

COMMENTARY

Democracy Belongs to the People Who Show Up

Alberta's separation debate exposes a larger democratic truth: having an opinion is not the same as exercising political power. If Canadians want a say in how they are governed, they have to show up.

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Illustration: Nasty Canuck / AI-assisted.

Alberta's separation debate is a reminder that having an opinion is not the same thing as exercising political power. From city halls and nomination meetings to provincial legislatures and Parliament, Canadians who want a say in how they are governed have to participate.

Most Albertans appear to want their province to remain in Canada. Three recent polls all put the stay side comfortably ahead, although by different margins: [Research Co.](#) found 74 per cent choosing to remain and 22 per cent favouring the start of the legal process toward a future binding separation

referendum; Leger found 65 per cent to 23 per cent, with another 10 per cent undecided or unsure; and Angus Reid measured the October choice at 61 per cent to 33 per cent.

Yet Albertans will still vote on the question October 19. Question 10 asks them either to keep Alberta as a province of Canada or instruct the provincial government to begin the legal process required to hold a future binding referendum on separation. The October vote itself is expressly non-binding.

Polls are useful, but they are not omniscient. Survey research has long documented social-desirability effects, while election polling can also miss because some groups are harder to reach or because predicting who will actually vote is difficult. There is no evidence that Alberta's current polls are concealing some enormous separatist majority. The more useful distinction is simpler: **polls estimate what people think; democracy records what people do.**

Alberta is the case study

Earlier this year, organizers seeking an Alberta independence referendum needed 177,732 signatures under the province's citizen-initiative rules. They submitted 286,593. Elections Alberta counted 279,337 as valid and, after statistical verification, estimated 222,597 verified signatures — about 7.5 per cent of Alberta electors.

That does not mean 7.5 per cent of Albertans can vote their province out of Canada. They cannot. What it demonstrates is that a relatively small but committed group can organize effectively enough to move an issue onto the political agenda.

There is an important fact on the other side. The **Alberta Forever Canada** initiative collected 404,293 verified signatures — about 13.6 per cent of Alberta electors — around the question: “Do you agree that Alberta should remain in Canada?” But the two initiatives were not asking government to do the same thing. The independence initiative was a constitutional proposal seeking a referendum on Alberta becoming an independent state. Alberta Forever Canada was filed as a policy proposal, which first went to the legislature and could be dealt with there rather than necessarily producing another province-wide referendum.

That distinction became important in May, when Premier Danielle Smith said approximately 700,000 Albertans had signed the competing petitions and characterized both as requests for a vote on Alberta's future. She cited those petitions when announcing that her government would add a non-binding separation question to the October ballot. But the underlying initiatives travelled through different legal streams and did not ask government to take the same action. One explicitly sought an independence referendum; the other supported Alberta remaining in Canada and was filed as a policy proposal.

This may sound like procedural plumbing, but it illustrates the larger point. **How citizens participate can matter almost as much as how many citizens privately agree with them.**

There are older agreements on the map

There is another reason Alberta's future cannot be understood simply as a contest between provincial separatists and federalists.

Much of what is now Alberta is covered by numbered treaties that existed before Alberta did as a province. Treaty 6 was signed in 1876, Treaty 7 in 1877 and Treaty 8 in 1899. Alberta became a province in 1905. Those treaties are not historical souvenirs: existing Aboriginal and treaty rights are recognized and affirmed by section 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982.

Treaty First Nations have not been passive observers in the current separation debate. Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, Piikani Nation, Siksika Nation and the Blood Tribe challenged the separatist citizen-initiative process in court. In May, the Alberta Court of King's Bench quashed the Chief Electoral Officer's decision approving the petition application after finding that the duty to consult had not been discharged.

That fight is still moving through the courts. Alberta and petition organizer Mitch Sylvestre appealed, and on September 4 the Alberta Court of Appeal granted the Development Foundation of Treaty Six Confederacy permission to intervene in the pending appeals. The court noted that Treaty 6 interests might otherwise not be fully represented because the existing First Nation parties were from Treaties 7 and 8. The September decision was about intervenor status, not the merits of the appeal.

The larger constitutional point is already clear enough. A province cannot simply vote itself out of Canada. The Supreme Court's Quebec secession decision held that a clear democratic expression in favour of secession would lead to negotiations, not automatic independence, and that Indigenous interests would have to be taken into account. The federal Clarity Act likewise requires any eventual negotiations to address the rights, interests and territorial claims of Indigenous peoples, along with issues such as borders, assets, liabilities and minority rights.

Whatever happens in the Alberta appeals, Treaty Nations have already demonstrated the civic lesson at the heart of this article. They believed their rights and relationships could be affected, so they organized, intervened and went to court rather than assuming those interests would somehow protect themselves. **That is what showing up looks like.**

The silent majority has a problem

We use the phrase **silent majority** as though silence itself carries political weight. Usually, it does not. A politician cannot count the voters who intended to write an email. A councillor cannot hear from residents who agreed with a proposal but never responded to the consultation. A political meeting cannot record the people who meant to attend. Pollsters can estimate private opinion, but political institutions mostly respond to behaviour: voting, organizing, petitioning, joining, contacting representatives and otherwise taking part.

A democracy can have a silent majority. It cannot have an effective silent majority.

That does not mean Canadians need to make politics their personality. Most people have jobs, families, mortgages, kids' practices, aging parents, groceries to buy and lawns that somehow wait until the busiest week of the year to grow six inches. Healthy democracy has to leave room for citizens to have lives.

But movements seeking change often possess a natural advantage over people satisfied with the status quo: they have a reason to act. Preservation can feel automatic because whatever is being preserved is already there. That feeling is comforting until people discover that decisions were being made while they assumed nothing important was changing.

Democracy happens before election day

There is nothing inherently wrong with a determined minority organizing aggressively. In many cases, that is exactly how democratic change begins. The problem is not that some citizens participate intensely. It is assuming that people who do **not** participate will somehow exert equal influence anyway.

A movement does not necessarily have to persuade an entire province or country before it begins affecting political outcomes. Influence can be exercised through petitions, public hearings, riding associations, leadership races, policy conventions, advocacy groups and candidate-selection processes long before most citizens see an issue on a general-election ballot.

At the federal level, political parties set their own candidate-selection rules, and nomination contests are not mandatory. Where contests do occur, however, the people who participate can help determine the candidates later presented to the much larger electorate. In a riding where one party is heavily favoured, that earlier choice can be enormously consequential.

Yet how many Canadians know who runs their local riding association, when candidate selection is taking place or who is competing to carry the party banner? Not everybody should join a political party, and plenty of Canadians quite reasonably want nothing to do with partisan organizations. But somebody joins, and the people who participate get a say. That is not gaming democracy. **That is democracy.**

Start at city hall

If you want to see the participation gap in its natural habitat, city hall may be a better place to look than Parliament Hill. Municipal governments make decisions about property taxes, housing, zoning, roads, transit, policing, parks, garbage collection and infrastructure — the parts of government Canadians can often see from their front porch.

Yet only about 30 per cent of eligible voters cast ballots in Toronto's 2022 municipal election, while Calgary's 2025 municipal election recorded turnout of 39.04 per cent. In both cases, most eligible voters did not participate in choosing governments responsible for some of the public services closest to their daily lives.

Research covering 300 Canadian municipal elections found that, among the factors studied, electoral competitiveness had the greatest influence on turnout. When people believe a contest matters, more of them show up.

That is understandable. The problem is what happens during all the years when nothing feels urgent. If people wait for democracy to become exciting before taking part, a great many decisions will be made during the boring years by those who bothered to pay attention. Zoning becomes interesting when someone wants to build beside you. Infrastructure becomes interesting when the water main breaks. A school-board decision becomes interesting when it lands in your child's classroom. Local democracy has an annoying habit of becoming fascinating about five minutes after the decision you weren't watching affects you personally.

Showing up isn't equally easy

There is an important complication to all of this: participation is not equally easy for everyone, and lower engagement cannot simply be dismissed as apathy. Someone working two jobs has less spare time than someone who is retired. Parents may need childcare to attend an evening meeting. Disability, transportation, language, shift work and exhaustion can all affect who is able to participate.

Canadian research using the Canadian Election Study from 1965 through 2021 found substantial turnout inequalities associated with class, education and income, with those disparities worsening over time. That places responsibilities on democratic institutions too. Meetings, consultations, elections and public information should be accessible enough that participation does not become the preserve of citizens with abundant time, money or insider knowledge.

Age is another reminder that participation is uneven. Elections Canada estimated turnout among eligible voters aged 18 to 24 at 55.9 per cent in the 2025 federal election, compared with 77.6 per cent among those aged 65 to 74. Equal citizenship does not automatically produce equal political influence.

Canadians know how to show up

Canada has also demonstrated what happens when citizens believe the stakes are unmistakable. On October 30, 1995, Quebec held its second sovereignty referendum. The No side won with 50.58 per cent of the vote against 49.42 per cent for Yes — a difference of just 54,288 votes. Turnout reached an extraordinary 93.52 per cent.

Nobody had to convince Quebecers that the result mattered. The future of their province and country was plainly at stake, and almost everyone eligible to participate did. The referendum is usually remembered for how close Canada came to changing permanently, but it should also be remembered as an example of what democratic participation looks like when citizens believe their agency matters.

The lesson from Alberta today is not that current polling predicts a separatist victory. It does not. It is that polling support and political power are different things.

Democracy ultimately records what people do.

Democracy has safeguards — but no autopilot

None of this means citizens lose their rights because they fail to vote or miss a meeting. Governments still owe lawful, accountable and equal treatment to the politically engaged, the politically exhausted and the person who would rather chew aluminum foil than spend Tuesday evening at a municipal planning hearing. Nor should democracy simply reward whichever faction is prepared to devote every waking hour to politics. Constitutional rights, courts, institutional safeguards, transparency requirements and limits on governmental power exist because raw political intensity cannot be allowed to decide everything.

But safeguards are not a substitute for citizenship. You do not need to attend every council meeting or buy a political-party membership, and you certainly do not have to spend every night arguing with strangers online. You do need to recognize when something consequential is being decided and decide whether it matters enough to participate.

Vote in the municipal election, not only the federal one. Learn who is seeking a nomination when that choice matters to you. Answer a consultation when government is asking about something that could shape your community. Sign the petition — or refuse to sign it. Contact your councillor, MLA, MPP or MP before the decision rather than complaining afterward. Volunteer when an issue matters enough. Support an organization doing work you believe in. If nobody seems willing to represent a position you think deserves a voice, perhaps consider showing up yourself.

Democracy is annoyingly high-maintenance. There is no autopilot setting.

Agency has a price

The immediate October 19 choice belongs to Alberta voters, but an actual attempt to leave Canada would be something entirely different. Canadian constitutional law does not permit a province simply to vote itself out of Confederation, and Alberta's Treaty relationships do not disappear because a provincial majority wants constitutional change.

Whether an Albertan chooses the first or second option this October is therefore not the larger point. The same democratic principle operates whenever Canadians choose councillors, premiers and prime ministers; whenever parties select candidates and leaders; whenever governments seek public input; and whenever organized citizens work toward an objective while everyone else assumes that somebody, somewhere, is taking care of things.

Representative democracy gives Canadians enormous agency, but it does not promise to exercise that agency for us. If you like the direction your community is going, show up and help preserve it. If you don't, show up and try to change it. If an institution matters to you, don't wait until it is threatened before discovering that somebody else has been organizing around it for years.

Having the majority opinion is not the same thing as having political power, and having rights is not the same thing as using them. Democracy does not belong exclusively to the loudest, angriest or most ideological citizens.

It belongs to the people who show up.

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