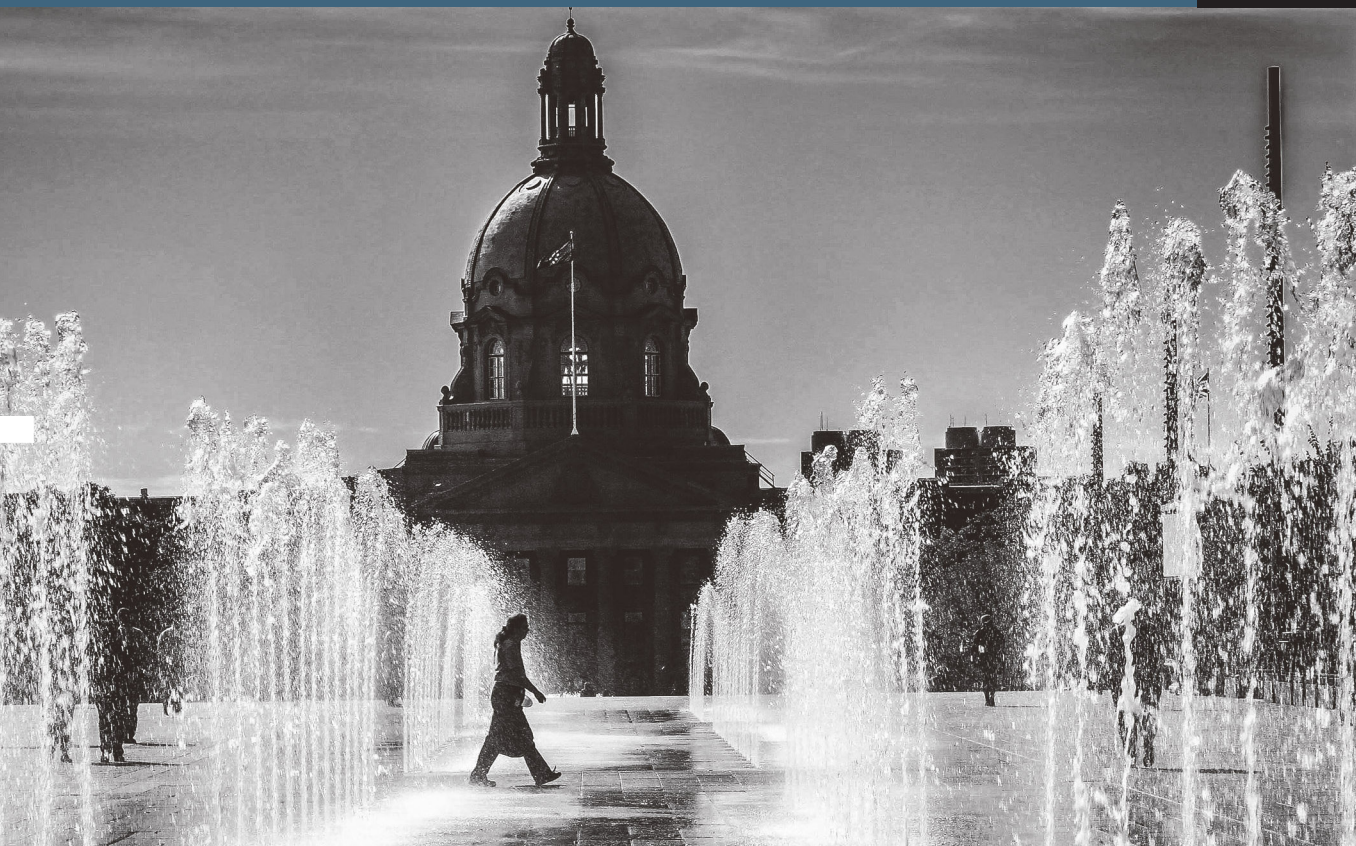


RÉFÉRENDUM | 20 REFERENDUM | 26

CANADIAN
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NETWORK



Referendum Report



REFERENDUM REPORT

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September 10, 2026



CENTRE FOR MEDIA, TECHNOLOGY AND DEMOCRACY

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Influencers, AI Content, Foreign Interest, and the Attention Economy Ahead of the October 19 Vote

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Executive Summary

Alberta is heading into a referendum on October 19, 2026, in a rapidly changing information environment. Year-over-year, online influencers have been accumulating relevance and engagement at the expense of news media and elected officials, and we now have a case study of what a democratic vote looks like squarely in the influencer era.

The online conversation about Alberta's referendum is driven by a passionate community of 114 accounts, unencumbered by traditional forms of political accountability, that have captured roughly half of all

engagement generated since January 1, 2025, across five platforms. Among these highly influential voices, pro-independence accounts outperform anti-independence ones by a ratio of roughly 8:1. Posts about Alberta separating from Canada, irrespective of position, receive more than double the engagement of comparable other-topic posts — an online Alberta Advantage.

A second major transformation has recently occurred as voters turn towards AI search and chatbots to understand the political world around them. However, these tools are still maturing and provide changing responses to common and important political queries in the context of the referendum. We find that Google AI Overview and ChatGPT give inconsistent, sometimes directly contradictory answers to the same questions. At the same time, AI-generated imagery is quickly emerging as a campaign tool in the information environment, and we find that the share of AI images among pro-independence posts on X has grown 3.5-fold since January 2025.

These new sources of information and campaign techniques are enormously consequential during this democratic moment. Most importantly, there is a striking difference between the online conversation and the general public of Alberta. While polling shows

roughly two-thirds of Albertans would vote to remain in Canada, the online conversations runs the inverse with far more posts and online engagement from the highly energetic independence movement. A political movement without elected leadership, but with a dominant online presence that harnesses rapidly maturing AI technologies, is driving the public conversation on a referendum related to whether Alberta should remain a province in Canada. All of this is unfolding while confidence that Elections Alberta will run the vote fairly sits at just 59%. Our democratic institutions and understanding of the public square must keep up.

Key Takeaways

- A powerful set of (largely pro-independence) political influencers dominate the online referendum conversation. With no elected party campaigning for Albertan secession, the leave side is championed by a constellation of grassroots individuals and civil society organizations. In this decentralized context of the upcoming referendum, 114 accounts have received half of all engagement over the past 20 months on five platforms. Of the 114 we identify, 66 argue for an independent Alberta and 29 for Alberta to remain in Canada, with the rest taking no side. Pro-independence accounts receive about 80% of the engagement on relevant posts versus about 10% for remainers.
- Social media platform dynamics favour conversation about independence, with a sizable Alberta advantage for relevant posts. Canadian accounts posting about Alberta independence receive 1.7x the engagement compared to Canadian accounts discussing other political topics. The top tier of referendum influencers are even more rewarded for discussions of independence with a premium of 3.8x the engagement. American voices receive a still-sizeable 2.4x advantage in their rare but notable posts.
- Facebook groups are an active space for discussing the upcoming referendum, and while pro-independence groups have larger membership, remain groups show larger median engagement and have comparable maximum engagement to the pro-independence groups. Both pro- and anti- separation groups focus heavily on identity and mobilization, with frustrations directed towards political elites from

opposing political parties.

- Generative AI is simultaneously fueling the online conversation and failing as a reliable source of information. AI tools, such as Google AI Overview and ChatGPT, currently produce unpredictable and conflicting responses about half the time when queried about potential outcomes of Alberta separating from Canada. At the same time, AI-generated images have grown 3.5-fold as a share of pro-independence posts on X and now approach a third of shared images in some Facebook groups.
- As of this report's release, we find no evidence of a covert, coordinated or disproportionate campaign by the U.S. or Russia to influence Alberta secession sentiment in the public digital information environment. Overt, attributable American engagement in the question is documented, and it rose sharply in late August 2026 amid the Canada-US trade war.

A note on AI tools in this research. Claude (Anthropic) was used extensively in this project for building and running parts of the data analysis pipeline, prototyping figures, and editorial assistance. These tools make it possible to conduct a study of this scale that would otherwise require a much larger team. All analysis, code, and text were reviewed and verified by the authors.



Introduction

The upcoming provincial referendum on whether Alberta should remain a province in Canada is a significant democratic moment. While Canada has witnessed prior sovereignty movements leading to independence referendums in Quebec, Alberta is unique in that no elected party is campaigning on the leave side of the referendum question. Instead, the leave side is championed by a swath of grassroots citizens who have also formed a constellation of civil society organizations, typically self-styled as the ‘independence movement’.

This movement is very active on social media. Perhaps because of its resistance to formal organizations with elected leaders, a robust range of views within the movement are aired on social media with no centralized campaign. Much of the discussion from this movement, and their critics, on the upcoming referendum is found on X. Other content forums, such as YouTube and the podcasting space, offer longer form mediums to discuss views and objectives, while popular groups on Facebook also provide discussion and sharing spaces.

We know that the media ecosystem surrounding the topic of Alberta’s potential secession is a lucrative space for outside actors to mislead and profit. [Our Centre published research last April](#) showing a network of YouTube channels pushing U.S. annexation narratives. This network was then [connected to a Dutch-based operation](#) of ‘faceless Youtube’ channels to generate revenue. Some channels were so profitable that [they hired American voice actors](#) to perform the content with an Albertan perspective. Although YouTube subsequently removed these channels, we know this is a widespread phenomenon on YouTube, and there are likely similar networks of outside actors seeking to profit off of the inherently divisive

topic of Alberta secession.

A confluence of inauthentic actors seeking to profit off of the topic of Albertan secession has created a space where the real, organic independence movement is frequently met with accusations of foreign manufacturing. This is unfortunate and undeserved. The lack of centralized organization in the movement produces blurred boundaries of membership and an information ecosystem where outside actors can mimic authentic activists to pursue their own objectives. This is the reality of modern political movements with a heavy presence on social media.

It is in this context that we present the following report on the social media landscape of Alberta’s upcoming referendum. We aim to characterize prominent figures and conversations in the digital space on both sides of the upcoming separation referendum. We provide evidence-based analysis, with replicable approaches, to shed light on the contested landscape of Alberta’s political future on social media. We open with two important notes.

First, Albertans will vote on ten questions on October 19, 2026, but only one question focuses on whether or not Alberta should remain a province in Canada. That question asks whether “Alberta should remain a province of Canada,” option one, or whether “the Government of Alberta should commence the legal process required under the Canadian Constitution to hold a binding provincial referendum on whether or not Alberta should separate from Canada,” option two. This report is singularly focused on Question 10 discussion online.

Second, freedom of expression is a critical value to Canadians, and one our research is committed to upholding. Advocacy for independence and sovereignty, whether from Alberta, Quebec or elsewhere, falls squarely within that space. Our goal is to equip Canadians with knowledge to

navigate the online ecosystem and ensure technology serves democracy. Albertans deserve a high quality, authentically Albertan, and fact-based information environment for the upcoming referendum. Albertan voices matter the most on topics relating to Alberta.

- Referendum
- Petition
- Separat(e/ion/ism/ist)
- Independence
- Sovereignty
- Secession
- 51st state
- Annexation

Using this keyword-based collection approach, we searched for posts across Instagram, X, YouTube, TikTok, and Bluesky for these terms in the given time range and collected all posts that were returned. Facebook's keyword-search yielded limited data due to the way results are surfaced, so for Facebook only, we did a group analysis approach and excluded their results from this section on top influencers. After running these posts through a model ensuring relevance, this search returned 136,387 posts from 31,970 unique entities. We grouped posts by account, and visualized the post count and engagement in figure 1.

We then identified entities with at least 10 posts, engagement (measured as likes, comments and shares) exceeding 10,000, and at least 5,000 followers. Entities that were accredited media or elected politicians (such as CTV, CBC, Rebel, Global, Juno or politicians like Danielle Smith, Mark Carney, Pierre Poilievre, Naheed Nenshi and Corey Hogan), were excluded from our seedlist. Civil-society organisations campaigning in their own name are retained. Figure 1 shows these accounts and we list below entities with at least 50,000 cumulative engagement in our keyword collection of posts. We ran the seedlist timeline data through a model which categorizes accounts for referendum stance by whether or not they advocate for an independent Alberta.

The Political Influencers Driving the Conversation

Modern politics, structured through social media, is changing the locus of attention from elected officials towards political influencers on social media. We define a political influencer, following Dubois and Dommett (2025), as an account that regularly produces or comments on political content without holding office or speaking for a news organisation or institution. In the last federal election, Canada saw political influencers displace news media and politicians as the most engaged type of account on social media (Bridgman et al. 2025). Political influencers play a distinct role as intermediaries for information sharing, combining candid political commentary with entertainment content to shape public opinion, while operating outside of the conventional journalistic standards of political communication (Dubois and Dommett 2025).

As the media ecosystem increasingly centres on political influencers, prior models of understanding political choices, such as through elected leaders and campaign platforms, lose relevance, and old forms of accountability through democratic and electoral processes, become outdated. In this context, an independence movement has emerged without any elected politician campaigning on Alberta's separation, securing a referendum on whether the province should remain in Canada. This absence of clear or formal political leadership leaves a vacuum for political influencers to intermediate the information ecosystem surrounding the campaign.

The following section identifies prominent political influencers, on both sides of the Alberta referendum debate, and analyzes their aggregated behaviour.

Methodology for Identifying Top Referendum Political Influencers

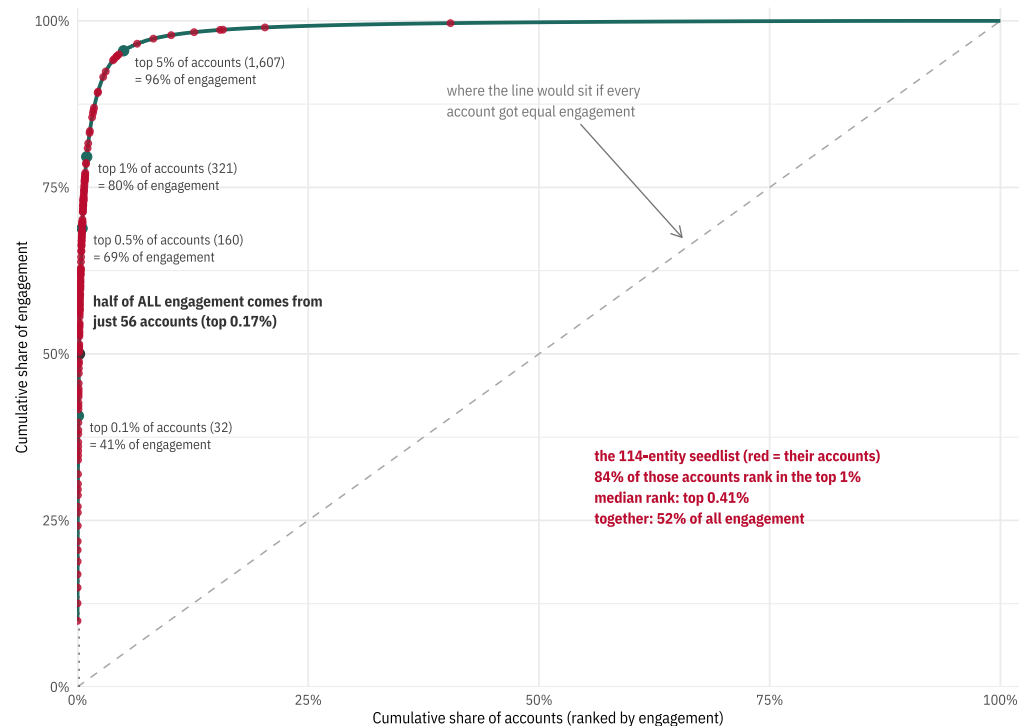
To identify the major political influencers who post about the upcoming referendum, we collected social media posts from 1 January 2025 until 3 August 2026 that included the following terms¹ and the word Alberta:

¹ General conclusions of the following analysis largely hold regardless of which terms subset you used in the above 8 phrases. We ran analyses with a subset of posts restricted to just the most neutral keywords to ensure we were not promoting biased results by only using terms that campaigners on one side of the referendum might use more often such as separatism or independence.

Figure 1: Every entity in the Alberta-secession conversation, by posts and total engagement, and which ones became seedlist candidates. One dot per cross-platform entity (31,970 entities, 136,387 relevance-classified posts on X, Bluesky, YouTube, TikTok and Instagram; 1 January 2025 to 8 July 2026 on X and to late July or 3 August 2026 on the other platforms), both axes log scale. Dashed lines mark two of the three candidacy thresholds (at least 10 posts summed across platforms, at least 10,000 engagement). Green entities clear these thresholds, while grey includes 49 entities that clear the thresholds but are excluded as media, elected officials, or under our follower count floor. Entities with zero engagement are omitted.



Figure 2: Cumulative share of engagement against cumulative share of accounts, ranked by engagement. 31,970 accounts and 18.4 million interactions in the relevance-classified conversation on X, Bluesky, YouTube, Instagram and TikTok. The dashed diagonal is equal engagement per account. Red dots are the 114-entity seedlist's 154 platform accounts.



The keyword-based approach is not an exhaustive representation of Canadian online space, but offers a method for identifying posts recommended through platform interfaces. Largely engaged-with public profiles are the focus of this section because they are the most influential intermediators of information on social media.

Lastly, for the 114 political influencer accounts that make up the report's roster, we coded each by stance on whether it advocates for an independent Alberta. We initially determined this by sampling a selection of Alberta referendum related posts for each of these entities and providing them alongside account bios to 2 language models, gemma-4-31B-it, and qwen3.8-27b. We then hand-reviewed every classification (2 corrections applied) to ensure that we were as accurate as possible with these assessments.

This analysis allows us to compare the two communities in detail in the following section. However, an initial finding, which shows the value of the variety of collection terms used, is that each community is much more likely to use specific words to describe the group supporting Albertan secession. Measuring the use of the key terms from our post search across the roster's 12,650 relevant posts on X, pro-independence accounts used "alberta independence" the most, at 51% of their term mentions; anti-independence accounts used "alberta separatist" the most, at 29%; and the group taking no side used "alberta referendum" the most, at 26%.

We take full responsibility for methodological mistakes and will publish corrections as soon as possible. If you notice any mistakes, please contact our centre and we will amend.

Top Referendum Political Influencers

Our social media search yielded 136,387 relevant posts from 31,970 unique accounts, carrying 18.4 million engagements. Of the 114 political influencers on the roster, these are the 40 public accounts with at least 50,000 engagements (sum of likes, shares and comments) on their relevant posts in our keyword-search collection, the same posts and engagement Figure 1 draws.

- RiseOfAlberta, 2,186,959, Pro-independence
- Keith Wilson (ikwilson), 554,377, Pro-independence
- Jeffrey Rath (jeffreyrwrath), 473,481, Pro-independence
- Alberta Separation (albertaseparate), 368,491, Pro-independence
- martyupnorth, 355,156, Pro-independence
- Tablesalt (tablesalt13), 239,560, Pro-independence
- Salty Canuck (fringedcanuck), 203,839, Pro-independence
- Thomas Lukaszuk (lukaszukab), 181,855, Anti-independence
- mrsunshinebaby, 176,621, Pro-independence
- jonfromalberta, 175,315, Pro-independence
- Alberta Prosperity Project (abprosperityprj), 173,861, Pro-independence
- Emmanuel Rach (emmanuel_rach), 165,112, Pro-independence
- pjthebelt, 161,082, Pro-independence
- Paul Mitchell (paulmitchell_ab), 157,679, Pro-independence
- erik_thorvalds, 153,846, Pro-independence
- Cory Morgan (corybmorgan), 148,855, Pro-independence
- Unacceptable Fringe (unacceptfringe), 136,889, Pro-independence
- Marc Nixon (marcnixon24), 133,596, Pro-independence
- yegwave, 126,558, No side taken
- jimfergusonuk, 124,986, No side taken
- J B (stayfreecanada2), 122,823, Pro-independence
- bertaprouddad, 117,262, Pro-independence
- Mario Zelaya (mario4thenorth), 111,097, No side taken
- Jason Lavigne (jasonlavigneab), 107,476, Pro-independence
- yukonstrong, 92,207, Pro-independence
- johnrbolton01, 91,034, Pro-independence
- David Parker (david_parker), 90,397, Pro-independence
- buperac, 86,200, Pro-independence
- sarobertson_, 79,612, No side taken²
- cnm5000, 76,781, Pro-independence
- Courtney Theriault (cspotweet), 76,070, No side taken
- Jason Kenney (jkenney), 72,219, Anti-independence
- Eva Chipiuk (echipiuk), 67,011, Pro-independence
- jsjamato, 65,046, Anti-independence
- gilmcgowan, 60,816, Anti-independence
- igorryltsev, 58,657, Pro-independence
- Sheila Gunn Reid (sheilagunnreid), 56,614, Pro-independence

² Sarobertson_'s account is affiliated with MeidasTouch. For context, MeidasTouch is an American media company with a Canadian presence hosted by Charlie Angus, who is largely critical of Alberta separatism

- coralie4955, 56,215, Pro-independence
- canadianpolling, 50,962, Anti-independence
- Jason Scott (jasononthedrums), 50,563, Anti-independence

Of the 114 accounts we identify, we find the following:

The top political influencers for the upcoming referendum are largely pro-independence. Our categorizer classifies 58% of these accounts (66 of 114) as advocating for an independent Alberta, and 25% (29) as advocating for Alberta to remain in Canada, with the rest not taking a clear stance. This skew of the most engaged with accounts, being more likely to be pro-independence, increases as you go up the list of most-engaged accounts. For example, of the top 10 most engaged-with accounts, only the account in 8th place — Thomas Lukaszuk, who leads the Forever Canadian campaign — is anti-independence. The next anti-independence advocate, Jason Kenney³, is the 32nd most engaged-with account.

X dominates as the space for discussion and engagement about the upcoming referendum. 96% of the roster's influencers have X accounts

³ Jason Kenney is the former premier of Alberta, but currently does not represent a political party or hold elected office. He frequently comments on the upcoming referendum through a personal account and in this regard, is defined as a political influencer

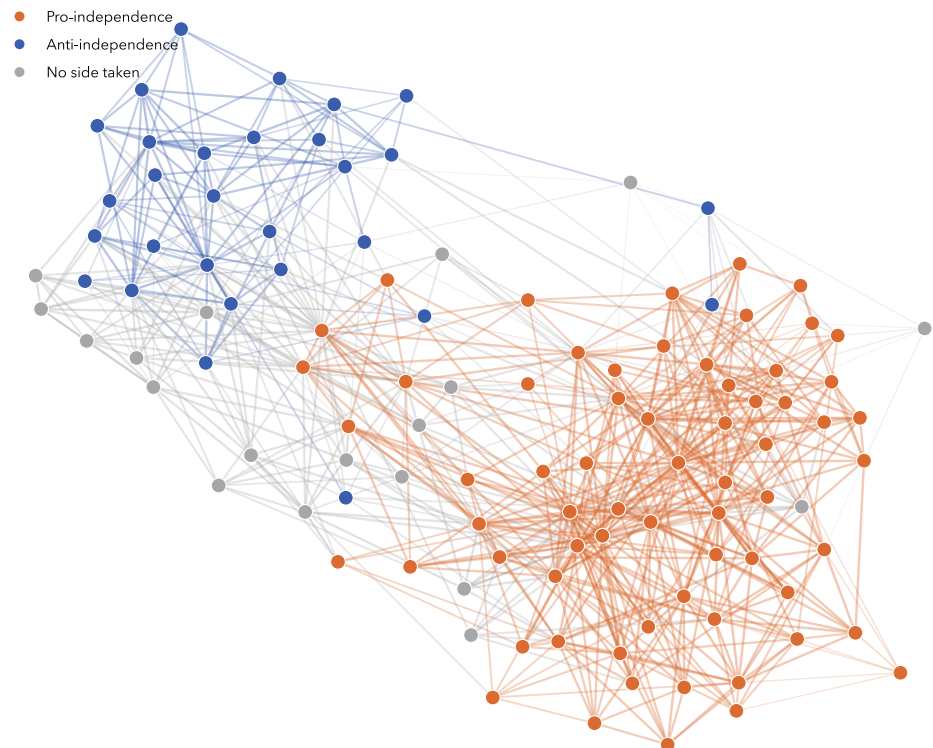
in our collection, and 73% have relevant posts on X and no other platform. On X, the 110 roster accounts with relevant posts are 0.5% of the 20,767 accounts in the relevance-filtered collection, but their posts account for 61% of its 13.8 million engagements. Across all five platforms with usable engagement fields, roster accounts hold 52% of 18.4 million engagements.

4 out of the top 10 of the most-engaged-with accounts top posters are largely anonymous. The single largest poster in our keyword collection is RiseofAlberta, who has nearly four times the engagement in our collection compared to the next largest account. RiseofAlberta is an account that posts arguments for independence, often featuring AI-generated graphics. The account also frequently advertises its merchandise store which sells pro-Alberta-independence products. Other major accounts, such as albertaseparate, Tablesalt13, and Salty Canuck present as largely anonymous. In our judgment, these accounts are likely genuine Canadian accounts but in our judgment, these accounts are likely genuine Canadian accounts but decide to not make their real-life identity part of their account.

Next, we visualize semantic similarity on the timeline posts by these top 114 political influencers. Through our stance categorization analysis, we identify that users align with the language of their community. In other

Figure 3: Seedlist entities positioned by what they post about, coloured by referendum stance.

Every entity's posts about Alberta independence since January 2025 are pooled into one profile of what it writes about, and each entity is linked to the entities whose profile is most like its own. Only each entity's three strongest links are drawn, so the picture is uncluttered. A link means two entities talk about the same things, not that they interact, and nothing here is evidence of coordination. Position is arbitrary; only grouping and adjacency carry meaning. Pro-independence and anti-independence entities form two distinct groups: 185 of the 727 links (25%) join entities on different sides, against 58% if stance had nothing to do with what they post about. The grey "no side" entities sit between the two.



words, pro-independence posters speak like their peers, and the same is true for those who oppose Albertan independence.

The Alberta Advantage, an Online Premium

We know that there are outside actors using the topic of Alberta's independence to generate passive income through clicks and sensationalism. For example, we published research last April showing an [inauthentic YouTube network](#) that had accumulated 40 million views, pushing secession and US annexation narratives. This network generated enough profit to hire American voice actors to perform their video scripts

while pretending to be Albertans.

Outside of inauthentic activity, a host of organic content creators are increasingly covering the upcoming referendum and the politics surrounding it. While much of this content is devoid of local Albertan context, the spectacle of a province potentially separating from Canada naturally draws attention. These posts draw large volumes of engagement. We characterize this as an 'online Alberta advantage'.

We take every post by a tracked account that our relevance classifier judged to be about Alberta separation, from January 2025 to August 2026, and compare its engagement to that same account's median post in the same month on the same platform. We do this for three populations: the referendum influencers, every other Canadian account MEO tracks, and a panel of prominent American influencers. Because the comparison needs

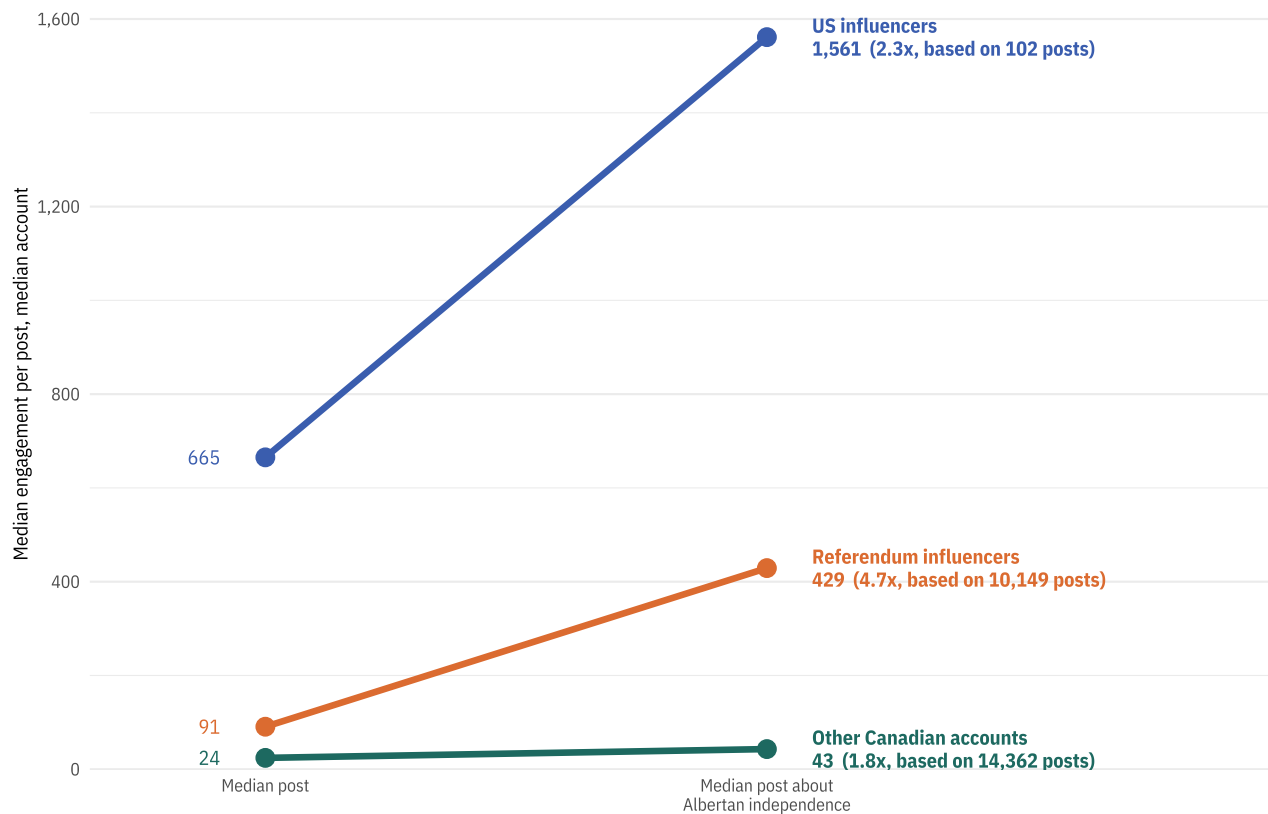


Figure 4: Median engagement on a post about Alberta secession against the same account's median post, for three populations. Each line is the median account in its population. The left point is that account's median post that month on that platform; the right point is its median post classified as about Alberta independence, January 2025 to August 2026, across X, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Bluesky and TikTok, retweets excluded. The ratio printed beside each line is the right point over the left point, which differs from the median per-account premium quoted in the text. Engagement is likes + comments + shares; post counts are those related to independence.

an account's full posting history, the influencer line covers the 60 of our 114 referendum influencers that MEO tracks, which skews towards larger established accounts. Results are shown in Figure 4.

First, posting about the referendum increases engagement, regardless of who is posting. The median referendum influencer's posts about secession receive 3.8 times the engagement of a typical post; for other Canadian accounts that were never selected for this topic, the figure is 1.7 times. American influencers see a 2.4 times bump on a far larger baseline: their typical post already draws about seven times the engagement of referendum influencers (who are almost entirely Canadian) referendum influencers. We discuss this American population further below in a section on foreign influence and interference. Within the topic, posts about the petition process travelled especially well. Many of the highest-engagement posts focused on the long lines of supporters waiting to sign the petitions needed to trigger a referendum.

Facebook Groups

Our keyword collection of Facebook posts also revealed prominent Facebook groups discussing the upcoming Alberta referendum. These groups provide an alternative and complementary means of studying the activity of the pro- and anti-independence communities, as these groups contain many posts from everyday users (as opposed to the high-profile referendum influencers), and are an unofficial rally point for engaged and like-minded community members. We use this section to explore the activity of these groups.

Overall, 45 groups were identified from our keyword collection, with about 40% being pro-independence, 20% being anti-independence, and 40% being generic political groups based on their group descriptions. To compare content, we collected and analyzed the posts from the top 5 largest groups by membership from both the pro- and anti-independence sides. Here, group stance was both determined from group descriptions and verified using samples of their posts. Due to the large post volumes of these groups (which can be hundreds of new posts per day), we limited our collection window to January 1, 2026, to August 15, 2026.

Top 5 pro-independence Facebook groups by membership (as of September 2, 2026):

- WEXITMovement.com — 209,953 members, created 6 April 2012 (previously “WEXIT Movement”, renamed 23 September 2020)
- Alberta Independence — 121,731 members, created 9 December 2018 (previously “Alberta Separatism”, renamed 16 December 2022)
- Alberta Separation — 70,471 members, created 3 July 2024

- Alberta Independence Movement — 52,731 members, created 29 April 2025
- Alberta 51st State Movement — 53,416 members, created 8 June 2020 (previously “Alberta, USA Statehood Movement”, renamed 19 October 2025)

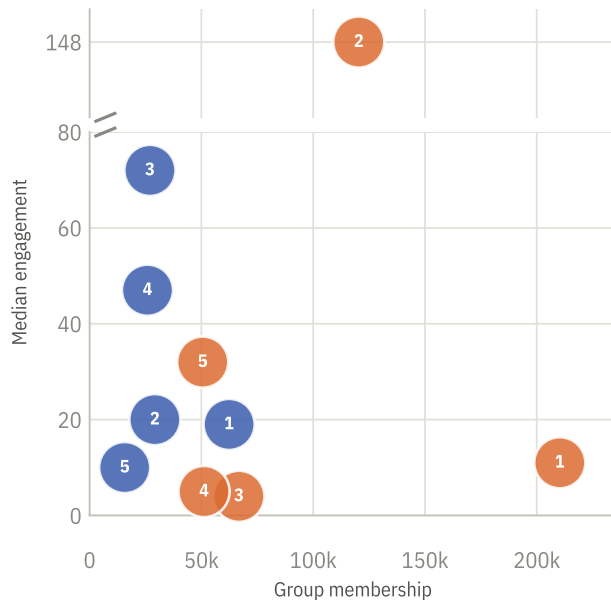
Top 5 anti-independence Facebook groups by membership (as of September 2, 2026):

- Albertans Against Separation — 65,958 members, created 3 November 2019
- Alberta Never 51/Never UCP — 32,092 members, created 3 March 2025 (previously “Alberta Never 51”, renamed 2 November 2025)
- Albertans United To Stop The UCP — 28,706 members, created 1 June 2019 (previously “Albertans Against Kenney's Cuts”, renamed 8 October 2022)

- Enough Is Enough UCP! - Alberta — 26,495 members, created 22 April 2024
- The Elephant in the Room — 16,119 members, created 5 June 2025 (previously “Forever Canadian”, renamed 4 August 2025)

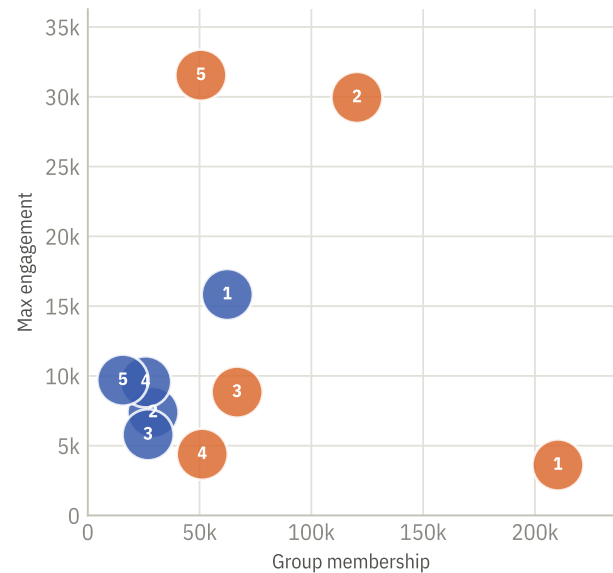
Figure 5 shows the median and maximum engagement from the pro- and anti-independence groups, based on group size. As seen on the

x-axis in both plots, the pro-independence groups are much larger, with between 50K-210K members, compared to the anti-independence groups with 15K-62K members. However on the y-axes, the anti-independence groups tend to have larger median engagement and have comparable maximum engagement to the pro-independence groups. This is with the exception of the ‘Alberta Independence’ group which has by far the largest median engagement, and the Alberta 51st State Movement group which has the largest maximum engagement.



Pro-independence

- 1 WEXITMovement.com
- 2 Alberta Independence
- 3 Alberta Separation
- 4 Alberta Independence Movement
- 5 Alberta 51st State Movement



Anti-independence

- 1 Albertans Against Separation
- 2 Alberta Never 51/Never UCP
- 3 Albertans United To Stop The UCP
- 4 Enough Is Enough UCP! - Alberta
- 5 The Elephant in the Room

Figure 5: Median (left) and max (right) engagement for each of the top Facebook groups by stance. Engagement is reactions + comments + shares. Top 5 groups by membership within each pro-independence and anti-independence group, scraped January 1st – August 15th, 2026. Stance was hand-verified for all 10 groups shown. Every post gathered in our collection is counted, not only posts about Alberta separation.

This shows that while the anti-independence groups are smaller in membership, their members appear to be more engaged within the groups themselves. Most of these groups are dominated by a few prolific posters; for example, BertaProudDad is the 2nd most prolific poster in the ‘Alberta Independence’ group.

Group Content

We ran a topic model over these group posts to identify themes and differences between the two communities. Figure 7 shows the top 10 topics in terms of post volume and engagement and Figure 6 shows a visualization of the posts by topic. A more detailed and interactive exploration of these

topics will be available on our website.

The discourse on both sides shares a lot of similarities but also has some differences. Both sets of groups prominently feature posts about movement mobilization (rallies, petition signings, community events) and advocacy. However, with respect to their share of posts, mobilization posts make up about twice the share of pro-independence group posts that they do of anti-independence ones. This may reflect the different structural positions both sides occupy, where pro-independence groups represent a break in the status quo and thus have to actively construct and sustain momentum around relatively coherent messaging. Both sides also heavily employ a populist blame framing, with either the Canadian federal government or the Alberta provincial government cast as corrupt and incompetent elites acting in their own self-interests.

Among other similarities, both sets of groups discuss the same overall

themes but along mirror-opposite perspectives. In terms of economics, the core question is whether separation will help or hinder Alberta, with the pro-independence groups arguing for improvements to cost of living, resource sovereignty and equalization payments, as opposed to the anti-independence groups who discuss job loss and fiscal burdens. Oil and pipelines are similarly either discussed as an opportunity for growth and sovereignty by the pro-independence groups, or as a fiscal and environmental risk by the anti-independence groups. Similarly, on referendum legitimacy, both sides focus on legal issues, such as the lack of financial disclosure from the Forever Canadian campaign cited by the pro-independence groups, or potential First Nations treaty violations on the anti-independence side.

However, these groups also express some distinct priorities and grievances. Posts about healthcare in Alberta receive a lot of engagement on the anti-side with very little engagement on the pro-side. This includes

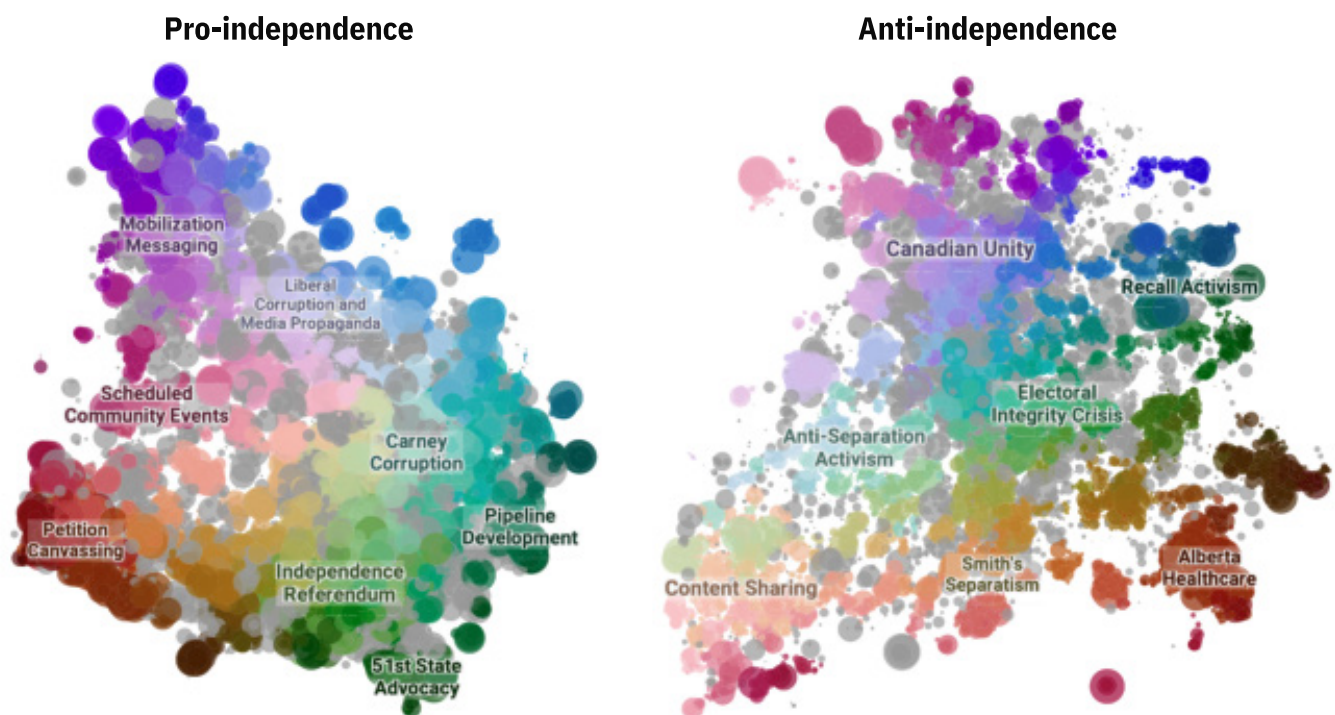


Figure 6: Visualization of the main topics in the top Facebook groups by stance. Each point is a post from the same 10 pro and anti groups as Figure 5, embedded and reduced to two dimensions with UMAP; point size relates to engagement. Similar colours mean similar topics within a panel only; colour is not shared across the two panels.

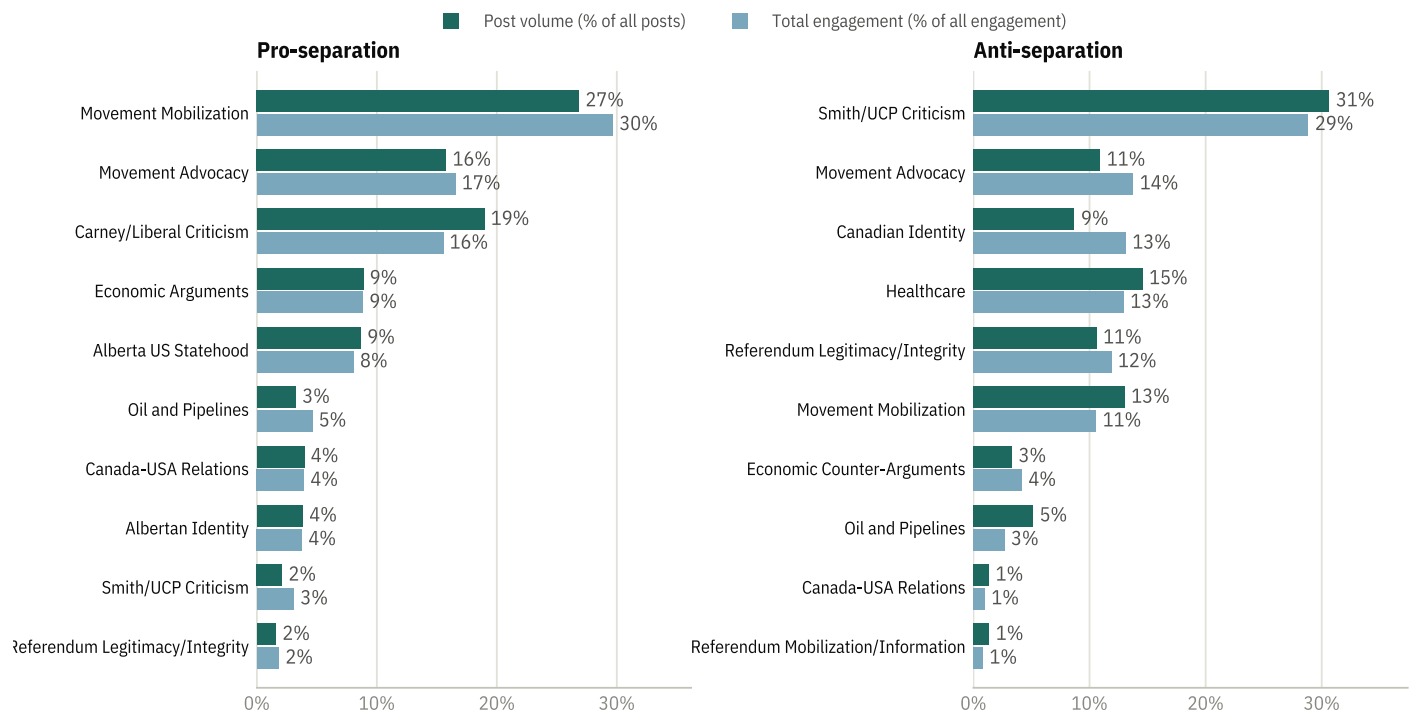


Figure 7: Top 10 topic categories among the posts of pro- and anti-separation Facebook groups, ranked by total engagement. Each bar is a category's share of all posts, or of all engagement (reactions + comments + shares), in that stance. Categories are topic-model labels over every post in these verified groups.

issues like the healthcare privatization crisis as well as AISH to ADAP disability cuts. Conversely, immigration criticism is a prominent topic on the pro-side. Discussion includes talk of tighter immigration controls and

law enforcement, primarily due to public safety concerns.

One of the groups — Alberta 51st State Movement — openly advocates for Alberta to become a US state, unlike the other pro-independence groups. The group's posts share some commonalities with other independence groups, including discussions of general pathways to independence and corruption within the Canadian federal government. However they also focus on other issues including gun rights advocacy, U.S. oil development in Venezuela (and how that affects Albertan oil development), and arctic geopolitics involving NATO and Greenland. They also more closely discuss (often in negative terms) Canada's increasing economic ties with China.

Another unique feature of this group is the number of American users posting within it. To better understand this, we classified all posts among pro-independence groups to identify whether the post author was American, based solely on the post text. From our classification, only a small fraction of the posts (less than 1%) had an inferable author

nationality. But among posts identified as having an American author, this group accounted for almost 90% of such posts, suggesting that American citizens are much more engaged with this group than with any other pro-independence group. While these posts only accounted for about 2% of this group's activity overall, some of them garnered

Alberta 51st State Movement · [Join](#)

24 January 2026

As a US citizen I wonder if you want Statehood or to be a Territory. Since we don't have socialized medicine would that be difficult for you to accept? If you became a State do you think you would be conservative or liberal as defined by our way of governing. What is the main reason you want to be part of the US

48 268 1

Alberta 51st State Movement · [Join](#)

15 August 2026

I'm posting anonymously because of all the hateful threatening comments.

I am a US citizen and I sincerely hope Alberta becomes independent so they can prosper without the oppression from Ottawa. We're all pulling for you.

515 1.1K 108

Alberta 51st State Movement · [Join](#)

27 December 2024

I am a half-Canadian (born USA, dad from Red Deer) living across the border from you all in Michigan. America would love to welcome you all as part of our great Nation. But you have to get super loud and never give up on making it happen!!!! Get on Tucker Carlson, get a big following on X, tag Elon Musk, get in the headlines and make the news, whatever it takes to amplify your voices. Get to WashingtonDC and be part of the Trump Inaugural parade. Never, ever give up!!! In less than 30 days on 20 January the world is going to start to change in big ways, wonderful ways. Look at all the so-called "crazy ideas" that are now realities - rockets that return to their docking station (Space X), mass illegal deportations in the US (coming soon, yay!!!!!!), Pres Trump back in office by mandate (super yay!!!!!!)... if these things can happen, so can Alberta statehood. Just never give up!

36 2 10

Alberta 51st State Movement · [Join](#)

15 July 2026

I would presume you would desire only productive input. I'm American, and welcome Alberta as a future state, but I see countless trolls using the meanest and most vile language I've ever witnessed ANYWHERE, and I was 21 years in the Air Force. Had I been in the Marines maybe this language wouldn't shock me. And today I saw some lowlife threaten to bomb Saskatchewan if they joined. If there was no other reason to split from Canada, and you have many, I can see why you would secede just to get away from such vile, 'love-is-love', liberals. Consider purging these trolls. I like your movement and these people are horribly distracting!

191 418 4

Exhibit 2: Sample posts from Americans in the Alberta 51st State Movement group. Four posts by self-identified Americans in the public Facebook group, dated 27 December 2024 – 15 August 2026 and captured 2 September 2026. Names and avatars are redacted for user privacy.



WOJTEK WITKOWSKI/UNSPLASH

thousands of reactions.

Among this activity, posts appear genuine and authentic. Initial analyses did not yield any evidence of coordinated activity, cross-border financing initiatives, nor prominent US politicians or influencers actively involved in the group. None of the referendum influencers identified earlier are active in the group.

Use of AI-Generated Images

As [AI tools](#) are increasingly integrated into democratic discourse, particularly around election processes, we measured the use of AI-generated images in online content related to the Alberta referendum. Using a

The AI-generated images that travelled furthest, by community

Pro-independence - X



Anti-independence - X



Facebook groups



Exhibit 3: Most-engaged-with posts related to the Alberta referendum featuring AI-generated images. The three highest engagement posts about the referendum, from separate accounts and from 2025–2026, from three groups: the pro-independence people on X, the anti-independence people on X, and the Facebook groups. We show X posts as a screenshot with their post because the creators are prominent influencers, and the Facebook post images standalone to preserve the privacy of the creators seeing as they are not prominent influencers.

classifier trained to determine AI-generated versus authentic images⁴,

⁴ We used an adapted version of the classifier from [this paper](#)

we classified all images posted in the twelve Facebook groups with the highest quantity of referendum focused content, and on X by referendum influencers, to compare two prominent but very different platforms for their use of AI-generated images.

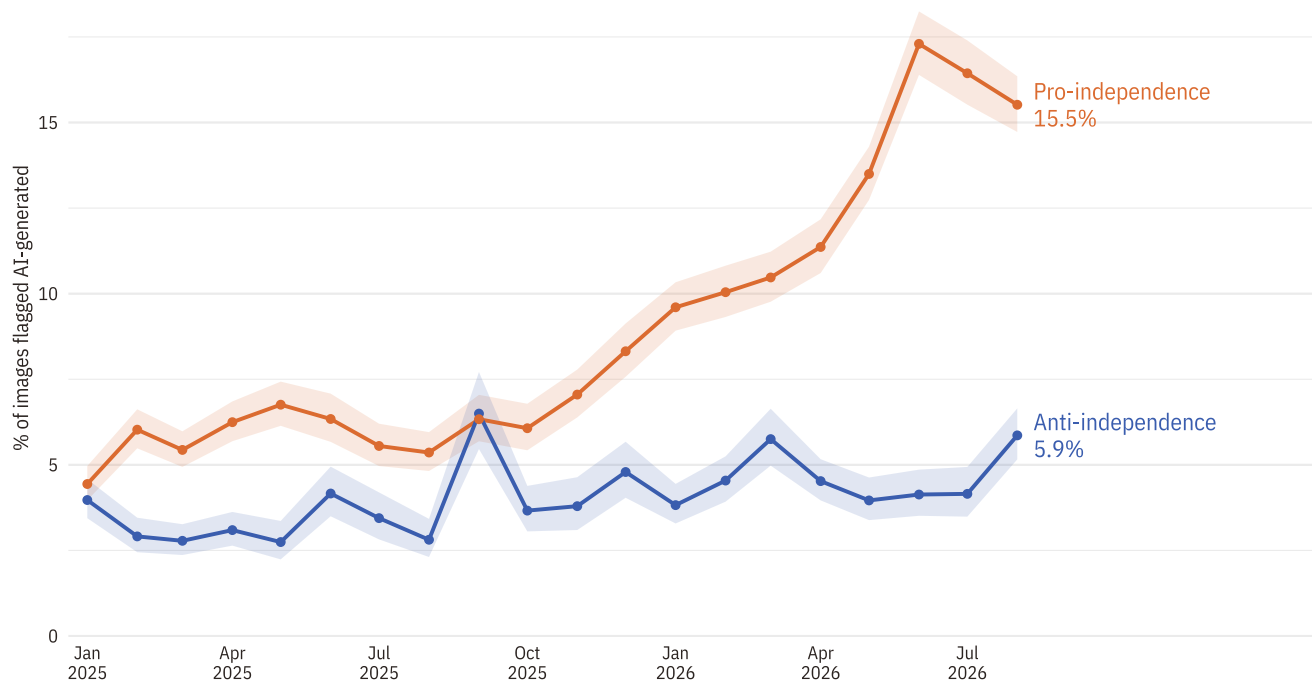


Figure 8: Share of an X seedlist account's images that the detector flagged as AI-generated, by month and by which side of the referendum conversation the account is on. One point per calendar month, January 2025 – August 2026, images pooled across each camp's accounts; bands are 95% intervals. 192,492 scored images. Pro-independence rises from 4.4% to 15.5%; anti-independence from 4.0% to 5.9%. Read the level as an upper bound: the detector's known false positives are real screenshots and text graphics, and both camps carry the same bias.

Over the past 20 months there has been a sharp rise in the use of AI-generated images by the X accounts we looked at in this report. For pro-independence accounts, the share of images the detector flagged went from 4.4% in January 2025 to 15.5% in August 2026, the last month of the series, more than tripling to 3.5 times its original share; for anti-independence accounts it increased from 4.0% to 5.9% over the same window.

Facebook has seen a particularly sharp increase, from 7% of image posts at the beginning of 2026 to 31.3% in July 2026. This increase is largely due to a small core of heavy AI-image posters, where for Facebook in particular, the top 10 AI-image posters produce 53% of the AI images

we saw in our data, with a similar rate for X (42%). As opposed to X however, the communities with the highest rate of AI images are not the pro-independence groups, but rather the pan-Canadian groups, with AI images accounting for 46% of image posts in those groups as opposed to 7% in the pro-independence Facebook groups (of which we had 4 in this analysis). Accounts on X are rewarded with higher engagement for

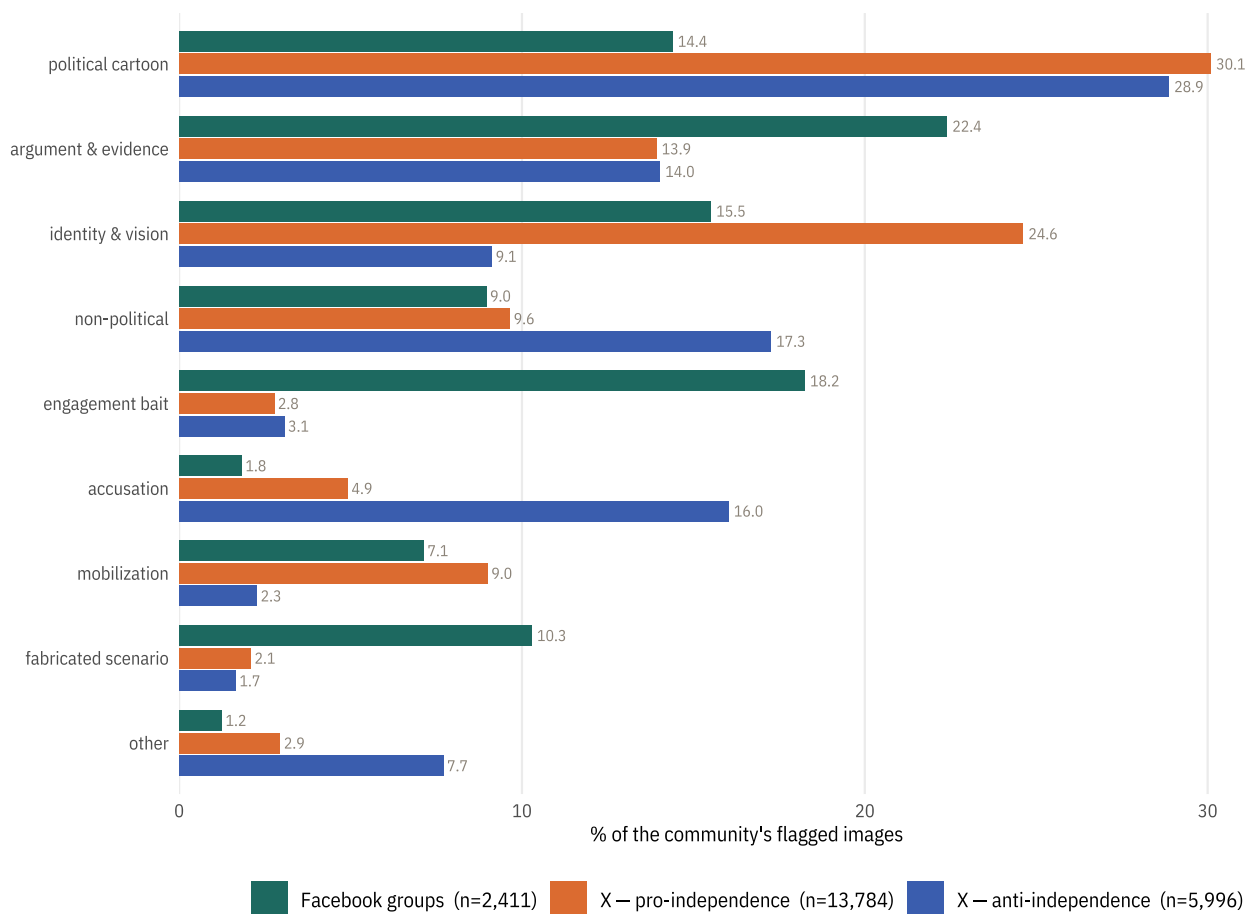


Figure 9: Predicted intent of the AI-generated images we classified from X and Facebook. Nine intent codes assigned by a vision model reading each flagged image with its post text. Bars are the share of that community's own flagged images. 22,191 coded images: 13,784 pro-independence X, 5,996 anti-independence X, 2,411 Facebook groups.

their AI-image posts, whereas Facebook posts normally receive reduced engagement for posts with AI images.

We predicted the intent of the AI-generated images, and other attributes of them, by passing them, and they post text that accompanies them, to a multimodal language model (gemma-4-31B-it), allowing us to categorize why people are using AI-generated images.

AI-generated images are frequently used as engagement bait on Facebook. The pro-independence community largely uses them for identity building and political cartoons, whereas the anti-independence community frequently uses them for political cartoons and accusations against individual figures. When used to attack specific figures, the pro-independence side frequently attacked Canada, Mark Carney, Ottawa, and Justin Trudeau, whereas the anti-independence side focused on Pierre Poilievre

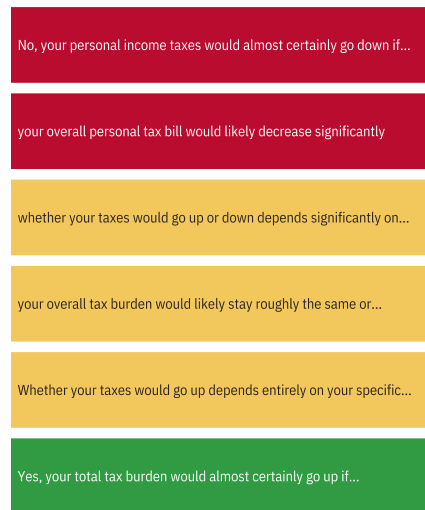
and Donald Trump.

AI Audit

As voters seek to understand their options and potential outcomes for this upcoming referendum, they frequently look to search engines for more information. Popular information aggregation products, such as Google and ChatGPT, are commonly used to search for such information. Google has fully integrated AI into search functions, such that Google AI Overview is now frequently the first result for traditional Google searches. Google AI Overview is a block of AI-generated text summarizing information from several web sources. AI models remain sensitive to how searches are phrased, and what sources they pull from. To understand what voters

(a) the same prompt, asked six times

"will my taxes go up if Alberta becomes the 51st state"



will it go up?

will it go down?

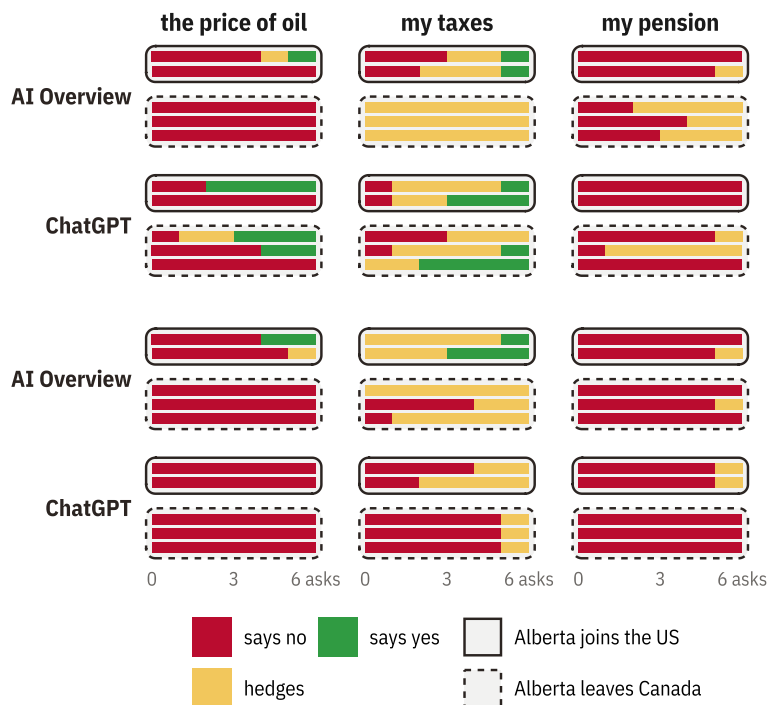
(b) every question, framing and model

Figure 10: Variation in Google AI Overview and ChatGPT responses to questions about outcomes of the Alberta referendum. (A) Examples of 6 different responses to the exact same query to AI Overview on one day. (B) The directionality of the answer to every combination of question, framing, and model: A solid coloured bar shows the answer was consistent. Out of 60 combinations of query and model (with 6 repeats each time), 28 queries resulted in a consistent response. Direction (denies, affirms, or hedges) are determined by an LLM judge from the first sentence of the response. All queries were made on the same day, August 20th 2026, so instability is not due to time differences.

would see when they typed searches into these products, we query a set of outcomes about the Alberta referendum, framed in different ways, to three products: Google AI Overview, ChatGPT, and Google Search, and show the results in Fig 10. We vary queries with various framing terms such as Albertan independence, separation, secession and US Statehood, similar to phrasing used in our influencer identification keyword search section.

We use the same product of queries and framings for each product, and ask each combination of query + framing + source 6 times to obtain a distribution of answers. If the models were perfectly truth-seeking, you would expect the distribution of answers inside each box to be the same, for the distributions to be the same across models, and for the distributions to be inverted between query directions. This is true of the models about half of the time, based on the figure.

We choose the subject of the queries based on Google search auto-complete data, and the framings based on previously explained divergences in how different communities talk about the referendum. The results from the figure showed that ChatGPT and AI Overview sometimes

show significant variability in their answers to key questions about Alberta secession, and though we hope they will be valuable information sources for voters in the future, they should be used alongside other sources.

The AI products we test here use web sources to inform their answers, and these sources determine the truthfulness and the framing of the answer given to a great extent. Google Search mostly produces 8 results, whereas Google AI Overview on average uses 13 sources, and frequently more, for its answers. Meanwhile, ChatGPT normally only used 2 or 3 sources. ChatGPT cited canada.ca (35% of its sources), alberta.ca (14% of its sources) for its top source domains, whereas Google AI Overview cited youtube.com (16%) and facebook.com (8%) as its top source domains, see Fig 11 for full results. To compare, Google Search's top source domains were facebook.com (13%) and reddit.com (11%), meaning that Google AI Overview uses its own platform, YouTube, much more in AI Overview answers than in Google Search results. Specifically, a small set of Facebook groups dominate the posts used as sources for

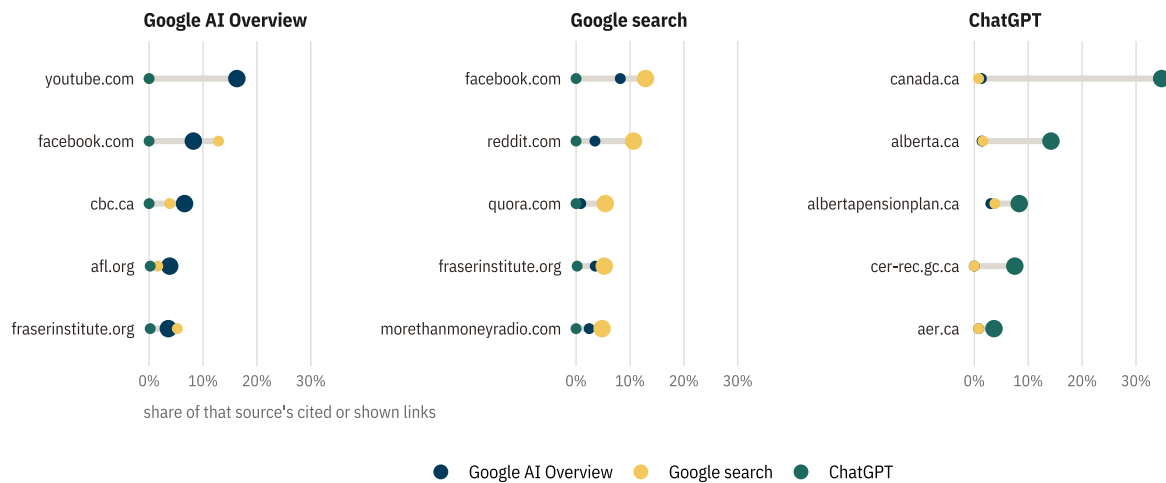


Figure 11: The websites behind each source's answers about Alberta independence. One panel per source, showing its five most-cited domains; the coloured dot is that source's share and the smaller dots are what the other two sources give the same domain. A long span is a domain that one source leans on and the others ignore. Shares are of cited or shown links, not of answers. Single day, 20 August 2026, 30 prompts; a domain's absence from a panel is not evidence it is never cited.

Google AI Overview answers. Overall, ChatGPT cites government sites more for its answers, whereas Google AI Overview cites social media and news sites more. Albertans seeking information on ChatGPT versus Google sites may receive differentiated official government-informed versus opinion and commentary-driven information, influencing their understanding of the referendum.

This implies that a single Facebook post could sway a Google AI Overview answer for whoever types a related query into Google. For example, we found a Facebook post in one of the groups cited by AI Overview, in which a user speculates in a two sentence post that Alberta could implement a commercial road toll which would bring in \$530 million a year. We then Google searched “how much money could Alberta make from a commercial toll road?”, and the first sentence in Google AI Overview was “Alberta could generate anywhere from \$50 million to over \$500 million annually...”, with that exact Facebook post as the top cited source.

We collected posts from the Facebook groups cited by Google AI Overview, searched them for specific, high engagement, and false/misleading claims, and then crafted similar queries that we then put to Google AI

Overview. We found that Google AI Overview cited the exact post in 1.3% of responses, and the Facebook group that we extracted the false/misleading claim from in 5% of these searches. Of those times the group was cited, AI Overview asserted the claim 44% of the time, and contradicted it 21% of the time (as measured by a language model judge, gemma-4-31B-it). Overall, unsubstantiated claims in Facebook group posts can be amplified to general audiences via Google AI Overview, but this occurs infrequently.

Foreign Influence and Interference

Here we ask the extent to which there is a concerted and impactful effort by American or Russian actors to target the Albertan referendum through public digital media. This analysis focuses entirely on what is publicly visible in the digital information ecosystem and does not speak to other forms of influence and interference. We look at whether foreign actors focus on Alberta in their online activity, whether the Albertan and Canadian conversations engage with foreign actors and, ultimately, whether there is unusual activity that should sound an alarm.

Throughout this analysis, we compare involvement against two well-documented instances of American/Russian interest in Canadian domestic

affairs.⁵ First is the 2022 Freedom Convoy, which remains the best-docu-

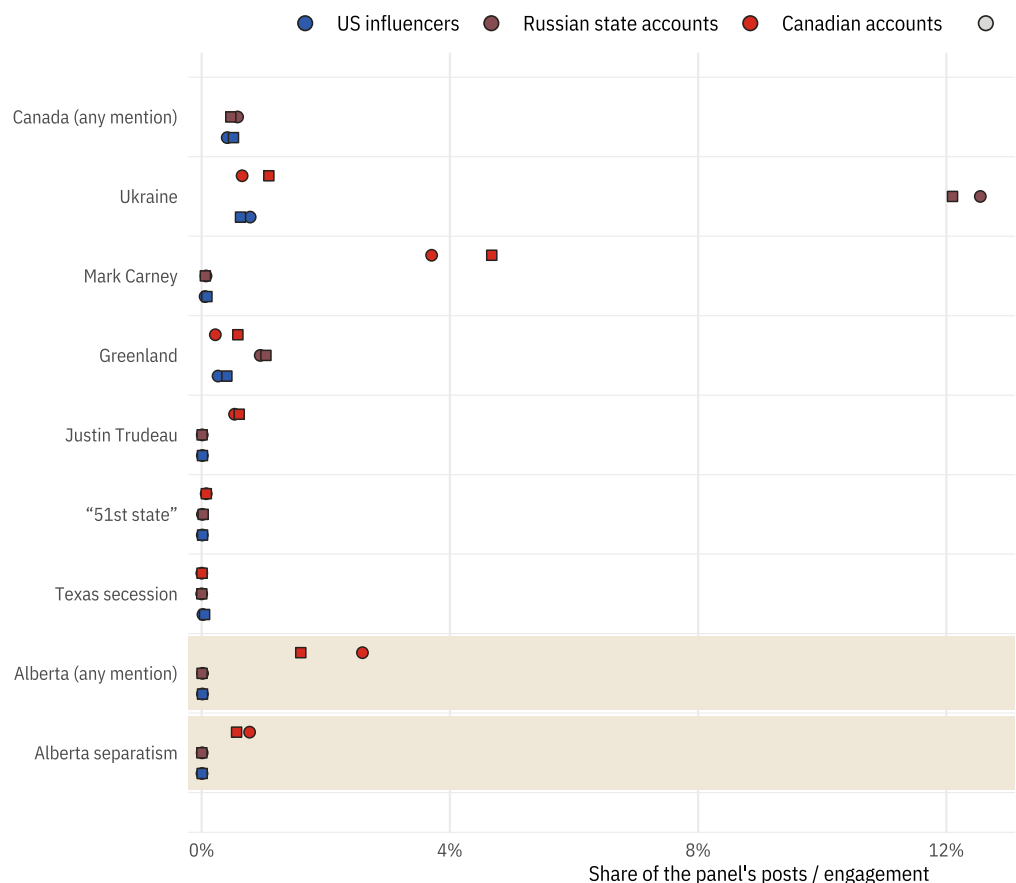
⁵ The strategic purpose behind Russian information operations is well documented. The affidavit filed and publicly released by the US Department of Justice in September 2024, supporting the seizure of 32 domains used by the “Doppelganger” operation, sets out internal planning documents that direct operators to identify existing social and political divisions in target countries and amplify them as the means to specific Russian policy ends. Our tests below are focused on Alberta-specific content and do not test whether Russian actors are working on adjacent grievances, such as energy policy, cost of living or distrust of federal institutions, which could potentially serve the same objective without naming Alberta.

mented case of foreign attention to and meddling in a Canadian political movement, and which answers all three of our questions in the affirmative. Second is the sustained Russian effort since 2022 to erode Canadian support for Ukraine, a Canadian political topic Russia is demonstrably focused upon, and one we can measure with exactly the data used here (McQuinn et al. 2024; Senate of Canada 2026). In both, foreign attention is material and visible.

We conclude this section with a reflection on what evidence there is of foreign meddling in the Albertan referendum, an issue that should concern all Canadians.

Is there a focus on Alberta in their online activity?

Figure 12: Each topic as a share of everything each panel posts (circles) and of the engagement those posts draw (squares), January – August 2026. Shares are of each panel's own output (5.0 million posts by Canadian accounts, 1.9 million by US influencers, 237,004 by Russian accounts), so the series are comparable despite the size gap; topics overlap. Engagement includes likes + shares + comments + reactions + quote-posts, views excluded. Topics are keyword matches, not classified relevance, so each share is an upper bound on genuine attention.



As of August 2026, we can not detect any significant foreign online activity focusing on Alberta and the upcoming referendum. If a foreign actor were publicly attempting to sway the referendum, Alberta would have to be a noticeable part of what that actor publishes: the topic would take a degree of prominence in its overall discourse. It does not. In fact, Alberta secession is barely present in the output of both American and Russian state accounts, which overwhelmingly focus on other things. When such content exists, engagement with it is not disproportionate to its volume. Figure 12 shows keyword-identified topics as a share of everything each panel posts. Data is drawn from our hand-identified set of Canadian, US influencer, and Russia-affiliated accounts. See methodology for full details.

For our high-profile tracked US influencers, Alberta secession is 0.007% of what they post (126 posts of 1,894,943) and 0.008% of the engagement they draw. Alberta mentioned at all is just 0.013% of posts. For Russian state media and officials it is 0.009% of posts (21 of 237,004) and 0.005% of engagement, against Ukraine at 12.5% of everything they publish. Canada in any form is 0.58%. The gap to the domestic conversation is two orders of magnitude, with Canadian accounts spending 0.77% of their posts on Alberta secession and 2.6% on Alberta at all, at roughly 90 to 120 times and 175 to 200 times the foreign shares. This is a domestic conversation that foreigners occasionally comment on, typically following notable domestic news events.

Moreover, we do not detect any amplification beyond normal online behaviours. For the American influencers, engagement tracks volume almost exactly, so what little is posted is receiving ordinary engagement. For Russia-affiliated accounts, engagement sits slightly below volume (on average, posts about Canada, Alberta, and Alberta secession get less engagement).

A more difficult test is, among posts about Canada, is there disproportionate focus on Alberta? Both sets of foreign accounts, when conditioned on Canada coverage, still do not focus on Alberta secession. Of every 1,000 posts about Canada, Canadian accounts give Alberta secession 20 posts, American and Russian voices are half of that at 10. In other words, even when they post about Canada, they pay less attention to Alberta.

The 2022 Freedom Convoy provides an instructive counter-example: when foreign attention to a Canadian movement is material and real. During the convoy, RT covered the protest on television nearly twice as much as the BBC, CNN, DW, Fox News, Al Jazeera, and MSNBC combined; RT correspondents worked in Ottawa and interviewed organizers; and American accounts out-posted Canadian accounts outright on populist-framed convoy content (Orr Bueno 2023; Boucher et al. 2024).

Is there engagement with foreign content with the Canadian and Albertan conversations?

If foreign actors were generating meaningful engagement on the Albertan and Canadian conversation, there would be material and noticeable engagement with visibly foreign posts, accounts or websites regarding the referendum. We have not seen this so far. Engagement on this topic overwhelmingly goes to Canadian accounts. Figure 13 shows the proportions of who posts, who is engaged with, and whose websites are linked. Canadian accounts write 73.3% of the relevant X posts, draw 83.2% of the engagement on them, and Canadian publishers hold 64.4% of the engagement on the posts that carry a link. American accounts take 7.8% of the engagement and American sites 3.6%. This data is from X only, with 92.9% of engagement attributed; the rest shown as unattributed rather than assumed domestic.⁶

None of the measures show a large foreign share. While American accounts are the larger presence, their share rests on a handful of very large accounts posting occasionally rather than on any sustained traction:

⁶ Nationality is attributed to accounts, not to posts, and only from evidence an account gives about itself. An account is counted as Canadian, American or other foreign if it is already known to MEO (the approved Alberta seedlist, MEO's Canadian and American influencer panels, the Russian state and commentariat lenses, or a hand-identified public figure), or if it names a country, province or state in its own X profile location or bio, or identifies itself in the first person in its own posts ("as an Albertan", "my congressman").

The method has real limits. Self-reported location can be wrong or false, and a foreign operator presenting as Canadian could be counted Canadian; the method identifies visibly foreign accounts, which is the quantity the argument needs, not covert ones. We are nonetheless confident in the direction for three reasons. First, roughly three-quarters of all engagement goes to accounts MEO had already identified independently of any profile string, so the Canadian share rests mainly on curated identification rather than self-reports. Second, the unattributed band is small, at 7.1% of engagement; even if every unattributed account were foreign, foreign accounts would hold well under a fifth of engagement against Canadian accounts' 83.2%. Third, the rules are built to under-attribute rather than over-attribute, so any error runs toward a larger unattributed band, and not a larger Canadian one.

Who posts

share of the 51,566 relevant X posts



Who is engaged with

share of the engagement those posts drew



Whose sites are linked

share of engagement on link-carrying posts, by the linked site's nationality



Canadian American Other foreign Russian Nationality not established

Figure 13: Alberta-secession posts on X by nationality, January – July 2026. Three stacked bars, each summing to 100%: who posts (share of the 51,566 relevance-classified X posts), who is engaged with (share of engagement on them), and whose sites are linked (share of engagement on the 6,178 posts carrying an outbound link, by the publisher's nationality). Segments below 3% are drawn but not labelled; Russian accounts and sites are the thin slivers, all under 0.5%. "Nationality not established" is shown rather than dropped, so no bar is a share of an unstated remainder.

1,487 likely-American accounts produced 2,387 posts, and the median one drew five engagements against the eleven of the median likely-Canadian posts (the ordinary American post on Alberta secession travels less effectively than the ordinary Canadian one). Sixteen posts carry half of all American engagement. Matched against Canadian accounts of comparable size and posting frequency, American posts take 0.884 times the engagement of Canadian ones. See Exhibits 4 and 5 for examples of American commentary, fully discussed in the next section. Russia is essentially absent with Russian domains appearing in three posts in the entire collection, every one of them a Canadian citing Russian material, largely as critiques.

Is there unusual activity that should sound an alarm?

Low foreign volume is reassuring but incomplete. Two additional alternatives are worth considering: 1) that foreign material leads the content

rather than follows Canadian voices; and 2) whether it is coordinated or disguised. Alarming patterns would be a narrative appearing in foreign channels before Canadian ones, foreign outlets out-covering Canadian ones as RT did on the convoy, foreign organizers made into recurring on-air personalities, resources crossing the border, and strategies to hide the origin of content.

On origination and disguise, we find no clear evidence in the material we can see. American and Russian interventions in the conversation are almost always following news events or Canadian discussion of the issue. There are two exceptions (1 American and 1 Russian)⁷:

⁷ There are also two documented attempts to manufacture a movement rather than comment on one. In September 2025, Recorded Future attributed the website albertaseparatist.com, together with associated TikTok and YouTube accounts, to Storm-1516, a Russian operation that builds websites impersonating local grassroots groups. EUvsDisinfo separately documented an AI-generated video promoting an Alberta secessionist rally circulating through the Pravda network (EUvsDisinfo 2026). Across 305,000 swept posts and 57,000 posts by Canadian seed accounts,

- The [Posobie interview with Bessent on January 22, 2026](#), which reached very few organically but then was highlighted by [Aaron Ruper](#) the following day. Note also that on October 2, 2025, Keith Wilson told The Glenn Beck Program that “Trump admin officials have indicated that the US would recognize” an independence

the domain appears twice, both times shared by Canadians discussing news coverage of it, and Russian-published sites have 0.47% of link engagement on the topic overall. A second attempt consists of a network of 22 AI-generated websites, each posing as an Alberta grassroots group for a different audience (e.g., farmers, veterans, seniors, mothers, youth, faith), registered in an automated way between 28 July and 5 August 2026 on a single US server and traced to a Florida site-generation vendor (White 2026). Two of the sites give an incorrect referendum date of 26 October. The sites are configured for retrieval by AI chatbots rather than for readers, and their social footprint is consistent with that: we have no posting of the URLs on the keyword-based searches since January 2025.

Exhibit 4: Russian posts about Alberta secession. *The Western news item that the Russian information ecosystem picked up is on the left, with the right showing an example Russian post. The counter-example is the only Alberta-adjacent story started by Russia in the twenty month period examined here.*

Russian posts almost always follow Western news stories

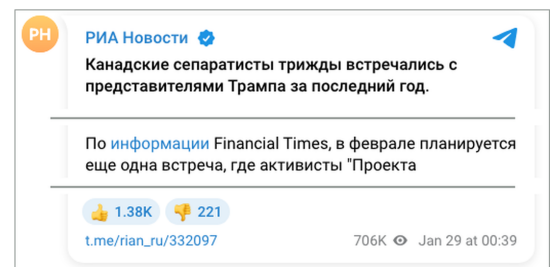
WHAT CAME FIRST

Example 1



Financial Times, 29 January 2026

WHAT RUSSIA PUBLISHED



“Canadian separatists have met three times with Trump’s representatives over the past year. According to the *Financial Times*, another meeting is planned for February, at which activists of the ‘Alberta Prosperity Project’ ... intend to request a \$500 billion credit line in the event of a referendum on Alberta’s exit from the Canadian state.”

Example 2



Real America's Voice, 22 January 2026

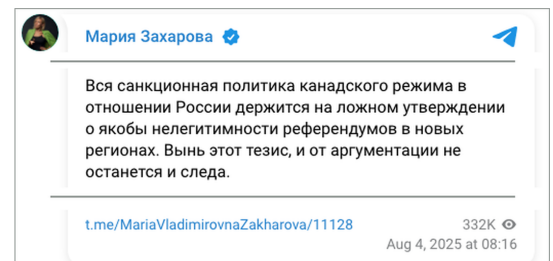
The world today with "Yuri Podolyaka"

"They have great resources. Albertans are very independent people. There's talk they might hold a referendum on whether they want to remain part of Canada or not."

Well, you get the idea. Trump doesn't need all of Canada. He needs Alberta, Canada. Or rather, its oil.

t.me/yurasumy/26588 1.58M Yuri Podolyaka, Jan 24 at 00:14

Only counter-example



“The entire sanctions policy of the Canadian regime towards Russia rests on the false assertion that the referendums in the new regions were supposedly illegitimate. Remove that thesis and not a trace of the argument remains. The hour has come when the boomerang thrown by Ottawa has landed in the thick of the maple leaves. ... Now Canada has an occasion to show how they ought to be conducted.”

[Canada](#) accounts [Soloviev's relay](#) drew a further 191,000 views. What makes it the exception is that almost everything else Russian in the period is demonstrably downstream of Western reporting, from RIA Novosti naming the Financial Times in its first sentence to Yuri Podolyaka quoting Bessent verbatim the day after the broadcast and adding that Washington “needs its oil”. The claims are also not about Alberta directly: the province is the instrument in a Russian argument about the legitimacy of the Donbas referendums, the post carries false polling figures for Manitoba and Saskatchewan, and it drew a rebuttal from [The Insider](#). It had no measurable uptake inside the Alberta conversation. See Exhibit 4.

Russia's campaign against Canadian support for Ukraine is the more recent counter-example. The effort is documented with the 2017 Russian-embassy-amplified story about Chrystia Freeland's grandfather (Fife 2017), and the September 2023 Hunka affair, in which the Russian Foreign Ministry, Maria Zakharova and the Russian embassies in Ottawa and London turned a parliamentary blunder into claims that “Canada funds and trains the heirs of the Waffen-SS” within days, complete with a fabricated Ukrainian postage stamp that drew half a million views (Boudjikianian 2023; Khatsenkova 2023). A Senate committee concluded in April 2026 that disinformation aimed at reducing Canada's support for Ukraine is Russia's principal line of effort against Canada, and heard evidence that half of Canadians have encountered pro-Kremlin content (Senate of Canada 2026). Using the same accounts, time window, and Telegram census as this section, that campaign is plainly visible: Russian state accounts devote fourteen times the share of their output to Canada's support for Ukraine that they devote to Alberta secession, and relative to how much Canadians themselves discuss each topic the gap is about seventy-fold; Russian-run Telegram channels carry five to ten times as much; Russian content reaches numerous Canadian Telegram channels on Ukraine, but not on Alberta.

We also looked for coordination activity through co-posting synchrony within platforms, machine-like posting cadence, verbatim text re-use, account-creation bursts and shared-link networks. Through this method, on YouTube, we found evidence that the engagement-bait network we documented in our [Slopaganda](#) report has continued operating on new channels, using similar techniques, albeit with many fewer views than before. We know from CBC reporting that this network was operated out of the Netherlands. We found another network cross-posting short clips arguing for Alberta to remain in Canada, with only a few thousand views per video. We also found syndicating posting from UCP MLAs on Instagram, coordinated activity but not inauthentic. No coordination is detected on X, where the American accounts are most active.

What evidence of foreign meddling is there?

Despite negative answers to the three questions posed above, there is still reason to be concerned about particularly American interest in the Albertan referendum. Over the past twenty months, there have been sustained, visible, and entirely undisguised American interventions in an Albertan constitutional question, conducted by named people in front of large audiences. Two exhibits show what that looks like.

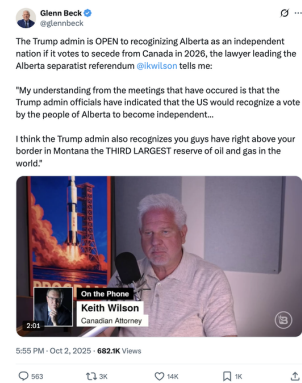
The first is on X as shown in Exhibit 5 which shows nine highly-liked posts about Alberta secession from American accounts between March 2025 and April 2026. Keith Wilson appeared on Glenn Beck's show on 2 October 2025 to say that “Trump admin officials have indicated that the US would recognize” an independence vote. Generally, these viral posts are invitational rather than observational, indicating a receptiveness to greater integration of Alberta and the United States. As shown in Figure 4 above, the American influencers we track generally receive much higher engagement than Canadian entities and receive a slightly smaller but still



(a) Eric Daugherty, 17 January 2026. The most-liked Alberta-separatism post in the collection.



(b) Elon Musk and David Parker, 8 April 2026. The movement's organizer attaches Alberta to a Musk post; Musk agrees.



(c) Glenn Beck, 2 October 2025. The referendum campaign's counsel, Keith Wilson, on US recognition (x.com/glennbeck/status/1973869486035144868).



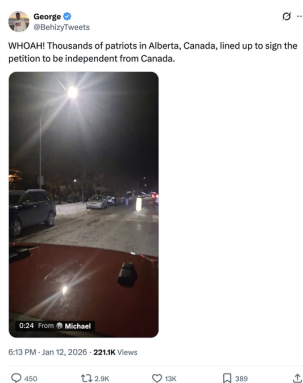
(d) Charlie Kirk, 5 March 2025. The earliest American endorsement among the most-liked posts.



(e) Rob Schneider, 9 April 2026. The day after the Musk exchange.



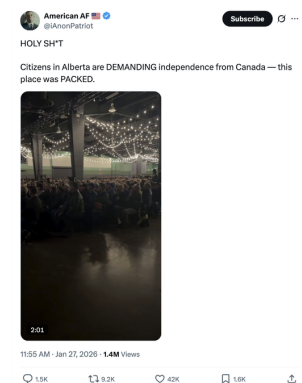
(f) unusual_whales, 29 January 2026. The *Financial Times* story, and the most-viewed post of the period from a tracked US account.



(g) George (@BehizyTweets), 12 January 2026. The earliest of the American line-up clips; Daugherty hat-tips the same account in (a).



(h) Benny Johnson, 18 January 2026. Reshares an Eric Daugherty line-up clip beside a highlighted-Alberta map of North America.



(i) iAnonPatriot, 27 January 2026. Another petition-event line-up, nine days after the Daugherty/Johnson pair.

Exhibit 5: Nine of the heavily-liked posts on X about Alberta secession from American accounts. Screenshots captured 22 August 2026, with engagement counts at time the screenshots were taken.

Addressed to Albertans, as “you”



“Albertans, Canadians ... **you need to leave Canada. ... Americans will welcome you with open arms.** This isn't just trolling.”

Steven Crowder

Louder With Crowder · 29 April 2025 · 307K views on YouTube



“Albertans, if you're listening, **you should break away and form your own country,** because Alberta, by the numbers, would be richer than Norway.”

Chris Martenson, with Royce White

War Room network – “Please Call Me Crazy” · 28 November 2025 · 3K plays on Rumble



“My recommendation to you is **hurry before Donald Trump leaves office, because he'd recognize you guys.**”

Glenn Beck, with Keith Wilson

The Glenn Beck Program · 7 April 2026 · 17K views on YouTube

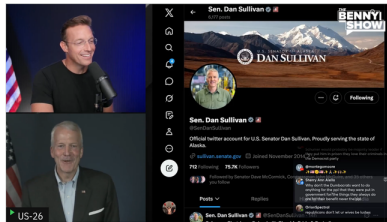
Alberta as something to own



“**Alberta is a natural partner for the U.S.** They have great resources. The Albertans are very independent people.”

Matt Walsh, playing tape of Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent

The Matt Walsh Show · 23 February 2026 · 150K views on YouTube



BENNY JOHNSON
“So would you be also the senator from Alberta?”
SEN. DAN SULLIVAN
“I'll let the Albertans make that call, but **heck, I'd love another state.**”

Sen. Dan Sullivan (R-Alaska), with Benny Johnson

The Benny Show · 25 June 2026 · 187K views on YouTube



“The hemispheric defense ... all the way up to potentially **our new state up in Canada,** right? That's Alberta.”

Eric Bolling, with Steve Bannon

Bannon's War Room · 14 July 2026 · 2K plays on Rumble

Argued against, from inside the same ecosystem



JOE ROGAN

“Well, there's talk about Alberta separating.”

PIERRE POILIEVRE

“**That won't happen.**”



“I don't think there's any widespread appetite in Alberta ... but **most of it's being astroturfed by conservative media [in] the United States.**”



“**I think we recklessly bullied Canada ... Even Alberta – I'll tell you, I think Alberta would be a blue state.**”

Exhibit 6: Nine American shows on Alberta secession. The figure is indicative of arguments made on American audiovisual content. View counts are as displayed at capture (August 24, 2026).

noticeable bump related to Alberta secession content. They can use their outsized microphones to [influence an otherwise domestic conversation](#).

Exhibit 6 focuses on major American shows, which include statements like: “you need to leave Canada”, and “hurry before Donald Trump leaves office, because he’d recognize you guys.” These broadcasters actively encourage separation. It is, however, rare: Alberta secession appears on 1.54 of every 1,000 American podcast episodes, against 93.0 per 1,000 on Canadian ones, in a scan of RSS-ingested podcast transcripts (\$9.4). The grid is evidence of discussion but not a sustained campaign, and there is not a uniform message, with sceptics inside the same ecosystem holding large audiences as well.

The movement is domestic and the conversation is Canadian. Canadian accounts post continuously and give Alberta secession roughly twice the share of their Canada coverage that either foreign group does. Nevertheless, American involvement is real, consequential, and attributable. Americans in government have met the campaign, and the campaign intended to ask one of them for a [US\\$500 billion line of credit](#). Russian involvement is limited and falls far short of Canada’s last case.

Note that a Canada–US trade rupture in the final week of August 2026 with retaliatory tariffs, a collapsed deal, and an open Trump–Carney confrontation pushed American attention to Alberta secession sharply upward in the last ten days of the month, to roughly ten times the level of the preceding three weeks and above every month since January 1, 2025. First, the October 19 referendum is now named, with its date, on mainstream American shows across the political spectrum (e.g., The Clay Travis and Buck Sexton Show, the syndicated conservative talk-radio successor to Rush Limbaugh’s slot; Pat Gray Unleashed, on Glenn Beck’s BlazeTV network; WNYC’s The Brian Lehrer Show and KQED’s Forum, the flagship public-radio call-in programs of New York and San Francisco; and The Long Game, the podcast hosted by former US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and his deputy Jon Finer) where earlier peaks were mostly banter. Second, the claim that the US government is promoting Alberta secession is itself now being made on air. Alberta enters this coverage as a sub-theme of the trade story and the rise does not change any answer above: attention remains open, attributable, and far below Canadian levels. We also do not see increasing Russian attention as of August 31, 2026. This report is, however, being released while this attention is still

Confidence Elections Alberta will conduct the referendum fairly

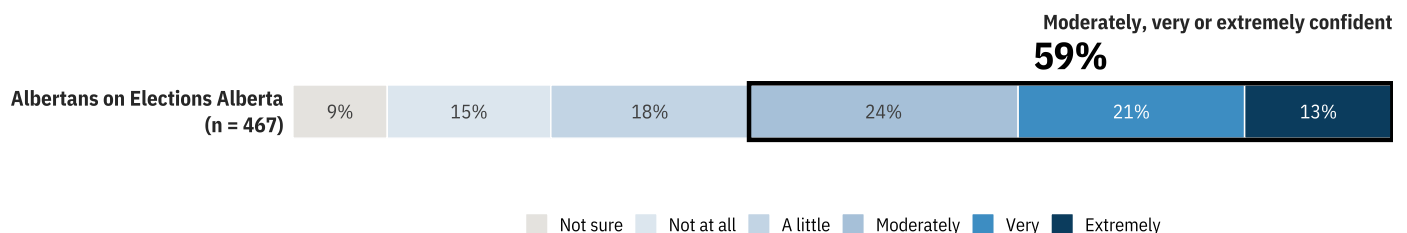


Figure 14: Confidence that the Elections Alberta will act fairly. The outlined box combines the top three response options; “Not sure / Don’t know” is retained in the base. Source: MEO Tracking Survey, July and August 2026 waves pooled, weighted; n = 467 Albertans

rising and we will monitor closely.

Public Opinion Context

As Albertans prepare to vote in the upcoming referendum, confidence

in the information system and democratic institutions facilitating the vote is weak.

Our survey data, fielded over the past two months, shows that only 59% of Albertans have confidence that Elections Alberta will conduct the upcoming referendum fairly.

When asked about confidence in major actors in the information

Trust in the information intermediaries, Alberta vs the rest of Canada

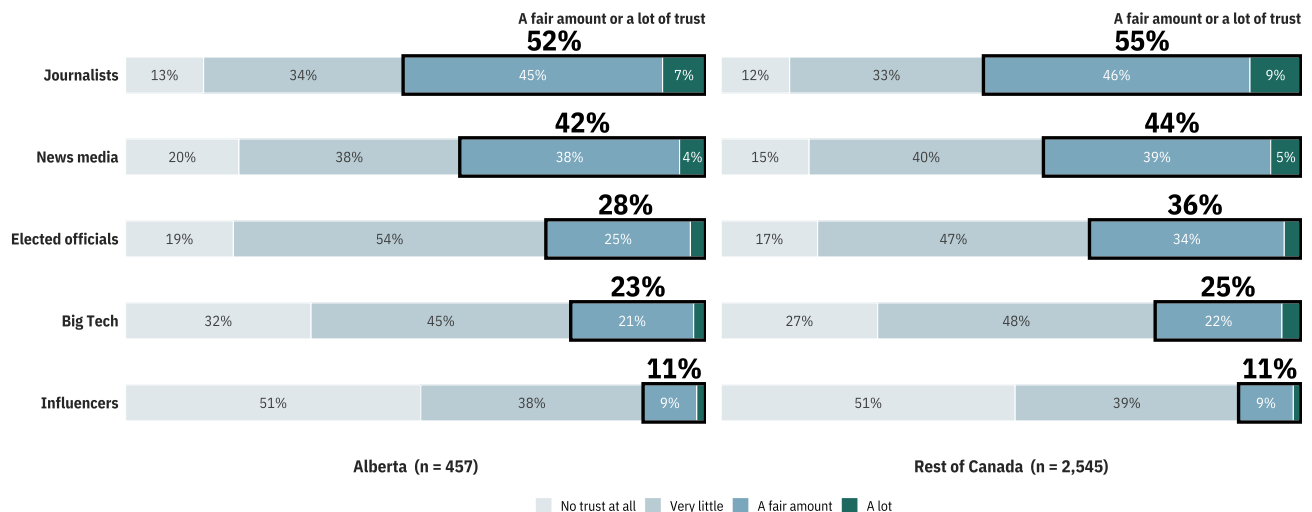


Figure 15: Trust in information intermediaries, Alberta and the rest of Canada. Ranked by rest-of-Canada trust; the outlined box combines the top two options, “a fair amount” and “a lot”. Albertans are not broadly more distrustful — journalists (52% against 55%), news media (42% against 44%), Big Tech (23% against 25%) and influencers (11% against 11%) all sit within sampling noise. Elected officials are the exception, 28% against 36%. There is no “don’t know” option, so every respondent is forced onto the four-point scale. The weights are national and were not built to be representative within Alberta, so read the Alberta panel as a descriptive contrast, not a provincial estimate. Source: MEO Tracking Survey, July and August 2026 waves pooled, weighted; n = 457 Albertans, 2,545 rest of Canada.

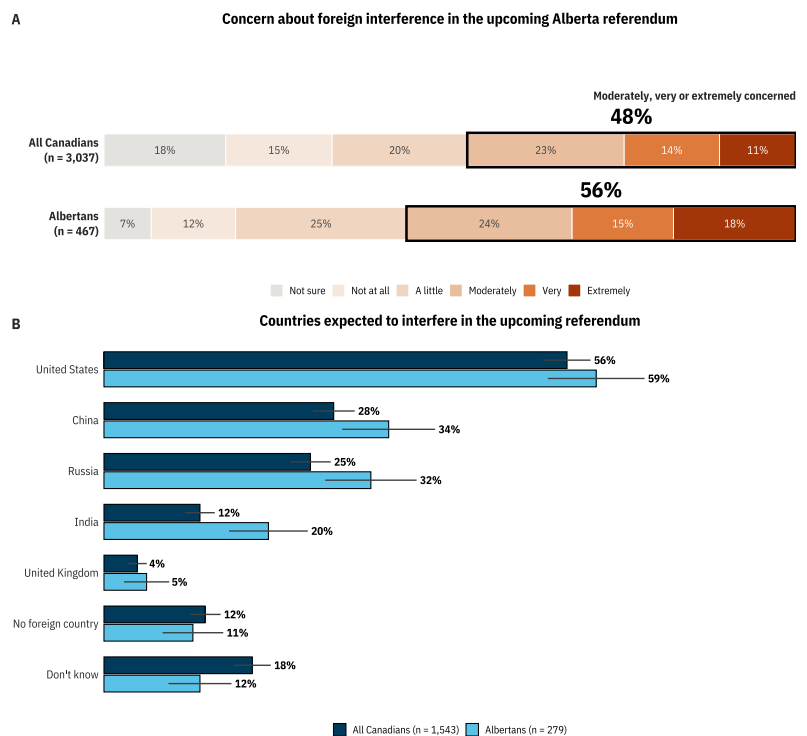


Figure 16: Concern about foreign interference in the Alberta referendum, and which countries respondents expect to interfere. (A) Concern among all Canadians and among Albertans; the outlined box combines the top three options. (B) Countries expected to interfere; respondents may select more than one, so bars do not sum to 100%. Panel A was asked in both waves, panel B in August 2026 only, so its bases are smaller. Source: MEO Tracking Survey, July and August 2026 waves, weighted; panel A n = 3,037 / 467 Albertans, panel B n = 1,543 / 279.

ecosystem, a slim majority of Albertans have a 'fair' or 'a lot' of confidence in journalists. While these questions do not measure trust in journalists, politicians or influencers that respondents individually support, it does capture a broad trend of low trust in the major actors that intermediate our information ecosystem.

When asked about concern for foreign interference in the upcoming referendum in Alberta, Albertans are more concerned than the rest of Canadians, with 56% moderately to extremely concerned. Albertans, like the rest of Canadians, show the greatest expectation levels for foreign interference to come from the United States.

Limitations

At least five limits bound what this report is capable of saying. First, everything here is public digital media. Private messaging, closed groups, paid placement, broadcast and in-person activity are outside what we can observe. As a result, all coordination tests answer only whether an operation is visible in public posting timing and text. Second, the keyword-based detection finds about four in five genuinely relevant posts from tracked accounts, and far fewer on Instagram, TikTok and Facebook pages. This is a limit of the infrastructure we use to collect the data, and ultimately causes low-engagement posts to be dropped from the analysis. We are confident in the findings but cannot preclude that there is coordination or unusual activity in that long-tail of low-visibility posts. Third, relevance and stance are model judgements checked against a second model and by hand, with the AI-image rates in particular are upper bounds. Error is inevitable for these classifications. Fourth, nationality rests on membership of known panels and on what accounts say about themselves as opposed to verified nationality of all accounts. Finally, and most importantly, the team behind this report has collected vast and multisourced datasets to inform the provincial and national conversation around the Alberta referendum. The data and code is available upon request and we have done our best to avoid errors given tight timelines, however, inevitably we are not providing a truly complete view and conclusions may not withstand further data collection or replication exercises.

Conclusion

This report provides an overview of the social media landscape ahead of the Alberta referendum, covering January 2025 to August 2026. The online environment is a space where passionate and active proponents of the Alberta independence movement, and its critics, advocate for their views. The most prolific accounts in the digital sphere skew heavily pro-independence at around a 2.3:1 ratio, with this gap increasing dramatically when measured by raw engagement. This is the reverse of

current public opinion polling, where, as of the beginning of September, [polling aggregators show roughly two-thirds of Albertans would vote to remain in Canada](#).

While social media is not a representative reflection of society, it is a major space where the politically active can organize and advocate for their political views. An important democratic conversation is happening in Alberta. We hope our report provides an evidence-based contribution to this conversation and sheds light on the online dynamics of the major voices surrounding it. With Alberta's referendum lacking elected leadership campaigning on the leave side, traditional forms of electoral accountability lose value. Our approach to navigating this modern intersection of social movements with referendum campaigning needs to adapt to these changes. This begins with a robust and evidence-based understanding of how these movements take shape, and who drives them.

As political events and the online response evolve, we will continue to monitor how discussions are being shaped, which voices are the loudest, attention from outside actors, and potential attempts at coordinated foreign influence. This occurs during a time of significant change in the media environment, where the digital tools available for shaping public

discourse can have electoral influence. As we demonstrate, the leave side is championed by a decentralized and leaderless movement, empowered by the connectivity of social platforms and the dominance of political influencers. AI tools shape the debate — used to generate images as part of mobilization and discourse tactics in Facebook groups and to influence how Albertans view information via AI overviews in search engine queries. While we find no evidence of a covert or coordinated foreign campaign, persisting and openly attributable US attention in Canadian politics and global trends towards foreign information operations can still pose a threat to the democratic process. Over the next two months, we will continue to monitor and assess how the Alberta information environment is shaped and its impact on the upcoming referendum.

Methodology

This report combines seven lines of evidence: 1) a multi-platform keyword sweep with a relevance classifier that decides whether each swept post is genuinely about Alberta leaving Canada; 2) an engagement-selected list of the political influencers who dominate that conversation and a classification of the side each argues for; 3) a study of the Facebook groups where ordinary Albertans discuss the referendum; 4) a collection and detector for AI-generated imagery shared on X and Facebook; 5) an audit of what AI search products tell voters; 6) a three-country test for foreign attention and coordination; and 7) MEO's national Tracking Survey. This section describes each in detail. Code, data and figure inputs are available on request.

1. Scope and windows

Unless a figure states otherwise, the window is 1 January 2025 to August 2026. The keyword sweep's corpus is 1 January 2025 to 3 August 2026. The collection period is stated on each figure.

2. Data sources

MEO's account panel and post index. MEO continuously collects the public posts of a curated panel of Canadian and foreign accounts across X, YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, Bluesky and Telegram. Panel construction follows MEO's published seedlist rules (Pehlivan et al. 2025): accounts are admitted by follower thresholds, share of political content, and a presumption of nationality, and typed as influencer, news outlet, politician, government or civil-society organization. Sports accounts are excluded. The foreign-attention analysis and the share-of-what-seeds-post analysis draw on this panel.

The keyword sweep. A separate collection, described in Section

3, gathered every public post on five platforms plus Truth Social that matched a set of Alberta-independence terms, regardless of whether the author is in MEO's panel. It is the basis for the influencer identification and for most figures in the first half of the report.

Seed timelines. For every account on the approved influencer list we collected its full public posting history on every platform where it has a presence.

Facebook groups. Posts from ten public Facebook groups discussing the referendum, crawled through MEO's Facebook collector between 12 and 13 August 2026 (Section 8.1).

A Telegram census and a Pravda-network crawl. Purpose-built for the Russia analysis: 145 public Telegram channels with 2.63 million messages, and all 33,280 articles of the Pravda network's Canada edition.

Podcast transcripts. Automatic transcripts of North American podcasts, ingested by RSS, from a podcast-transcript database we scanned for the audio analysis (Section 9.4).

AI search products. Logged responses from Google AI Overview, Google Search and ChatGPT to a fixed bank of prompts (Section 8.3).

The MEO Tracking Survey. Monthly national online surveys with extra sampling of Albertans in August; July and August 2026 waves are used here (Section 10).

3. The keyword sweep

We searched 6 platforms (X, Bluesky, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook) for posts from 1 January 2025 until 3 August 2026 that included the following terms and the word Alberta:

- Independence
- Referendum
- Separation
- Separatist
- 51st state
- Sovereignty
- Petition
- Separatism
- Secession
- Annexation

The sweep returned 304,774 distinct posts in the window: X 208,463 (68.4%), Bluesky 84,963 (27.9%), YouTube 7,152, TikTok 1,944, Truth Social 856, Instagram 807, Facebook 589. The 10 generic phrases

were the primary matched term on 149,406 posts, the organizations on 122,130 and the named people on 33,238. A post can match several terms, so the report's corpus is defined on every term a post matched, not only its primary one: it is the 161,723 swept posts on the five platforms other than Truth Social whose matched terms include at least one generic phrase. Of these, 136,387 are relevant (Section 4). Facebook's keyword search surfaces group posts rather than page timelines and returns reactions without comments or shares, so no Facebook account could clear the influencer thresholds in Section 5, and Facebook is instead studied through its groups.

4. Relevance: is a post genuinely about Alberta leaving Canada?

A keyword match tells us the words were present. Whether the post is about Alberta separation, as opposed to an independence-day greeting, Quebec sovereignty, a named lawyer's unrelated case or an "all of Canada as the 51st state" joke, is decided by a second step: a large language model reads each post and returns yes, no or unclear, with a confidence and a twelve-word reason.

Model and setup. Qwen3.8-27B (FP8), served with vLLM on H100 GPUs at the Digital Research Alliance of Canada's Rorqual cluster, temperature 0, one post per call, no images. The model is given the platform, the text of the post the item replies to, the text of any quoted post, and the title and description of any linked article, then the post itself. It is deliberately not told the matching keyword, the author's handle or the author's bio, so that it cannot learn to say yes because a post came from a known separatist. URLs, handles and email addresses are masked. The definition of yes is: the post substantively discusses, advocates, opposes, mocks, reports, polls or analyzes Alberta separation, secession, independence or sovereignty as a country, US annexation, the referendum or the petitions, or the groups and figures acting in those roles. Posts that are too short, a bare link, a name alone or a generic reaction are unclear, not no, and are excluded from relevance-filtered counts.

Result. Of the 161,723 tier-1 posts, 136,387 (84.3%) are relevant, 18,846 (11.7%) are not, and 6,462 (4.0%) are unclear. On the full 37-term sweep of 304,774 posts, the classifier keeps 155,380 (51.0%); the difference is the organisation- and name-only matches, which are mostly off topic and are not used. Every figure in this report that counts posts, engagement or accounts on the topic starts from the relevant set. The kept rate varies sharply by term: over 87% of "alberta separation", "alberta independence" and "alberta 51st state" hits are relevant, against 2.9% of "Vote to Stay" hits and 0.9% of "Lead Not Leave", phrases which mostly occur in unrelated contexts. By platform, YouTube (62%), Bluesky (59%) and X (48%) classify reliably; TikTok and Instagram do not, because their posts are usually a title and hashtags, and 71% to 78% come back unclear. We do not report TikTok or Instagram relevance rates.

Validation. A second, independent model (gemma-4-31B-it) classified a random 49,505 posts with the identical prompt: three-way agreement 94.0% (Cohen's κ 0.90); two-way 95.5% (κ 0.91). Recomputed here from the two label columns in the release, against the final labels (which add reply and quote context), the figures are 91.1% (κ 0.840) and 93.6% (κ 0.873). On a 150-post stratified sample adjudicated by a third model, the yes label had 98.0% precision and 92.1% recall. Posts with identical text received the same label in 99.7% of 4,966 duplicate groups. When the prompt was re-run with reply and quote context added, labels on posts whose input did not change agreed at 99.7% (κ 0.995), confirming the instrument is stable. The classifier's weakness is recall, not precision: it is less sure of campaigns and figures it was not told about, so counts here are conservative.

Classified denominators. Rates need a denominator that has been through the same test. For the foreign-attention comparisons we therefore ran two further classifiers over 1.86 million panel posts that mention Canada, labelling each as about Alberta (61.6% of them) and about Alberta secession (13.0%), and sampled roughly 1,500† posts per panel to measure how often a bare mention of "Canada" is actually a post about Canada (48†% to 77†%, depending on the panel). This correction matters and it ran against our own headline: it moved the ratio of Canadian to American attention from 3.4:1 to 2.1:1. The corrected figures are the ones reported.

5. Identifying the political influencers

We define a political influencer, following Dubois and Dommett (2025), as an account that regularly produces or comments on political content without holding office or speaking for a news organisation or institution. The list was built in four stages.

- **Relevant posts, one row per account.** The 136,387 relevant posts were grouped by author and merged across platforms where the same person or organisation posts on several, giving 31,970 entities on the five platforms other than Truth Social.
- **Activity and reach thresholds.** An entity had to have at least 10 relevant posts summed across its platforms, at least 10,000 engagement (likes, shares and comments summed) on them, and at least 5,000 followers on the platform where it is largest (the X count from the sweep; hand-verified counts elsewhere). 165 entities cleared the first two thresholds.
- **Exclusions.** News outlets and sitting politicians were removed (31 entities). Former office-holders who now comment through personal accounts, such as Jason Kenney, are retained.
- **Human review.** The remaining 114 candidates were reviewed individually by the research team against MEO's written seedlist criteria and the definition above.

Together the listed accounts wrote a small fraction of relevant posts but received 52.2% of all engagement in the sweep; half of all engagement in the corpus goes to just 56 accounts, the top 0.18% of entities (Figure 2). Selection is on engagement, so “most-engaged accounts” is the accurate label; the list makes no claim that these accounts are influential offline.

6. Which side each influencer argues for

Stance was classified at the account level, not post by post. For each of the 114 accounts we assembled one fixed bundle: the bio, the account’s 40 most-engaged original posts mentioning the topic, and 20 drawn at random, retweets excluded. Two models, Qwen3.8-27B and gemma-4-31B-it, each read every bundle independently with reasoning enabled at temperature 0 and assigned one of five labels: pro-independence, anti-independence, neutral observer, no position found, insufficient evidence. Disagreements between the two were adjudicated by a third model, claude-opus-5, and every one of the 114 rows was then reviewed by hand. The final split is 68 pro-independence, 34 anti-independence and 19 taking no side.

7. Within-account comparisons: the topic premium

To ask whether posting about the referendum is rewarded, we compare each account with itself, in three populations: the 114-account roster, other Canadian accounts in MEO’s panel, and the US-influencer panel. For each account we take the median engagement of its posts that the relevance classifier judged to be about Alberta independence (retweets excluded) against the median of every post by that account in the same month on the same platform, taken from MEO’s index; there is no minimum post count. The account’s ratio is the median over its platform-month cells, and each point drawn in Figure 4 is the median account in its population, with a bootstrap interval over accounts; the calculation runs on the post-level parquets in one script, across X, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Bluesky and TikTok. The median per-account ratio is 3.8x for the roster, 1.7x for other Canadian accounts, and 2.4x for US influencers. The ratio printed beside each line in the figure is the ratio of the two plotted medians (4.7, 1.8 and 2.3), a different statistic from the per-account median, and the text quotes the per-account median throughout. The gap between the roster and other Canadian accounts is tested on account × platform × month cells with account-clustered errors: the interaction is 1.41 times (95% CI 1.09–1.82, $p = 0.008$).

8. Facebook groups, topics, AI images and AI search

8.1 Facebook groups and what they talk about

Facebook’s keyword search returned posts from several public groups discussing the referendum. Overall, posts from 45 different groups were identified using the keyword search. Each group was then classified according to stance (pro-independence, anti-independence, neutral/other) based on their group descriptions. To be considered a pro- or anti-independence group, a group’s name or description had to be clearly about Alberta or Western Canada. From these, the posts from the top 5 groups from each stance (pro-/anti-independence) were crawled through MEO’s collector for January 1 to August 15 2026. These posts were then manually verified to confirm the accuracy of each group’s stance classification.

Unlike the keyword collection, posts were not individually relevance-filtered as the groups have clear descriptions focusing on Alberta. Facebook’s group collector applies the date filter client-side and sorts by “top posts”, so a group’s posts are complete for prominent content but are not a chronological census. Also note that due to the long collection times of some of the posts, some groups may be better represented closer to the August 15 date than others.

Topics were derived from the 24,287 posts in the ten pro and anti groups. This was done using the Toponymy library with details as follows: sentence embeddings computed using the all-MiniLM-L6-v2 sentence transformer, subsequently reduced to two dimensions using UMAP, which are then clustered via HDBSCAN. Topics were named with Claude Haiku 4.5 (claude-haiku-4-5-20251001). These topics were then grouped by hand into the framework of 14 pro-side and 11 anti-side categories. Shares of posts and of engagement are computed over each side’s full mix before the top ten are shown.

8.2 AI-generated images

Every image posted in the twelve Facebook groups with the most referendum content (12,367 of 53,360 posts carrying an image) and every image posted by the 114 roster accounts on X since 2022 (614,329 images) was scored by an AI-image detector: a SwinV2 model trained on the OpenFake corpus (Livernoche et al. 2026, the WWW paper on deepfakes in the 2025 Canadian election), fine-tuned by us with a low-rank adapter on rendered text graphics, the detector’s known weak point. An image is counted as AI-generated at a score of 0.75 or above. Hand-labelling of 127 flagged images gives precision of 93% on X for scores above 0.99, 66% for scores between 0.90 and 0.99, and 98% on Facebook above 0.90; the residual errors are screenshots of real posts and born-digital text graphics. Rates are therefore upper bounds, and the X rates are inflated by roughly a fifth. The detector flags 1.8% of 2022 images, which we treat as its false-positive floor.

For every flagged image, a multimodal model (gemma-4-31B-it) was shown the image and the post text, blind to the account, group and stance, and asked what the image is for, using a nine-category “act” scheme of our own (identity building, mobilization, political cartoon, attack on a named figure, engagement bait, and so on), together with target, stance

and whether AI origin is evident. Engagement comparisons are on original posts only, median AI-image post against median other-image post within the same community.

8.3 What AI search products tell voters

We wrote a bank of 30 prompts: 6 questions (whether oil prices, taxes and pensions would rise or fall), each in 5 framings that resolve to two outcomes (Alberta joining the United States, Alberta leaving Canada). Question subjects were chosen from Google's autocomplete suggestions for Alberta-separation searches, and the framings from the vocabulary differences between the two communities documented in Section 8.1.

The exact questions were: 'will the price of oil go up', 'will the price of oil go down', 'will my taxes go up', 'will my taxes go down', 'will my pension go up', 'will my pension go down'. The exact framings were: 'if the us annexes alberta', 'if alberta becomes the 51st state', 'if alberta separates from canada', 'if alberta secedes from canada', 'if alberta becomes independent from canada'.

Each prompt was put to Google AI Overview and ChatGPT 6 times, and Google Search 2 times, on a single day, 20 August 2026 (420 asks), the only day all three were asked the same bank; the wider collection ran from 29† June to 20 August. Variability is reported at three levels: between repeats of the same prompt, between framings, and between products. The queries were done using logged-in phones; however, it does not appear Google AI Overview or ChatGPT used location data to determine their responses: a checked sample were all addressing their answer as if the asker were Albertan. We accessed Google AI Overview via google.com/search?q=<prompt>&udm=50, and Google Search via google.com/search?q=<prompt>. The exact ChatGPT model was not recorded, nor was the model behind Google AI Overview.

For Google AI Overview and ChatGPT, the first sentence of the answer was coded affirm, deny or mixed by a language model reading the answer text, and every cited or shown link was recorded. We initially used a regex-based classifier to code stance, but then switched to a language model for improved accuracy. We used gemma-4-26B-A4B-it as the judge model.

A second experiment took specific, highly engaged, false or misleading claims from the Facebook groups that AI Overview cites, wrote queries a voter might type about each, and recorded whether AI Overview cited the originating post and, when it did, whether it asserted or contradicted the claim, again judged by a language model.

Specifically, we scraped posts from 10 Facebook groups that were the most cited in the results of a previous round of queries, extracted claims from posts in that set that had above-mean engagement, and triaged this down to 224 top-interest claims. Of this set, we found that 27 were false, and 26 misleading, and used these 53 claims as the elicitation sample. We then fielded 1,435 searches related to those claims, of which 1,358 returned an overview. We used gemma-4-31B-it for claim extraction,

fact-checking, and claim-entailment.

9. Foreign attention and coordination

9.1 The three panels

We compare what three sets of accounts publish. Canadian: MEO's full Canadian seedlist, 5.02 million posts in the window Figure 12 uses (12.27 million over the longer 2025 window). American influencers: a panel of 500 of the most-followed US political influencers, built from six candidate sources (Pew's America's News Influencers, top-podcast charts, accounts named by Canadian seeds, platform snowballs, two audience tools and researcher knowledge), filtered to persons or media products with at least 20,000 followers, a 2:1 follower-to-following ratio and more than half political content, then cut to the 500 largest by total cross-platform following; 1.89 million posts (the Doc's 3.99 million was the 2025 window and is in no committed file). Russian: a named roster of ministries, embassies, officials, RT, TASS, Sputnik and RIA Novosti, the non-Canadian pro-Kremlin commentariat and Russian domestic press, 54 entities on 84 accounts; 237,004 posts (673,944 over the 2025 window). The Russian roster was audited against MEO's wider foreign tag by reading every foreign account that posted on the topic; 44 of 45 Russian-aligned Alberta posts were already inside it.

Topics are keyword matches applied identically to all three panels, in English, Russian and French: "Alberta separatism" (Alberta with any of independence, separation, secession, referendum, sovereignty, 51st state, annexation, petition, Wexit and their Russian and French equivalents), "Alberta" at all, "Canada" at all, and, as a scale reference, "Ukraine". The Russian clause requires a separatism stem, because «Альберта» is also a case form of the name Albert, and every Russian-panel post that matched was read by hand. Shares of output and of engagement (likes, shares, comments and quotes; views excluded) are each panel's own, so the panels compare despite the size gap. Because the topics are keyword-defined, each share is an upper bound; because the same net runs on every panel, the comparison is fair.

9.2 Who posts, who is engaged with, whose sites are linked

Nationality on X is attributed under two gates and never inferred from stance, language or topic. Gate 1, known to MEO: the account is in the US panel, the Alberta list, MEO's Canadian panel or the Russian roster, or is a hand-identified public figure (568 accounts carrying 73.5% of engagement on relevant X posts). Gate 2, stated by the account: a profile location or bio naming one country (7,045 accounts, 18.3%). A bio naming two of Canada, the United States and Russia is a conflict and falls through; a bio can never produce a Russian label. The remaining 7.1% of engagement is shown as unattributed, never assumed domestic. All 107 then-approved

Alberta seeds were individually re-checked: 96 Canadian, 9 unresolved, 1 British and 1 American. For the third square, the nationality of a linked site is the publisher's, hand-assigned for the roughly 369 domains carrying 99.4% of linked engagement, with platforms and shorteners classed separately whatever their TLD.

9.3 Podcasts and shows

Podcast rates come from RSS-ingested automatic transcripts, the one census-like layer of the audio ecosystem; Rumble, YouTube and broadcast clips appear as exhibits and never as denominators. An episode counts once if "Alberta" and a secession term co-occur in a transcript segment.

9.4 Russia: Telegram and the Pravda network

We crawled Telegram directly. Rather than hand-pick "Russian Telegram", we let a Kremlin-aligned actor draw the boundary: the population is every Telegram channel the Pravda network's Canada edition cited as a source over the window, recovered from a full crawl of its 33,280 articles (678 channels). Two strata were fixed in advance: all 45 feeder channels that had already produced an Alberta-secession item, and the eight highest-volume feeders that had produced none, as a blind control. Every channel was hand-coded for who runs it, and only that coding defines the Russian figure. The census holds 2.63 million messages from 145 channels. Candidate posts were found with the sweep's term list in English and Russian and classified with the same relevance prompt; all 75 Cyrillic confirmations were read by hand (one false positive removed). Because the feeder stratum was selected on the outcome, the resulting rate is a ceiling: the selected stratum posts on the topic of Albertan independence 5.9x as often as the blind control. RT's and Sputnik's Telegram channels are blocked in Canada under the 2022 sanctions listing and are reported as unmeasurable. Translations are LLM-generated, from archived originals, and are faithful rather than polished.

The Freedom Convoy comparison rests on two published studies: Orr Bueno (2023) for RT's coverage relative to Western broadcasters, and Boucher, Rutherglen and Kim (2024) for the count of American against Canadian populist convoy posts.

10. The survey

Public-opinion figures come from MEO's Tracking Survey, an online non-probability panel survey of Canadian adults fielded through Qualtrics. Figures 14, 15 and 16 pool the July (13 July to 05 August 2026, $n = 1,497$) and August (07 to 30 August 2026, $n = 1,548$) waves, $n = 3,037$ nationally and 467 in Alberta; the FI country battery was asked in August only (Alberta $n = 279$). Each wave is raked to Statistics Canada 2021 Census targets on gender and age within six regions. Likert items are reported as weighted percentages; select-all items carry design-based 95% confidence intervals from the survey package, which account for the variance

added by weighting. The weights are national and were not built to be representative within Alberta, so Alberta panels are descriptive contrasts, not provincial estimates.

Question phrasing (answer options are displayed in the plots):

- Figure 14: How confident are you that Elections Alberta will conduct the upcoming provincial referendum fairly?
- Figure 15: How much overall trust do you have in the following groups to act in the best interests of Canadians?
- Figure 16A: How concerned are you about foreign interference in the upcoming Alberta referendum?
- Figure 16B: Which of the following countries do you expect to engage in foreign interference in the upcoming Alberta referendum? Please select all that apply.

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