

The 1998

SENATE VOTE

MONDAY OCTOBER 19



Alberta's Road to Senate Reform

TAKING A LOOK: PUBLIC OPINION IN ALBERTA AND CANADA ON SENATE REFORM

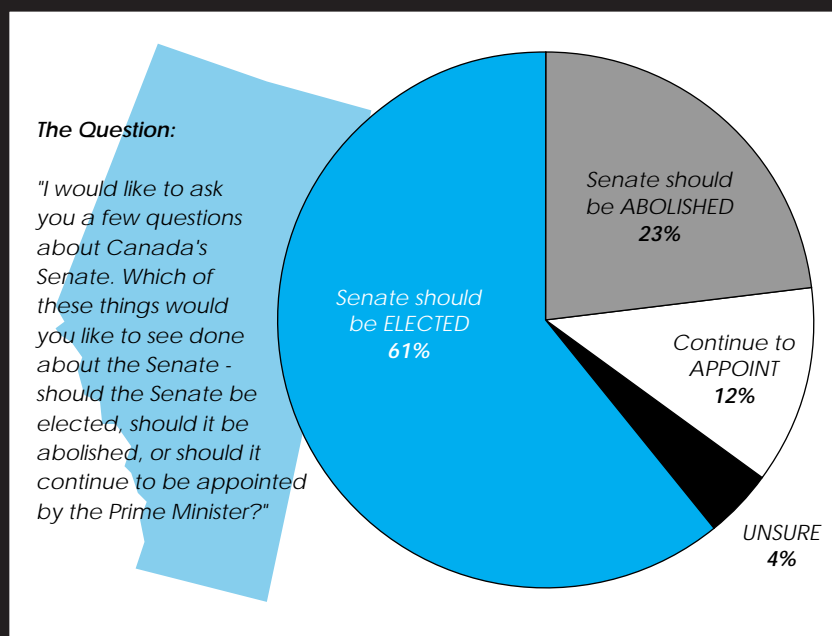
INTRODUCTION

With the collapse of the Charlottetown Accord in 1992, the issue of Senate reform quickly moved from front and centre to the political backburner. But in late 1997 and throughout 1998, the shoddy attendance of some Senators, quickly and quietly approved pay raises, numerous and contentious patronage appointments, and serious allegations and confirmation of wrongdoing have once again placed the Senate under the national spotlight. Canadians are once again asking the all too familiar question: *"What do we do about the Senate?"* In June of 1998, the Alberta government provided its answer – Albertans would be going to the polls on October 19th to elect two special "stand-by" Senators who would be available for appointment when the next Alberta vacancy opened in the upper house.

Alberta's decision to elect two "stand-by" Senators as a way to get the ball rolling on Senate reform has sparked considerable debate in the province and right across Canada. The recent resignation of an Alberta Senator intensified the debate, and the Prime Minister's decision to quickly appoint a replacement without waiting for the outcome of the election has upped the stakes and done nothing to bring it to a close.

Does the Prime Minister's insistence on maintaining the status quo of appointing Senators fit with public opinion in Alberta and across Canada? Does the Alberta government's decision to hold a Senatorial election fit with the thinking of Albertans? In this report, the Canada West Foundation carries out its mandate to act as a catalyst for informed debate over issues of public policy by examining the state of public opinion in Alberta on Senate reform. The thinking of other Canadians will also be explored, as will Albertans' thoughts on the upcoming election.

FIGURE 1: Albertans Thoughts on Three Options for the Senate



SOURCE: Canada West Foundation-EnviroNics Survey, August 1998.

CANADA WEST FOUNDATION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Alberta government's decision in June of 1998 to hold an election for two "stand-by" Senators has stimulated a debate across the province and Canada on the issue of Senate reform. This debate has intensified with the recent resignation of an Alberta Senator and the Prime Minister's decision to appoint a replacement in the middle of the election campaign. In order to fulfill its mandate to act as a catalyst for informed debate on important issues of public policy, the Canada West Foundation is publishing a series of research reports discussing the Senate, Senate reform, and the upcoming Senate election. In this report, the Foundation explores the state of public opinion in Alberta towards Senate reform and the upcoming election, and the state of public opinion in the West and across Canada.

In August of 1998, Canada West Foundation contracted with Environics West to survey a representative sample of 1,000 Albertans on their views towards the Senate, Senate reform, and the upcoming Senatorial election. The survey was conducted from August 10 to 31, 1998, and the results are deemed accurate within 2% points 19 times out of 20. This survey, placed in context with the historical results of other surveys by firms such as Angus Reid, CROP, Gallup and Environics, produces a comprehensive and highly informative look at the historical and current state of public opinion in Canada on the Senate:

- A majority of Albertans (61%) favour Senate reform over abolition or the status quo. The status quo was favoured only by 12% of respondents, and abolition was favoured by 23%. Support for Senate reform is remarkably consistent among both genders, all age groups, regions, education and income levels, and federal and provincial party preferences.
- Public opinion on Senate reform in Alberta has seen some shifts over the last 10 to 12 years, but there is a dominant pattern that holds most of the time. The essence of this pattern is that Albertans favour reform and election of the Senate over abolition or the status quo, and they do so by a wide majority.
- This pattern of public opinion in Alberta is not atypical of the general pattern existing in the West, although Albertans are perhaps more likely than others to agree with reform and election of the Senate than with abolition. This, combined with the Alberta government's decision to hold an election for Senate nominees, arguably makes Alberta the leader in the drive for meaningful Senate reform.
- When the opinions of Canadians as a whole are considered, an equal number support reform and its outright abolition. This is the result of two visions for the Senate that split along regional lines. The West and Ontario are more likely to favour reform and election, while Quebec and Atlantic Canada are more favourable to abolition.
- Abolition of the Senate has gained more currency in Canada over the years, but it has not come at the expense of support for reform. Rather, more and more Canadians are rallying around abolition because of the virtual collapse of support for the status quo of appointing Senators. This shift also splits along regional lines. Over 90% of the support previously given to the status quo in Quebec and Atlantic Canada has gone towards supporting abolition today. In Ontario and the West, this shift has been equally beneficial to both reform and abolition.
- Albertans are divided on whether the October Senate election is a waste of time, but an overwhelming majority (80%) do feel that it is the "best way" available to keep the drive for Senate reform alive. An equal number of respondents added that the Prime Minister should honour the results of the vote by appointing the winners to the Senate when a vacancy occurs. This strong support is spread equally across the province and can be found among all types of Albertans as well as supporters of different federal and provincial political parties.

THE SENATE: ELECT, ABOLISH, OR THE STATUS QUO?

If there is one province in Canada that champions the cause of Senate reform, that province would have to be Alberta. Alberta's position has long been that Canada needs a reformed Senate. In 1985, the Alberta Legislature unanimously approved the Report of the *Alberta Select Special Committee on Upper House Reform*, which called for a **Triple-E** Senate. Such a Senate would be directly *elected* with *equal* representation of provinces and real *effect* over national decision-making. While other Canadians are also eager to see action on the Senate, it is widely recognized that Senate reform has reached the status of a constitutional mantra in Alberta.

THE STATE OF PUBLIC OPINION IN ALBERTA

Figure 1 on page 1 shows how Albertans generally feel about the three broad options available for the Senate – election, abolition, or the status quo of prime ministerial appointment. Not surprisingly, the CWF-Environics survey shows that the status quo is clearly not an option for Albertans today. Only 12% of the survey's respondents said they were in favour of the Senate continuing to be appointed by the Prime Minister. The option of abolishing the Senate is more popular at about 23%, but it is the idea of electing Senators that still carries the most currency with Albertans. Indeed, 61% of the respondents to the CWF-Environics survey said they would rather see the Senate elected than abolished. Also worthy of note is that very few respondents to our survey were unable to express an opinion on the Senate. Only 4% of respondents were unsure of what option they favoured.

In other words, for every Albertan who wants to see the status quo continue, there are two who want to see the Senate abolished, and six who want to see the Senate elected.

Senate reform in Alberta has sometimes been a partisan issue, with different parties taking different positions. For instance, the decision to hold a Senate nominee election was made by the provincial Conservatives and is strongly supported by the federal Reformers, but opposed by Liberal and New Democrats at both the federal and provincial levels. While the opinions of Albertans do vary to some extent with party allegiance, it remains the case that a majority of supporters for *all* political parties at *both* the federal and provincial levels favour Senate reform over abolishment or the status quo.

Of those respondents who said they would vote Conservative in a federal election, two-thirds (66%) said they would like to see the Senate elected (**Figure 2, page 3**). Those who would support the Reform Party were only slightly more likely to agree at 68%. Supporters of both of these parties were the least likely to agree with the status quo of appointment (8% and 5% respectively). Quite surprisingly, 63% of those who would vote NDP also want to see the Senate elected, and only 24% agreed with the official NDP position of abolishing the Senate. Those who said they would vote for the federal Liberals were the least likely to support an elected Senate (53%) and the most likely to support the practice of appointing Senators (22%). While federal Liberal and NDP supporters were less likely to agree to an elected Senate, even they favoured election over abolition by a margin of two to one.

A WORD ABOUT METHODOLOGY

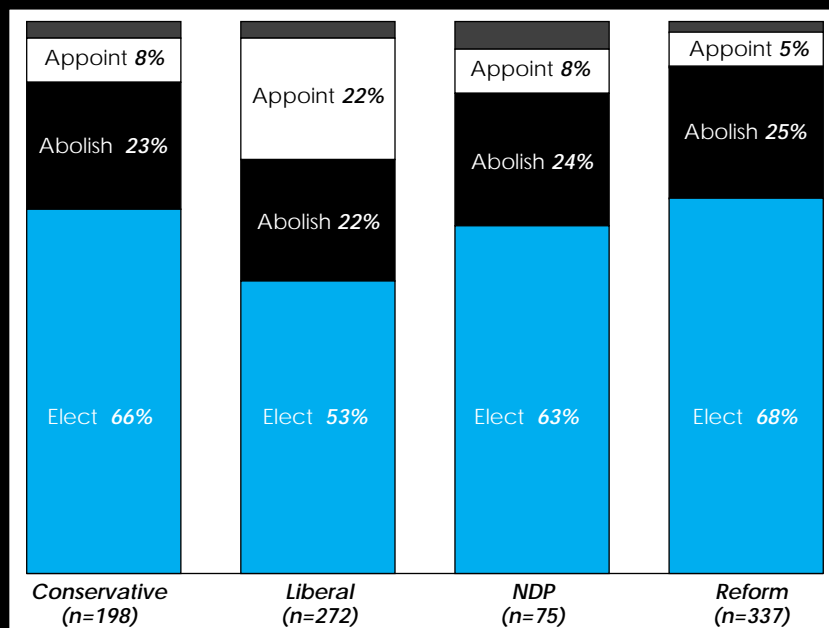
In reading this report, several things should be kept in mind by the reader:

- 1) The section discussing the current state of opinion in Alberta and the upcoming election uses a public opinion survey conducted by Environics West on behalf of Canada West Foundation. The survey took place over a period from August 10th to 31st of 1998 and involves a representative sample of 1,000 Albertans. The sample was properly stratified and weighted according to several variables including region, gender, education, and income. The results of the poll are accurate within plus or minus 2% points 19 times out of 20. The reliability of data for some subsample groups is lower as they include fewer respondents.
- 2) This survey was conducted before Senator Jean Forest resigned her seat in the Senate and the Prime Minister quickly appointed a replacement. These events have likely served to intensify the debate, but whether they have significantly modified public opinion is not altogether clear. On the one hand, the events may have only served to place the election back to "square one", but on the other, it may have caused opinions to shift.
- 3) Data in the other sections discussing historical public opinion in Alberta and Canada come from various polls taken from 1982 to 1998. Significant effort was expended to secure as many historical surveys as possible, and every available survey was used. In years where two or more surveys were available, the results were averaged to produce figures for that particular year. Because the surveys come from a wide range of public sources (CROP, Angus Reid, Environics, and Gallup) the reader should note that some of the questions may differ slightly. The statistical reliability of the data can also vary as the number of respondents in the surveys are not the same. As such, we do not claim 100% statistical accuracy with all of our comparisons, but neither do we believe the data unreliable. The data is of sufficient quality to draw at least some elemental conclusions about Albertans' and Canadians' views on the Senate and the issue of Senate reform.

In short, official federal party positions on Senate reform do not necessarily mirror public opinion in Alberta. Canada's federal parties have staked out some very different ground over what to do with the Senate – the Liberals are adamant in continuing to *appoint* Senators, the NDP has long supported *abolishing* the Senate, the Reformers (at a minimum) want to see it *elected*, and several Conservative leadership hopefuls are leaning the same way.

Despite the different positions taken by the leadership of Canada's federal political parties on the Senate, a majority of Albertans – regardless of their partisan preference – are in favour of electing their Senators. Only about one-quarter of Albertans of any political stripe want to see the Senate abolished. Very few are satisfied with the status quo, although federal and provincial Liberal supporters are twice as likely to favour it than are other Albertans.

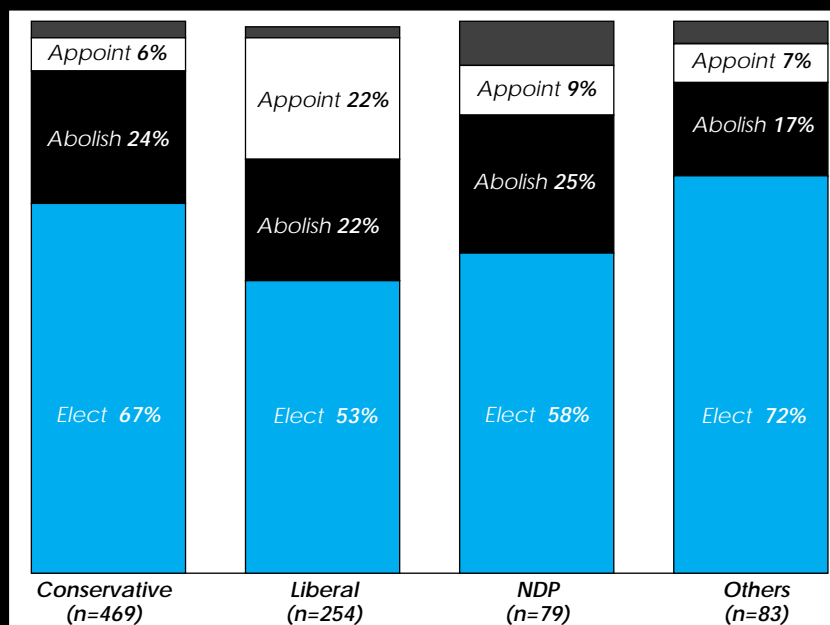
FIGURE 2: Three Senate Options by Federal Party Support



SOURCE: Canada West Foundation-EnviroNics Survey, August 1998

The same pattern of public opinion is repeated as far as provincial party support is concerned (*Figure 3*). Almost 70% of Albertans who would vote Conservative in a provincial election support an elected Senate. Those who would vote NDP are less likely to agree, but not appreciably so (58%). At 53%, provincial Liberal supporters are the least likely to agree, but a majority are still in favour of electing Senators. Albertans who would vote for some other party aside from the “big three” are perhaps the most likely to favour elected Senators (72%). This higher prevalence is a result of a handful of respondents who said they wanted to vote for a provincial “Reform” party and the solid support for elected Senators amongst Social Credit supporters. All of those who would like to support “Reform” at the provincial level want elected Senators, as do 73% of Social Credit supporters.

FIGURE 3: Three Senate Options by Provincial Party Support



SOURCE: Canada West Foundation-EnviroNics Survey, August 1998

The provincial NDP and the Liberals are on record as opposing the October election, but the *official* position of most provincial political parties on the broader issue of Senate reform matches quite well with the thinking of the Alberta electorate. Conservatives, Liberals and Social Credit are all on record as supporting Senate reform, and only the NDP have traditionally supported its abolishment. But even among NDP supporters, almost 60% said they want an elected Senate. Only one-quarter of provincial NDP supporters said they want the Senate abolished.

A majority of Albertans, regardless of their provincial partisan preference, support an elected Senate. While support is stronger among those Albertans who would vote Conservative or Social Credit, the fact remains that a majority of Albertans – regardless of how they vote – want an elected Senate.

FIGURE 4: The Three Options Among Different Groups of Albertans

VARIABLES		ELECT	ABOLISH	APPOINT	UNSURE
SEX	Male (n=492)	59%	27%	11%	2%
	Female (n=508)	63%	19%	12%	5%
AGE	18-24 (n=142)	55%	15%	26%	3%
	25-44 (n=477)	63%	21%	11%	4%
	45-64 (n=285)	61%	28%	7%	4%
	65 + (n=94)	62%	30%	7%	1%
REGION	Calgary (n=285)	62%	21%	13%	3%
	Edmonton (n=229)	57%	27%	11%	4%
	Smaller Cities (n=88)	66%	20%	11%	2%
	Rural (north) (n=174)	59%	25%	8%	7%
	Rural (central) (n=113)	66%	21%	11%	2%
EDUCATION	Rural (south) (n=112)	64%	20%	14%	2%
	< High School (n=24)	49%	18%	25%	8%
	High School (n=356)	56%	26%	12%	6%
	College (n=257)	66%	23%	9%	3%
	University (n=358)	64%	21%	12%	3%
INCOME	< \$20,000 (n=141)	56%	19%	18%	7%
	Up to \$30,000 (n=121)	66%	17%	10%	7%
	Up to \$40,000 (n=131)	62%	24%	10%	5%
	Up to \$60,000 (n=206)	65%	24%	10%	1%
	\$60,000 + (n=289)	65%	23%	11%	2%

SOURCE: CWF-EnviroNics Survey, August 1998. NOTE: Some rows may not total 100% due to rounding.

But partisan preference is only one dimension that could impact the views of Albertans on the Senate. What about differences generated based on their income, age, or where they live?

Based on these factors, the picture that emerges is quite impressive (*Figure 4*). The spread of support for the three Senate options of election, abolition, and the status quo is very even across the entire province and among all types of Albertans. At least 57% of Albertans in every region, 55% of Albertans in every age group, 50% at every level of educational achievement, and 56% in every income group favour an elected Senate over abolishment or the status quo. There is no sign of a significant gender gap either – 63% of women and 59% of men think the Senate should be elected.

There are some differences to be sure, but these are not appreciably large, and more important, most of them are not statistically significant.¹ In fact, the only differences that are statistically significant are that men and older Albertans are perhaps more likely to support abolition than are women and younger Albertans. Younger Albertans are also more likely to support the status quo of appointing Senators. While it seems that those with less education and lower income are also more likely to support appointment, this difference, given the small sample size (or “n”), is not large enough to ensure that it actually exists. The difference could also be due to chance.

There are no particular attributes that identify Albertans who want an elected Senate. A majority of Albertans – whether male or female, young or old, holding a university degree or a high school diploma, earning \$60,000 or \$20,000, living in Calgary, Edmonton, another city, or in rural Alberta – prefer an elected Senate. There are some differences, however, between those who support the status quo and those who want the Senate abolished. Men are slightly more likely than women to favour abolition, as are older Albertans. On average, younger Albertans are three times more likely to favour the status quo than are older Albertans.

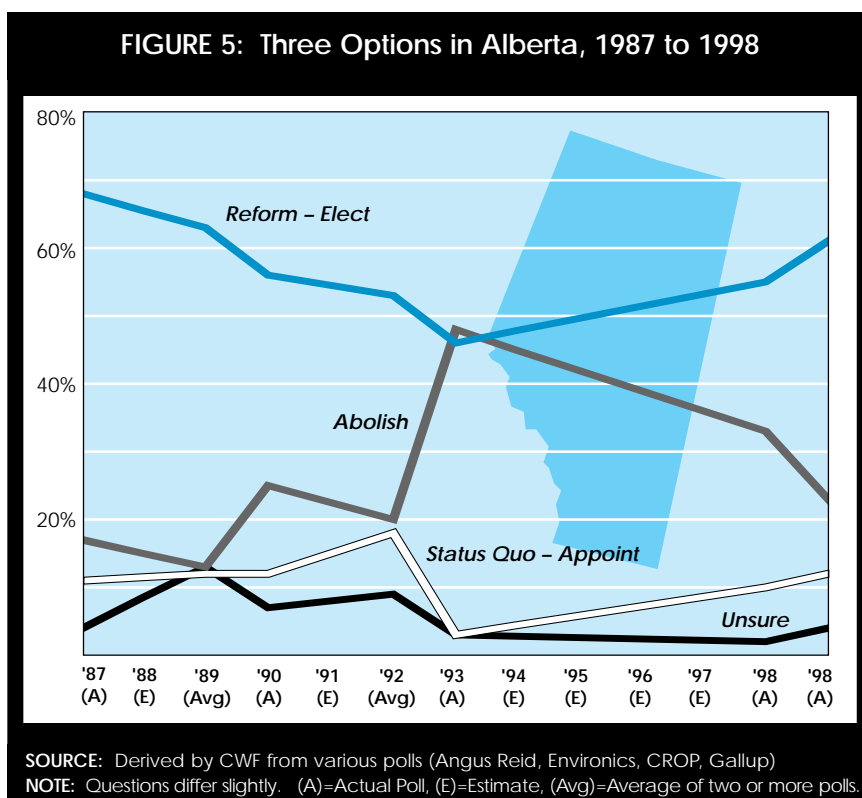
1. The concept of statistical significance is used to determine the probability of two different poll results occurring by chance. The standard significance test is that any difference between two groups in a poll must have a significance level of 5% or better. In other words, the chances must be less than 1 in 20 that any difference between two groups could occur by chance as opposed to actually existing in the population. The calculation of this 5% significance level depends on the size of the percentage difference between the two subsample groups and the number of respondents in those two subsamples.

EVOLUTION OF THE SENATE REFORM DEBATE IN ALBERTA

The Canada West-EnviroNics survey conducted in August of 1998 found that election of the Senate is the number one choice for the majority (61%) of Albertans. Abolishment follows a distant second at 23%, while the status quo is supported only by a handful of Albertans. How then, does our survey compare with past surveys in Alberta?

For purposes of this discussion, we can use a May 1987 poll conducted by the Angus Reid Group. In that survey, 68% of Alberta respondents said they were in favour of a “reformed” Senate. (*The 1987 Angus Reid question is different from the 1998 CWF-EnviroNics survey question which asked about “election.” On the one hand, it is quite possible for these different questions to produce different results, but comparison is still useful because for many, the notion of Senate reform does imply election*). In the 1987 survey, 17% of Albertans were in favour of abolishing the Senate and 11% were content with the status quo of appointment. Only 4% were unsure. Using the 1987 survey as our base and using other polls through to the 1998 CWF poll, we can identify three distinct periods of public opinion on Senate reform in Alberta (*Figure 5*).

- 1) *In the mid and late 1980s*, Albertans were solidly in favour of a reformed/elected Senate. Support for this option was in the 60% to 70% range, leading to a huge gap between this option and the abolition or status quo options.
- 2) *Beginning in 1990*, support in Alberta for the notion of a reformed and/or elected Senate began to slip. Support bottomed out in the summer of 1993 at 46%. At the same time, support for the idea of abolition grew quickly and remarkably. Support for the status quo also decreased.
- 3) *From 1993 to 1998*, public opinion in Alberta has rebounded to show much the same picture as 10 or 12 years ago. Support for reform/election is the most favoured option, abolition has fallen off to the 20% range, and support for the status quo remains at about 10%.



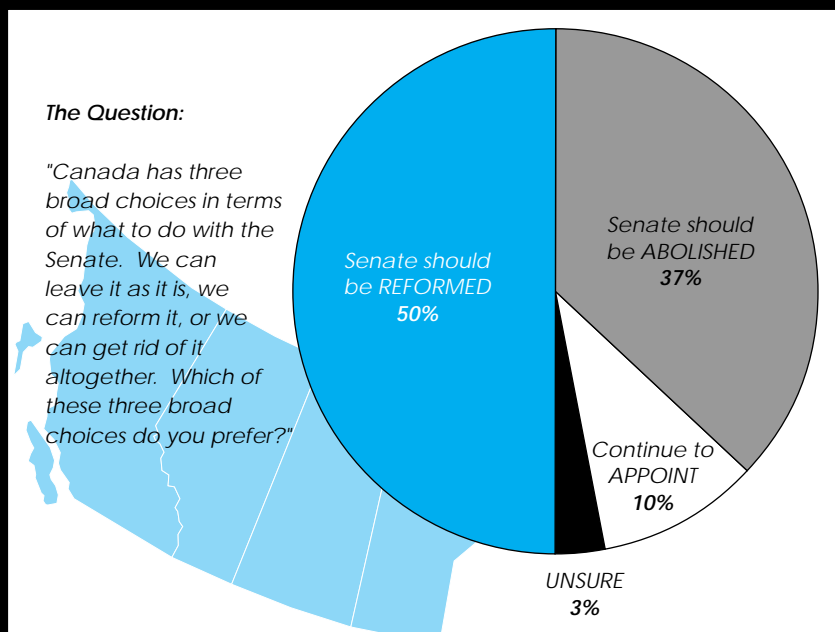
These three periods seem to suggest a certain volatility in the minds of Albertans on Senate reform. Afterall, there have been some remarkable shifts in opinion over the last 12 years. However, this finding must be placed in the context of certain events which also served to dampen enthusiasm in Alberta for the prospects of Senate reform. First, in 1989, over half a million Albertans turned out to vote in Canada’s first ever Senate election. While their hopes for an elected Senator were not dashed, they were certainly tested by a reluctant Prime Minister who waited for over eight months to appoint the winner. Secondly, in the process leading up to the Charlottetown Accord, Senate reform was often portrayed as a potential “deal-breaker” and its supporters were engaged in constant debate about whether Charlottetown had achieved meaningful Senate reform. The collapse of the accord in the 1992 referendum served notice on many Albertans that Senate reform might never be possible. While almost half of Albertans stayed with their preference for a reformed Senate, more and more began calling for its abolition. Since then, the abolitionist crusade has again retreated, support for the status quo has remained stagnant, and Senate reform/election has again assumed dominance.

Over the years, there have been shifts in opinion among Albertans on Senate reform, but there is a dominant pattern that holds most of the time. The essence of this pattern is that by a wide majority, Albertans favour Senate reform and election over abolition or the status quo.

THE STATE OF OPINION IN THE WEST TODAY

The Canada West-Environics survey was conducted only among Albertans, but it is also important to gauge the sentiments of Western Canadians to determine how Alberta fits within the larger regional picture. Are Albertans alone in their feelings about the Senate? To answer this question, we can point to a recent national survey conducted by the Angus Reid Group in April of 1998. This survey asked whether respondents agreed with the status quo, abolition, or a reformed Senate.

FIGURE 6: Western Canada and Three Options for the Senate



SOURCE: Angus Reid Survey, April 1998.

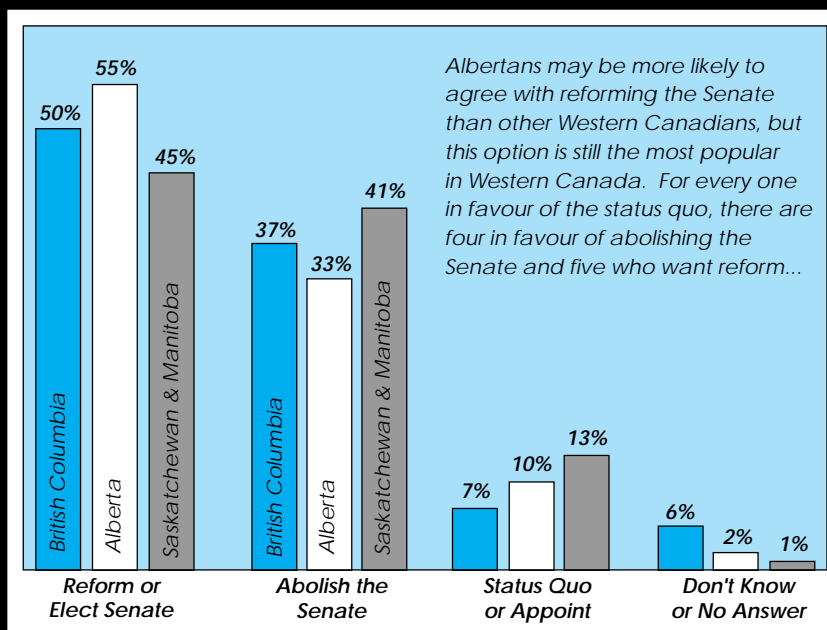
The results of this poll show that exactly 50% of all respondents in Western Canada said they favoured a "reformed" Senate (**Figure 6**). About 37% of Western respondents said they were in favour of abolition, and only 10% agreed with the status quo of Senatorial appointment. Again, few Westerners were unable to express an opinion – only 3% of respondents said they were unsure of what to do about the Senate.

Clearly, Albertans are not alone in their attitudes towards the Senate. In fact, the basic pattern of public opinion existing in Alberta is repeated across Western Canada (**Figure 7**). Reform of the Senate is the most popular option, abolition comes in second, and the status quo of appointment comes in a distant third. While the **basic** pattern of public opinion is the same, it is also important to note a few differences between the western provinces.

- 1) Support for "reform" of the Senate is the most popular option in the West, but only in Alberta did a majority support this option.
- 2) Support for abolition is stronger in Saskatchewan and Manitoba than Alberta and British Columbia. This affects public opinion in the West by lowering support for reform and boosting support for abolition.

Regarding the three broad options available for the Senate, public opinion in Western Canada follows much the same pattern as public opinion in Alberta. However, Albertans are more likely to favour Senate reform than abolition, and as such, they are arguably the leaders in the West for meaningful reform of the Senate.

FIGURE 7: Three Senate Options in the Western Provinces



SOURCE: Angus Reid Survey, April 1998.

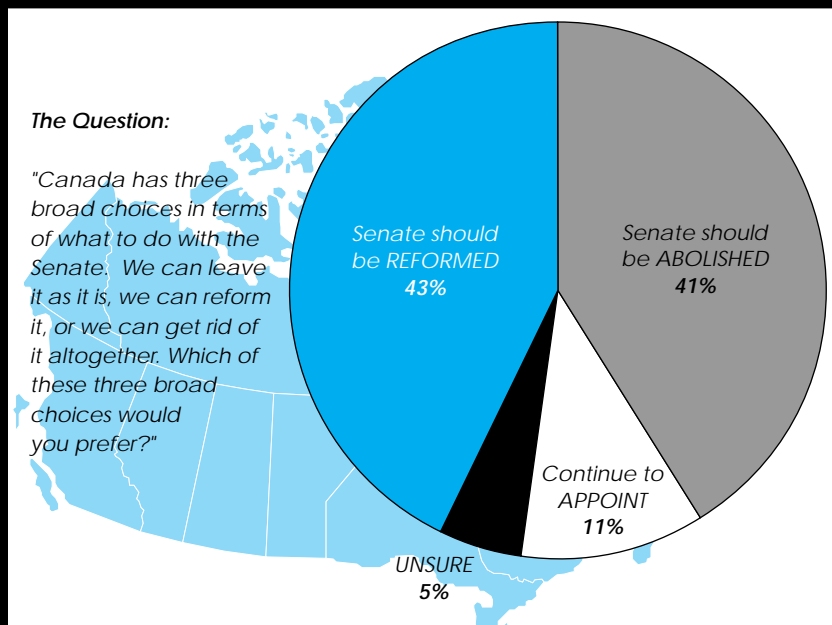
THE CURRENT STATE OF OPINION IN CANADA TODAY

Alberta's strong and persistent support for reforming the Senate is typical of the Western region generally, but opinion in Alberta is quite different from the larger national pattern. As we have seen, there is a huge gap in Alberta between those who favour reforming or electing the Senate and those who favour its abolition. In Canada, these two options are currently running neck and neck, with an equal number of Canadians on both sides (*Figure 8*).

In the April 1998 Angus Reid survey, 43% of all Canadians said the Senate should be elected. Roughly the same proportion of respondents said the Senate should be abolished (41%). The status quo of prime ministerial appointment was mentioned as the best option by 11% of the survey respondents, while 5% said they were unsure about any of the Senate options. Thus, there are two major differences between the views of Albertans (and to some extent the West) and other Canadians:

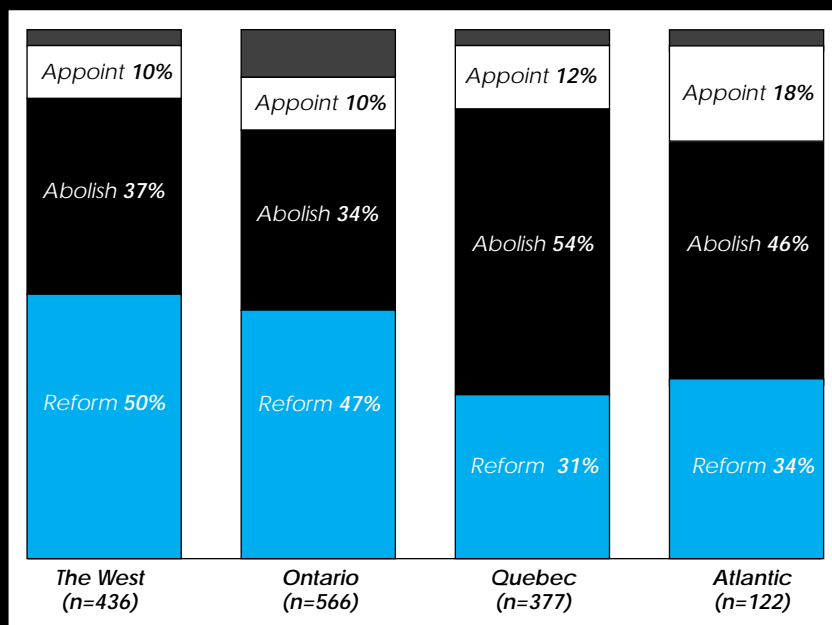
- 1) Reform of the Senate is not supported as strongly throughout Canada as it is in Alberta or the West; and
- 2) This lower level of support is not due to a higher level of satisfaction with the status quo, but to a higher level of support for the abolition option.

FIGURE 8: Canadians and the Three Senate Options, 1998



SOURCE: Angus Reid Survey, April 1998.

FIGURE 9: Regional Break-Down of Opinion in Canada, 1998



SOURCE: Angus Reid Survey, April of 1998.

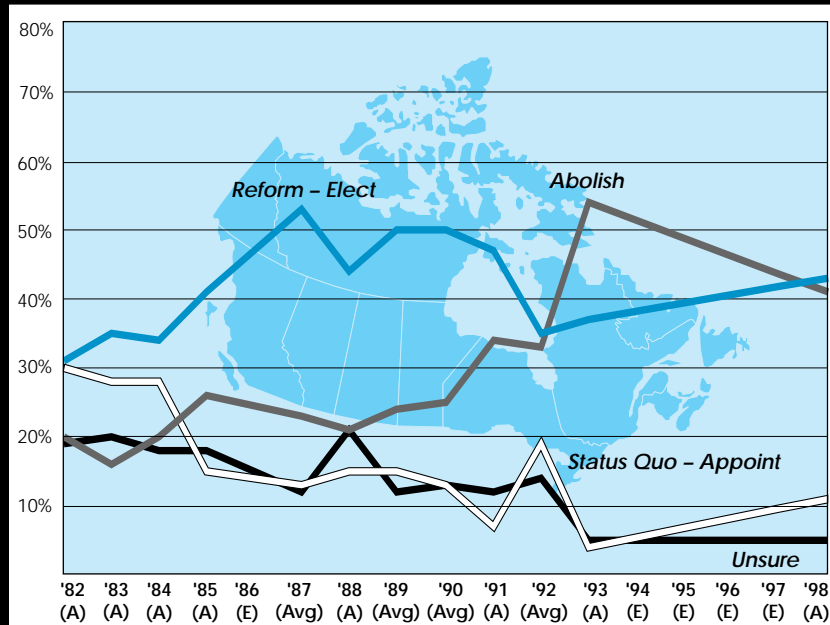
Figure 9 provides a regional break-out of the national data and yields a fuller understanding of the public opinion dynamic in play across Canada. As the figure shows, the strength of the abolishment option comes from the eastern half of the country. A majority of Quebecers (54%) are in favour of abolishing the Senate and less than one-third (31%) are in favour of reforming it. In Atlantic Canada, only 34% support Senate reform and 46% favour abolishment. Public opinion in Ontario does not differ much from that in Western Canada.

When the opinions of all Canadians are considered as whole, an equal number support Senate reform and its outright abolition. This is the result of two visions for the Senate that split on a regional basis. The West and Ontario are more likely to favour reform, while Quebec and Atlantic Canada are more likely to favour abolition.

EVOLUTION OF THE SENATE REFORM DEBATE IN CANADA

Public opinion on the Senate in Canada, like that in Alberta, has also shifted significantly in recently years (**Figure 10**). In 1982, Canada West Foundation contracted with the CROP polling organization about Canadians' attitudes on the Senate. In that survey, about 30% of respondents Canada-wide said that the Senate should be reformed. An equal number said the status quo should prevail. Roughly 20% agreed with abolishing the Senate while 20% were undecided.

FIGURE 10: Canadians and the Three Options, 1982 – 1998



SOURCE: Derived by CWF from various polls (Angus Reid, Environics, CROP, Gallup)

NOTE: Questions differ slightly. (A)=Actual Poll, (E)=Estimate, (Avg)=Average of two or more polls.

If reform of the Canadian Senate were a horse race, it would have four entries named “Reform”, “Abolition”, “Status quo”, and “Unsure.” Early in the race, “Reform” and “Status Quo” were running neck and neck in the lead, with “Abolition” and “Unsure” trailing, but by no means out of the race.

Throughout the 1980s, “Reform” pulled well ahead, while “Status Quo” began to fade steadily. “Abolition”, which started out slowly and was even in last place at one point, began to build up steam and even briefly took the lead in 1993 just as “Reform” began to falter. Since then, “Reform” has recovered, and now finds itself running neck and neck in the lead with “Abolition.” A striking feature of this Senate horse race is that “Status Quo” – an original leader – has come to rest in third place. As the race has moved along, “Unsure” has steadily declined as more and more Canadians develop an opinion on the issue.

Over the last 15 years, there have been four major elements in the evolution of Canadian public opinion on Senate reform:

- 1) **A steady and marked decline in support for the status quo:** When the Senate reform debate effectively started in the early 1980s, almost one-third of Canadians supported the status quo – that is, unilateral Prime Ministerial appointment of Senators for lengthy terms. In recent years, that figure has moved to between 5% and 10%.
- 2) **A steady erosion in the number of Canadians who are unsure of what to do about the Senate:** In the early 1980s, about 20% of Canadians were unable to formulate an opinion on the Senate. Today, Senate reform is an issue on which the vast majority of Canadians have a clear opinion and a solid preference. Only about 5% of Canadians are unable to express an opinion on what should be done.
- 3) **A steady and marked increase in support for abolition:** In 1980, abolition of the Senate was in last place along with those Canadians who were unsure of what to do about the upper house. Today, almost 40% of Canadians believe the Senate should be abolished.
- 4) **A much larger gap separate the most popular options from the least popular options:** In the early 1980s, only 10% separated the most popular options (reform and status quo) from the least popular options (abolition and unsure). Today, the size of that gap has tripled to almost 30%.

As in Alberta, Canadian public opinion on the Senate has seen some dramatic shifts. The most important of these has been a remarkable decline in support for the status quo and a significant rise in support for abolition. Senate reform has also become an issue on which the vast majority of Canadians have a clear opinion and a solid preference. In other words, the issue has become more salient for a greater number of Canadians.

Falling support for the status quo combined with more and more Canadians expressing an opinion on the Senate has fuelled the abolition option to where it now rivals the popularity of reforming the Senate. Understanding this shift provides valuable insight to recent developments on the Senate issue, but it only answers one half of a very important question – *why* has public opinion evolved this way?

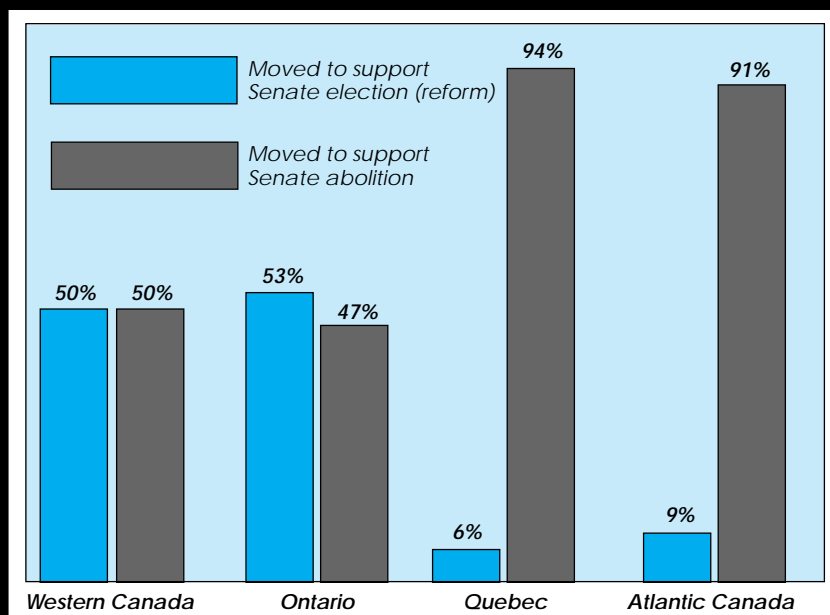
Part of the answer lies in how the different regions in Canada have changed their opinions on the Senate. **Figure 11** presents data on this shift by comparing the regional break-outs in a 1982 CWF-CROP survey to those of the 1998 Angus Reid survey. Using this data, one can determine whether support in 1982 for the status quo (and those who said they were unsure) has gone to bolster support for reform or abolition in 1998. The results of this analysis appear in **Figure 12** below.

FIGURE 11: Public Opinion Shifts in the Four Regions

	THE WEST		ONTARIO		QUEBEC		ATLANTIC	
	1982	1998	1982	1998	1982	1998	1982	1998
REFORM the Senate	34%	50%	30%	47%	29%	31%	31%	34%
ABOLISH the Senate	21%	37%	19%	34%	24%	54%	14%	46%
Continue to APPOINT the Senate	28%	10%	30%	10%	28%	12%	40%	18%
UNSURE of what to do	17%	3%	21%	9%	19%	3%	15%	2%

SOURCE: Angus Reid Survey, April 1998 and CWF-CROP Survey (1982).

FIGURE 12: Where the Shift has Landed



SOURCE: Angus Reid Survey, April 1998 and CWF-CROP Survey (1982).

In **Western Canada**, the drop in support for the status quo and the number who used to be unsure about the Senate have split evenly between reform and abolition. In **Ontario**, reform has grown slightly more. But, for all intents and purposes, this is where growth in the reform option stops.

In **Atlantic Canada**, more than 90% of the shift in status quo support and the unsures has gone towards abolition. This tendency is surprising since Atlantic Canada stands to gain from the structural over-representation that Senate reform implies. In the 1980s, former Newfoundland Premier Clyde Wells powerfully expressed this vision, and it competed with a deeply entrenched support of the status quo. But, this vision has not gained much support as the status quo crumbled. While the popularity of Senate reform has not dropped in the Atlantic and its support is higher than ever, today it is less popular than abolition.

The figures from **Quebec** are not particularly surprising. Throughout the 1980s, public opinion on the Senate was fragmented in Quebec, but there was at least some support for a reformed Senate. This support – whether the result of a perceived trade-off against constitutional recognition for Quebec or because Senate reform was attractive in its own right – has stalled. In the 1990s, public sentiment in Quebec has coalesced around the abolition option.

In future constitutional discussions, Senate reformers will not only have to fight to get their issue on the agenda, but if they do, they they will have to contend against the abolitionists even more than against the defenders of the status quo. This is a different kind of battle than the ones fought in the past, and one that will be rendered even more complex by the stark East–West division over the preferred options for the Senate.

ALBERTANS AND THE 1998 SENATE ELECTION

Aside from the broader question on Senate reform, the 1998 CWF-Environics survey also narrowed the focus by asking Albertans about their thoughts on the upcoming Senate election.

IS THE ELECTION A WASTE OF TIME?

First, Albertans were asked whether they thought the election is a waste of time because it is unclear whether the Prime Minister will appoint the winners to the Senate. The results appear in **Figure 13**, and show Albertans divided on the election. About half of the respondents (51%) felt the October election is a waste of time, while the other half (46%) disagreed.

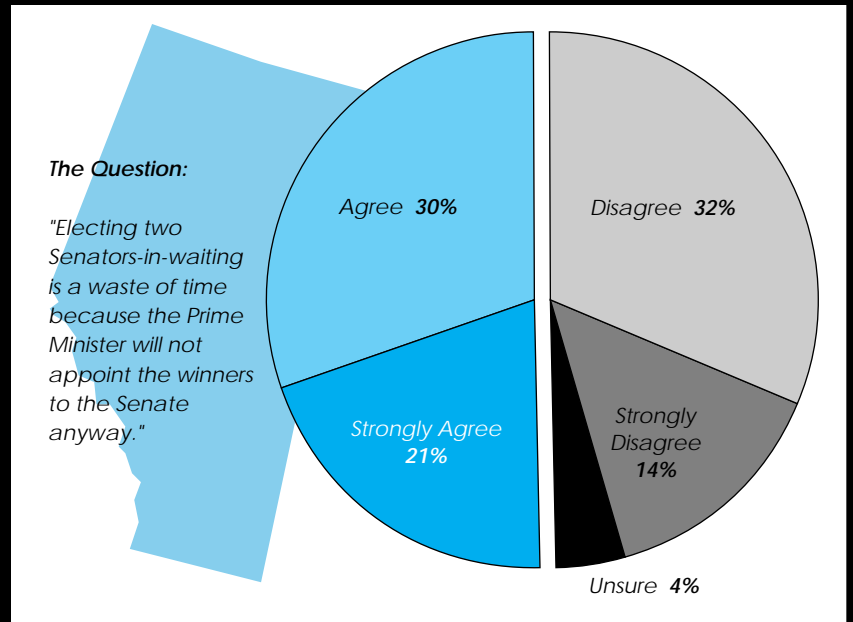
In terms of intensity on this question, one-fifth of Albertans (21%) felt “strongly” that the election was a waste of time, while only 14% said they “strongly” disagreed. Only 4% of respondents said they were unsure of what to think about the October vote.

No differences on this question emerged based on gender, and while there were some very minor differences in support for the election among Albertans with different education and income levels, no clear pattern or tendency to either support or oppose the election emerged.

Interestingly, few differences emerged based on Albertans’ party preferences. As already discussed, the different parties at both the federal and provincial levels of government have taken different positions on the election, some supporting it and others opposing it. In our survey, about half of the supporters for each and every party at both the provincial and federal levels agreed the election was or was not a waste of time. For example, at the provincial level, 51% of Conservative and NDP supporters, 49% of Liberal supporters, and 48% of those supporting other parties felt the election was a waste of time. Federally, the range of basic agreement on this question begins at a low of 48% for NDP supporters to a high of 52% for Liberals, with the rest somewhere in between.

However, some differences worth

FIGURE 13: Is the Election a Waste of Time?



SOURCE: Canada West Foundation-Environics Survey, August 1998

mentioning did occur based on two other variables. First, the data seems to suggest that Calgarians and those living in central Alberta’s rural areas may be slightly more likely to feel the election is **not** a waste of time. Between 50% and 51% of Albertans living in these two areas said the election was **not** a waste of time compared to about 40% to 43% of Albertans living elsewhere.

Second, younger Albertans, particularly those aged 18 to 24 years, are more likely than older Albertans to feel the election is **not** a waste of time. This difference among certain age groups can also be seen in the “intensity” of the responses to this question. Older Albertans (aged 65 years and over) were almost three times as likely as younger Albertans (18 to 24 years) to “strongly agree” that the election was a waste of time. About 29% of Albertans aged 65 years and over “strongly agreed” the election was a waste of time compared to 11% of those aged 18 to 24 years.

Albertans are divided on whether the October Senate election is a waste of time or not. Half of the respondents to the CWF-Environics survey said the election is a waste of time and half said it was not. This split in opinion holds for both men and women, most types of education and income groups, and the supporters of different political parties. In fact, Conservative, Liberal, NDP and Reform supporters (at both the federal and provincial level) are not any more or any less likely to hold one view or the other. However, younger Albertans, and those living in Calgary and in rural areas in the centre of the province, were slightly more likely to say the election is NOT a waste of time.

IS THE ELECTION THE “BEST WAY” TO LET OTTAWA KNOW ALBERTANS WANT SENATE REFORM?

Albertans were also asked about the election using a more positive statement. Respondents were asked whether they thought the election was “the best way” to let Ottawa know Albertans want action on Senate reform. As shown in **Figure 14**, an overwhelming majority of respondents agreed with this statement. In fact, almost 80% of respondents said they agree that the election is a good way to let Ottawa know Alberta is serious about Senate reform. Only one in five (19%) disagreed.

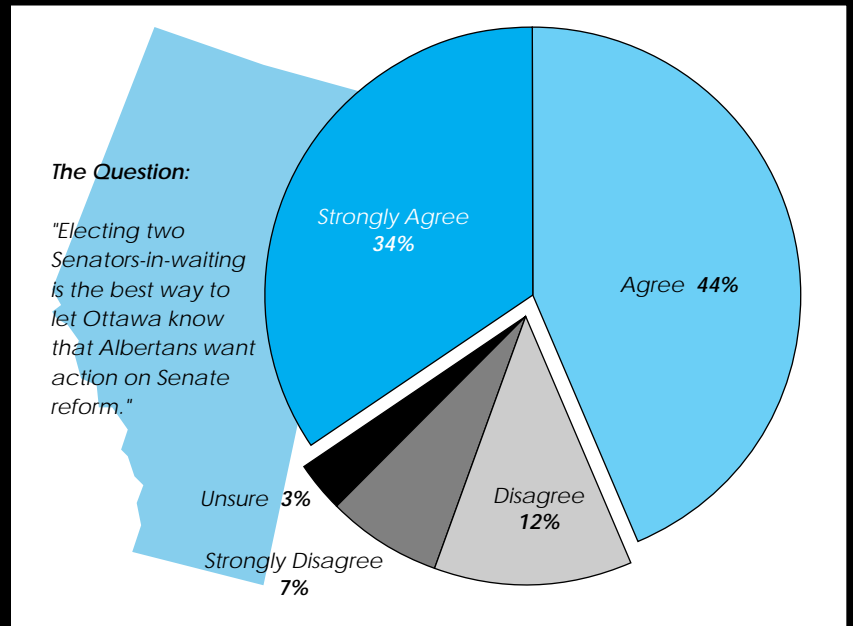
Not only did an overwhelming number of respondents agree on the merits of the election, but many said they “strongly agreed.” In fact, one in three (34%) said they “strongly agreed” that the October Senate election was the “best way” to let Ottawa know Albertans want action on Senate reform. Only 7% of respondents said they “strongly disagreed.”

The level of *basic* agreement – those who said they “agreed” and “strongly agreed” – to this statement was also consistent among the different groups of Albertans in our survey. For the most part, about 70% to 85% of all types of respondents agreed that the election was “the best way” to send Ottawa the message that Albertans are serious about Senate reform. This support is high and narrow – only 15% points separate those Albertans least likely to agree and those most likely to agree. In other words, support for the election holds for *all* types of Albertans – male or female, urban or rural, old or young, Conservative or Liberal.

There were, however, some differences with regards to how *strongly* Albertans felt about the election. First, older Albertans were much more likely to say they “strongly” agreed with this statement than were younger Albertans. Only one-quarter (27%) of respondents aged 18-24 years of age said they “strongly” agreed with this statement, but that figure rose to 44% for respondents aged 65 years and older.

Secondly, while there was basic agreement on the statement across all education levels (from 75% to 87%), the data also suggests that those with the least amount of education were more likely to “strongly agree” on the merits of the election. Only about one-third of those with a university, college or high school education said they “strongly agreed” compared to 60% of those with less than high school. This is an interesting finding,, but since the sample contained so few respondents in the latter category, its significance is diminished somewhat as the spread cannot be confirmed with absolute certainty.

FIGURE 14: Is the Election the Best Way to Move on Reform?



SOURCE: Canada West Foundation-EnviroNics Survey, August 1998

Finally, it is also worth noting some differences based on respondents' partisan preferences. While at least 70% of Albertans (regardless of their partisan stripe) support the election, provincial Conservative supporters were slightly more likely to agree (85%) than were their Liberal and NDP counterparts (73% and 70% respectively). Federally, Reform supporters were the most likely to agree (86%) closely followed by federal Conservative supporters (85%) and Liberal and NDP supporters (70% and 71% respectively).

Not surprisingly, those Albertans who said they would vote Conservative or Reform in a federal or provincial election tended to be stronger in their level of agreement about the election's ability to send Ottawa a message. Only about one-quarter of NDP and Liberal supporters at both the federal and provincial levels said they “strongly agreed” on the merits of the election. This rose to 38% for federal Conservative supporters, 43% for provincial Conservative supporters and 46% for Reform supporters.

An overwhelming majority of Albertans – almost 80% – feel that the election is the “best way” to tell Ottawa that Albertans want action on Senate reform. This high level of agreement exists among all types of Albertans, including those of different partisan preferences. Older Albertans and those with Conservative and Reform leanings are, however, more likely to “strongly” agree with this statement than are other Albertans.

SHOULD THE PRIME MINISTER HONOUR THE OUTCOME OF THE VOTE?

Albertans believe very strongly that the Prime Minister should honour the outcome of Alberta's Senate vote (*Figure 15*). The CWF-EnviroNics survey – conducted before the unexpected Senate vacancy and the Prime Minister's subsequent appointment – shows that over 80% of all respondents felt Alberta's elected Senate nominee should be appointed to the next vacancy. Clearly, the Prime Minister's insistence on choosing his own Senators is out of step with the thoughts of Albertans.

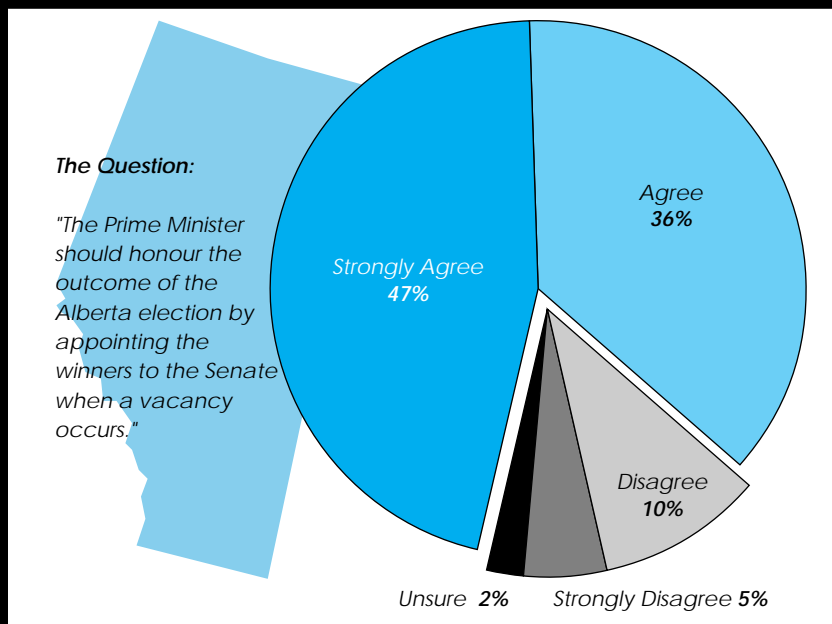
More impressive yet is the fact that almost half (47%) of the survey's respondents said they "strongly agreed" that the Prime Minister should appoint the winners. Only 5% said they "strongly disagreed."

Basic agreement or disagreement on whether the Prime Minister should appoint Alberta's elected Senators did not differ much based on where respondents lived or their level of income. From 79% to 88% of Albertans in all areas of the province were in basic agreement on what the Prime Minister should do, and while some respondents were more likely to "strongly" agree than others, these differences in intensity were relatively small, and no consistent pattern of "strong" agreement or disagreement emerged. Based on income, from 82% to 86% of respondents in all income groups expressed basic agreement. With regards to intensity, respondents in one income category were no more likely to "strongly" agree or disagree than were respondents in the other income categories.

However, some patterns did emerge when answers to this statement were tested against other characteristics. First, women were slightly more likely than men to say the Prime Minister should appoint the winners (87% vs. 79%), although just as many men as women said they "strongly agreed" or "strongly disagreed."

Second, while Albertans of all age groups were equally likely to support the Prime Minister appointing the winners, older Albertans tended to be more "strongly" in favour than younger Albertans. About one-third (35%) of respondents aged 18-24 years said they "strongly agreed that the Prime Minister should honour the outcome of the vote, but that grew to 59% for those respondents aged 65 years and older. In other words, our survey's younger respondents were simply more likely to "agree" that the PM should honour the vote, while older Albertans were more likely to "strongly" agree.

FIGURE 15: Should the Prime Minister Honour the Outcome?



SOURCE: Canada West Foundation-EnviroNics Survey, August 1998

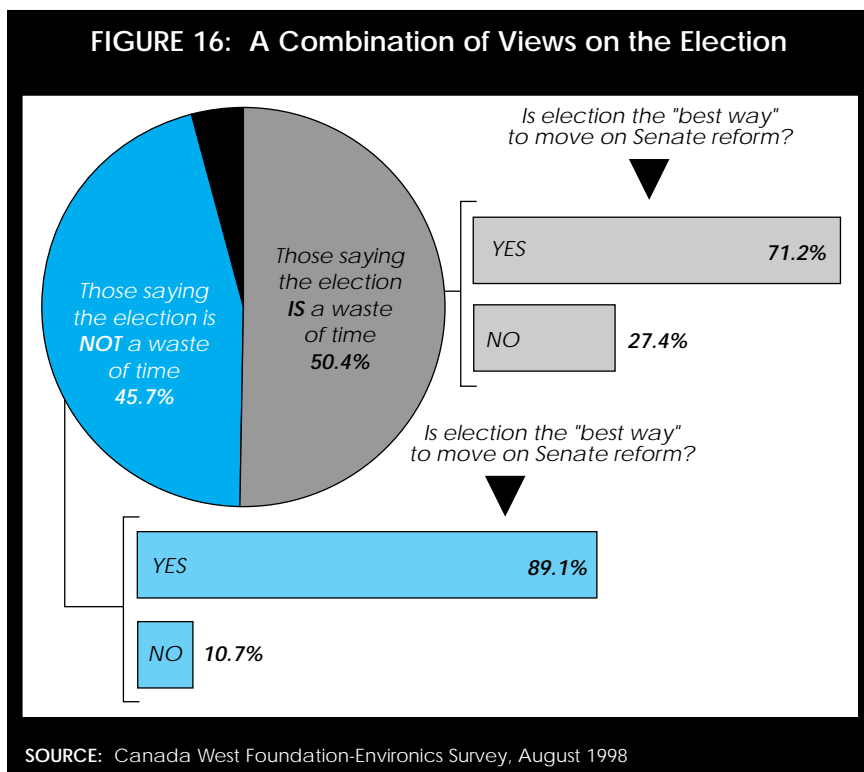
Third, while 79% to 87% of respondents in all education categories were in basic agreement about what the Prime Minister should do, those with the least amount of education may have been more inclined to "strongly" agree.

With regards to the provincial parties, 75% to 88% of all respondents said the PM should appoint the winners. Again, Conservative supporters were slightly more likely to agree (88%) than New Democrats or Liberals (75% and 77%). Provincial Conservative supporters were also more likely to "strongly" agree (55% for Conservatives versus 30% for NDP and 37% for Liberal supporters). Federally, 90% of Reform supporters and 87% of Conservatives said the PM should appoint the winners compared to 72% and 77% for the Liberals and NDP. Reformers and Conservatives were also more likely to "strongly" feel this way (61% and 49% respectively versus 34% for both Liberal and NDP supporters).

Not only do most Albertans feel the Prime Minister should respect the wishes of the Alberta electorate and appoint the winners of the election, but almost half of those polled feel "very strongly" on this point. Support for the Prime Minister honouring the outcome of the vote cuts across all types of Albertans and all types of partisan preferences. The strength of this feeling, and the evenness with which it is spread across the population (even among federal Liberal supporters) suggest that there is significant political risk to simply ignoring the vote.

THE ELECTION: A BRIEF ANALYSIS

There seems to be a certain ambivalence that emerges when Albertans are queried about the Senate election. On the one hand, Albertans are fairly evenly divided on whether the election is a “waste of time.” On the other hand, an overwhelming majority of respondents agree that electing two Senators is the “best way” of sending Ottawa the message that Albertans want action on the Senate. At first glance, this seems somewhat contradictory. How is it that half of Albertans (51%) believe the election is a waste of time yet an overwhelming majority (83%) say it is the “best way” to convince Ottawa that Alberta wants action on Senate reform?



The answers to these two questions seem contradictory, but the explanation may in fact be quite simple. First, there is a group of Albertans (46% of all survey respondents) who think that the election is **not** a waste of time. As shown in **Figure 16**, almost 90% of these respondents also agree that the election **is** the “best way” of putting pressure on Ottawa. This is a logical and consistent combination of views, and those who hold it account for the largest single group of respondents in our survey (41% of the total).

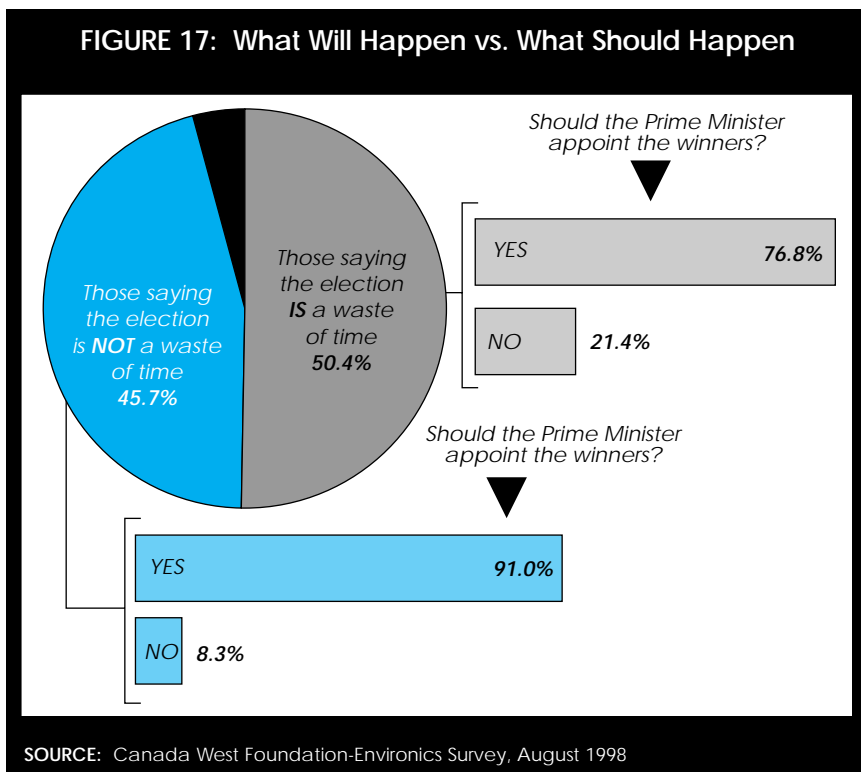
Then there are those (50% of the entire sample) who think that the vote **is** a waste of time. It is not illogical to assume that most of these would also say the vote is **not** the best way to promote reform of the Senate, but **very few** Albertans hold this combination of views. In fact, only about one-quarter of those who think the vote is a waste of time also think it is not the best way to move on Senate reform.

Thus, the problematic group (36% of the total sample and the second largest group in our survey) are those who think the election **is** a waste of time, but who also believe that it **is** the “best way” of promoting Senate reform. How do we account for this seemingly inconsistent combination of views held by over one-third of Albertans?

First, it is clear that a significant group of Albertans feel the election is waste of time in the strict sense that the winners are unlikely to ever take their seats in the Canadian Senate. This line of reasoning is justified given the Prime Minister’s expressed opposition to the election and his unwavering insistence that he will not pay any attention to the outcome. Some might even argue that this view is even confirmed given the Prime Minister’s recent decision to appoint a Senator for the province. Second, because our survey was conducted before Alberta Senator Jean Forest’s resignation created an Alberta vacancy in the Senate, respondents can also be justified in thinking the vote a “waste of time” in the further sense that there was no vacancy to which the winner could be elected and subsequently appointed. Third, it therefore must be the case that many Albertans are convinced that there is precious little that can be done right now about Senate reform. In the absence of other avenues to pursue renewal of the Senate and in light of the recent scandals surrounding the upper house, even a “waste of time” election is the best way to promote Senate reform. The election may be a waste, but it is the only “game in town.”

The single largest group of Albertans in our poll (41% of the entire survey) believe the election is not a waste of time AND that it is the best way to promote the idea of Senate reform. Only a few (14% of the entire sample) believe the election is a waste of time AND that there are better methods to pursue Senate reform. About one-third of Albertans (36%) seem to hold an inconsistent view on the value of the upcoming election. For these Albertans, they recognize that the vote may be a “waste of time,” but because it may be one of the only things that Alberta can do right now, it is “the best way” to send Ottawa the message that Albertans want action on the Senate.

The fact that half of our survey’s respondents think the election is a waste of time must also be put in context of their hope for what the election could ultimately accomplish (*Figure 17*). In other words, what Albertans **think** will happen – that the election will be a waste of time because the winners won’t be appointed – must be set against what they **hope** will happen – that the Prime Minister will appoint the winners (a hope that has certainly been tested by the Prime Minister’s recent appointment).



Once again, there are several identifiable groups of Albertans in our survey. The first group is comprised of those respondents who think the upcoming election is **not** waste of time and who also believe the Prime Minister should appoint the winners. This is a logical position to take, and indeed, over 90% of those who think the election is not a waste of time also believe the Prime Minister should appoint the winners.

The second group is comprised of those who think the election is a waste of time and who also believe that the Prime Minister should not appoint the winners. Again, this is a logical combination of views, but very few Albertans think this way. In fact, only one in five respondents who think the election is waste of time also think the Prime Minister should not appoint the winners. The rest (almost 80% of the group) believe the Prime Minister should honour the outcome of the vote.

WRAPPING UP

The results of the Canada West-EnviroNics survey show that Albertans are divided on whether the election is waste of time or not, but this does not mean that Albertans are opposed to Senate reform in general or to the idea of electing their own Senators in particular. Rather, a majority of Albertans support the idea of meaningful Senate reform, and this support is both significant and widespread. An overwhelming number of Albertans also support the idea of electing Senators as a way to send Ottawa the message that Alberta means business on Senate reform. The hope of Albertans is that this message will be heard so clearly that the winners will eventually be appointed to their position in the upper house. Given the lack of other alternatives available to move the idea of Senate reform along, the Alberta Senatorial election is seen as the “best way” to promote Alberta’s commitment to renewal of the upper chamber.

However, many Albertans also feel that the election could very well be a waste of time. Whether this turns out to be the case or not depends entirely upon the Prime Minister. By appointing a Senator for Alberta before the ballots have even been cast and tallied, he has clearly challenged Albertans and drawn a line in the sand. But that line is not fixed, and public opinion in the province suggests that Albertans will take up the Prime Minister’s challenge. It is one thing for Ottawa to make an appointment in advance of an election, but quite another to do so after Albertans have handed two “stand-by” Senators a significant democratic mandate. This mandate will total hundreds of thousands of votes, and will arguably be the largest mandate of any public decision-maker in the country.

In short, support for Senate reform and the upcoming election tends to build across the Canada West-EnviroNics survey. A solid majority of Albertans want the Senate to be reformed in such a way that Senators are elected. But even those who favour the other options agree that electing Senators is the best way to show Ottawa that Alberta is serious about Senate reform. Most of those who disagree with the merits of the election still say that the Prime Minister should honour Albertans’ democratic choice. Even a majority of those supporting the federal Liberal Party and its provincial counterpart favour Senate reform and the upcoming election. The same level of agreement exists among supporters of the federal and provincial NDP.

TAKING A LOOK: PRIMARY CONCLUSIONS

1) *In terms of public opinion, the status quo is dead:* The current practice of appointing Senators by prime ministerial fiat has lost all currency. Only one in ten Canadians supports an appointed Senate, and this sentiment carries from one end of the country to the other – from the West through to Ontario, Quebec and Atlantic Canada. The Prime Minister’s determination to continue appointing Senators is clearly out of step with public opinion and is supported only by a handful of Canadians.

2) *By a wide majority, Albertans support Senate reform:* Albertans of all ages, all regions, all income and education levels, both genders, and all political stripes support reform/election of the Senate. The idea of abolishing the Senate runs a distant second. While Albertans did flirt with abolition for a brief period following the demise of the Charlottetown Accord, support for this option has dropped dramatically. For every Albertan who still maintains faith in the status quo of appointing Senators, there are two who want the Senate abolished and six who want to see it elected. The views of Albertans are not out of step with the views of other Western Canadians.

3) *Nationally, support for a reformed and elected Senate remains high, but its numbers are rivaled by support for abolition:* In Canada today, there is a “close race” between reform and abolition as options for the Senate. However, this stronger support for abolition comes not at the expense of support for Senate reform, but rather, from the total collapse over the last decade of support for the status quo. In other words, Canadians from coast to coast are united in their disdain for the appointment of Senators, but divided on the other options. There is much stronger support for abolition than for reform in the five eastern-most provinces (Quebec and Atlantic Canada) and there is much stronger support for reform than abolition in the five western-most provinces (Ontario and the West). Paradoxically, this regional saw-off has only served to strengthen the status quo as it faces a divided attack rather than a united one.

4) *There is strong support for the Alberta election and its intended purpose:* An overwhelming majority of Albertans support the idea of electing Senate nominees. Indeed, over 80% of Albertans feel that the October election is the “best way” to keep the drive for Senate reform alive, and that the Prime Minister should honour the outcome by appointing the winners. This support can be found in all areas of the province and among all types of Albertans, although some do feel stronger on this point than others. Most important, support for the October election is not restricted to Albertans with a certain political stripe. In fact, supporters of all parties – at both the federal and provincial level – are in basic agreement with the election and hope the Prime Minister accepts the outcome.

5) *The firm opinions of many Albertans on Senate reform and the lack of support across Canada for the status quo means the October 19th Senate election retains the potential of having a significant impact on Canada:* The field for Alberta’s Senate election has shifted from a somewhat sleepy affair in which only one political party was running candidates to a contest that many perceive will ultimately pit the will of Albertans against the federal government’s defense of the status quo. By filling an Alberta vacancy in the Senate by appointment rather than waiting for the election, the Prime Minister is challenging Albertans on their commitment to Senate reform. Given the state of current opinion in the province, Albertans will likely accept his challenge.

6) *The Alberta government is more closely in tune with the opinions of Albertans than many perceive:* Premier Klein’s strategy to pursue Senate reform through a “stand-by” election clearly strikes a chord with most Albertans – even those who support other political parties than his own. While this strategy may have suffered a setback given the Prime Minister’s recent Senate appointment, the Alberta government does have public opinion in its corner. As the election proceeds, public opinion will certainly up the ante in what is turning into a game of Senate brinkmanship.

Canada West Foundation is a non-profit and non-partisan research institute located in Calgary, Alberta. This document is the first in a series of reports released by the Foundation for Alberta’s upcoming Senate election. The purpose of this series is to inform Albertans and other Canadians about the Senate, its need for reform, and how electing Senators at the provincial level can advance Senate reform. This report was written by Canada West Research Analyst Casey Vander Ploeg and CWF Research Associate Dr. Peter McCormick along with CWF Research Assistant Glenn Blackett. Because of the independence given the authors in writing this report, the opinions and recommendations expressed within are those of the authors only, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Canada West Foundation Council, its members, or donors. Permission is hereby given by the copyright owners for any and all reproduction of this report in its entirety for non-profit and educational purposes.