

# Trouble in Paradise?

## Citizens' Views on Democracy in Alberta



A study prepared for the  
Parkland Institute by  
Trevor Harrison, University of Lethbridge  
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ISBN 1-894949-04-X

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**Acknowledgements** The authors wish to acknowledge the support of the Population Research Laboratory, Department of Sociology, University of Alberta, in collecting the data discussed in this paper. The authors wish also to thank Roger Epp and Tom Fuller for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this report, and Robin Hunter who gave the report a final copy-editing. Any errors or omissions are the responsibility of the authors.

**Abstract** This report uses survey data to examine Albertans' attitudes regarding the state of democracy in the province. The findings suggest Albertans are very concerned about the health of democracy in the province, but disagree in fundamental ways with political leaders and much of the mainstream media regarding the causes for concern and means of improving democracy.

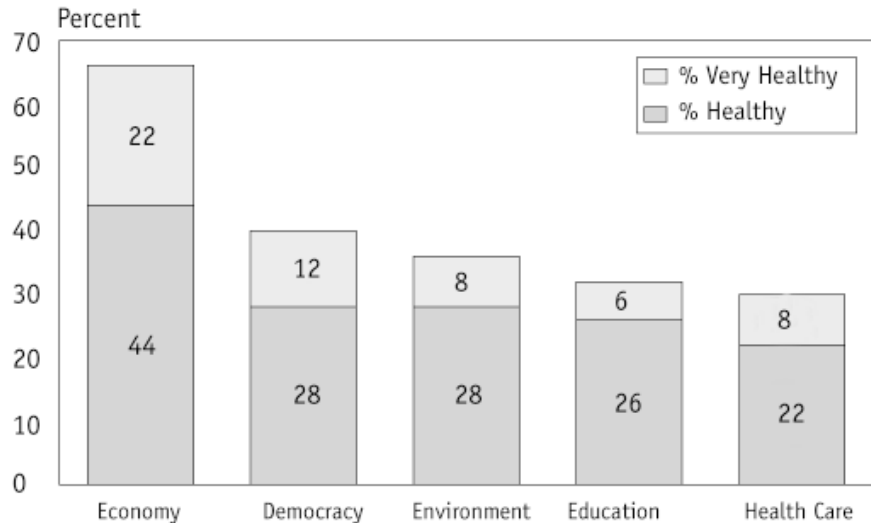
**Parkland Institute** Parkland Institute is an Alberta research network that examines public policy issues. We are based in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Alberta and our research network includes members from most of Alberta's academic institutions as well as other organizations involved in public policy research. Parkland Institute was founded in 1996 and its mandate is to:

- conduct research on economic, social, cultural, and political issues facing Albertans and Canadians.
- publish research and provide informed comment on current policy issues to the media and the public.
- sponsor conferences and public forums on issues facing Albertans.
- bring together academic and non-academic communities.

## Executive Summary

This report examines Albertans' attitudes regarding the state of democracy in the province. It is based on responses from about 1200 adult residents of the province to questions about democracy and related political issues that were asked as part of the 2003 Alberta Survey conducted by the Population Research Laboratory (PRL) at the University of Alberta. The findings suggest Albertans are very concerned about the health of democracy in the province, but disagree in fundamental ways with political leaders and much of the mainstream media regarding the causes for concern and means of improving democracy.

**figure 1:** Perceived health of Alberta institutions, 2003\*



\* Respondents (N=1204) were asked to describe the health of the environment / education / economy / health care system / democracy in Alberta on a 5 point scale with '1' meaning "very unhealthy" and '5' meaning "very healthy."

### Health of Democracy in Alberta

**Figure 1** displays responses to a set of five questions asking Albertans' about their perceptions of the health of the environment, the education system, the economy, the health care system and, finally, democracy in Alberta.

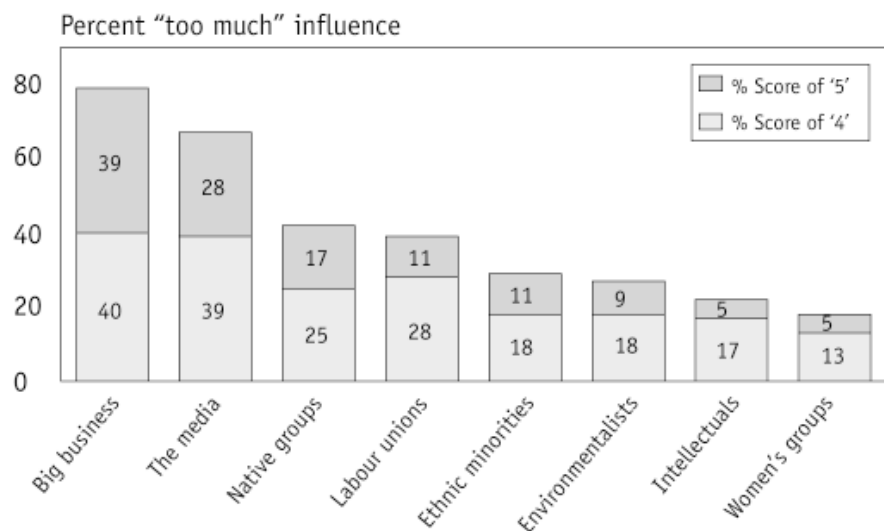
About two-thirds of the sample felt that the provincial economy was "healthy" or "very healthy," compared to only 40% who felt this way about democracy in Alberta. Somewhat fewer responded this positively about the environment and about the education and health care systems. These differences were small, however.

Additional analyses revealed that Albertans who vote Conservative provincially were more likely than Liberal and New Democrat supporters as well as Non-Partisan Albertans (those who did not state a provincial party preference) to rate each of the economy, democracy, the environment, and the education and health care systems more positively. Even so, only 57% of Conservative supporters believed that democracy in Alberta was “healthy” or “very healthy.”

### Influence of Groups / Institutions on Government

The study also asked survey respondents about the perceived influence on the government of eight different groups or institutions in the province. There was considerable agreement among Albertans that “big business” and “the media” have too much influence, with 79% and 67% respectively indicating that these two groups had too much influence on government (Figure 3). Surprisingly, 40% or less felt this way about native groups, labour unions, ethnic minorities, women’s groups, and environmentalists - groups often labeled “special interest groups” and criticized for having too much influence on government decisions.

**figure 3:** Perceived influence on government of different Alberta groups, 2003\*

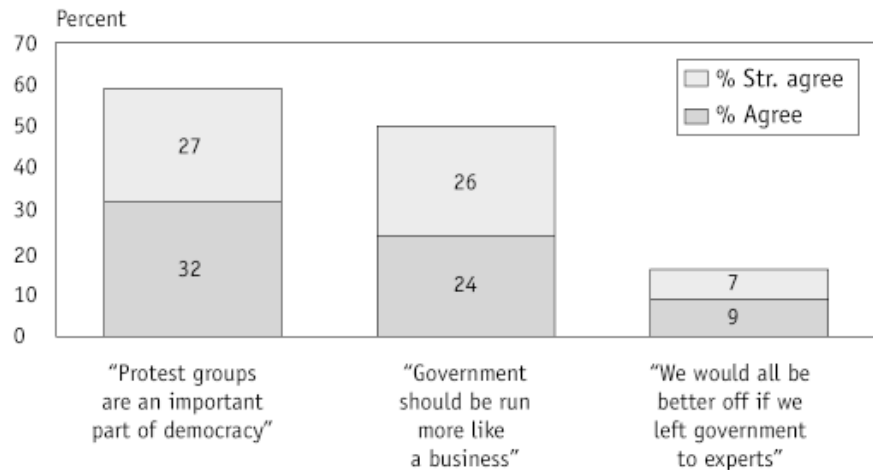


\* Respondents (N=1204) were asked to rate the influence of different Alberta groups on government on a 5-point scale with '1' meaning “too little influence” and '5' meaning “too much influence.”

## Different Approaches to Government Decision-Making

The study asked respondents to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with the following statements about preferred ways of government decision-making: (1) Protest groups are an important part of democracy. (2) Government should be run more like a business. (3) We would all be better off if we left government to the experts. **Figure 6** displays Albertans' reactions to these three propositions.

**figure 6:** Opinions about Preferred Means of Government Decision-Making\*



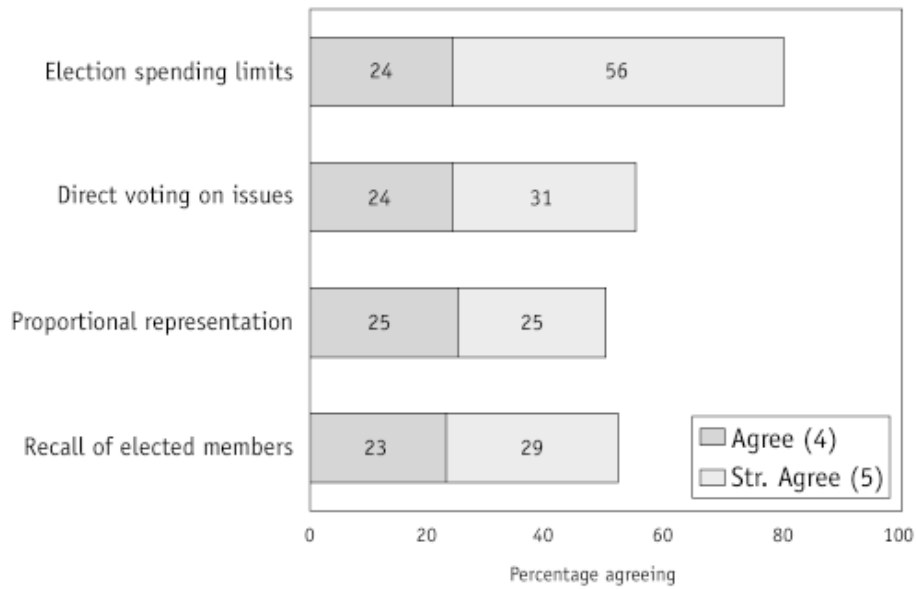
\* Survey participants (N=1204) were asked to respond to each statement using a five-point scale with '1' indicating "strongly disagree" and "5" indicating "strongly agree." Percentages choosing responses of '4' and '5' are shown in this graph.

While six out of ten (59%) Albertans agreed that protest groups are central to democracy, only 50% felt that government should be run more like a business. Only a small minority (16%) agreed that government decision-making by experts, without citizen input, was a good idea.

## Preferences for Changes to the Political Process

The study also asked about the types of political reform that Albertans would support. **Figure 8** highlights the level of support for four different reforms that have been promoted by various political parties and lobby groups in the past decade. Four out of five Albertans favour limits on election spending, while roughly half agree with direct voting on political issues (referenda), proportional representation, and the possibility of recalling elected officials who are seen to be representing

**figure 8:** Support for changes to political process, Alberta, 2003\*



\* Respondents (N=1204) were asked to respond using a 5-point scale with '1' meaning "strongly disagree" and '5' meaning "strongly agree."

poorly the interests of their constituents. There were few differences between Conservative, Liberal and New Democrat supporters in responses to these four proposals for political reform.

### Views on the Current Government

The survey concluded by asking Albertans how much they agreed or disagreed with two statements about the current policies and practices of the Tory government: **1)** "The Alberta government hides a lot of information from the people of the province"; and **2)** "The provincial government has removed too much power from local (municipal) authorities." Fifty percent of the sample agreed with the first statement, and almost as many (46%) agreed with the second. While Liberal and New Democrat supporters were more likely to agree, it is noteworthy that about four out of ten Conservative supporters agreed with both statements.



## Conclusion

This 2003 survey indicates that many Albertans are concerned with the state of democracy in their province. The results also suggest a major disconnection between the concerns and policies of the mainstream political parties, especially the government, and those of ordinary Albertans. For example, considerably fewer Albertans are concerned about the influence of unions on government than that of big business and the media. Yet such concerns are rarely broached in public discourse, and are certainly not given a high profile hearing in the Legislature. Likewise, government denunciations of protests and other forms of criticism, implying that political decision-making should be left to the economic and political elite, find little support among Albertans, a majority of whom believe that protest groups play an important role in a democracy. In contrast, only a small minority of respondents agreed with the statement that government should be left to experts.

A similar disconnection exists with respect to specific reforms proposed as remedies for Alberta's ailing democracy. Our data show moderate support among Albertans for such measures as direct democracy and the use of recall - changes often proposed by Alberta's political and media elite - and for the less frequently expressed idea of proportional representation. However, this study shows far greater support among Albertans for limits on election spending, something almost never broached in public debate.

This disconnection seems particularly strong between the public and the governing Conservatives, with just over half of Albertans believing that the provincial government hides information from the public and has removed too much power from local authorities. These results reinforce the core finding of this survey, that Albertans are concerned about the state of democracy in their province.

The practical consequences of this concern are very difficult to assess. One might argue, however, that the results suggest possible problems on the horizon for the current government unless these concerns are heeded.

# Trouble in Paradise? Citizens' Views on Democracy in Alberta

## Introduction

Recent years have witnessed in Canada (and elsewhere) rising concern, expressed on airwaves, in public forums, and in books regarding what is often referred to as a democratic “deficit” or “malaise” (Law Commission of Canada, 2002; also Rebick, 2000; Grafftey, 2002).

Evidence for this perceived deficit varies, from declining voter turnout to decreasing participation in civic affairs generally (Saul, 1995; Pharr and Putnam, 2000; Pharr and Putnam, 2000). Likewise, explanations for the perceived deficit also vary, sometimes focusing on structural or institutional barriers to participation, other times focusing on broader issues of alienation (Butovsky, 2003).

In Alberta, concerns over democracy often centre on the practices of the federal Liberal party and its electoral dominance at that level. As researchers familiar with the Alberta political scene, however, we are struck by how complaints often made against the federal government - a lack of free votes, infrequent legislative sittings, the alleged “ramming through of legislation,” and the centralization of power - might also be successfully lodged against the Alberta government. In April 2003, for example, the provincial government prohibited a free vote on electoral boundary changes that, as Premier Klein freely admitted, would have been defeated in a free vote (Edmonton Journal, 2003a). Likewise, the sitting days of the Alberta provincial legislature are among the lowest in Canada.<sup>1</sup> The use of closure by the current Conservative government is standard practice - 32 times since first elected in 1993, compared with only once during the entire fourteen years of the Loughheed Tory administration and 14 times during the six years of the Getty administration.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, since coming to power in 1993, the Klein government has dismissed, and sometimes replaced with government appointees, the elected members of numerous public boards, especially in health and education.<sup>3</sup> Finally, one might append to this litany of questionable practices the refusal of the current government to establish legislative standing committees - something common to the federal parliament and most other provinces.

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1 In 1997, the government did not even hold a fall sitting, opting instead to hold a public assembly attended only by invited people.

2 See <http://www.assembly.ab.ca/pro/hansim.asp>);

3 The recent case of regional health boards provides a particularly striking example. One of the Klein government's early initiatives after coming to power was the creation of regional health boards whose members, the premier said, would in time be elected. Finally, in 2001, elections were held for the first time. Little over a year later, however, the government announced it was dismissing the elected members and ceasing further elections, arguing that they had not been effective (Edmonton Journal, 2003b).

In this context, some in Alberta have begun raising questions about the state of democracy in the province, as witnessed by a recent Edmonton Journal (2003c) editorial:

*With such things as brief sittings of the legislature, Tories-only legislative committees, legislation that gives the government wide latitude to write the detail of policy behind cabinet doors, and a preference for policymaking without public hearings and formal "white papers," Alberta could be accused of being behind Ottawa in balancing the books on democracy.*

The editorial concluded with the suggestion that, in light of a host of summits in the past on growth, gaming, children, and water, Alberta should consider holding a "Democracy Summit" to commemorate its centennial in 2005.

But, were such a summit held, what might it find? Taking a page from the Premier's book, what do we hear when we really "listen to the people?" Are "Martha and Henry" satisfied with the state of democracy in Alberta, however they might define it? Do ordinary Albertans perceive that some groups, "special interest" groups perhaps, have too much influence on government? Do they support some of the "solutions" to the perceived democratic deficit as recommended by some critics? And how do Albertans view the governing practices of their elected officials? In short, what do they think about democracy and how it is currently practiced in the province?

Our report suggests considerable discontent with the way democracy is practiced in Alberta. Surprisingly, however, this discontent is not directed at the usual suspects - "special interests" - often described in the media and by conservative politicians. Rather, the discontent seems lodged against big business and media itself. Likewise, the usual panaceas often identified as solutions have little support, presumably for much the same reason: they do not address the real causes of the democratic malaise felt by many Albertans.

## Research Design and Sample Characteristics

To answer these questions, we included a set of questions about democracy and related political issues on the 2003 Alberta Survey<sup>4</sup> conducted by the Population Research Laboratory (PRL) at the University of Alberta. A computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) system employing random-digit-dialing (RDD) technology was used to make contact with a representative sample of households across the province. When contact was made, adult residents (age 18 and older) were invited by trained and supervised interviewers to participate in the 20 minute survey.

A quota sampling system was used to obtain equal numbers of female and male respondents. To ensure regional representation, a disproportionate stratified sampling approach was used, with targets of 400 interviews each in metropolitan Edmonton, metropolitan Calgary, and the rest of the province. The final sample contained 1204 respondents, and reflected a response rate of 40 percent. The survey results reported in this paper are weighted to correct for the small extent to which the two metropolitan areas were over-sampled.

A quick overview of the socio-demographic characteristics of sample members indicates that this group of randomly selected Alberta adults was representative of the provincial (adult) population. The sample was equally divided among males and females. The age categories of the sample were as follows: 18-24 (12%); 25-34 (22%); 35-44 (22%); 45-54 (21%); 55-64 (11%); and 65+ (12%).

One-third of the sample lived in the metropolitan Calgary region, while almost as many (32%) were residents of the metropolitan Edmonton region. The remaining 35% lived in smaller urban or rural parts of the province. Five out of six sample members (84%) were born in Canada. Seventy-two percent owned their own homes. Six out of ten (62%) were married or living with a long-term partner.

Fully 69% had taken some post-secondary schooling (including 24% who had acquired a university degree). Of the remainder, slightly less than 19% had completed high school, while only 12% had less than high school education.

Three out of four (76%) sample members were employed at the time of the interview, 4% were unemployed, and the other 20% were out of the labour force, including 13% who were retired.

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4 The Alberta Survey, conducted annually since 1987 by the Sociology Department's Population Research Laboratory, is an omnibus survey in which a number of different researchers share the costs of data collection by pooling their specific questions on a single survey.

## Measurement

We began by asking Albertans a set of five questions about the health of democracy, the economy, the environment, and the education and health care systems in the province. These survey items, original to this study, allowed us to benchmark survey members' sentiments about the state of democracy in the province relative to other centrally important institutions.

Questions of political influence are central to debates about the legitimacy of the democratic process. For this reason, we also asked Alberta Survey respondents whether eight different groups (e.g., big business, unions, environmentalists, women's groups) had too little or too much influence on government decisions. This set of questions was adapted from questions we asked in an earlier (1994) Alberta-wide survey of political attitudes (Harrison et al., 1996).

Third, in a similar vein, we asked Albertans a series of questions about the process of democratic decision-making. These questions inquired whether respondents felt government should be run more like a business, whether it should be left to "experts," and whether protest groups have a role to play in a democratic political system.<sup>5</sup>

Fourth, we wanted to gauge Albertans' support for four changes to the political process that have been proposed over the past decade as improvements to the democratic process: direct voting; recall; proportional representation; and limits on election spending. The first two proposed remedies have a long history in Alberta. Direct voting (i.e., referenda and initiatives) has deep roots in Alberta's political history (Finkel, 1989; Laycock, 1990) and has been revived in recent years by the Reform party (Manning, 1992; Harrison, 1995) and, later, the Alliance party. Recall was enacted (and then rescinded) by the first Social Credit administration (Finkel, 1989), was also later supported by Reform, and (in 1994) was implemented in the neighbouring province of British Columbia, resulting to date in twelve recall petitions filed (CBC News Online, 2003). Proportional representation is often proposed as a more democratic means of selecting political representatives than Canada's current "first past the post" electoral system (Conway, 1997), and recently received support from 133 prominent political scientists from 34 Canadian universities.<sup>6</sup> Election spending limits have received notoriety because of legislation proposed by the Chretien government to limit corporate and individual contributions to federal political parties, an action that the Edmonton Journal declared "the right thing to do, if for no other reason than it helps reduce the democratic deficit in the public mind" (Edmonton

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5 Some critics would argue the current Alberta government has been dismissive, even insulting, of opposition, with protesters of government policy often denounced as "special interests," "left-wing nuts," and even Communists.

6 The political scientists specifically endorsed a petition organized by Fair Vote Canada (FVC) that stated, "The present voting system wastes millions of votes, distorts election results and denies fair representation to many Canadians. We call on the Government of Canada and all other Parliamentary parties to: 1) initiate a public consultation on instituting a more proportional voting system; and 2) provide Canadians with a referendum process to choose the best voting system."

Journal, 2003d). The questions used to measure support for these possible changes to the political process were devised specifically for this study.

Fifth, given the longevity and electoral dominance of the Conservative party in Alberta, we also included two original questions concerning Albertans' views of the current government, especially with respect to democratic practices (i.e., sharing of information; removing power from local authorities).

Finally, the survey also asked how respondents would vote if a provincial "election was held today."<sup>7</sup> These results were used to examine differences in responses to the questions listed above between Conservatives, Liberals, New Democrats, and a large group of Non-Partisans - voters who said they did not know for whom they would vote or who said they would not vote at all.

## Results

### *Health of Democracy in Alberta*

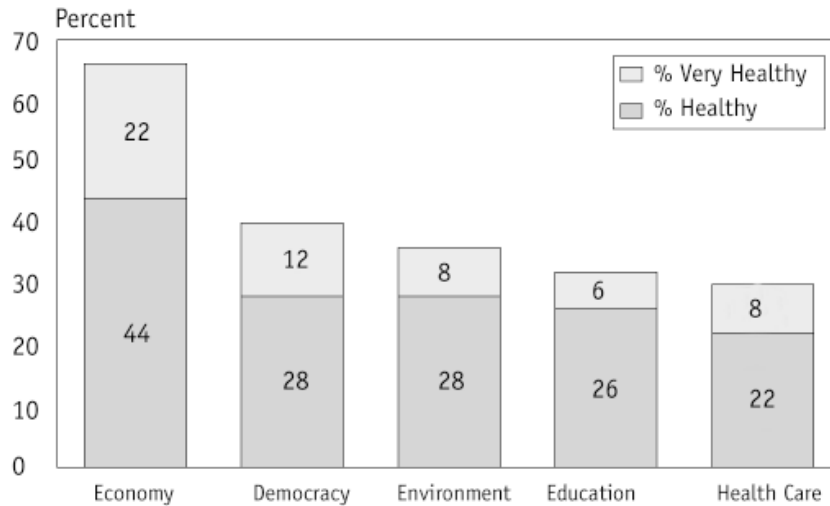
We used a five-point scale, with the end-points labeled "very unhealthy" and "very healthy," to evaluate survey respondents' perceptions of the health of, in the following order, the environment in Alberta, Alberta's education system, Alberta's economy, Alberta's health care system and, finally, democracy in Alberta. **Figure 1** displays the proportion of the 1204 sample members who responded with answers of '4' and '5' indicating that they believed that these institutions were "healthy" or "very healthy."

It is very apparent that many more Albertans consider the provincial economy to be healthy (66%) than feel the same way about democracy (40%), the environment (36%), the education system (32%), and the health care system (30%). We have no other provincial or national benchmarks against which to compare these findings, and no prior survey results to examine shifts over time. However, it is instructive to observe that two out of three adult Albertans perceived the provincial economy to be healthy, but only 40% or less felt that way about the other four quality of life issues. Admittedly, democracy was evaluated positively by more Albertans than were the environment and the education and health care systems, but the difference was small.

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7 The same question was also asked for federal voting intentions, but these data are not used in this analysis.

**figure 1:** Perceived health of Alberta institutions, 2003\*



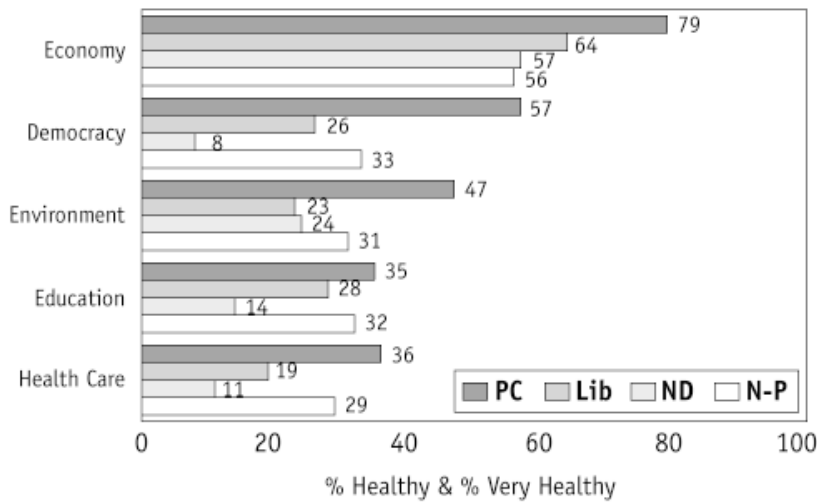
\* Respondents (N=1204) were asked to describe the health of the environment / education / economy / health care system / democracy in Alberta on a 5 point scale with '1' meaning "very unhealthy" and '5' meaning "very healthy."

Might these results vary according to party support? Had an election been called when we conducted this survey, over one-third of the respondents (38%) would have voted Conservative, 13% said they would have voted Liberal, and 6% answered New Democrat. However, those who answered "don't know" or said they would not vote constituted the largest bloc of potential voters (39%). Given the size of this group, and on the assumption that non-partisanship itself might be an important index of voter disenchantment with the state of democracy, we included Non-Partisan Albertans in our analysis.<sup>8</sup>

Not surprisingly, Conservative supporters answered most positively for each of the five questions (**Figure 2**). New Democrat supporters were somewhat more critical than Liberal supporters when asked about the economy, and much more critical than Liberals when commenting on the health of democracy and of the health and education systems. Liberal and New Democrat supporters were equally likely to be critical of the health of the environment. But the most interesting finding concerns the Non-Partisans.<sup>9</sup> Respondents in this group were less positive than were partisan supporters (albeit marginally so) about the economy, but more positive than either Liberal or ND supporters about the health of the other institutions.

- 8 Very few (less than 2%) mentioned the provincial Alliance Party (no relation to the federal party of the same name) as their choice, with about the same proportion spread across two or three other fringe parties. These "fringe" partisans are omitted from our analysis of differences in survey responses by voting preference.
- 9 Age, gender, education, socio-economic status, and urban-rural residence have an impact on party identification. Our data show that young Albertans, the less educated and less affluent, women, and urban residents are somewhat more likely to be in the Non-Partisan category.

**figure 2:** Perceived health of Alberta institutions by provincial voting preference, 2003\*



\* Respondents were asked about provincial voting preferences. Thirty-eight percent answered Progressive Conservative, 13% said Liberal, 6% said New Democrat, 4% mentioned other parties, 38% answered “don’t know” or that they would not vote, and 1% indicated that they were ineligible. Only those supporting the three main parties and the non-partisan group (don’t know / won’t vote) are included in this graph.

At the same time, we must conclude that despite some partisan differences, none of these four groups appeared to view democracy in Alberta as being particularly healthy. It is particularly striking that only a small majority of committed Conservative voters (57%) believe that democracy in Alberta is in a healthy state!

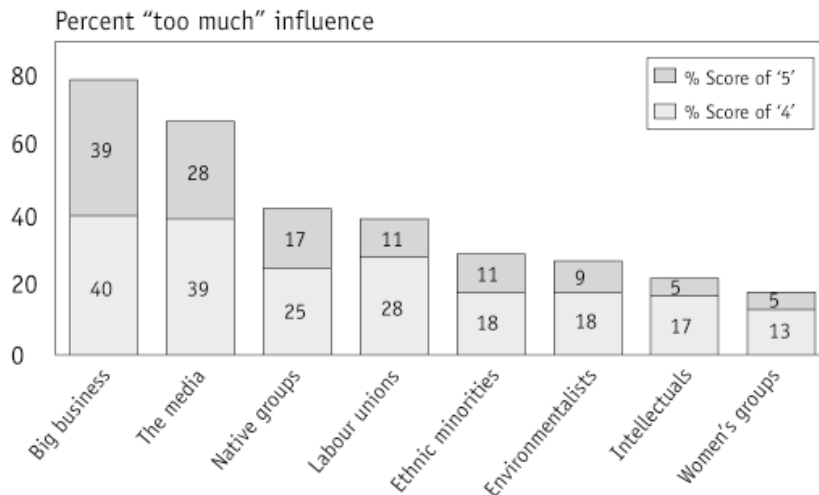
In an effort to explore the extent of social differentiation on the “institutional health” items we cross-tabulated them by gender, age, and education (see Appendix A). With respect to the health of democracy, only gender differences proved to be statistically significant, with 43% of males versus 36% of females viewing the state of democracy as “healthy” or “very healthy.” We further sought to establish the extent to which people had different responses to these items according to their metropolitan region (Calgary, Edmonton, other Alberta), community size, and home ownership/renting (see Appendix B). Metropolitan region was not a significant predictor of perceptions of democracy, but the other two factors were, with respondents in cities (compared to town/rural dwellers) and renters (compared to home owners) more likely to consider democracy in Alberta to be healthy.



### *Influence of Groups / Institutions on Government*

Having asked sample members to diagnose the health of democracy in Alberta, we proceeded to ask about the perceived influence on the government of eight different groups or institutions. Respondents were asked to assess the influence of each on a 5-point scale with '1' labeled "too little influence" and '5' labeled "too much influence." Figure 3 shows that "big business" and "the media" were seen by large majorities of Albertans (79% and 67%, respectively) to have too much influence on government.<sup>10</sup> (Almost no one thought that these two groups had too little influence on government in Alberta - see **Appendix C**.)

**figure 3:** Perceived influence on government of different Alberta groups, 2003\*

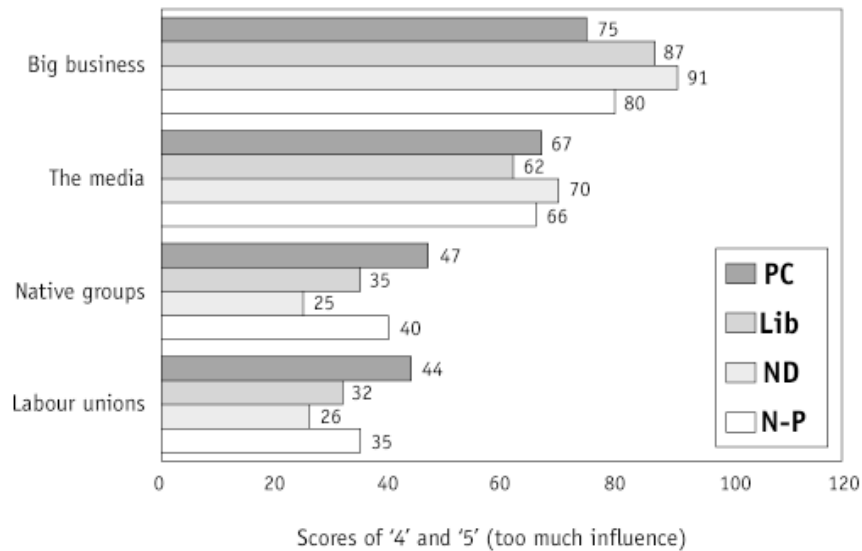


\* Respondents (N=1204) were asked to rate the influence of different Alberta groups on government on a 5-point scale with '1' meaning "too little influence" and '5' meaning "too much influence."

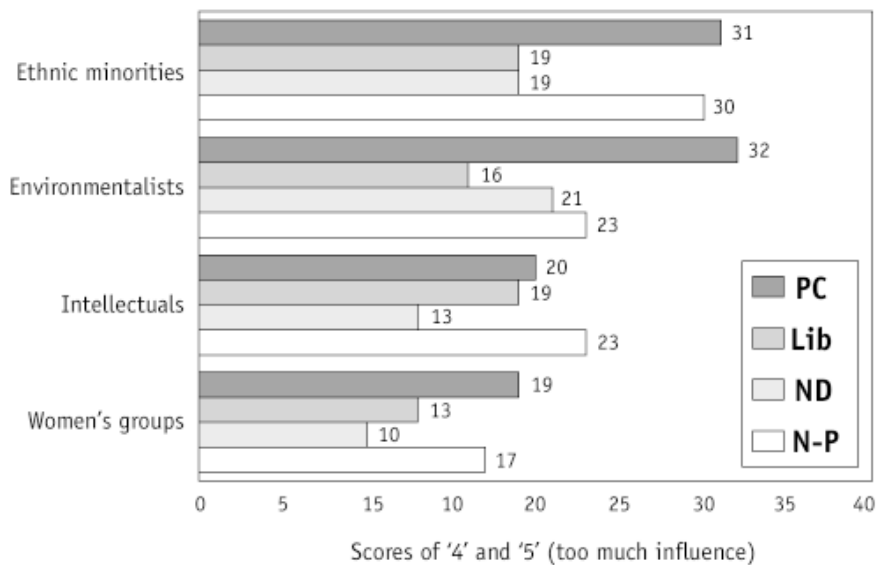
About four out of ten Albertans felt that Native groups (42%) and labour unions (39%) had too much influence on the government (**Figure 3**), while about three out of ten felt this way about ethnic minorities (29%) and environmentalists (27%). Intellectuals and women's groups were seen as even less influential (22% and 18%, respectively). In fact, 38% of the sample members felt that women's groups had too little influence (**Appendix C**), and about one-third believed that intellectuals, environmentalists, and ethnic minorities had too little influence. Thus, while conservative commentators often draw attention to "special interest" groups perceived to be influencing government, the only groups seen to be overly influential by a majority of Albertans were "big business" and "the media."

**10** A separate question on the survey asked Albertans about their perception of the media's relationship to the current Conservative government. One-third of the respondents (33%) agreed that "[t]he media in Alberta often seems to be speaking for the provincial Conservative government." Thus, while two-thirds of the sample members felt that the media had too much influence on the government, only half as many would go so far as to say that the media "speaks for" the government. As we might expect, Liberal (45%) and New Democrat supporters (59%) were much more likely than Conservative voters (22%) to hold this opinion.

**figure 4:** Perceived influence on government of big business, the media, native groups and unions by provincial voting preference, Alberta, 2003



**figure 5:** Perceived influence of ethnic minorities, environmentalists, intellectuals, and women by provincial voting preference, Alberta, 2003



**Figures 4 and 5** cross-tabulate responses to these eight questions by provincial voting preference. These graphs demonstrate that Conservative supporters were somewhat less likely than Liberal and New Democrat voters to believe “big business” is too influential, and more

likely to conclude that native groups, labour unions, ethnic minorities, and environmentalists are too influential. Even so, what stands out is the across-party majority support for the belief that “big business” and “the media” are too influential. Interestingly, Non-Partisans were most similar to Conservative supporters in rating the influence of most groups, indeed estimating the influence of intellectuals higher than any group of partisan supporters.

Not surprisingly, perceptions of undue influence tend to “cluster” in certain ways. For example, Albertans who believe big business has too much influence on government are also more likely to feel this way about the media. At the same time, these same individuals are less likely to feel unions, women’s groups, and Aboriginal groups have too much influence. Likewise, those who feel big business is too powerful are inclined to say that environmentalists have too little influence.

We examined the data for differences by gender, age, and education (**Appendix D**). In general, the lower the level of education, the more likely respondents perceived the undue influence of traditional “special interests”; the higher the level of education, the greater the perception that big business had too much influence. Female respondents were more likely to believe that the media and unions had too much influence on government, while males were more concerned about the influence of Native, environmental, and women’s groups. Age was a significant factor only in the case of ethnic groups, environmentalists, and women’s groups, with older respondents more likely to perceive undue influence than were younger respondents.

Finally, we looked to see whether metropolitan region, community size, and home ownership influenced responses to these questions (**see Appendix E**). Edmonton respondents were significantly more likely to perceive undue influence by Aboriginal groups, while individuals living outside Edmonton and Calgary were more likely to perceive undue influence by unions and environmentalists. Metropolitan region was not a factor in terms of perceptions of the influence of the other groups considered. In contrast, town and village/rural dwellers (in general) were more likely than city dwellers to perceive undue influence by Natives, unions, ethnic groups, environmentalists, and women’s groups. Finally, home ownership was a significant factor in the perception that Native peoples have too much influence on government.

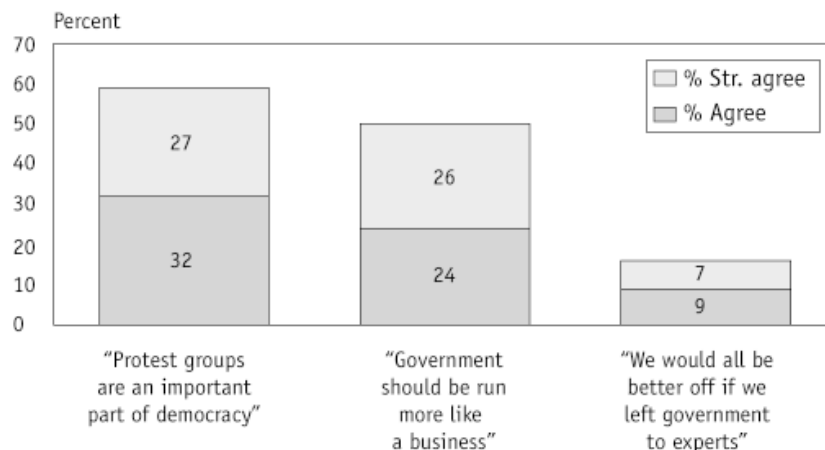
### *Different Approaches to Government Decision-Making*

Alberta has a long history of deference to experts. Since 1993, the provincial government has also widely promoted business approaches to governance while (at times) denigrating the role of protesters opposed to its policies. How do Albertans view these distinct approaches to political decision-making?

In our survey, we asked respondents to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with three statements about these issues: **(1)** Protest groups are an important part of democracy. **(2)** Government should be run more like a business. **(3)** We would all be better off if we left government to the experts. **Figure 6** displays Albertans' reactions to these three propositions, while **Figure 7** cross-tabulates sample members' responses by their provincial voting preferences.

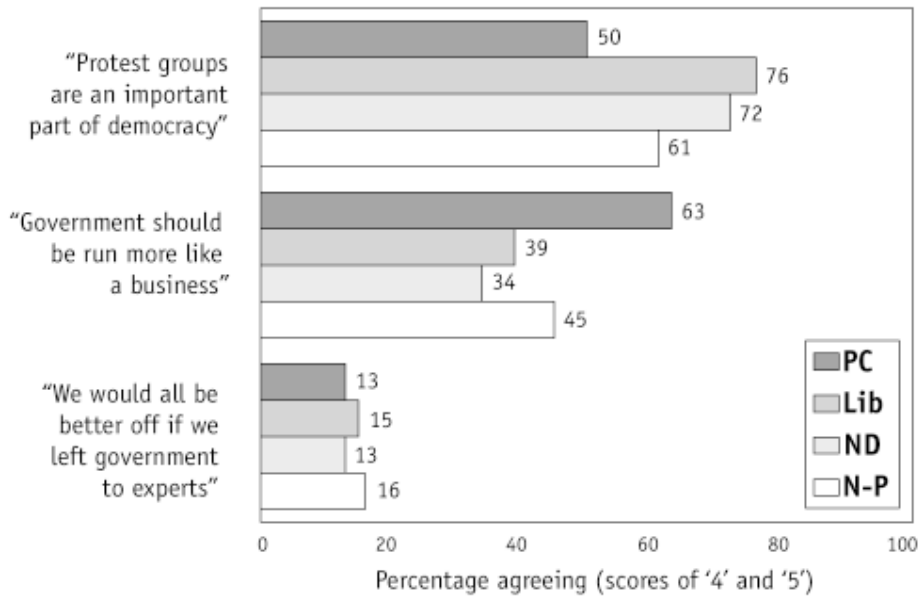
Liberal and ND supporters most strongly supported the role of protest groups in democracy, but even 50% of Conservative supporters believed they have a role, with Non-Partisans falling in-between (**Figure 7**). Conservative supporters stood out also on the question of whether government should be run more like a business, with 63% agreeing, the Liberals and New Democrats most likely to be disagreeing, and Non-Partisans again falling in-between. There was only minimal support among Albertans of any political stripe, however, for government being left to experts.

**figure 6: Opinions about Preferred Means of Government Decision-Making\***



\* Survey participants (N=1204) were asked to respond to each statement using a five-point scale with '1' indicating "strongly disagree" and "5" indicating "strongly agree." Percentages choosing responses of '4' and '5' are shown in this graph.

**figure 7:** Opinions about preferred means of government decision-making by provincial voting preference, Alberta, 2003



In an effort to establish the social basis for variation in these items, we cross-tabulated them by gender, age, and education (see Appendix F). Younger and better-educated Albertans were significantly more supportive of the role of protest groups. By contrast, males and older respondents tended to believe most strongly that government should be run like a business, while (to the degree anyone supported the idea), less-educated individuals were significantly more likely to believe government should be left to experts.

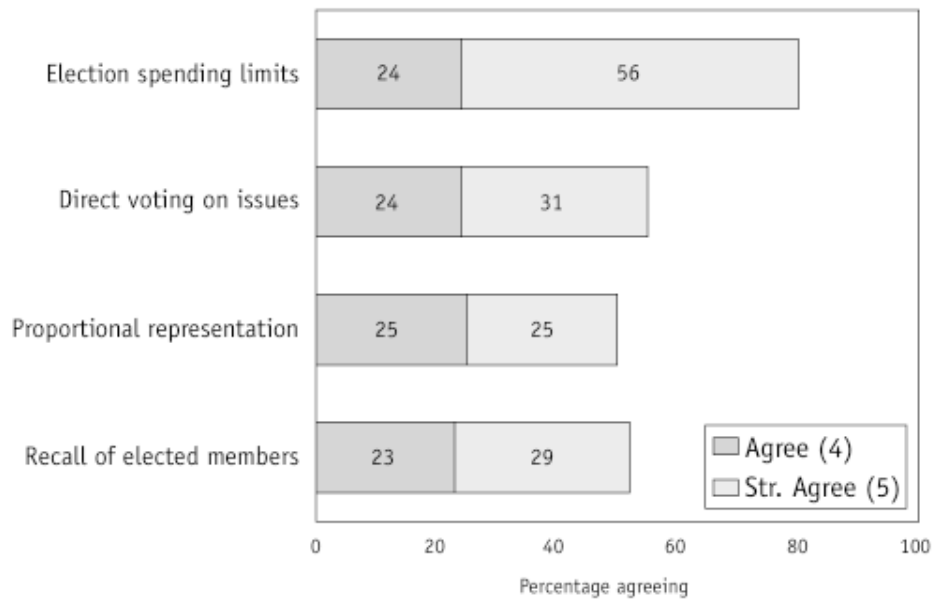
City dwellers were significantly more supportive of protest groups than were town or village/rural respondents (see Appendix G). The latter, in turn, along with home owners, were significantly more likely to support the idea that government should be run like a business.

*Preferences for Changes to the Political Process*

The responses to the previous questions suggest a degree of dissatisfaction with politics and democracy in Alberta. We wanted to find out what measures Albertans might support to reform the political process and therefore to conceivably reduced the concerns about the health of democracy in Alberta.

**Figure 8** highlights the extent of public support in Alberta for four different political reforms that have been promoted by various political parties and lobby groups in the past decade. Over half of the sample (55%) supported the idea of direct democracy, agreeing that “most political decisions should be made by voters directly, rather than by elected officials.” Exactly half of the sample (50%) agreed with proportional representation (“The election system should be changed so that a party receiving 20 percent of all the votes gets 20 percent of all the seats in the legislature.”). A similar proportion (52%) approved of recall legislation (“Members of the legislature who don’t vote the way their constituents want them to should lose their seats”). However, the strongest support for any political reform was for “limits on election spending by political parties” (80%). Indeed, a majority (56%) of Albertans “strongly agreed” with this proposed reform.

**figure 8:** Support for changes to political process, Alberta, 2003\*

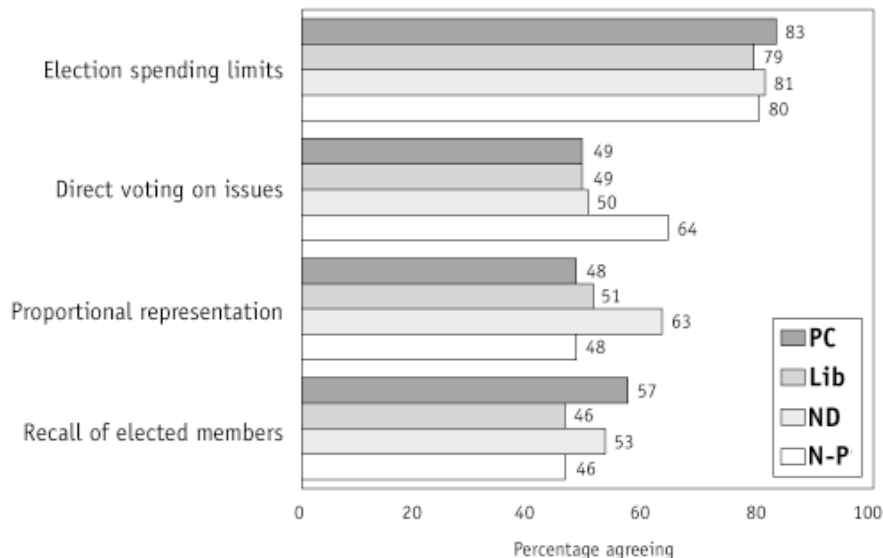


\* Respondents (N=1204) were asked to respond using a 5-point scale with ‘1’ meaning “strongly disagree” and ‘5’ meaning “strongly agree.”

Thus, while right-wing populist groups have been reluctant to recommend limits on election spending,<sup>11</sup> a huge majority of Albertans favour this reform of the political process.

Again, does party preference influence these views? As shown in **Figure 9** (below) there were virtually no differences in support for election spending limits and direct democracy among party supporters, though Non-Partisans were more supportive of the latter. However, New Democrat voters were most likely to favour proportional representation and Liberal voters were least supportive (tied with Non-Partisans) of recall mechanisms.

**figure 9:** Support for changes to political process\* by provincial voting preference, Alberta, 2003



\* Respondents (N=1204) were asked to respond using a 5-point scale with '1' meaning "strongly disagree" and '5' meaning "strongly agree."

Cross-tabulating by gender, age, and education (**Appendix H**), we find that females were significantly more likely than males to support spending limits while the reverse is the case regarding recall of elected representatives. Younger voters were significantly more likely than older respondents to support spending limits and direct democracy. Less-educated study participants were more supportive of direct democracy compared to more highly educated respondents, while the reverse was true regarding spending limits and recall. Neither gender, age, or education proved to be significant factors affecting support for proportional representation.

<sup>11</sup> For example, the National Citizens' Coalition, formerly led by Stephen Harper, now leader of the federal Alliance party, has steadfastly opposed restrictions on election spending.

Examining the influence of metropolitan region, community size, and home ownership/renting (**Appendix I**), only community size proved to be significant, and that only regarding spending limits. Town dwellers were significantly more supportive of this measure than were city or village/rural dwellers.

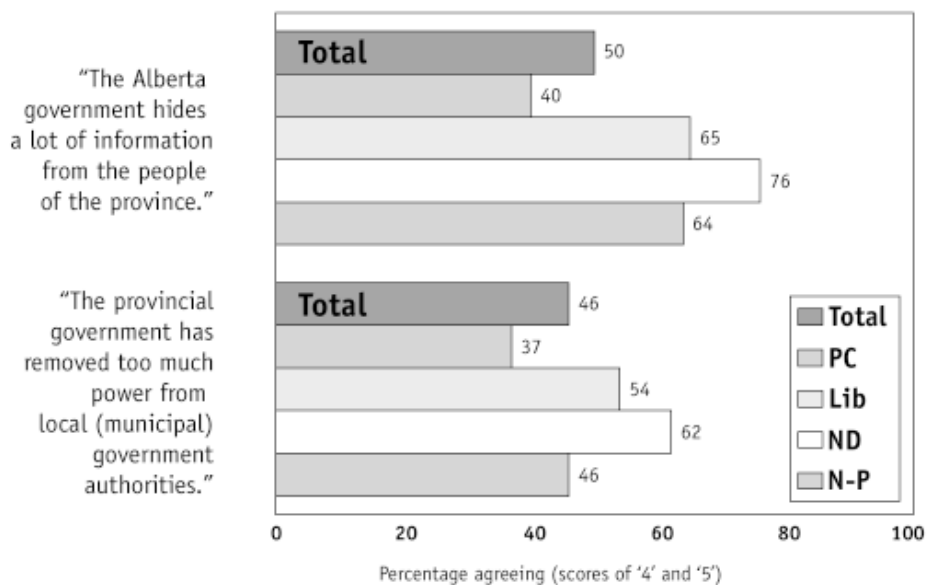
### Views on the Current Government

We concluded our questions about democracy and politics in Alberta by asking sample members how much they agreed or disagreed with two statements about the current policies and practices of the Tory government. **Figure 10** displays the proportion of the total sample, and of each of the three partisan political groups, agreeing with these statements.

Exactly half of the sample (50%) agreed that “the Alberta government hides a lot of information from the people of the province” while almost half (46%) agreed that “the provincial government has removed too much power from local (municipal) authorities.”

Of course, on such questions we would expect a partisan divide. Figure 10 also shows, not surprisingly, that Liberal and New Democrat supporters were much more likely to agree with these criticisms of the provincial government. Even so, approximately four out of ten Conservative supporters also agreed with each of these statements.

**figure 10:** Opinions about provincial government decision-making by provincial voting preference, Alberta, 2003





Female study participants were more likely than their male counterparts to agree that the provincial government hides information and has removed too much power from local authorities (**Appendix J**). Older respondents were more likely than their younger counterparts to agree with the second opinion statement. Education level was not a factor in explaining responses to either statement. Metropolitan region, community size, and home ownership / renting did not shape patterns of response to either of these opinion statements (**Appendix K**).

## **Making Sense of It All: What do the Results Mean?**

Our survey provides some unanticipated and quite surprising results. While a majority of Albertans are extremely happy with the provincial economy, only a minority are pleased with other important elements of Alberta society, such as health care, education, the environment - and (central to this paper) the state of democracy.

The survey data suggests a major disconnection between the concerns and policies of the mainstream political parties, especially the government, and that of ordinary Albertans. For example, considerably fewer Albertans are concerned about the influence of unions on government than that of big business and the media. Yet such concerns are rarely broached in public discourse, and are certainly not given a high profile hearing in the Legislature. Likewise, government denunciations of protests and other forms of criticism, implying that political decision-making should be left to the economic and political elite, find little support among Albertans, a majority of whom believe that protest groups play an important role in a democracy. In contrast, only a minority of respondents agreed with the statement that government should be left to experts.

A similar disconnection exists at the level of specific remedies to the ills of Alberta's democracy. Our data show support among Albertans for such measures as direct democracy and the use of recall - ideas often proposed by Alberta's political and media elite - and for the less frequently proposed idea of proportional representation. However, our data show far greater support among Albertans for the idea of limits on election spending, something almost never broached.

This disconnection seems particularly strong between the public and the governing Conservatives, with just over half of Albertans believing that the provincial government hides information from the public and has removed too much power from local authorities. These results reinforce the core finding of this survey, that Albertans are concerned about the state of democracy in their province.

What do the results mean in the political arena? In the main, the survey findings do not highlight any immediate danger to the governing Conservatives. This conclusion is based both on respondents' stated voting intentions and on the very positive assessment Albertans provide of the provincial economy. Governing parties are not defeated during good economic times and current times in Alberta remain very good, despite current global economic woes and the recent problems facing Alberta's cattle industry.

Still, critical examination of political change should not stop at surface events, but should also consider undercurrents and possibilities that are latent. In many ways, the "Klein revolution" of the early 1990s represented an internal revolt against interventionist government and social liberalism. Though populist in form, the Klein government's policies are often viewed - sometimes even by former Conservatives - as corporatist and antithetical to democratic accountability. Our data is consistent with the argument that, as the debt crisis of the early years has receded, replaced by economic bounty, many Albertans have grown uneasy with the process of governance that has marked the "good times."

How might this discontent with Alberta's democratic deficit play out? Will the Conservatives find new ways of incorporating or assuaging it? Might either the Liberal or ND parties mobilize it? Or might discontent find its voice in a new, alternative party, of which the history of Alberta is replete? Obviously, our data cannot provide an answer. It seems, however, that politics in Alberta may be evolving in unanticipated ways.

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**Appendix A:** Perceived health of Alberta institutions by gender, age, and education.

	Percent answering “healthy” (4) and “very healthy” (5)				
	Economy	Democracy	Environment	Education	Health care
<b>TOTAL</b>	66	40	36	32	30
<b>Gender</b>					
Female	57 *	36 *	30 *	30	26 *
Male	76	43	43	34	33
<b>Age</b>					
18 - 34	68	38	33	31 *	28 *
35 - 54	66	39	39	29	27
55 +	67	46	38	40	38
<b>Education</b>					
High school or less	60 *	40	37	33	34
Some post-secondary	69	39	36	31	28
University degree	73	41	37	31	27

\* Highlighted differences are statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ).

**Appendix B:** Perceived health of Alberta institutions by metropolitan region, community size, and home ownership.

	Percent answering “healthy” (4) and “very healthy” (5)				
	Economy	Democracy	Environment	Education	Health care
<b>TOTAL</b>	66	40	36	32	30
<b>Metropolitan Region:</b>					
Edmonton	65 *	39	33	32	29
Calgary	73	42	39	28	28
Other Alberta	62	39	37	35	30
<b>Community Size:</b>					
City	69 *	41 *	37	32	29
Town	59	31	36	33	26
Village/rural area	62	42	35	29	33
<b>Home Ownership:</b>					
Own	68	38 *	34 *	31	29
Rent	62	44	41	32	31

\* Highlighted differences are statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ).

**Appendix C: Perceived influence on government\***

	% too little (1)	(2)	(3)	% too much (5)
Big business	1	3	40	40
The media	2	5	39	28
Native (aboriginal) groups	10	19	25	17
Labour unions	7	18	28	11
Ethnic minorities	10	26	18	11
Environmentalists	9	25	18	9
Intellectuals	9	24	17	5
Women’s groups	10	28	13	5

\* Respondents (N = 1204) were asked to rate the influence of different Albert groups on government on a 5-point scale with ‘1’ meaning “too little influence” and ‘5’ meaning “too much influence.” This table displays the percentage of the total sample responding with scores of ‘1’ (too little), ‘2’, ‘4’ and ‘5’ (too much).

**Appendix D: Perceived Influence on government by gender, age, and education.**

	Percent who think group has too much influence on government (scores of ‘4’ and ‘5’)							
	Business	Media	Natives	Unions	Ethnic groups	Environmentalists	Intellectuals	Women
<b>TOTAL</b>	79	67	42	39	29	27	21	18
<b>Gender</b>								
Female	80	70*	39*	42*	28	22*	21	14*
Male	79	64	44	35	29	32	20	21
<b>Age</b>								
18 - 34	80	70	39	35	24*	20*	19	12*
35 - 54	80	64	45	40	29	27	20	18
55 +	77	65	41	42	34	35	26	26
<b>Education</b>								
High school or less	73*	65	46*	45*	37*	38*	28*	21
Some post-secondary	80	68	42	38	29	25	20	19
University degree	80	67	35	31	17	16	13	10

\* Highlighted differences are statistically significant (p < 0.05).

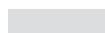
**Appendix E:** Perceived influence on government by metropolitan region, community size, and home ownership.

	Percent who think group has too much influence on government (scores of '4' and '5')							
	Business	Media	Natives	Unions	Ethnic groups	Environmentalists	Intellectuals	Women
<b>TOTAL</b>	79	67	42	39	29	27	21	18
<b>Metropolitan Region:</b>								
Edmonton	78	65	38	35*	27	22*	21	16
Calgary	82	70	35*	37	27	25	19	18
Other Alberta	78	65	31	44	32	33	22	19
<b>Community Size:</b>								
City	80	66	40*	36*	25*	22*	20	15*
Town	78	70	54	41	33	36	24	24
Village/rural area	80	66	49	47	38	38	19	22
<b>Home Ownership:</b>								
Own	79	67	43*	40	29	27	19	18
Rent	79	67	37	35	27	25	24	15

\* Highlighted differences are statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ).

**Appendix F:** Other political opinions by gender, age, and education.

	Percent agreeing (scores of '4' and '5')							
	Gender		Age			Education		
	Female	Male	18 - 34	35 - 54	55 +	<= High School	Some post-sec.	University degree
Protest groups are an important part of democracy.	58	60	64	61	48 *	50	57	73 *
Government should be run more like a business.	45	56 *	41	53	61 *	53	52	45
We would all be better off if we left government to experts.	14	15	15	13	15	19	13	10 *

 \* Highlighted differences are statistically significant (p < 0.05).




## Appendix G: Other political opinions by metropolitan region, community size, and home ownership.

	Percent agreeing (scores of '4' and '5')							
	Metropolitan region			Community size			Home Ownership	
	Edmonton	Calgary	Other Alberta	City	Town	Village/rural area	Own	Rent
Protest groups are an important part of democracy.	60	62	55	61	56	53 *	59	58
Government should be run more like a business.	46	54	51	49	44	60 *	53	44 *
We would all be better off if we left government to experts.	17	15	12	15	14	10	14	16

\* Highlighted differences are statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ).

**Appendix H:** Support for changes to political process by gender, age, and education.

	Percent agreeing (scores of '4' and '5')							
	Gender		Age			Education		
	Female	Male	18 - 34	35 - 54	55 +	<= High School	Some post-sec.	University degree
There should be limits on election spending by political parties.	83	70 *	80	84	74 *	74	85	81 *
Most political decisions should be made by voters directly, rather than by elected officials.	57	53	59	52	51 *	65	56	39 *
The election system should be changed so that a party receiving 20 percent of ALL the votes gets 20 percent of ALL the seats in the legislature.	51	49	51	50	50	46	53	52
Members of the Legislature who don't vote the way their constituents want them to should lose their seats.	48	55 *	48	54	53	46	54	55 *

 \* Highlighted differences are statistically significant (p < 0.05).


## Appendix I: Support for changes to political process by metropolitan region, community size, and home ownership.

	Percent agreeing (scores of '4' and '5')							
	Metropolitan region			Community size			Home Ownership	
	Edmonton	Calgary	Other Alberta	City	Town	Village/rural area	Own	Rent
There should be limits on election spending by political parties.	78	82	81	80	87	76 *	80	80
Most political decisions should be made by voters directly, rather than by elected officials.	54	52	59	54	57	58	54	57
The election system should be changed so that a party receiving 20 percent of ALL the votes gets 20 percent of ALL the seats in the legislature.	52	51	49	50	55	50	51	50
Members of the Legislature who don't vote the way their constituents want them to should lose their seats.	53	53	50	50	52	57	53	48

\* Highlighted differences are statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ).

**Appendix J:** Opinions about the provincial Conservative government by gender, age, and education.

	Percent agreeing (scores of '4' and '5')							
	Gender		Age			Education		
	Female	Male	18 - 34	35 - 54	55 +	<= High School	Some post-sec.	University degree
The Alberta government hides a lot of information from the people of the province.	59	53 *	54	57	55	55	58	53
The provincial government has removed too much power from local (municipal) government authorities.	49	42 *	39	43	58 *	47	44	46

 \* Highlighted differences are statistically significant (p < 0.05).

**Appendix K:** Opinions about the provincial Conservative government by metropolitan region, community size, and home ownership.

	Percent agreeing (scores of '4' and '5')							
	Metropolitan region			Community size			Home Ownership	
	Edmonton	Calgary	Other Alberta	City	Town	Village/rural area	Own	Rent
The Alberta government hides a lot of information from the people of the province.	58	51	59	54	65	55	54	60
The provincial government has removed too much power from local (municipal) government authorities.	42	44	49	44	51	46	47	42

 \* Highlighted differences are statistically significant (p < 0.05).





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ISBN 1-894949-04-X