

The Evolution of Climate Framing in Alberta Politics

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499 Honours Thesis

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May 2021

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Acknowledgments

I would first like to thank my family for their amazing support and encouragement throughout the years. From the very beginning of my education, they supported me even when I did not believe in myself, and truly could not have made it this far without them. I would also like to thank Dr. Lori Thorlakson for acting as my supervisor for the year. This was a whole new world for me, and I would have remained completely lost without her guidance and mentorship. Lastly, I need to express my sincerest gratitude to Dr. Linda Trimble and my peers in the 499 honours seminar for their amazing assistance, and taking this journey with me. These were truly unprecedeted times, and they made it manageable for me. It took a group effort to accomplish what we did this year, and I will never forget this group of amazing people who I had the privilege of working with.

List of Abbreviations

AB NDP: Alberta New Democratic Party

CCS: Carbon Capture and Storage

PC Party: Progressive Conservative Party

UCP: United Conservative Party

Introduction

Research has found that a belief in anthropogenic climate change, and public approval of policies to combat it, are lower in Alberta compared to the rest of Canada.¹ To build on this work, I explored one hundred Albertan news and opinion articles from 1997-2005 and 2015-2020, utilizing a media frame analysis to answer the question: How has the framing of climate change by Alberta politicians evolved over time? These two time periods were chosen because they are both times during which Alberta grappled with debate about an international climate treaty. Furthermore, public perceptions about climate change and the necessity to address it have evolved dramatically between 2005 and 2015.

From this research, I found that politicians from all the major political parties in Alberta framed climate change through an economic lens in both time periods, but their proposals to combat climate change varied greatly. Furthermore, the debate among politicians shifted from whether climate change should be addressed, to how it would best be addressed. This paper builds on previous research which demonstrated that elite discourse significantly influences public perceptions of climate change,² and can help us to better understand the saliency of climate change among Albertans.

Background

Before I will analyze the framing of climate change by provincial parties, it is important that I first provide context of what was occurring during, and in between, the two time periods I am analyzing. There are some key factors that I will focus on throughout this overview,

¹ Mildenberger et al., "The Distribution of Climate Change Public Opinion in Canada."

² Carmichael and Brulle, "Elite Cues, Media Coverage, and Public Concern."

including the health of Alberta's oil and gas sector, and national and international developments that impacted the demand for oil. I am beginning with an overview of this context because partisan rhetoric does not develop in a vacuum, and one cannot try to understand why certain rhetoric is used without first understanding the situations in which that rhetoric developed.

First Period (1997-2005)

Canada first signed onto the Kyoto Protocol in the late 1990s and ratified it in 2002.³ From 2002 until its withdrawal from the agreement in 2011, Canada had been criticized for not being on track to reach its commitment, which was a reduction of CO₂ emissions by 17% under 2005 levels.⁴ The target proposed by Alberta, which were proposed to be chiefly accomplished through technological innovation, fell short of both the Kyoto Protocol and federal climate commitments.⁵ This can be, at least partially, attributed to the contributions that the oil and gas sector were making to Alberta's economy and budget. Before the 2008 recession, Alberta's oil and gas sector was earning tens of billions of dollars in profits each year; in 2005 for example, it generated a combined \$30 billion in profits and paid \$7.5 billion in income taxes, a 65% rise from 2004.⁶

Between Periods (2008-2014)

Fast forward to the months leading up to the 2008 recession, and oil prices were in the ballpark of \$100 per barrel and expected to climb further in the coming years.⁷ Within six months of the 2008 economic crash, the long-term forecast for oil surpassed where it was before

³ CBC News, "Canada Pulls out of Kyoto Protocol | CBC News."

⁴ CBC News, "Canada Pulls out of Kyoto Protocol | CBC News."

⁵ Calgary Herald, "Timeline: Alberta and the fight against climate change."

⁶ Statistics Canada, "Boom Times."

⁷ Leach, "Why This Oil Crash Could Be Worse for Alberta than the One in 2008."

the recession, and Alberta collected billions of dollars in royalties.⁸ Alberta's provincial election of 2012, held only four years after the 2008 financial crisis, was notably the last election in which the Progressive Conservative Party and the Wildrose Party faced each other as the front-runners.⁹ Neither of these parties wanted to drastically alter provincial energy policies.¹⁰ In fact, they both relied heavily on donations from resource companies.¹¹ In the year prior to this election, the federal government, led by Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper, officially pulled Canada out of the Kyoto Protocol.¹²

The Alberta PC party, who won the provincial election and formed government, took a large gamble with the budget that it proposed during the campaign; the Toronto Star calculated that the price of oil would need to reach approximately \$200 per barrel in order for the government to pay for all of its promised spending.¹³ Criticism regarding the environmental impact of Alberta's oil and gas industry had started to rise in the United States and Europe, which forced the Alberta and Canadian governments to begin exploring the balance between the environment and the economy.¹⁴ However, the status quo of development was still the preferred path of the provincial and federal governments.¹⁵

Second Period (2015-2020)

In 2015, the AB NDPs led by Rachel Notley were elected to govern Alberta for the first time in the party's history – ending 44 years of continuous PC rule in the process.¹⁶ Unlike

⁸ Leach, "Why This Oil Crash Could Be Worse for Alberta than the One in 2008."

⁹ Gillian Steward, "Oil Industry the Big Winner in Alberta Election."

¹⁰ Gillian Steward, "Oil Industry the Big Winner in Alberta Election."

¹¹ Gillian Steward, "Oil Industry the Big Winner in Alberta Election."

¹² CBC News, "Canada Pulls out of Kyoto Protocol | CBC News."

¹³ Gillian Steward, "Oil Industry the Big Winner in Alberta Election."

¹⁴ Gillian Steward, "Oil Industry the Big Winner in Alberta Election."

¹⁵ Gillian Steward, "Oil Industry the Big Winner in Alberta Election."

¹⁶ Reuters, "New Democrats Win Alberta Election as Canada's Oil Sands Dump Conservatives."

previous Premiers, Rachel Notley was upfront that the fossil fuel industries did not have a long-term future in Alberta.¹⁷ Later that year, Canada signed onto the Paris Climate Agreement, which succeeded the Kyoto Protocol.¹⁸ The Paris Agreement was adopted by many more nations than the Kyoto Protocol; over 190 nations signed the Paris Agreement.¹⁹ There is a political will to combat climate change that was not present when the Kyoto Protocol was negotiated and ratified, and this makes it more difficult for members to step back from their commitments.²⁰

On top of these developments, Alberta also suffered a major economic recession in 2015, when the price of oil plunged from over \$100 per barrel, to under \$40 per barrel.²¹ This saw the layoffs of over thirty thousand workers by the summer of 2015, and it was estimated that the oil sector would take multiple years to recover to pre-2015 oil prices.²² The AB NDPs lost power in 2019, after serving in the government for one term.²³

Despite the governing UCP's attempts to aid the oil and gas sector, the price of oil did not surpass \$60 per-barrel in 2019, let alone \$100 per-barrel as it had in the oil sector's heydays.²⁴ Renewable energy had also fallen in cost in 2019, and the International Energy Agency predicted that demand for renewable energy would continue to dramatically rise in the early 2020s.²⁵ These two factors have made it difficult for Alberta's provincial economy to recover from the

¹⁷ Suzanne Goldenberg, "No Long-Term Future in Tar Sands, Says Alberta's Premier."

¹⁸ Chris Hannay, "What Canada Agreed to in Paris."

¹⁹ Chris Hannay, "What Canada Agreed to in Paris."

²⁰ Wong, "Even without the US, the Paris Climate Agreement Can Succeed Where Its Predecessor Failed."

²¹ Kyle Bakx, "Oilpatch Bids Good Riddance to 2015, but 2016 Could Be Just as Bad | CBC News."

²² Kyle Bakx, "Oilpatch Bids Good Riddance to 2015, but 2016 Could Be Just as Bad | CBC News."

²³ Slav Kornik, "Alberta Breaks Record for Most Votes Cast in Provincial Election."

²⁴ Sharon J. Riley, "Alberta's Record-Low Oil Prices."

²⁵ International Energy Agency, "Renewable Energy Market Update – Analysis."

2015 recession, and its unemployment rate hovered at approximately 7% in 2019 – up from the 4-5% average it boasted at the end of 2014.²⁶

Literature Review

Mildenberger et al. surveyed Canadians to determine the distribution of public opinion regarding climate change in every provincial riding.²⁷ They found that fewer Albertans believe climate change is real, and that climate change is influenced by humans, compared to the national average.²⁸ There is not much literature that discusses the partisan rhetoric regarding climate change in specific provinces such as Alberta. Rather, most literature which discusses the framing of climate change focuses on case studies in the United States. Jason T. Carmichael and Robert J. Brulle analyzed data from 74 different surveys conducted in America between 2002-2013.²⁹ They concluded that one of the most effective influences on public opinion are political elite cues, which are often amplified by media coverage.³⁰ Political elite cues are simply the opinions that political figures hold about certain issues such as climate change, and members of the public in-turn adopt.³¹ The media is an effective amplifier of these cues because it often provides coverage on the positions and statements of these political elites, rather than reporting on the elites themselves.³² Thus, members of the public use the media to identify the opinions of political figures that they trust and support, and form their beliefs accordingly.³³

²⁶ Government of Alberta, “Unemployment Rate.”

²⁷ Mildenberger et al., “The Distribution of Climate Change Public Opinion in Canada.”

²⁸ Mildenberger et al., “The Distribution of Climate Change Public Opinion in Canada.”

²⁹ Carmichael and Brulle, “Elite Cues, Media Coverage, and Public Concern.”

³⁰ Carmichael and Brulle, “Elite Cues, Media Coverage, and Public Concern.”

³¹ Carmichael and Brulle, “Elite Cues, Media Coverage, and Public Concern.”

³² Carmichael and Brulle, “Elite Cues, Media Coverage, and Public Concern.”

³³ Carmichael and Brulle, “Elite Cues, Media Coverage, and Public Concern.”

Dunlap and McCright argue in “Organized Climate Denial” that conservative politicians have a vested interest in denying the existence of human-influenced climate change, because such a concept contradicts their core value that the free market inevitably created progress.³⁴ This in-turn would mean that government regulations would be needed in order to combat climate change, which is unacceptable to these politicians.³⁵ Focusing on the American context, Dunlap and McCright describe a number of Republican congressmen who have denied the science of climate change, tried to discredit climate scientists, and in at least one case, called for climate scientists to be criminally prosecuted.³⁶ This denialism was further institutionalized by the Bush administration from 2001-2009.³⁷ Notably, Republican politicians who supported bipartisan climate legislation were forced to back-pedal from these efforts due to pressure from supporters of, and donors to the Republican Party.³⁸

Although the remainder of the works that I include in this review do not discuss rhetoric, they still provide valuable insights into the beliefs and practices of the Alberta government, and are thus important to include. In their work “Integrated Land Management in Alberta”, Brownsey and Rayner found that the Alberta government delayed key land regulation reforms during a period of recession that faced the province.³⁹ However, even after the economy picked up due to an oil-and-gas boom, land management regulations were still “locally negotiated and

³⁴ Dunlap and McCright, “Organized Climate Change Denial.”

³⁵ Dunlap and McCright, “Organized Climate Change Denial.”

³⁶ Dunlap and McCright, “Organized Climate Change Denial.”

³⁷ Dunlap and McCright, “Organized Climate Change Denial.”

³⁸ Dunlap and McCright, “Organized Climate Change Denial.”

³⁹ Brownsey and Rayner, “Integrated Land Management in Alberta.”

relatively relaxed".⁴⁰ This meant that resource companies would negotiate land use with the province on an individual basis, setting the stage for favouritism and "clientist politics".⁴¹

Similarly, Carter et al. noted that in 2010, the Alberta government went as far as blocking certain environmental groups from submitting concerns on a tar sands project; a move later deemed illegal in court.⁴² The authors further noted that the process for such groups, as well as land owners, to have their voices heard in such developments was difficult and expensive.⁴³ Meanwhile, Adkin found that millions of dollars earmarked for research into green technology was actually used to subsidize oil-and-gas industry "green" research and development.⁴⁴ She also discusses the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers' concerns with acting on climate change; they argued that the government and industry should partner to find solutions to climate change.⁴⁵ She further found that both the Progressive Conservative government and the subsequent New Democrat government took up this approach in earnest, although the former did more-so than the latter.⁴⁶ They used a variety of funds to allocate millions of dollars to help the oil-and-gas sector find solutions to climate change.⁴⁷

Boyd found that climate action seldom occurred organically in Alberta.⁴⁸ Although it is responsible for over one third of Canada's greenhouse gas emissions, it usually acted as a result of external pressures rather than a desire among Albertans to fight climate change.⁴⁹ These

⁴⁰ Brownsey and Rayner, "Integrated Land Management in Alberta."

⁴¹ Brownsey and Rayner, "Integrated Land Management in Alberta."

⁴² Carter Angela V., Fraser Gail S., and Zalik Anna, "Environmental Policy Convergence in Canada's Fossil Fuel Provinces?"

⁴³ Carter Angela V., Fraser Gail S., and Zalik Anna, "Environmental Policy Convergence in Canada's Fossil Fuel Provinces?"

⁴⁴ Adkin, "Technology Innovation as a Response to Climate Change."

⁴⁵ Adkin, "Technology Innovation as a Response to Climate Change."

⁴⁶ Adkin, "Technology Innovation as a Response to Climate Change."

⁴⁷ Adkin, "Technology Innovation as a Response to Climate Change."

⁴⁸ Boyd, "A Province under Pressure."

⁴⁹ Boyd, "A Province under Pressure."

pressures included the need to maintain economic competitiveness, and the desire for a better social licence.⁵⁰ Adkin et al. argued that the Alberta government believed that the Kyoto Protocol was a major threat to its economic wellbeing.⁵¹ Thus, in 2002, once it learned that over seventy percent of Albertans supported it to some degree, the Alberta government launched a major public awareness campaign that successfully reversed public support for the Protocol.⁵² In 2009, when the protocol was finalized, the Alberta government released its own climate plan to oppose the Kyoto Protocol's approach.⁵³ It included pillars such as carbon capture and storage and "clean coal"; proposals which were more favourable to the resource sector than a carbon tax or cap and trade system.⁵⁴

In a third paper, Adkin argues that no drastic change can occur unless the Alberta government conducts a major education campaign on climate change, such as the risks posed by unmitigated climate change, and how Alberta can cope.⁵⁵ She also raises the concept of "climate capitalism", which was first defined by Jean-Philippe Sapinski as "a regime of capital accumulation founded on climatically benign production technologies and increased energy efficiency."⁵⁶ Climate capitalism involves the pricing of carbon, investments in private research and development, and the implementation of other financial mechanisms which encourage private companies to develop renewable energy, carbon capture and storage (CCS), and other technologies which decarbonize our society and take carbon out of the atmosphere.⁵⁷ Climate capitalism foresees the use of natural gas as a transition energy source between coal – which

⁵⁰ Boyd, "A Province under Pressure."

⁵¹ Adkin et al., "Can Public Engagement Democratize Environmental Policymaking in a Resource-Dependent State?"

⁵² Adkin et al., "Can Public Engagement Democratize Environmental Policymaking in a Resource-Dependent State?"

⁵³ Adkin et al., "Can Public Engagement Democratize Environmental Policymaking in a Resource-Dependent State?"

⁵⁴ Adkin et al., "Can Public Engagement Democratize Environmental Policymaking in a Resource-Dependent State?"

⁵⁵ Adkin, "Crossroads in Alberta."

⁵⁶ Sapinski, "Constructing Climate Capitalism."

⁵⁷ Adkin, "Crossroads in Alberta."

pollutes more – and renewable energy, and it also involves the compensation of companies for the stranded assets that they can no longer profit from due to the shift to a zero-carbon economy.⁵⁸

Wellstead and Stedman claim that perceptions of climate change among policy makers in Canada were most stable along ideological lines.⁵⁹ Geo Takach identifies fifteen frames through which Alberta negotiates its environmental issues.⁶⁰ These frames include greed, ethical oil, and money.⁶¹ According to Kendra Isaac's review of *Some like it Cold*, Paehlke argues that there cannot be a balance struck between oilsands development and the environment as many governments have claimed.⁶²

Overall, there is a sizeable number of articles that explore and analyze the policies and approaches of the Alberta government regarding the oil and gas sector. However, there are relatively few articles which explore the rhetoric used by previous Alberta governments to frame climate change, and no articles that I found give any consideration to other political parties in Alberta. Deviating from the previous literature, I hope to fill a gap regarding the rhetoric that parties in Alberta use, and the factors that shape this rhetoric. There is extensive literature on the policies of the provincial governments in Alberta, and their track record of climate (in)action, but there is comparatively little attention given to the ways in-which these governments frame climate change, and why.

⁵⁸ Adkin, "Crossroads in Alberta."

⁵⁹ Wellstead and Stedman, "Climate Change Policy Capacity at the Sub-National Government Level."

⁶⁰ Takach, *Tar Wars : Oil, Environment and Alberta's Image*.

⁶¹ Takach, *Tar Wars : Oil, Environment and Alberta's Image*.

⁶² Isaac, "Review of Some like It Cold."

It is important to understand how and why this rhetoric has shifted over time because, as the literature described above details, this rhetoric is an important influence on the beliefs and attitudes of the public. If a party spends time and resources questioning the science of climate change, it does not matter if they still take actions to help the environment; many of their supporters will remain skeptical of climate change, and this will greatly harm efforts to address it.

Methodology and Scope

This paper consists of a qualitative and quantitative analysis of media reports at two different points in recent Albertan history, with the objective being to trace the evolution of partisan climate rhetoric in Alberta, and why certain political parties use certain language to describe – or deny – anthropogenic climate change at certain points in time. The media reports that I include in my analysis center around two time periods: 1997-2005, when the Kyoto Protocol was a contentious source of debate in Alberta; and 2015-2020, when the Paris Climate Accord led to a large increase in the salience of climate change among many Albertan voters. By analyzing news articles within these periods, I hope to answer the question: How has the framing of climate change by Alberta politicians evolved over time?

I chose the Kyoto Protocol as a starting point because it sparked one of the first major debates surrounding climate policy in Canada, and as I will discuss further in this paper, the Alberta government spent a significant amount of effort and resources into shifting public opinion against the accord.⁶³ Conversely, I finish this paper by discussing the rhetoric employed during the debate surrounding the Paris Agreement for similar reasons. Unlike the first period, I

⁶³ Adkin et al., “Can Public Engagement Democratize Environmental Policymaking in a Resource-Dependent State?”

extended the timeframe of the second period beyond Canada's ratification of the Paris Climate Accord because climate change remained a salient topic among Albertans.

The media reports which I analyzed were collected from the Proquest database. I collected 100 articles in total, with 50 from each time period. My search parameters are provided in the appendix. These articles came from a total of 34 news publications from across Canada; encompassing small regional publications such as the North Bay Nugget, up to large national organizations like the Globe and Mail. The articles, and their publishers, were chosen mostly at random to ensure that I did not introduce too much bias when selecting resources to draw from. However, I did look through every article before selecting them to ensure that they quoted or paraphrased an Alberta politician, and that it was relevant to this project.

I applied a coding frame to each article which captured a variety of details, but four frame elements are of central importance to this paper. These four questions aim to capture whether Alberta provincial politicians quoted or paraphrased in the articles: Mentioned the science of climate change, mentioned fossil fuels, mentioned international climate treaties, and/or mentioned 'solutions' for climate change – whether they be technical or policy-based. These frames are important to analyze because they recognize the diversity of ways in-which politicians can discuss climate change. For example, a politician might not explicitly say the words "climate change" when discussing Alberta's resource sector, but their statements regarding related topics can still be very revealing.

My method of analysis does have two key weaknesses. Firstly, media publications have inherent biases in their news and opinion columns, and this impacted the quality of the information that I accessed. While some articles I used were relatively factually and unbiased news articles, others were opinion pieces with very clear agendas. I accounted for this as best as I

could, but such biases cannot be scrubbed entirely. Secondly, I did not examine public opinion polling data in conjunction with the media content analysis. For the purposes of this project, I focused on what politicians said and how their framing changed over time, rather than how their words and framing changes were impacted by public opinion. Although the research produced by Mildenberger et al. provides great insight into public opinion at the present, it does not give insight into how public opinion in Alberta regarding climate change evolved over time. I will discuss this in further detail near the end of this paper.

It is important to explore this topic because partisan discourse has one of the largest influences on public opinion regarding climate change, with studies finding that it shift public opinion to a larger degree than weather events.⁶⁴ Thus, an analysis such as this can help to explain what has shaped Alberta's climate policy over time, and why the province continues to see lower acceptance rates of human-influenced climate change compared to the rest of Canada.

Findings

As previously discussed, four frame elements in particular are central to my analysis:
Does the politician who was quoted or paraphrased...

V8. Mention the science of climate change (e.g. Acceptance or denial)?

V9. Discuss fossil fuels (e.g. Advocate for the use of oil, or mention 'clean coal' technology)?

⁶⁴ Carmichael and Brulle, "Elite Cues, Media Coverage, and Public Concern."

V10. Mention international climate treaties (e.g. the Kyoto Protocol or the Paris Agreement)?

V11. Discuss climate change solutions (e.g. Policy or technology proposals)?

	V8	V9	V10	V11
1997-2005	8	4	45	22
2015-2020	16	3	7	70

Figure one: The occurrence of the aforementioned variables within the two time periods.

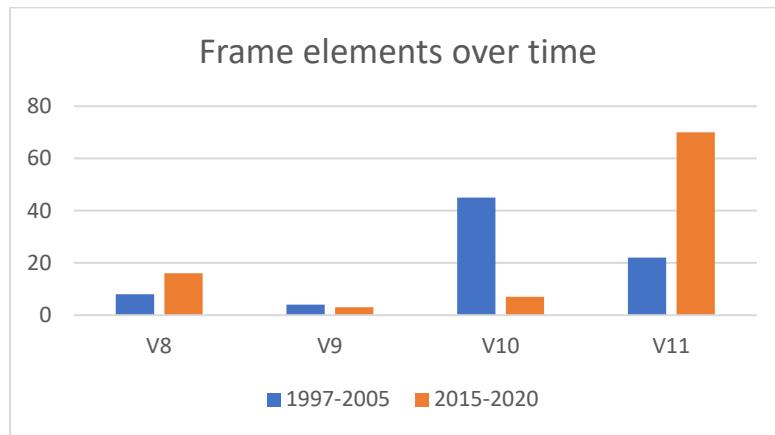


Figure two: A graph for the data in figure one

First Period

Of these frame elements, V10 and V11 were employed most often in both time periods.

Both frames were utilized predominantly through an economic lens. The first period was characterized by a domination of the discussion by the governing Progressive Conservative (PC) party under Premier Ralph Klein. Premier Klein and members of his government make up all but two of the politicians who fall under the purview of this study. When discussing climate change, the topic they discussed most frequently was the Kyoto Protocol. Klein and his caucus framed the Kyoto Protocol in a negative light – arguing that it would have a highly detrimental impact on Alberta's economy.

Their economic arguments against the agreement centered around two key themes: The emissions targets in the treaty were arbitrary, and the agreement would disadvantage Albertan industries against foreign industries which did not need to limit their emissions. Aside from economic impacts, these politicians also argued that the protocol was inferior to theoretical “made in Canada” solutions, such as commercialization of CCS technology, and that it was a federal infringement on provincial jurisdiction.

Although PC politicians mostly discussed the Kyoto Protocol, they did also make some references to other topics such as the viability of fossil fuels, and the science of climate change. These politicians, including Premier Klein and his successive Environment Ministers, mostly accepted that climate change is a real phenomenon, but argued that the science regarding the degree to-which humans influence it, if they do at all, is unsettled. At one point, Premier Klein quipped that Albertans could greatly limit their carbon emissions if they stopped breathing.⁶⁵ Meanwhile, their perceived solutions to address climate change – including ‘clean coal’ and CSS technology – were largely rooted in a goal to maintain the status quo of Alberta’s resource sector. For example, Klein advocated for clean coal technology to be included in the Kyoto Protocol as a means for Alberta to contribute to Canada’s emissions reduction targets.

During the first period, there were only two instances in-which opposition members were quoted or paraphrased talking about climate change. In both cases, they were members of the Alberta Liberal Party: Environment critic Debby Carlson and party leader Ken Nicole. Both of them were quoted in articles dating from 2002. Nicole spoke against an Alberta government anti-Kyoto advertising campaign, arguing that the government should instead encourage Albertans to

⁶⁵ The Globe and Mail, “Waiting to Exhale.”

lower energy use through conservation. Meanwhile, Carlson claimed that the provincial government would support the Kyoto Protocol if it truly cared about listening to public opinion, since polls showed that most Albertans supported it at the time.

	PC	Wildrose	AB NDP	AB Party	AB Liberal
1997-					
2005	61	0	0	0	2
2015-					
2020	6	15	33	3	6

Figure three: The number of times which a member of each political party was quoted or paraphrased.

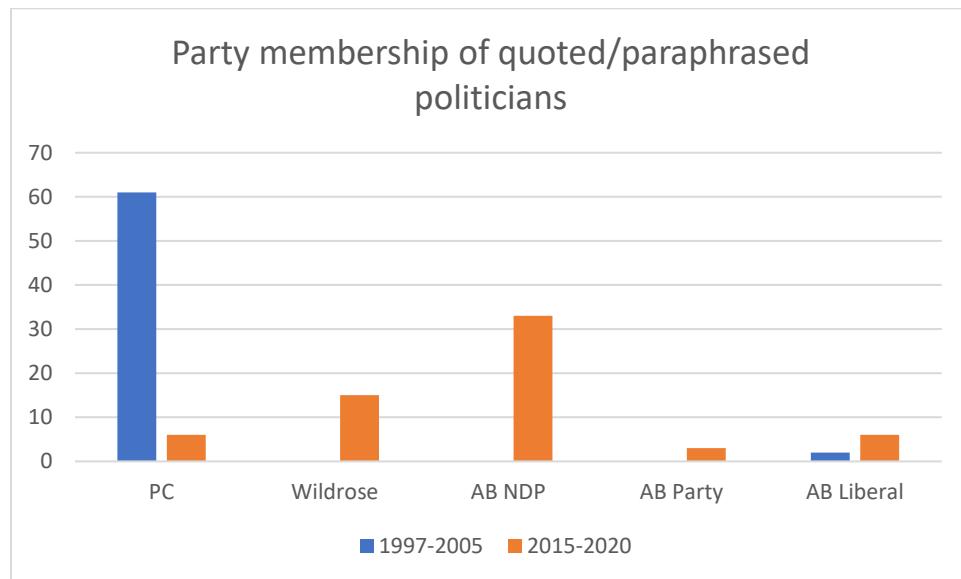


Figure four: A graph of the data within figure three.

Second Period

As demonstrated by figures three and four, Alberta's political landscape changed quite a bit in the ten years after Canada ratified the Kyoto Protocol. The PC government was only in power until October 2015, and nobody from their party referenced the Paris Agreement during

this time. Similarly, the agreement was only mentioned a handful of times prior to its ratification in 2015 and the years afterwards. Aside from one adversarial remark interim PC leader Rick McIver made regarding it – when he warned the AB NDP government not to “window shop” for policies in preparation of the 2015 Paris conference – the Paris Agreement has generally been accepted among the mainstream political parties within Alberta. Rather than focusing on the validity of the agreement or the need to act on climate change, the debate has shifted to the legality and efficacy of various policy and technological proposals.

The AB NDP government’s tone regarding climate change has been much different from previous governments. While the rhetoric of Ralph Klein’s government was a mixture of climate change skepticism, anti-federalism, warnings of economic doom, and pro-fossil fuel language, Rachel Notley’s government embraced the notion of making Alberta’s economy greener, and argued that it was of the utmost urgency. Notley argued that if Alberta took actions to address climate change, it would give Alberta’s fossil fuel sectors a “license” to operate. This meant that pipelines and exports of oil and gas would become more acceptable to the Canadian public, as well as global leaders and investors, because the province’s resource sectors would seem more environmentally friendly than if Alberta resisted efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Members of Notley’s government also argued that Alberta could attract significant amounts of investment in alternative economic sectors, which would help to diversify Alberta’s economy and create jobs. This stands in large contrast to Ralph Klein and his Ministers, who argued that Alberta would lose “billions or trillions” of dollars in investments, as well as thousands of jobs, if it tried to act on climate change. After losing to the United Conservative Party in the 2019 provincial election, members of the AB NDP continued to frame climate change as they did when they governed the province. For example, environment critic Marlin

Schmidt criticized the UCP government for battling the federally imposed carbon tax in court.⁶⁶ Schmidt claimed that this effort was “wasting money on pricey lawyers playing political games” – and was also indicative of the UCP’s position on climate change.⁶⁷ Schmidt further tied climate action to economic performance, and linked the UCP’s apparent lack of action on climate change to the financial organization Moody’s downgrading Alberta’s credit rating.⁶⁸

The UCP government, under Premier Jason Kenney, has adopted a tone which harkens back to the rhetoric used by the Klein government, but does not mark a full return to such attitudes. While Klein and his caucus members toed the line between accepting that climate change is real and insisting that the science was not settled, members of the UCP caucus accept that human-influenced climate change is a real phenomenon. However, much like Klein’s PC government, the United Conservative government championed “made in Alberta” solutions to climate change, such as CCS technology, criticized provinces like Quebec for opposing Alberta’s resource sector, and adopted an adversarial relationship with the federal government when it proposed its own climate solutions.

Jason Kenney himself used very militant language when discussing environmentalism – promising that his government would “go to war” with environmental groups and other critics of Alberta’s energy industry.⁶⁹ His opposition to the federal carbon tax appeared to be at least partly ideological; when discussing the link between forest fires and climate change, he proclaimed that carbon taxes do not fight forest fires in British Columbia or Alberta.⁷⁰ Although Kenney generally accepted that anthropogenic climate change is occurring, he made a number of

⁶⁶ Herring, “UCP Not Giving up Carbon Tax Fight.”

⁶⁷ Herring, “UCP Not Giving up Carbon Tax Fight.”

⁶⁸ Herring, “UCP Not Giving up Carbon Tax Fight.”

⁶⁹ McCarthy, “Two Visions, One Sector.”

⁷⁰ McCarthy, “Two Visions, One Sector.”

statements which contradicted this reality, or made his true beliefs more ambiguous. At one point, when he promised that Alberta would “do its part”, he also argued that its efforts would have a negligible impact on global greenhouse gas emissions.⁷¹

While Rachel Notley associated economic success with taking action on climate change, Jason Kenney framed the issue as a zero-sum situation. This was best demonstrated when climate activist great Thunberg visited Alberta. Kenney affirmed that the world would not “shut down the modern industrial economy”, nor would Asian countries stop trying to provide energy to their growing populations.⁷² He argued that unless people stopped using technology such as planes, cars, iPhones, televisions, and fridges, and halted their electricity consumption for good and pledged to “live in the dark”, fossil fuels would continue to be needed for decades to come.⁷³ Furthermore, he continued, such a transition away from fossil fuels would cost millions of people their jobs and was contrary to “Alberta’s perspective”.⁷⁴

During the second period, members of opposition parties were quoted or paraphrased in news and opinion articles much more frequently than in the first time period. Members of the Wildrose Party, some of whom later served under the UCP after it was formed, frequently questioned the validity of climate science or downplayed the need for Alberta to lower its emissions. MLA Don MacIntyre accused a journalist who pushed back on this narrative of having an agenda, while party leader Brian Jean could only begrudgingly admit that humans had at least a partial influence on climate change.⁷⁵ Jean also demanded that the then-governing AB

⁷¹ Gerein, “As Alberta Burns, UCP Begins Its Mandate with Retreat on Climate Change.”

⁷² Bell, “Regretably No Face Time; Premier and Teenaged Climate Activist Thunberg Won’t Get to Swap Stories.”

⁷³ Bell, “Regretably No Face Time; Premier and Teenaged Climate Activist Thunberg Won’t Get to Swap Stories.”

⁷⁴ Bell, “Regretably No Face Time; Premier and Teenaged Climate Activist Thunberg Won’t Get to Swap Stories.”

⁷⁵ Thomson, “Wildrose Still Flirts with Denial; MLA’s Stance on Climate Change and Science behind It a Cause for Concern.”

NDPs revoke the carbon tax that they had put in place, arguing that it would never give Alberta's resource sector a "social license" to operate, and that Alberta would never appease "eco radicals".⁷⁶

One deviation from this trend occurred in 2016, when Jean pledged to revoke the AB NDP carbon tax if he became Premier, because it was "not a true carbon tax", but refused to promise that he would not introduce a different carbon tax.⁷⁷ Meanwhile, members of both the Alberta Party and Alberta Liberals were generally in favour of carbon pricing and taking other actions to address climate change, but were critical of how subsequent Alberta governments tried to tackle the issue. They tended to accuse the PC and UCP governments of not doing enough to address Alberta's climate emissions and criticized certain technical aspects of the Notley government's carbon tax.

Discussion

The results of my coding show a significant shift in the politics of climate change in Alberta between the two time periods that I analyzed. Although fewer Albertans believe climate change is real compared to the national average, climate action has become more politically feasible, and possibly necessary, for Alberta politicians. In 1997-2005, Premier Ralph Klein and his ministers openly questioned the science of climate change, claimed that coal was not very polluting, and frequently fear mongered about the Kyoto Protocol. Meanwhile in the second

⁷⁶ Thomson, "Wildrose Still Flirts with Denial; MLA's Stance on Climate Change and Science behind It a Cause for Concern."

⁷⁷ Thomson, "Wildrose Still Flirts with Denial; MLA's Stance on Climate Change and Science behind It a Cause for Concern."

period, the members of the United Conservative government did not mention the Paris Agreement once despite using some rhetoric which echoed the rhetoric of the Klein era.

During the second period, members of the Wildrose Party did still blatantly deny the science of anthropogenic climate change and generally resist efforts to fight it. However, the party did not come close to governing during this period, and it soon merged with the PC Party to form the United Conservative Party. While their position is noteworthy, I view it as an outlier from the trend rather than representative of broader patterns in Alberta politics since it was not presented as a major political force in the articles that I analyzed.

I was also able to trace the ways in-which the framing of climate change did not shift in Alberta. The most notable factor which remained constant over time, as noted previously, was the fact that the PC, NDP, and UCP governments all framed the majority of their discussions about climate change through an economic lens. Ralph Klein's government tried to keep the discussion focused on how much money, and how many jobs, the Kyoto Protocol could cost Alberta. Similarly, Jason Kenney's caucus repeatedly talked about how detrimental the Alberta AB NDP carbon tax, and the federal one which later replaced it, would be to Alberta's consumers and resource sector.

Meanwhile, members of the NDP government frequently discussed the economic benefits that Alberta could realize by diversifying its economy and reducing its reliance on its fossil fuels sectors. Such benefits included the potential to receive billions of dollars worth of investments in the province's emerging renewable resources and technology sectors, a stronger economy that was not at the mercy of oil's boom-and-bust price cycle, and a "social license" that would make Alberta's oil and gas sectors more competitive to Canadian and global consumers who are becoming increasingly critical of "dirty" fuel and energy sources. Despite losing the 2019

provincial election, politicians from the AB NDP have maintained this position and helped to change the discourse of economic diversification as one of economic opportunity rather than economic burden.

The Alberta Party and Alberta Liberals have criticized some technical aspects of Alberta NDP policy, such as where revenue from the provincial carbon tax was directed, but overall had similar views to the AB NDP. Politicians from all three of these parties have expressed support for policies that embrace the concept of climate capitalism. As discussed previously, such policies include carbon pricing, investing in research and development for technologies such as renewable energy and CCS, and using natural gas as a cleaner alternative for energy compared to coal-fired plants until renewable energy sources are rolled out en-masse. This further demonstrates that the positions of the Wildrose Party's caucus members, despite being voiced relatively recently, were anomalies rather than signs of a broader trend in Alberta politics. Although the former two parties are relatively small, and do not currently occupy seats in Alberta's Legislature, they have managed to remain relevant forces in Alberta's political field for numerous years, and they do manage to get heard on occasion. As well, despite the lukewarm commitments that the UCP leadership makes towards climate action, it is significant that they generally accept climate change is real to begin with, let-alone influenced by humankind. Such a consensus in Alberta's political landscape would have been unimaginable a mere fifteen years ago, when Ralph Klein still reigned over the province.

Lastly, this project was able to reveal the ways in-which ideology impacts partisan discussions regarding climate change. Despite differing in their acceptance or lack thereof of the science of climate change, the PC Party and UCP adopted similar stances regarding climate change "solutions", and employed similar rhetoric when discussing the federal government. For

example, they both advocated for ‘made-in-Canada’ solutions such as CSS technology and natural gas power plants. As well, they both fought the federal government on major policies on a number of fronts. Klein opposed the Kyoto Protocol, while Kenney opposed a federally-imposed carbon tax. Both Premiers tried to rally the support of other provinces in their fight against the federal government, both Premiers argued that their provincial sovereignty was being unconstitutionally infringed upon, and both Premiers warned that the federal government’s policies would bring Alberta untold economic ruin. These stances were adopted regardless of what polls showed a plurality of Albertan voters wanted, as well as whether these arguments were rooted in evidence or not.

Some ideological influence was seen in the statements of AB NDP politicians, but to a much lesser extent than their PC and UCP counterparts. Given that the global economy and public support are shifting away from fossil fuels, it makes sense that these politicians would want Alberta to follow suit and avoid being left behind. Further, they have been very pragmatic by defending this transition in economic terms rather than moral terms, because the former highlights how Albertans can benefit from transitioning away from fossil fuels, while the latter makes such a transition seem like a sacrifice that would leave people worse off.

Thus, ideological influences in the arguments of these politicians can be best seen from the fact that they consistently made these arguments even after their losses in the 2019 provincial election. This consistency demonstrates that even when the UCP might have done better by catering to industries that benefit from the status quo, the AB NDP’s caucus and candidates would rather continue to try and convince voters to support their proposals rather than backing away from climate action to leech UCP supporters.

This paper raises a number of implications which are worth exploring further in greater detail. Firstly, some sources and articles I analyzed showed that a majority of Albertans supported the Kyoto Protocol while Klein was opposing it, and a majority of Albertans supported a carbon tax while Kenney claimed the contrary. Thus, it would be beneficial to do an in-depth analysis of public opinion polling during these two time periods to get a better sense of how the rhetoric of Alberta politicians support, or go against, what the majority of voters want. Saskatchewan is also a jurisdiction which I believe should be looked into more. Mildenberger et al. found that public perception of climate change is similar between Alberta and Saskatchewan,⁷⁸ but it cannot be assumed that my findings in this paper can apply to Saskatchewan as well.

Another route that should be explored involves the various ways in-which media publications frame climate change, and whether their framing has changed over time. Hannan Noor is making great strides with her yet-to-be-published honours thesis which explores the media's framing of the AB NDP's carbon tax in the months prior to Alberta's 2019 provincial election. I believe that due to increasing media conglomeration and the resulting near-monopolies that some media companies enjoy in certain areas, it is important to critically analyze the ways in-which information and opinions are disseminated to the public, and whether areas with very little media competition, if any, still receive a healthy variety of views in their local news.

Conclusion

⁷⁸ Mildenberger et al., "The Distribution of Climate Change Public Opinion in Canada."

In this paper, I demonstrated some key overarching themes in the framing of climate change by Alberta politicians. Members of the Progressive Conservative and United Conservative parties framed the science of climate change differently – with UCP members more likely to acknowledge that climate change is influenced by humankind – but framed potential solutions for climate change in very similar ways. Furthermore, caucus members of the Alberta New Democratic Party consistently touted the potential economic benefits that acting on climate change would bring the province, while members of the Alberta Party and Alberta Liberal Party held views similar to, and supported the same broad policies as their AB NDP counterparts. However, politicians from the latter two parties disagreed on how best to execute those policies. This is important to examine because politicians exert a great deal of influence on public perceptions regarding climate change, and Alberta's actions impact whether Canada is able to meet its international emissions obligations. Lastly, further attention should be paid to the degree to which politicians in Alberta changed, or did not change, their rhetoric to match public opinion. As well, the role of media bias and conglomeration on public opinion should also be explored.

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Appendix

Search parameters

Terms: “Alberta and (climate change or global warming)”

Alberta and (climate change or global warming) and ((PC or progressive conservative) or wildrose or (new dem* or NDP) or (UCP or united conservative*) or premier)

Location: Alberta

Sources: Any news publication in the Proquest database

Date ranges: 01-01-1997 – 31-12-2005, 01-01-2015 – 31-12-2020

Coding frame

1. Date of the article’s publication (dd/mm/yyyy)

String variable:

2. Name of the news organization which published the article

String variable:

3. City and province of publication

String variable:

4. Is the article news or an opinion piece?

0. News

1. Opinion

5. How many Alberta politicians does the article quote or paraphrase?

Note: If more than one Alberta politician is quoted or paraphrased, V6-V10 will be repeated for each politician, and marked with letters to differentiate between politicians (E.G. V6, V6a, V6b, etc.)

6. Political party membership of the quoted or paraphrased politician(s):

String variable:

Note: PC = Progressive Conservative Party, UCP = United Conservative Party, NDP = Alberta New Democratic Party (not to be confused with the federal New Democratic Party)

7. Did the politician hold a seat in the provincial legislature?

0. No

1. Yes

8. Does the quoted/paraphrased politician state a belief or disbelief in the science of climate change?

0. No

1. Yes

String variable:

Note: The string variable is used to capture key statements or phrases which

demonstrate the politician's views if 1. is chosen.

9. Does the quoted/paraphrased politician state an opinion about fossil fuels?

0. No
1. Yes

String Variable

Note: The string variable is used to capture key statements or phrases which demonstrate the politician's views if 1. is chosen.

10. Does the quoted/paraphrased politician state an opinion about international climate treaties?

0. No
1. Yes

String Variable

Note: The string variable is used to capture key statements or phrases which demonstrate the politician's views if 1. is chosen.

11. Does the quoted/paraphrased politician state an opinion about climate change solutions (E.G., technology or policy)?

0. No
1. Yes

String variable:

Note: The string variable is used to capture key statements or phrases which demonstrate the politician's views if 1. is chosen.

List of Utilized News Publications

Airdrie City View	Nanaimo Daily News	The Globe and Mail
Calgary Sun	National Post	The Guelph Mercury
Cambridge Reporter	Niagra Falls Review	The Hinton Parklander
Chronicle-Herald	North Bay Nugget	The London Free Press
CTV Scarborough	Sault Star	The Ottawa Citizen
Daily News	Spruce Grove Examiner	The Province
Eckville Echo	Star Phoenix	The Record
Edmonton Journal	Sudbury Star	The Spectator
Edmonton Sun	The Brooks Bulliten	The Standard
Edson Leader	The Calgary Herald	Toronto Star
Examiner	The Daily Herald-Tribune	
Fort McMurray Today	The Gazette	