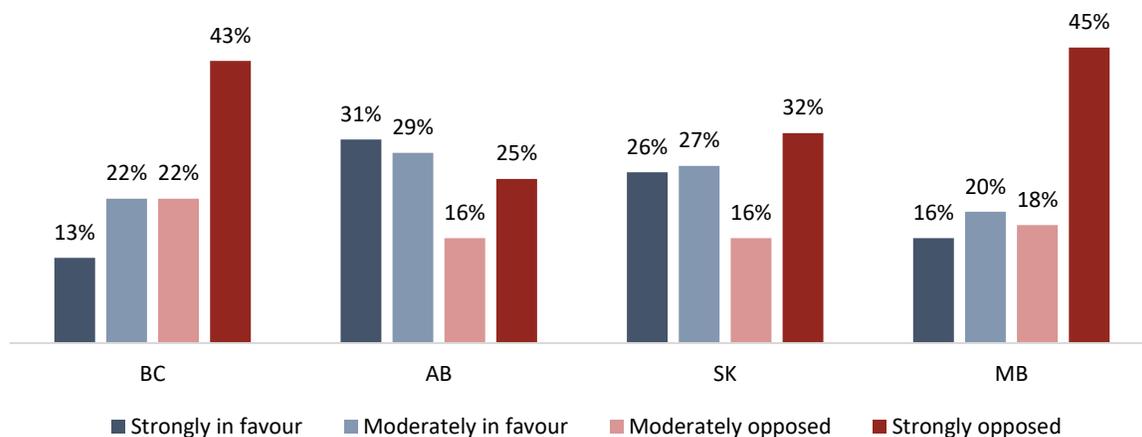
To what extent do you consider Alberta separatism to be a real possibility?



Clearly, separatist feelings are much stronger in Alberta than they are elsewhere in Western Canada today. More than half of Albertans (52%) say they believe the west would be better off if it left Canada. This sentiment is less than four-in-ten in every other western province (declining from 38% in Saskatchewan to 26% in Manitoba and 25% in B.C.; [see comprehensive tables for greater detail](#)).

So, if Alberta threatened to leave, would the rest of Western Canada join it? Slightly more than half of Saskatchewan residents say they would be open to a western separatist movement, but a plurality in that province are “strongly opposed.” Likewise, significantly larger pluralities in B.C. and Manitoba are strongly opposed to this prospect, as seen in the graph that follows.

Would you be in favour or opposed to your own province joining such a western separatist movement?



How to deal with the discord?

In the unlikely event that separatist feelings in Alberta were to spread to the rest of Western Canada and become a significant political movement, where would that leave the rest of the country?

Those in Ontario, Quebec, and Atlantic Canada were asked what sort of approach they would like to see the federal government take to dealing with such a circumstance. As seen in the graph that follows, Quebecers – perhaps reflecting their province’s history of separatist sentiments – are much more likely to favour taking a “soft” approach to a separation-minded West.

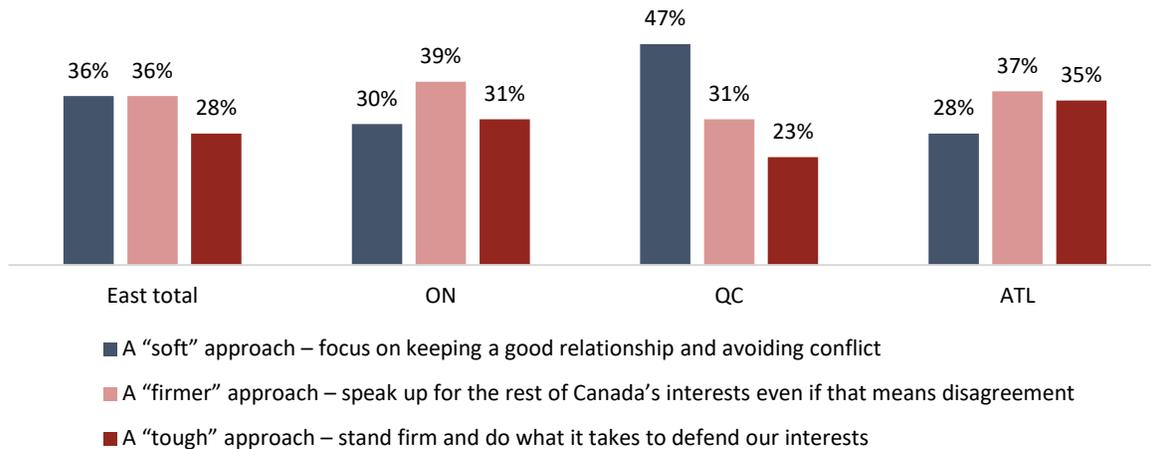
Ontario and Atlantic Canada, meanwhile, are more inclined to favour a “firmer” or even a “tough” approach:

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Asked of Eastern Canadians (ON, QC, ATL) n=2779

What kind of approach do you think the federal government and the rest of Canada should take to respond?



*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 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](#).

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