



By: TA | AP Insight

How Alberta separatism went from fringe cause to referendum



For decades, Alberta separatism was a fringe cause. On Monday, voters in Canada's oil heartland will decide whether to take the first step toward a referendum on leaving the country.

Alberta, home to the world's fourth-largest proven oil reserves, is not voting to leave Canada on Oct. 19. Instead, **voters will decide** whether the province should remain in Canada or begin the legal process toward a future **referendum on separation**.

Alberta Premier Danielle Smith, who called the vote but supports remaining in Canada, has said that support for starting the separation process, which was around 23% in a recent poll, is "still too high for my liking."

Alberta has long feuded with the federal government over oil and federal power.

Liberal prime ministers Pierre Trudeau and, decades later, his son Justin became deeply unpopular in the province over energy policy.

Justin Trudeau's government imposed a **national carbon tax** and other climate measures that Alberta leaders said hurt its oil industry.

Yet separatist parties typically drew only 1% or 2% of the vote, former Alberta Premier Jason Kenney said.

Then came the pandemic and the **Freedom Convoy**, which paralyzed parts of Ottawa, the Canadian capital, and blocked major Canada-U.S. border crossings.

"They needed a new cause," Kenney told The Associated Press. "And it naturally morphed into separatism."

Pandemic-era restrictions supercharged separatism

Jeff Rath, a leader of the independence movement, said federal vaccine rules preventing unvaccinated Canadians from

flying were his breaking point.

"If Trudeau won't let me leave Alberta, I'm just going to pick up my whole province and go," Rath recalled telling a friend. "COVID was really the straw that broke the camel's back."

"A lot of people were radicalized by the convoy," he said.

The 2022 Freedom Convoy began over vaccine requirements for cross-border truckers but grew into a broader **revolt against pandemic restrictions**.

Kenney said people mobilized over anger at globalization, vaccines and pandemic restrictions, while social media allowed previously isolated activists to find one another and organize.

"They found each other and they found a cause," Kenney said.

MAGA movement has been inspirational for some separatist activists - Jason Kenney

Kenney said the movement also became more professional, building organizations, raising money and drawing in political operatives with campaign and fundraising experience.

He also sees substantial overlap between separatist activists and people who support Russian President Vladimir Putin or believe conspiracy theories about Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

Kenney stressed he was describing activists, not typical separation voters, whom he characterized as frustrated Albertans sending Ottawa a message.

Kenney said the MAGA movement has been "inspirational" for some separatist activists.

He said they "tried to infiltrate with at least some success" the United Conservative Party he founded. Smith replaced Kenney in 2022 after appealing to United Conservative Party

members angry over COVID-19 restrictions.

“Literally, you can look at the players,” Kenney said of the convoy and separatist movements. “It’s the same people.”

Carney finds unusual support in Alberta

Prime Minister Mark Carney has made getting Alberta oil to new markets a national priority and backs a **proposed pipeline** to the West Coast.

His more business- and energy-friendly policies, along with his opposition to U.S. President Donald Trump’s trade war and 51st-state rhetoric, have made the federal Liberal leader unusually popular in conservative Alberta.

Kenney, one of the most prominent conservative critics of Trudeau’s approach to Alberta, said Carney “speaks as an Albertan,” understands the province’s grievances and aspirations, and is moving in the right direction on energy.

Jeff Rath said he would be thrilled with more than 30% of the vote

Rath called Carney a “formidable opponent,” saying “every major politician” in Alberta and Canada is against the separatists and acknowledged an uphill battle.

He said he would be “thrilled” with more than 30% of the vote — well short of a majority.

“Canada is facing real threats to our economy, to our security, to our way of life,” Carney said. “We have to be strong and we are stronger together.”

Activists go to Washington

Alberta sends roughly 90% of its crude oil exports to the United States, and separatists

have taken their campaign directly to Washington.

Rath confirmed he and other independence advocates met with U.S. State Department officials three times and presented a document outlining what an independent Alberta could offer the United States.

Rath claimed people involved in the meetings were going directly to the White House and that a possible oil pipeline through the U.S. to the Pacific was “literally a topic of our last meeting with the U.S. State Department.”

The vote is a decision for the people of Alberta - US State Department

The State Department said that “The Department regularly meets with a wide range of representatives. The vote is a decision for the people of Alberta.”

Kenney called the outreach “bonkers,” saying people with “zero democratic mandate” were discussing with a foreign government “the status of a separate state that does not exist.”

U.S. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent has called Alberta “a natural partner.”

Future of separatism

Keith Wilson, another Alberta independence leader who was lead counsel for the 2022 convoy organizers, said separatists see the vote as a way to give Alberta more leverage in dealing with Ottawa, even short of independence.

“That’s right, because it’s called leverage. It’s called negotiation,” Wilson said. He said he would accept substantial structural changes to Alberta’s relationship with Ottawa short of independence.



That's not a threat to Canada. But it is a threat to the conservative movement - Jason Kenney

"I don't think it will recede," Kenney said of the separatist movement in Alberta. Even 10% to 20% support, he noted, would far exceed separatists' historic vote share. If low turnout pushed them toward 30%, "they're going to be even more emboldened."

"That's not a threat to Canada," Kenney said. "But it is a threat to the conservative movement."

Alberta is not Canada's only national-unity challenge. Quebec voters returned the separatist **Parti Quebecois** to power Oct. 5, although support for independence remains around 30% and its leader has said he will not hold a referendum while Trump is U.S. president.

Quebec voters have twice rejected independence, most recently by a razor-thin margin in a 1995 referendum.