

Alberta Referendum Deep Dive: Question wording may overstate support for some government proposals

Researchers compare referendum questions as designed vs. versions written using established practices

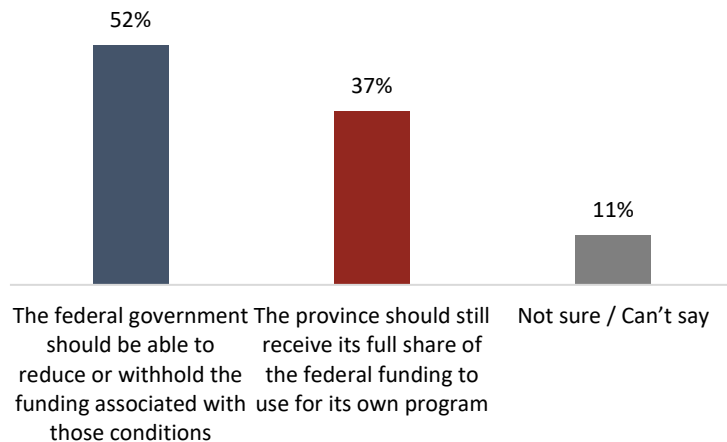
September 21, 2026 – Albertans voting in the fall referendum will be asked to weigh in on a sweeping collection of policy questions, from immigration and access to social programs to the balance of power between Edmonton and Ottawa. On their faces, several of the proposals command majority support. But new research suggests the answers Albertans give may depend considerably on exactly what they are being asked.

New data from the non-profit Angus Reid Institute finds that, overall, one-in-five Albertans consider the text of the fall referendum questions difficult to understand, which may also pose challenges for residents and the government when interpreting the mandate that emerges from the results.

With this in mind, Angus Reid Institute researchers decided to run an experiment. After fielding a survey with the official language for all 10 questions, ARI conducted an additional survey based on what we would consider best practices in polling.

Consider that approximately three-in-five Albertans support each of the government's immigration-related referendum questions when presented as written by the government of Alberta. This includes 62 per cent who would vote "Yes" to a question combining support for increased provincial control over immigration, lower immigration levels, a preference for economic migrants and priority for Albertans in hiring. Another 64 per cent support restricting access to provincially funded health care, education and social services based on immigration status.

If a province chooses not to meet the federal conditions attached to a program, which of the following comes closer to your own view?



METHODOLOGY:

The Angus Reid Institute conducted an online survey from Aug. 10-13, 2026, among a randomized sample of 1,017 Canadian adults who are residents of Alberta.

A second survey was conducted from Aug. 26 to Sept. 1, 2026, among a randomized sample of 964 Canadian adults who are residents of Alberta.

Respondents are drawn from the [Angus Reid Forum](#), a large-scale online panel developed to include Canadian residents in each of the 343 federal ridings in Canada and representative of the Canadian population by age, gender, family income, ethnic status and education. The sample was weighted to be representative of adults provincewide according to region, gender, age, household income, and education, based on the Canadian census. For comparison purposes only, a probability sample of this size would carry a margin of error of +/- 3 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.

For more information on our polling methods, [click here](#).

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Our version, which separates the individual policies bundled together in those questions, reveals a considerably more complicated picture. While 56 per cent favour reducing immigration from current levels and 58 per cent prioritize immigrants' economic contribution, Albertans divide almost evenly over whether people already living in the province should receive priority for jobs. Overall, four-in-five (80%) disagree with at least one element contained in the government's first immigration question, despite just one-third (33%) saying they would vote "No" when presented with that question as written.

Similar complications emerge elsewhere on the ballot. Support for restricting access for non-permanent residents varies substantially depending on whether Albertans are asked about education, health care or income assistance. And while the government's question about allowing provinces to opt out of federal programs while retaining federal funding produces an even split (44% for, 44% against), a majority (58%) separately say federal funding should generally require provinces to meet national conditions. Further, 52 per cent say Ottawa should be able to reduce or withhold funding when those conditions are not met.

About ARI

*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.*

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Introduction

Alberta's referendum day is a little more than one month away, and a [surge in requests for mail-in ballots](#) has signalled high levels of interest. In February, three-quarters (76%) said they were following in the news as the Alberta Prosperity Project collected signatures in a referendum attempt that has [since been tied up in the courts](#).

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Alberta Premier Danielle Smith stepped in, and the UCP government instead created its own question to put forward to Albertans this fall: a referendum on a future binding referendum on separation.

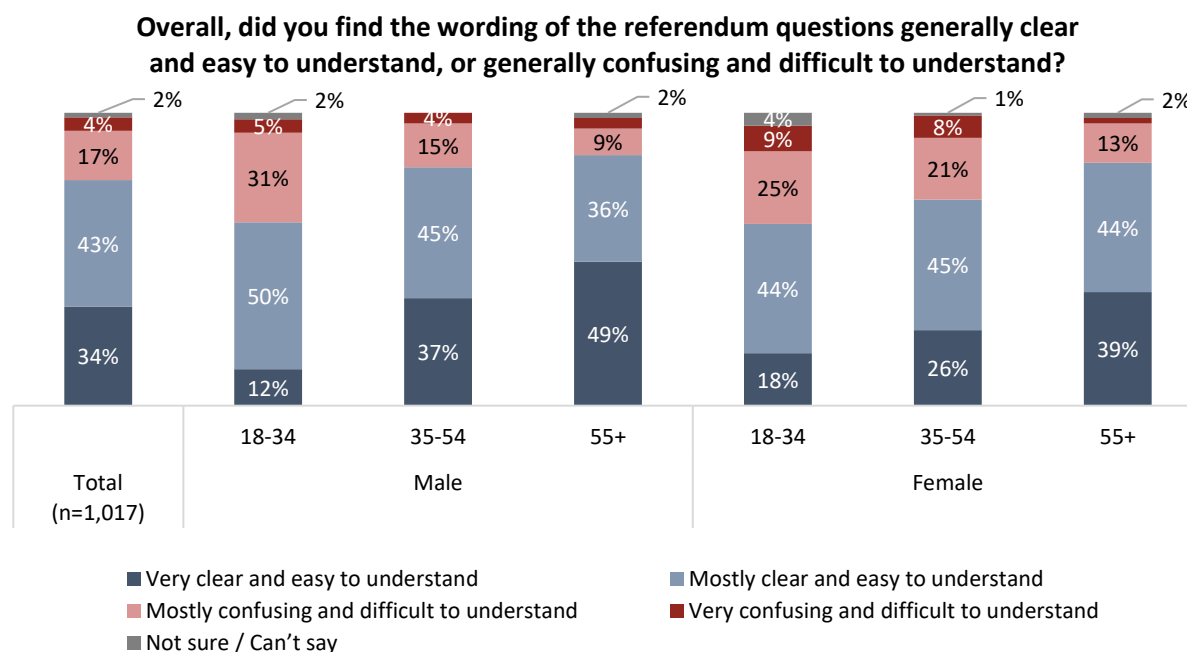
Alongside that ballot, Albertans have been asked to weigh in on nine other questions on matters of immigration, social services for temporary residents, voter identification during elections, judge appointments, the senate, and federal jurisdiction.

Angus Reid Institute conducted an initial survey from August 10 – 13 with responses to all questions in order, [viewable here](#).

Are the questions clear?

The questions and their wording have been criticized by some for being [confusing](#); the Canadian Bar Association wrote that it might be difficult to suss out [the “practical implications” of yes votes](#) for some of the battery of immigration questions.

After reading through the more than 400 words in the 10 referendum questions, one-in-three Albertans (34%) say they are “very clear and easy to understand”, while two-in-five (43%) say they’re “mostly” clear. For one-in-five however, (21%) the wording was described as difficult to understand.



Part Two: What happens when we write the questions with standard polling methodology?

After reviewing each of the questions posed in this referendum, Angus Reid Institute researchers conducted internal discussions about potential confusion the wording may cause. The result of these conversations was an idea: find out how Albertans would respond if the questions asked dealt with one policy concept at a time and avoided double and triple-barrelled wording.

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Note that several of the referendum questions conflate broad public preferences with policies the Alberta government may not actually have the authority to implement as described, but the purpose of this project was not to ascertain the practicality of proposed actions.

Polling 101

Good questionnaires are designed to measure what people think without pushing them toward a particular answer. They should be clear, ask about one concept at a time and offer balanced response options. Problems arise when questions are double- or triple-barrelled (measuring two or three items with one answer), use leading language, or present an argument for one side without offering a comparable consideration for the other.

Researchers at the Angus Reid Institute noted that some, though not all, of the questions proposed for Alberta's referendum would not meet the standards ARI typically applies when designing public opinion questions. Some of the questions on immigration, for example, combine several distinct ideas about immigration levels, who should be prioritized and how much control Alberta should have over the system. A respondent may agree with one part but disagree with another, making it difficult to determine precisely what a "yes" or "no" response represents.

In some cases, more than one question needed to be asked to fully understand what the government's version was trying to measure.

See methodology notes below for sample comparison.

Example 1: On Immigration: What are Albertans voting on?

Question 1 in the official referendum set is regarding a cap on immigration and various other aspects that surround it.

Do you support the Government of Alberta taking increased control over immigration for the purposes of decreasing immigration to more sustainable levels, prioritizing economic migration and giving Albertans first priority on new employment opportunities?		
Yes	No	Not sure
62%	33%	5%

From a survey-design perspective, the core challenge is that this question is attempting to measure several different concepts.

Is the Alberta government trying to ascertain:

- Support for the Government of Alberta taking increased control over immigration?
- Desire to decrease immigration to more sustainable levels?
- Want to prioritize economic migration?
- Belief that Albertans should have first priority for jobs in the province?

This is important because as our first survey shows, the Yes response defeats No by a healthy margin.

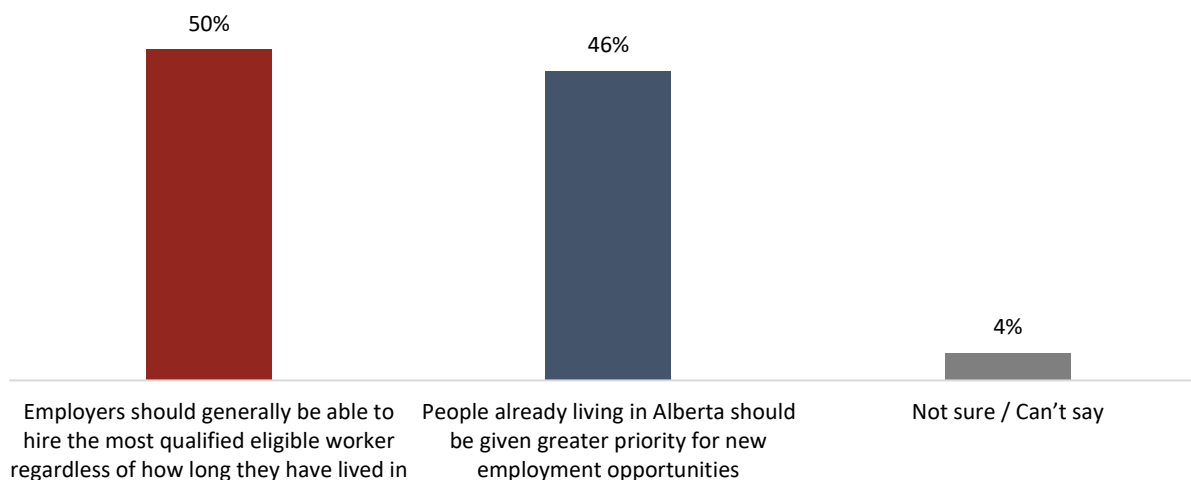
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Finding 1:

Residents are deeply divided over the prioritization of current Albertans over newcomers for jobs. In fact, slightly more (50%) say that jobs should go to whomever is most qualified, regardless of time in province.

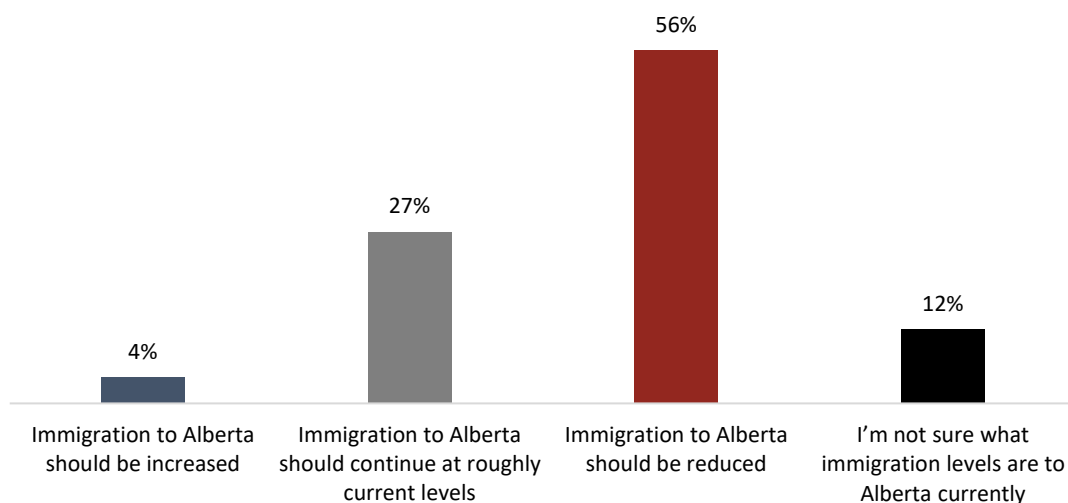
Which of the following comes closest to your own view? (Alberta, n=964)



Finding 2 :

Albertans do, generally, support reducing immigration levels (56%). This is a strong indicator of a Yes response, but does not reach the 62 per cent mark on its own:

Which of the following comes closest to your own view? (Alberta, n=964)

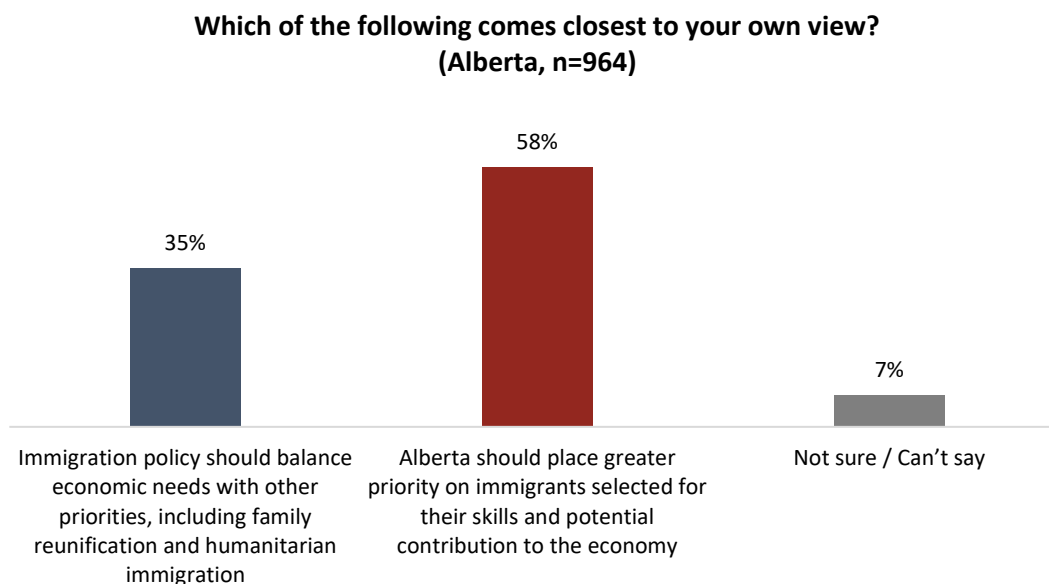


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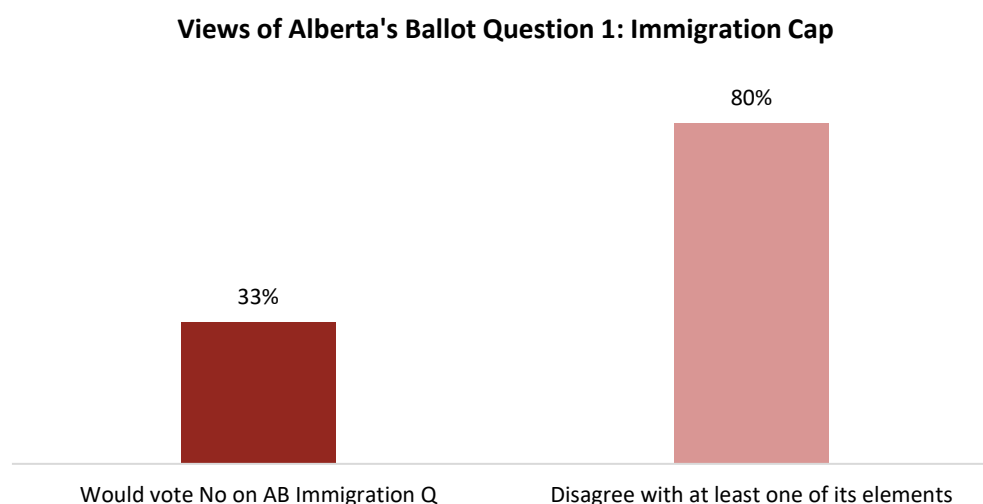
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Finding 3:

Albertans do, generally, feel that economic contribution is more of a priority than refugee assistance or family reunification:



Looking at this another way, overall, 80 per cent of respondents disagree with at least one aspect of what a Yes vote would support. This suggests that the No vote of 33 per cent in the government version of the question may be drastically underestimating opposition to its contents.



Example 2: The differences between social assistance, health care, and education

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Ballot Question 2 in the official referendum set is regarding eligibility for provincial funding for non-residents and non-Canadians.

Do you support the Government of Alberta introducing a law mandating that only Canadian citizens, permanent residents and individuals with an Alberta-approved immigration status will be eligible for provincially-funded programs, such as health care, education and other social services?		
Yes	No	Not sure
64%	31%	5%

We again have overlap around the variables being measured. Health care, education, and social services are all unique. Delivery of each in Canada is subject to conditions based on time in province and type of immigration, but putting those issues aside, we can again measure support for the different variables.

Finding:

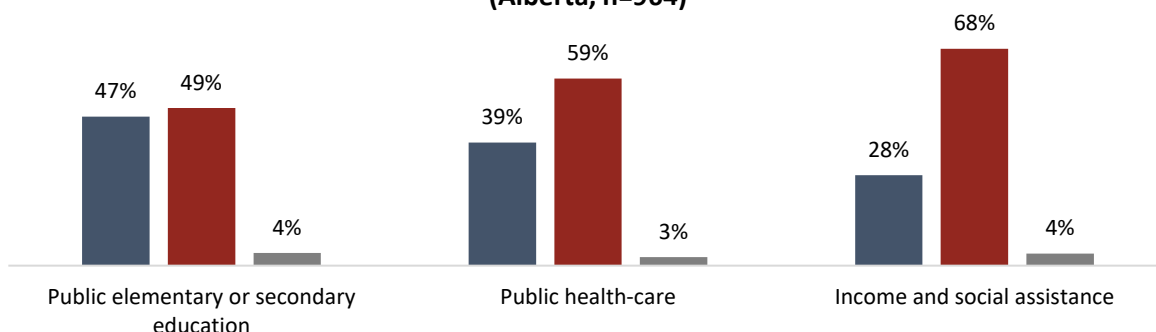
Albertans feel much differently when considering government-funded access to these three distinct areas. Half believe education should be restricted to citizens and permanent residents, while the same number says this should be open to those with non-permanent status. More say that public health-care access should be restricted, while an even greater number would restrict income and social assistance.

So, while 64 per cent vote Yes on limiting these in a bundle, support may indeed be lower for certain aspects.

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**For each of the following, which approach comes closer to your own view?
(Alberta, n=964)**



- People with a legal immigration status in Alberta, including those with temporary or non-permanent status, should generally be eligible for this
- Eligibility for this should generally be limited to Canadian citizens, permanent residents and others specifically approved by Alberta
- Not sure / Can't say

Example 3: Provincial versus federal jurisdiction, and a funding follow-up

Ballot Question 8 in the official referendum set asks Albertans about opting out of federal programs while continuing to receive federal funding.

Do you support the Government of Alberta working with the governments of other willing provinces to amend the Canadian Constitution to allow provinces to opt out of federal programs that intrude on provincial jurisdiction such as health care, education and social services, without a province losing any of the associated federal funding for use in its social programs?		
Yes	No	Not sure
44%	44%	12%

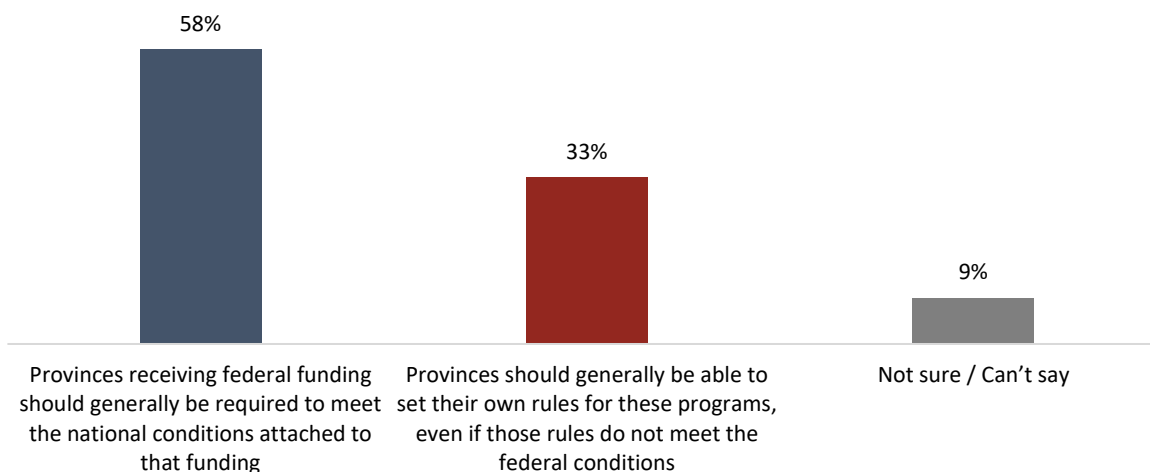
Finding 1:

The idea of federal funding being tied to national conditions is a popular one (58%), with one-in-three Albertans (33%) saying provinces should be able to set their own rules for programs rather than the federal one. This suggests that already the 44-44 split will be difficult to parse.

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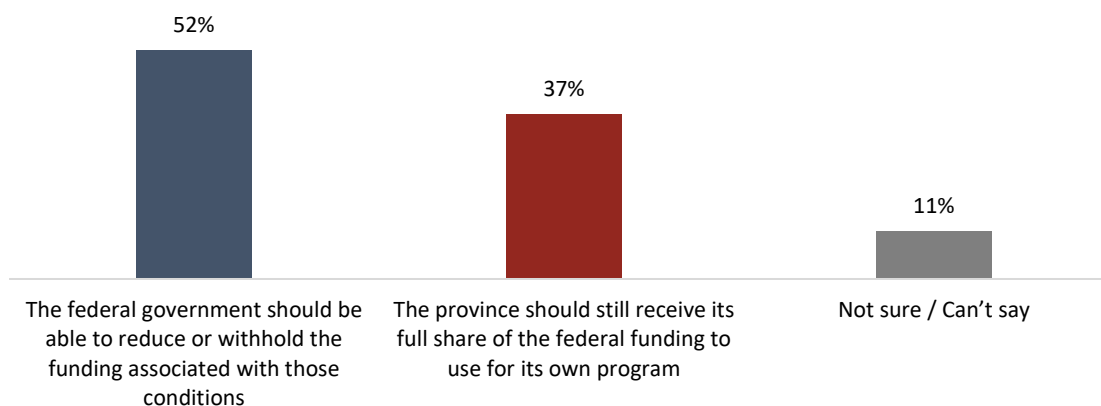
**Which of the following comes closer to your own view?
(Alberta, n=964)**



Finding 2:

Further, half also say that in the event that a province fails to meet national standards, the federal government should be able to reduce or withhold funding. Both of these datapoints suggest that the Yes proportion may be overstated in the final result for Question 8:

**If a province chooses not to meet the federal conditions attached to a program, which of the following comes closer to your own view?
(Alberta, n=964)**



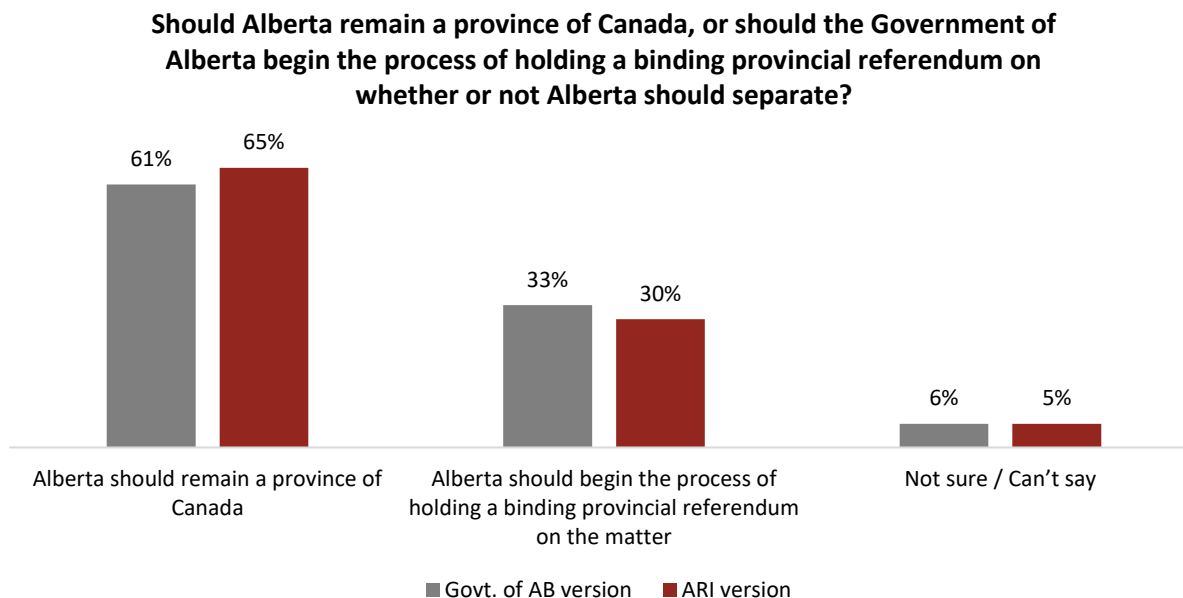
Example 4: No matter how you cut it, No vote wins on separation referendum

In the official referendum ballot order, Albertans will first vote on whether or not to pursue a referendum on separation. Angus Reid Institute asked the question in this order, and in an alternate version where it

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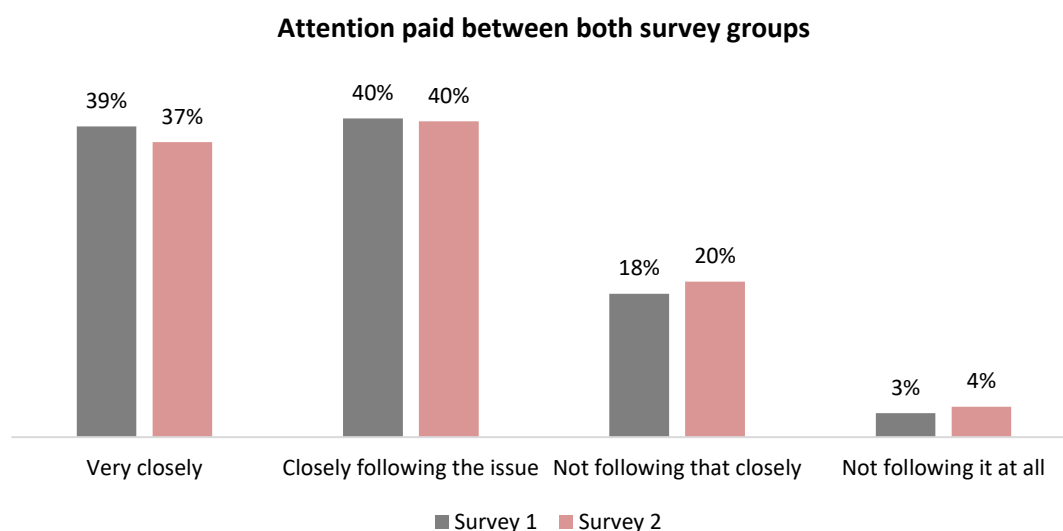
was presented as the final question. Slightly simplified wording and placement at the bottom of the question list did move the “remain” vote by plus four points:



Methodology notes:

Sample comparison

Note that the two samples generated near-identical responses in both attention and vote-likelihood.



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How likely are you to vote in Alberta's provincial referendum this October?		
	Govt. of AB version	ARI version
Certain to vote	79%	78%
Likely to vote	11%	12%
Could or could not	5%	5%
Unlikely to vote	2%	1%
Certain not to vote	1%	2%
Not sure / Can't say	3%	3%

Questionnaire links

[Survey 1, Government language – August 10 to 13](#)

[Survey 2, ARI version – August 26 – September 1](#)

Data Tables

[Survey 1, Government language – August 10 to 13](#)

[Survey 2, ARI version – August 26 – September 1](#)

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