

## BLUE STORM: THE RISE AND FALL OF JASON KENNEY

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# The Alberta 2019 Election Online: A Turn to Two Party Electoral Dominance?

*Peter Malachy Ryan and Kate Toogood*

This chapter analyzes, from a political communication perspective, how the “new knowledge logic” of algorithmic media technologies,<sup>1</sup> which were available via the Alberta party websites during the 2019 election, were employed by the parties to disseminate the main framing language used in their party platforms. The top five parties in the campaign, as tracked in the mainstream media and polls during the election, are the focus of this analysis (listed here alphabetically): the Alberta Party (AP), Alberta Liberal Party (ALP), Freedom Conservative Party (FCP), New Democratic Party (NDP), and United Conservative Party (UCP). To note, analysis of the FCP is limited because that party did not run a full slate of candidates and could not feasibly form government. Overall, the digital party communication vehicles were assessed for their constructions of idealized voting groups and rhetorical communities to understand the top issues communicated during the election, with the aim of revealing keys to successful campaign strategies online. This paper argues that a turn to two-party dominance is clear from the captured data points, including social media reach, party donations, and third-party support. Further, from a framing theory perspective of strategic communication, it is clear that the NDP-UCP battle was framed as the nurturing parent vs. strict parent, respectively.<sup>2</sup>

Automated digital humanities methods identified the dominant issues that parties developed online and successfully amplified via social media (specifically, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter in this analysis). With an emphasis on the NDP and UCP campaigns, this paper assesses the effectiveness of the communication strategies employed and how “master brands” were developed to attract and cultivate voters’ support.<sup>3</sup>

Two dominant visions of Alberta came to the forefront in the 2019 election (see Figure 2.1a and 2.1b): (1) the Kenney UCP’s “jobs, economy, pipelines” nostalgic strict-father vision, and (2) the Notley NDP’s “fighting for you” progressive, protective, yet nurturing-parent vision. The 16 April 2019 Alberta election resulted in a majority government, with sixty-three seats for the UCP. The UCP win was built on Kenney’s vision for the province, developed over his rapid rise to provincial leadership for the new party formed in 2017 from the remnants of the Progressive Conservatives (PCs) and Wildrose parties. The NDP under Rachel Notley had their seat total cut in half from their 2015 majority government: from forty-eight seats to twenty-four, which is still among the most opposition seats held by non-conservatives in the legislature since 1993, when the Decore Liberals held thirty-two. The AP and ALP both lost their seats, marking the first time since 1993 that only two parties occupied the legislature. It was also the first time for a governing party to lose a majority but not entirely disappear after the election, with the NDP leader and ten cabinet ministers remaining.

The election had the highest voter turnout since 1982 at 64 per cent, up from 57 per cent in 2015. This was the fifth change of government since Alberta had become a province in 1905, and the first time a provincial government had failed to win a second term. In that context, the stage is set for the 2023 election to possibly have Notley and the NDP become the first premier and party to return to government after an election loss. This study presents the online tools and communication strategies that led to this two-party battle of competing visions for Alberta, which will continue to play out until the next provincial election in 2023, and has established a fundamental change from the previous forty-four years of nearly uncontested PC dominance in the province.

Analyzing political communication strategies helps to assess the comparative health of Alberta’s democracy. Alberta’s democracy is certainly

**Figures 2.1a and 2.1b.** The 2019 Election Master Brands of the NDP and UCP



Sources: Bill Kaufman, “Notley-Trudeau ‘sabotage’ of Alberta economy to be answered with constitutional challenge: Kenney,” *Calgary Herald*, 21 March 2019, <https://calgaryherald.com/news/local-news/notley-promises-2000-more-long-term-care-beds-warns-ucp-is-on-the-road-to-american-style-health-care>



Sources: Justin Giovanetti, “Alberta election 2019: NDP seat count cut by more than half as Notley’s historic run comes to an end,” *Globe and Mail*, 17 April 2019, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-alberta-election-2019-ndp-seat-count-cut-by-more-than-half-as-notley>

not in decline in terms of the historic level of party donations, at least for the NDP and UCP, and the amount of social media use by both parties and citizens. Notably, the polarization of the social media sphere has benefited the two dominant political parties, though the tone of communication mirrors some of the worst conspiratorial and misinformation tendencies south of the border, exemplified during the Trump presidency leading to the Capitol Riots on 6 January 2021. And while new parties have been created in Alberta (for example, AP, FCP and the Wildrose Independence Party of Alberta [WIPA]) in the hopes of creating a more diverse body politic, money and electoral support have not yet moved toward them; those parties lack visible leaders, candidates with staying power and overall media presence—but they nonetheless contribute to polarization online. Monitoring that polarization is important for gauging the stability of the newly formed UCP under Kenney, and whether the right-wing factions of the party could split again.<sup>4</sup>

Put into context, David Stewart and R. Kenneth Carty's "many political worlds" party-system theory has changed on the prairies with Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan each having two dominant parties in their legislatures after recent elections.<sup>5</sup> For instance, Manitoba's 2019 election resulted in another conservative majority, with Brian Pallister's PCs winning thirty-six seats, and new leader Wab Kinew's NDPs winning eighteen (the Liberals lost one seat, taking three in total, losing official party status, which requires four seats). Similarly, the 2016 election in Saskatchewan saw conservative Brad Wall lead the Saskatchewan Party to win fifty-one seats, and the NDP ten; while the 2020 election won Wall forty-eight seats, and the NDP thirteen. Given these trends until the end of 2020, Roger Gibbins' earlier insights about the prairies remain informative as regionalism and western alienation fluctuate again in favour of conservative party dominance from Alberta to Manitoba.<sup>6</sup> This two-party dominance dynamic is analyzed in what follows, particularly how social media and policies related to social media have affected the political shift.

## The Effects of Social Media Policy Changes: Election Disruptions and Amplifications

Many of the significant changes online during the 2019 Alberta election were documented by researchers in real time.<sup>7</sup> For instance, Jared Wesley partnered with Darkhorse Analytics to monitor Twitter, finding that parties used it to set the agenda of issues being discussed. They documented “a huge spike on March 25 in favour of the NDP on civic rights and education. That spike flowed from the UCP’s education platform announcement, which was criticized for its stance on gay-straight alliances (GSAs).”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Livewire Calgary used the Talkwalker’s Free Social Search to study the #abvote hashtag, and others associated with it, for the weeks of 30 March to 5 April, and 6 to 12 April 2019—they likewise identified an agenda-setting use, and the negative sentiment of online discussion, which reflected key disruptions in the race, polarized by the two-dominant parties’ supporters and third-party advertisers (TPAs).<sup>9</sup>

“Bots” (fake social media user accounts) and their constructed server-farm amplification of key messages also played a role in the election. Initially, researchers determined that less than 5 per cent of Twitter activity linked with the main parties’ communications was due to bot traffic prior to the election writ dropping on 19 March.<sup>10</sup> However, by 13 April, the “Alberta Federation of Labour found that in a five-week period from February to March, nearly one-third of Alberta political tweets were by either bots or humans amplified by bots.”<sup>11</sup> These two data points demonstrate an increase in bot traffic as the election proceeded. Both the NDP and UCP used bots for the first time in an Alberta election to text voters, in attempts to assess voter support and gain donations.<sup>12</sup>

Table 2.1 provides a timeline of the main election campaign disruptions to offer context to party scandals and self-inflicted wounds that were amplified by social media.<sup>13</sup>

Scott Pruysers identified how provincial parties with strong alignment to federal parties were better able to communicate professionally during election campaigns due, in part, to shared staff, research, and tools.<sup>14</sup> However, in 2019, the best-funded UCP campaign had a rocky start, in spite of shared federal Conservative Party resources, electoral support for Kenney, and the Alberta PC’s historical ties. Early in pre-election

**Table 2.1.** Alberta 2019 Election Campaign Disruptions—  
A Timeline

DATE	ONLINE EVENT OR ISSUE	CAMPAIGN DISRUPTED
9 February 2019	Alberta Party leader Stephen Mandel declared ineligible to run by Elections Alberta because of late paperwork submission (the decision was reversed on 4 March)	AP
24 February 2019	Notley campaigns inside a hospital, breaking election laws	NDP
19 March 2019: Election starts (right after the 18 March Speech from the Throne)		
20 March 2019	Robocalls and text messages from both parties (i.e., virtual door knocking)	NDP and UCP
20 March 2019	UCP Calgary-Mountain View candidate Caylan Ford withdraws from the election because of leaked private Facebook messages	UCP
21 March 2019	20-year-old video of Jason Kenney used to critique his past LGBTQ record	UCP
23 March 2019	“6.9m” road sign modified by two UCP staffers near Kenney speaking to the media	UCP
25 March 2019	UCP Calgary-South East candidate Eva Kiryakos withdraws from the election to avoid being a distraction based on past comments about Muslim refugees and transgender people	UCP
27 March 2019	UCP Edmonton-Gold Bar candidate David Dorward critiqued for statements made in 2016 about transgender people	UCP
2 April 2019	UCP Drayton Valley-Devon candidate Mark Smith’s comments advocating the firing of gay teachers critiqued	UCP
12 April 2019	RCMP search business owned by Calgary UCP candidate Peter Singh	UCP

*Sources:* Data compiled by the authors.

campaigning, Kenney dealt with critiques ranging from having rigged his UCP leadership campaign with a Kamikaze candidate, to stating that “[m]en are better at ‘Tactical Politics’” than women—which led to the hashtag “#BetterOffWithRachel” trending on 3 March 2019.<sup>15</sup>

Conversely, very well-run campaigns that do nearly everything right still cannot guarantee a win. In the NDP’s case, anger had built up in the province, shifting votes away from the party, and leading to the NDP’s

negative shadow campaign through the third-party group Press Progress (which eventually became viewed as directly connected to the party). Notley also had a few missteps before the election was called: the \$9.87 million cost for the “Keep Alberta Working” advertising campaign and surveys connected with monitoring its success, as well as campaigning in a hospital before the election period, which broke Alberta election laws.

Many Albertans noted the negative tone of the social media campaigns, though it’s up for debate whether the sentiment was any different from the previous election. Table 2.1 also excludes at least three more UCP candidate mis-steps, such as robo-calls in Stephen Mandel’s riding during the campaign, or the multiple candidates who stepped down because of comments made—all of which demonstrate social media’s power to “cancel” political candidates, or hold them to account, depending on the context. Several other “kamikaze candidate” revelations could be added to Table 2.1, to document questions about the UCP leadership campaign. Such instances demonstrate that the UCP’s path to victory could potentially have been bigger if the party had better vetted its candidates.

On 13 April 2019, advanced polling ended with Elections Alberta estimating a record 696,000 votes cast, demonstrating a highly engaged electorate. Within this context, it is important to assess the partisan communication strategies and tactics that led to the two competing visions of Alberta.

## The Case Study: Analyzing Competing Issue Networks for the Online Campaigns

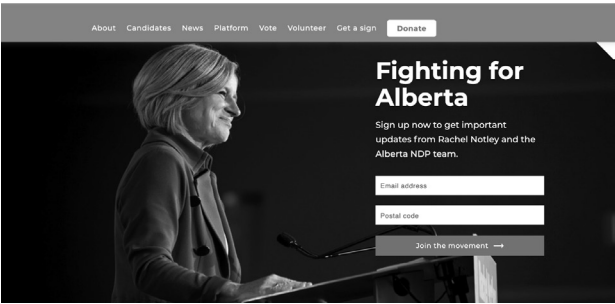
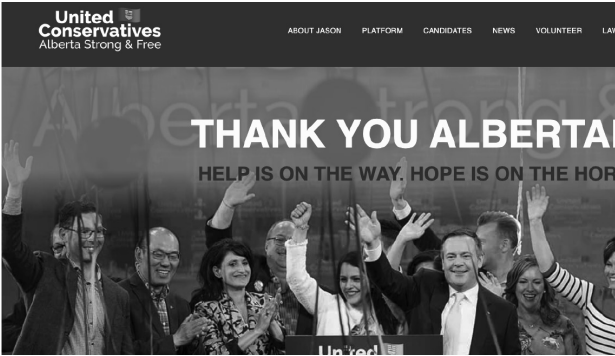
This content analysis reviews (1) party websites, (2) the top issues that were communicated and the associated issue networks on party apps and platforms, and (3) the partisan social media campaigns. In plain terms, the content-analysis methods employed below include counting the web tools, social media followers, and views or uses of pertinent social media channels for each of the top parties.<sup>16</sup>

### *1) The New Democratic Party and United Conservative Party Websites*

The website content analysis focuses on the two parties that won seats in the legislature: the NDP and the UCP (see Table 2.2). In terms of social



**Table 2.2.** The New Democratic Party and United Conservative Party Website Splash Pages and Digital Tools

	Donation link: Yes Newsletter link: Yes Issue summary: Yes Candidate links: Yes Email link: Yes Facebook link: Yes Twitter link: Yes Instagram link: Yes YouTube link: No
	Donation link: Yes Newsletter link: Yes Issue summary: Yes Candidate links: Yes Email link: Yes Facebook link: Yes Twitter link: Yes Instagram link: Yes YouTube link: No

tools, the 2019 Alberta election websites saw the removal of an official YouTube link and the addition of the first Instagram links on the party websites, as compared to the party websites captured in *Orange Chinook*,<sup>17</sup> which documented the 2015 election as the first to see the political parties reach a professional level of online campaigning. The 2019 websites demonstrated the continuation of professional practices reached in the 2015 election, based on the stable funding for the top two parties. However, the speed at which the UCP ramped up their online presence following the merger of its two predecessors, the PCs and Wildrose party respectively, should be noted.

*2) The Apps and the Party Platform’s Top Issues and Associated Issue Networks*

None of the parties began the race using apps for data collection while campaigning door to door, because cellphone and tablet batteries do not

last very long when there is still snow on the ground, as was the case in March and early April of 2019. Nonetheless, it was the first Alberta election to reach the same level of market surveillance first achieved in the 2015 federal election with the use of apps and social media combined. For instance, the NDP used two apps (see Figure 2.2): (1) “Forward” was a closed, safe party-supporter community that required users to be invited into it, and (2) “Organizer Canvassing” was used to track voter sentiment at the door. The UCP had a derivative of the federal “C2G” app (or “Conservative to Go”) to monitor voter sentiment and issues at the door stop (or if recorded on paper, to be put into the database system at the party headquarters when the app couldn’t be used due to weather).

It is important to note that no partisan communication officer or party official would go on the record to confirm that data and information is shared between provincial and federal factions, due to the grey area of political parties using third parties to collect and share voter information; however, off the record, the practice is not just common, but rampant. Voters are unaware of the end-use agreements that allow the party to share voter information with third-party groups, especially via apps used at the door.<sup>18</sup> The UCP and NDP data links with respective federal party networks gave them an advantage over the other parties in the race, as even the ALP third-party access to the federal Liberal database wouldn’t have been able to monitor sentiment as well without the same number of volunteers compared to the two dominant parties.

In short, the use of apps by the NDP and UCP allowed for greater voter data tracking, as well as aligning agenda setting with party platforms (i.e., the political manifestos). Local riding representatives were able to try out different messaging at the door, then document if it was useful. If the messaging was effective, it could be amplified online or in the release of the final platform.

Party platforms are a key strategic political communication document for agenda setting during elections.<sup>19</sup> The following content analysis illustrates the links between the NDP and UCP’s respective master brands. Figure 2.3 presents a sample of the top forty key words (or “issue units”) in the platforms, using common open source concordance lists, visualized using a relational mapping software called RéseauLu.<sup>20</sup> This method focuses on nouns, cutting out some 350 standard “stop words” (i.e., articles,

**Figure 2.2.** The Three Main Apps in the Campaign



conjunctions, prepositions, etc.), narrowing in on the top 30 to 40 per cent of repeated words in the document. The method assumes that successfully branded communications are not buried; rather, political parties repeat their top messages. Such repetition is clearly found in the UCP’s “jobs, economy, pipelines” slogan, along with other UCP words such as “red tape” and “carbon emissions,” which contrasts with the NDP’s use of “climate change” (see Figure 2.3).

The two large nodes in Figure 2.3’s relational map identify that the UCP and NDP shared the most “issue units” compared with the other parties’ platforms (inclusive of the AP and ALP, as the FCP’s few links didn’t even plot on the map). Using network theory, political analysts and strategists review such maps to understand if the network is homogenous or heterogenous. The central solid-lined sphere identifies the words or issue units that all the parties used in their platforms, homogeneously bringing them together: “Alberta,” “Albertans,” “care,” “education,” “government,” “industry,” “plan,” “program,” “seniors,” “services.” However, the points of potential heterogeneity (or difference) among these four platforms are quite small, with the biggest overlap coming between the NDP and UCP, which both focused on “access,” communities,” “crime,” “families,” infrastructure,” “investment,” “jobs,” and the two urban battlegrounds of “Calgary” and “Edmonton.”

In contrast, the dotted-line spheres in this image identify the party branding and differentiation targets. For example, the UCP did not mention Notley by name or office; they focused on the NDP only as a party,



terms of creating rhetorical communities to attract voters. Instead, they create two competing visions of Alberta, targeting generic “middle class” nuclear family voters. Such political marketing strategies were used during the federal election in 2015 and 2019, and are now evidently also being employed at the provincial level.

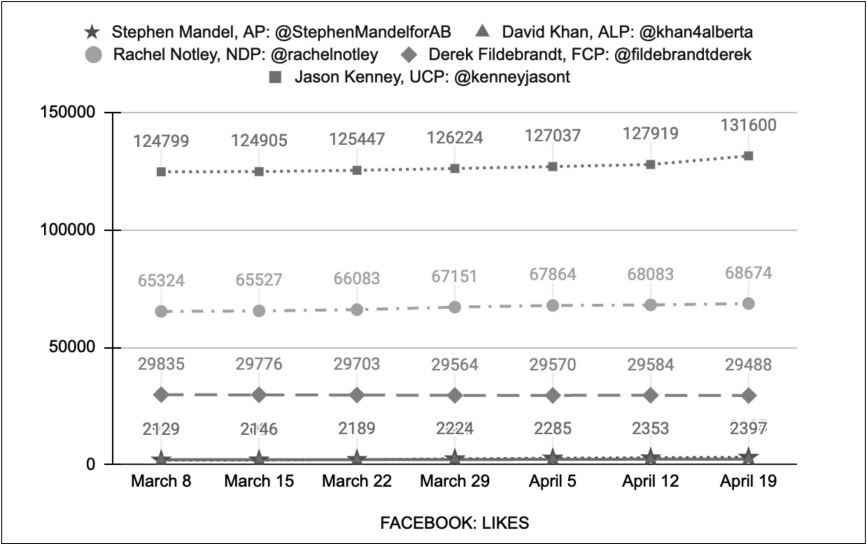
Of note in 2021, the UCP platform did not mention any revision to coal policy, and the document only mentioned “climate change” twice, stating: “The world is grappling with the tension between our need for the carbon-based energy industry and a consensus that its emissions are directly contributing to climate change. The United Conservatives are committed to responsible energy development and that includes action to mitigate greenhouse emissions and reduce their contribution to climate change.”<sup>21</sup> “Carbon tax” was mentioned thirty-one times, while “greenhouse gas” emissions were mentioned four times.

In contrast, “climate” was mentioned nine times in the NDP platform, with a focus on the NDP’s Climate Leadership Plan, and not a “carbon tax” (no mentions), but a “carbon levy” (one mention). “Greenhouse gas” emissions were mentioned three times. This demonstrates the NDP’s strategy to downplay their green initiatives, in favour of focusing on common NDP safe areas like education, health care, and supporting working families. In this way, several pundits identified that the NDP platform avoided running on their economic or energy programs, which some viewed as a strategic error, particularly in hindsight—during the pandemic, Alberta’s economy cratered.

### *3) Partisan Social Media: The Horse Race Online*

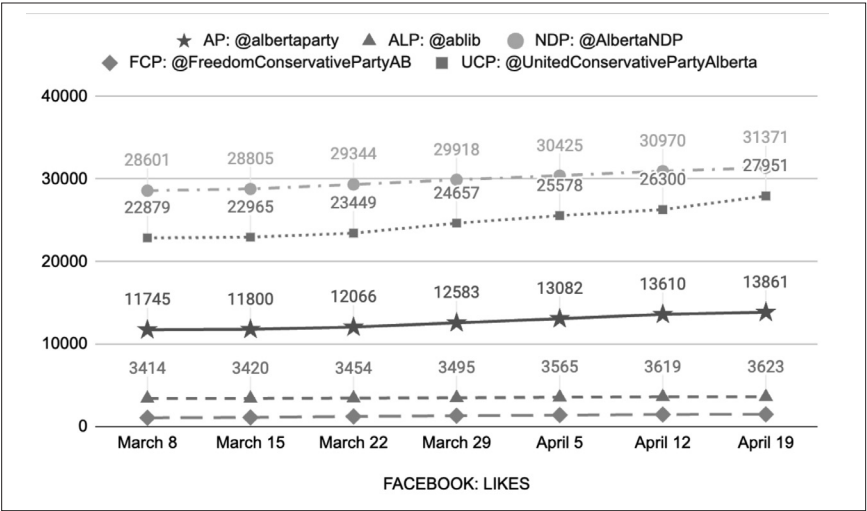
In the 2019 election, Kenney had a clear lead on social media that was built during his tenure as a federal cabinet minister under Prime Minister Harper (from 2006 to 2015); it is rare to start well ahead of an incumbent premier in terms of social media metrics (see Figure 2.4). Obviously, social media followers do not equal supporters as in polling, but in this instance, the correlated support did hold true for the Kenney UCP win on election day. In the data tracked, Kenney ended up leading in all areas: (1) Facebook “Likes” (131,600 to Notley’s 68,674), (2) Facebook “Followers” (133,385 to Notley’s 70,359), (3) Twitter followers (172,000 to Notley’s 121,000), and (4) Instagram followers (20,500 to Notley’s 14,700).

**Figure 2.4.** The Leaders' Facebook Accounts: Likes



*Note:* The televised Leaders' debate was 4 April. Stephen Mandel's values here are hidden behind David Kahn's, but are relatively in line. Due to space limitations, some of the lower performing leader and party values are cut off in the tables that follow. The entire data set for the social media content analysis tracked in the following tables is available here: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1PvrZKbdr4EIgHOOsd8yqI4c9To-8u-h4P75j8Grh48E/edit?usp=sharing> (accessed 1 July 2020).

**Figure 2.5.** The Parties' Facebook Account: Likes



No clear turning points online were evident from this sample, as steady growth for the top two parties was documented throughout the sample (as in Figure 2.4, for example). The televised Leaders' debate was on 4 April 2019, but it did not demonstrate any change in support for the top two parties, which reflects common analyses that most Albertans had decided who they would vote for early in the race. Overall though, the two-party dominance for the NDP and UCP leaders was clear in all social media accounts tracked.

In contrast to the leader accounts, the NDP account led the social media metrics over that of the newly formed UCP, who were starting from behind (see for example, Figure 2.5). In sum, the data trends once again demonstrate the lead of the same two parties online, with the lone exception of the AP's Twitter coming in above the UCP's. Compare the final 19 April metrics for social media accounts at the party level: Facebook "Likes" (the NDP's 31,371 to the UCP's 27,951), "Followers" (the NDP's 31,777 to the UCP's 29,489), Twitter followers (the NDP's 31,900 to the AP's 15,500), and Instagram followers (the NDP's 3,506 to the UCP's 1,623).

Of note here is how the scalability of the 2019 Alberta election's on-line activity compares with the numbers collected in the three previous Alberta elections.<sup>22</sup> The 2019 scale for rural Alberta is similar to the numbers found in 2008's urban social media numbers (moving from hundreds to thousands of followers online); local urban ridings are at the 2012 election level (in the tens of thousands), but the leaders in 2019 at the provincial levels are reaching numbers that federal leaders achieved in the 2015 election (in the hundreds of thousands). This demonstrates the scalability of social media networks that increase in density and interactions over time. Another finding in these numbers is the clear possibility that the top two parties may have also benefited from constructed "bot" leads, versus constructed losses, in that there were similar gains week after week over the duration of the election in the hundreds of followers.<sup>23</sup>

## Analysis and Discussion: Party Election Spending, Third Parties, and Polling

Cournoyer (2019) studied party fundraising and spending accounts for the 2019 election and found UCP and NDP spending was well above

any of the other parties. The UCP spent “\$4,561,362.10, while raising \$3,889,582.70 during the campaign period, ending the campaign with a deficit of \$671,779.40.”<sup>24</sup> The NDP spent “\$5,363,029.30 and raised \$3,706,785.66, ending the campaign with a deficit of \$1,656,043.64.”<sup>25</sup> In a distant third, the AP “raised \$206,597 and spent \$199,935 during the campaign period.”<sup>26</sup>

Beyond party spending totals, Table 2.3 demonstrates the size of TPA groups online, and how this was the first Alberta election where online activity, particularly social media, was a factor in amplifying partisan messages. Alberta Elections reported the total registered spending contributions for TPAs as \$1,035,103.17.<sup>27</sup> In November 2016, TPAs in Alberta were required to register separately for election advertising versus political advertising that happened before the election period; the following totals are for the election period ending on 18 April 2019.

In contrast to the official TPA, Table 2.4 presents a list of unregistered third-party groups who also posted messages during the election period, without any consequences for breaking election laws being documented by Alberta Elections. The two types of third-party groups taken together demonstrate a sea change in online activity during a provincial election—Canada’s versions of the US “Super PACs.” The main concern for Albertans in this context is that the unregistered groups may spread misinformation, and can be problematic for democratic communications, particularly in light of rising conspiracy and hate messaging that has been linked with the Yellow Vest social media groups.

Some groups not listed here also affected the election, such as Alberta Advantage, which didn’t operate in 2019, but raised over \$1 million in 2017, helping to target the NDP over the carbon tax. Future research into the impacts of TPAs during campaigns could include the role of the mainstream media (MSM) and non-MSM media (such as Breakdown, Press Progress, Rebel Media, the Western Standard, etc.) in amplifying messages and how misinformation can be addressed via platform algorithms and policies. In all cases, third parties can be more extreme in their messaging than political parties, contributing to greater polarization, and their role in 2023’s election will have to be monitored, particularly as social media platforms have increased their vetting and policies regarding disinformation and misinformation during the COVID pandemic and subsequent



**Table 2.3.** Registered Third-Party Advertising Groups (Alberta Elections, 2019)

<b>Alberta Federation of Labour (Messaging: Left leaning): \$253,339.89</b> Facebook Likes: 16,105   Facebook Followers: 16,078
<b>Alberta Firefighters Association (Messaging: Left leaning): \$91,822.52</b> Facebook Likes: 3,321   Facebook Followers: 3,371
<b>Alberta Medical Association (Messaging: Left leaning): Not engaged in election event</b> Facebook Likes: 5,370   Facebook Followers: 5,479
<b>Alberta Proud: @AlbertaProud.org (Messaging: Right leaning): \$165,450.44</b> Facebook Likes: 174,456   Facebook Followers: 173,250
<b>Alberta Teachers Association (Messaging: Left leaning): \$253,339.89</b> Tweets: 15.7K   Following: 2,151   Followers: 24.7K Facebook Likes: 11,568   Facebook Followers: 11,904
<b>Shaping Alberta's Future: @shapingalberta (Messaging: Right leaning): \$298,000.00</b> Tweets: 104   Following: 1,448   Followers: 1,464 Facebook Likes: 4,210   Facebook Followers: 4,263

*Note:* Groups are listed alphabetically. Totals are for the end of the election on 18 April 2019: Alberta Elections, “Third Party Advertisers—Election Alberta,” 2019, <https://www.elections.ab.ca/political-participants/third-party-advertisers/>.

elections. For instance, some TPAs have already turned against Kenney (such as Alberta Blue Skies, not listed in Table 2.3).

About a month out from the 2019 election day, some media polls were identifying that the NDP might be making up ground in Calgary through their door-to-door campaign and grassroots efforts. However, those urban gains were only reflected in the NDP stronghold of Edmonton in the end. In fact, tracking polls demonstrated a similar lead for the UCP from the moment they merged in fall 2017 to election day in April 2019 (see below). Heading into election day, it was clear that the Alberta election had been a two-party race for the entire period, with no possibility of a minority government forming (see Figure 2.6).

## Conclusion and Looking Ahead

The Alberta 2019 election was a two-party race in (1) the use of professionally integrated websites, party apps, and databases, (2) targeted platform communications, (3) party fundraising and spending, (4) partisan social

**Table 2.4.** What about the Unregistered Third-Party Groups’ Social Media Numbers?

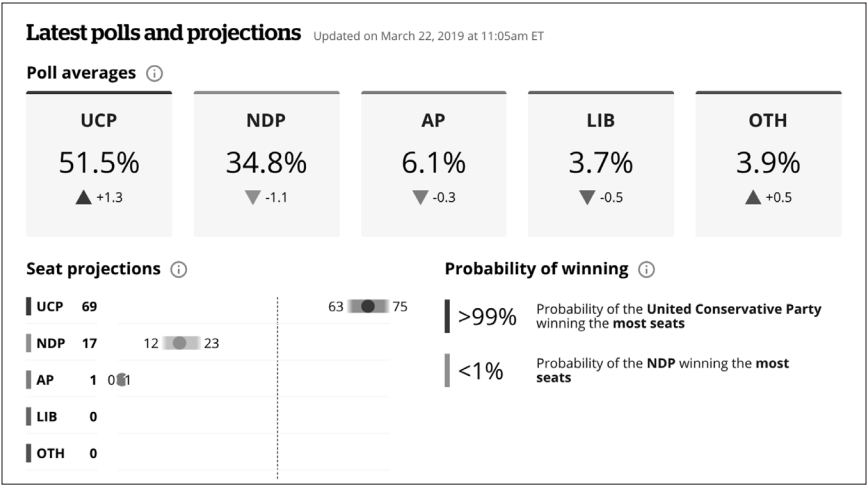
<b>Albertans against the NDP (Messaging: Right leaning)</b> Facebook Likes: 49,218   Facebook Followers: 47,401
<b>Albertans against the UCP (Messaging: Left leaning)</b> Facebook Likes: 13,078   Facebook Followers: 14,331
<b>Debunk Inc: @debunkinc (Messaging: Right leaning)</b> Tweets: 7,301   Following: 4,360   Followers: 3,045 Facebook Likes: 26,936   Facebook Followers: 27,022
<b>Energy Now: @EnergyNow (Messaging: Right leaning)</b> Tweets: 2,781   Following: 906   Followers: 1,737 Facebook Likes: 989   Facebook Followers: 1,064
<b>Oils Sands Action: @OilsandsAction (Messaging: Right leaning)</b> Tweets: 3,401   Following: 574   Followers: 59.7K Facebook Likes: 193,416   Facebook Followers: 191,734
<b>Press Progress (Messaging: Left leaning)</b> Tweets: 12.8K   Following: 1,783   Followers: 16.7K Facebook Likes: 136,107   Facebook Followers: 134,966
<b>Yellow Vests Alberta Page (Messaging: Right leaning)</b> @AlbertaForResponsibleGovernment Facebook Likes: 4,732   Facebook Followers: 4,833
<b>Yellow Vest: @YellowVestsCA (National group; Messaging: Right leaning)</b> Tweets: 327   Following: 774   Followers: 787
<b>@YellowVestsCanada1 (National group; Messaging: Right leaning)</b> Facebook Likes: 1,519   Facebook Followers: 1,567
<b>Yellow Vests Canada Facebook Group (National group; Messaging: Right leaning)</b> 108,569 Members

*Note:* Groups are listed alphabetically. Totals are for the end of the election on 18 April 2019.

*Sources:* Data compiled by the authors.

media amplification potential from third parties, (5) the polls, and (6) the final election results. In total, the content analysis of the NDP and UCP’s websites and the social media strategy used in the election reinforces a competition between the two parties master brands and visions for the province, as presented in their platforms. That competition is staged to continue in the 2023 election as well.

**Figure 2.6.** Alberta Election—16 April 2019—CBC Vote Tracker (Aggregated Polls)



Note: Éric Grenier, “Alberta Votes 2019 Poll Tracker,” *CBC News*, <https://newsinteractives.cbc.ca/elections/poll-tracker/alberta/> (accessed 22 March 2019).

The issue-networks method identified the top issues communicated during the election, which were amplified via social media groups and TPAs. The method also allows more questions to be raised and explored; for example, which top issue units in the 2019 platforms were missing with the hindsight of the pandemic or other current political issues? Not surprisingly none of the parties used the term “COVID” or “pandemic” in their communications during the election (the virus was first identified in November 2019). However, during the 2019 election, the UCP made a “Health Care Guarantee” to maintain or increase funding. This pledge has since been used to judge the credibility of the UCP’s election promises during numerous criticisms of Jason Kenney’s handling of the pandemic, including on-going troubled labour negotiations with doctors and nurses and negative voter reaction to some of Kenney’s team going on vacation during the travel lockdown at the end of 2020.

At the time of publication, Kenney’s UCP have been hammered in the polls for creating new policies not documented in their platform, or policies that went against their original platform promises, such as education

and health care cuts, new Alberta Parks policies, a new coal policy, a referendum on equalization, and an Alberta-only pension and police force (that is, no longer using the federal RCMP). These latter trial balloons were not in their original party platform, but emerged via Kenney's Fair Deal Panel after Trudeau's federal re-election win, which, along with communication issues during the COVID pandemic, have led to the Kenney UCP losing credibility and trust from voters. The UCP have gone against their small government brand during the pandemic and possibly permanently damaged their reputation; their new policies might lead to a further loss of support. Current polls show many urban Albertans are feeling more connected to the Canadian government because of the pandemic supports: for example, the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) and vaccinations. These types of strategic political miscalculations by the Kenney UCP could also lead to further internal party struggles.

By early 2021, Kenney's vision for the province no longer aligned with the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic. The UCP dropped significantly in the polls numbers to second place (36.6 per cent), and members of the party have called for Kenney's resignation to avoid potentially losing the 2023 election to Notley's resurgent NDP, presently first place in the polls at 41.6 per cent.<sup>28</sup> The polls reflect how Notley's caring vision for Alberta attracted voters during the pandemic, with the NDP being presented as a government in waiting and their donations doubling that of the UCP in the first quarter of 2021 (\$1,186,245 in donations, while the UCP raised \$591,597).<sup>29</sup>

Until the UCP's fall in the polls in 2020, Roger Gibbins' earlier insights about the prairies would have remained informative with regionalism and western alienation fluctuating again in favour of conservative party dominance.<sup>30</sup> However, the competing visions of two-party dominance on the prairies have changed since 2019, with conservative parties struggling to deal with the pandemic and satisfy their bases. In Alberta particularly, WIPA formed in 2020, as a reaction to Trudeau's federal election win, and WIPA gained part of the UCP's support lost during the pandemic, sitting at roughly 12 per cent. This could affect the two-party dynamic for the 2023 election, with vote splitting going to the NDP, like some ridings in 2015, when the Wildrose Party still existed.

Tactically, Kenney's UCP "jobs, economy, pipelines" slogan has been used to target the premier's credibility for a vision that does not match the reality of the times, particularly when US President Biden cancelled the Keystone XL pipeline after the UCP made a billion-dollar gamble on it. Kenney's UCP may also have reached the limit of flirting with Trump-style attack tactics, or of floating trial balloons that attract separatists and far-right votes, when most Albertans are realizing that other provinces have fared better against the COVID pandemic, and that the UCP have frequently ended up adopting the Notley NDP's proposals for dealing with the pandemic, representing a clear vision for a government in waiting. Albertans who have received CERB and other supports from the federal government are now reflecting on Quebec's experiences with separation, possibly realizing the value of the open NDP vision of Alberta's future; Alberta may need more federal help going forward to recover from the pandemic, and the NDP may also be more aligned with the new US Biden administration politically.

Overall, the two competing visions of Alberta's future are rooted in the election platform promises and issues networks documented in this analysis. Time and time again, politicians are held to account over how successfully their visions were achieved over their four-year mandates, and we have watched the battle of two competing visions of Alberta play out in the media and polls ever since the 2019 election. This battle is one that did not exist in Alberta during the PC one-party reign for the forty-four years prior to the 2015 election, and democratic theorists would agree that that battle at least allows a greater diversity of voices in the legislature, supported by two professionalized parties. It is important to note that few Canadian political leaders have recovered from polls as negative as those of Jason Kenney's at the time of writing at roughly 31 per cent; for examples, look no further than minority government electoral comebacks, like Pierre Trudeau's 1980 campaign, which only cracked a 4.23 per cent point swing.

So, the question remains, is the next provincial election becoming Rachel Notley's comeback story as the Official Opposition demonstrates they are a government in waiting? Have Albertans decided that the UCP's 2019 election platform promises are a vision of Alberta that no longer matches the times that we live in, and that Alberta was

“#BetterOffWithRachel” and the NDP’s new modern vision of a progressive Alberta? The UCP honeymoon period of electoral support is well past, and their team may have succumbed to a loss of momentum and intellectual capital expended to deal with the pandemic. It will ultimately be up to Albertans to decide which vision for the future they support in 2023.

### Notes

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### NOTES

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