

BLUE STORM: THE RISE AND FALL OF JASON KENNEY

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Divisions among Alberta’s “Conservatives”

David K. Stewart and Anthony M. Sayers

As September 2021 drew to a close the United Conservative Party (UCP) of Alberta was anything but. Front page headlines in the *Calgary Herald* blared “UCP knives come out for Kenney” and “Kenney wins battle, but war still on.”¹ These and other stories spoke of constituency organizations mobilizing to force a leadership review and of caucus discussions on the same issue. A leadership review was eventually scheduled for the spring of 2022² and after one postponement, the outcome was announced on 18 May 2022. Premier Kenney’s hopes of surviving such a review were dashed as just over 51.4 per cent (17,638 of 34,298) of the members voting supported the premier and he announced his intention to resign.³ The Kenney era ended on October 6, 2022, when Danielle Smith captured the leadership of the UCP.

Premier Kenney was in the unenviable position of being unpopular with two different elements of his party. Many on the right of the party were unhappy with the implementation of any kind of vaccine mandate, while others blamed him for taking too long to respond to the emergence of a fourth COVID-19 wave in the late summer of 2021, and, indeed for putting in place policies that might have increased the severity of that wave (see Lisa Young’s chapter). There was certainly no debating the fact that Alberta was leading the country in cases and hospitalizations. This despite, or perhaps because of, the declaration that the pandemic was over in the summer. The shuffling of the health minister to a new portfolio

was a partial response to the discontent, but the chances of such a move satisfying critics on either side were extremely small.

This disunity in the governing party came just four years after Kenney was easily elected as leader of the new UCP, a party created from the merger of the former Progressive Conservative (PC) and Wildrose parties. This merger was intended to ensure the long-term dominance of the right in Alberta's political system and was based on the assumption that the defeat of the PC government in 2015 was owed largely to divisions on the right, and the Rachel Notley-led New Democratic Party (NDP) government simply a by-product of those divisions.⁴

The attractiveness of that narrative is obvious for both Alberta's right wing and for the assumption that Alberta is the centre of "conservatism" in Canada. This easy analysis ignores the divisions that have existed within Alberta's right-of-centre political parties and the struggles that have taken place on this side of the political spectrum.

This chapter outlines some of those struggles captured in continuity and change in voter support for "conservative" parties in 2015 and 2019⁵ as well as the nature of internal divisions on display at the 2020 UCP policy convention.⁶ The premier's declining approval ratings were intimately connected to these divisions. The COVID-19 pandemic forced the UCP government to deal with sharply differing opinions within its ranks as to how best to respond to the virus. These divisions greatly complicated the task of governing and of managing the party. With no clear path to resolving differences, ongoing discord diminished the premier's standing as a competent politician, damaged the party's electoral fortunes, encouraging even greater dissent. These factors underpinned the poor result for the premier at the UCP leadership review. As the summer of 2021 drew to a close, the UCP, in stark contrast to their founding myth, trailed its NDP opponent in vote-intention polls and faced the very real prospect of losing power in the next election.⁷ As has often been the case in Alberta, and indeed, Canadian politics more broadly, parties faced with such a possibility see a leadership change as providing an opportunity to escape defeat and present a new image.⁸

Before its defeat in 2015, the PCs had controlled the Alberta government since 1971, enjoying the longest continuous reign of a single party in Canadian history. The PCs were able to maintain power in part by dealing

with popularity issues through the mechanism of leadership change and a voting process that from 1992–2014 invited all Albertans to vote directly for their next premier through internal party elections. At its apex in 2006, more than 144,000 Albertans availed themselves of this opportunity.

Alberta's parties are very much leadership-dominated institutions, but while this tendency is strong in Alberta it is by no means unique. Writing in the early twentieth century, André Siegfried maintained that "it is of the first importance to the success of a party that it should be led by someone who inspires confidence and whose mere name is a programme in itself. As long as the Conservatives had Macdonald for their leader, they voted for him rather than for the party. So it is with Laurier and the Liberals of today. If Laurier disappeared, the Liberals would perhaps find that they had lost the real secret of their victories."⁹ Most analyses of Canadian parties suggest that the role of the leader in defining parties is undiminished.

More unique in the Alberta experience was that the election of a new leader was so often successful. In a study of Canadian leadership changes from 1960 to 1992, Stewart and Carty found that a change in the leadership of a governing party was generally followed by an election loss.¹⁰ This is an unsurprising finding given that parties are more likely to change their leader in an environment in which their position in power seems threatened.

In 1992, when Ralph Klein was elected PC leader in the first of the party's "premier primaries," the party was trailing its Liberal opponents in the polls and seemed destined to lose its grip on power. Indeed, Klein himself described the 1993 election victory as the "miracle on the prairie."¹¹ This miracle undoubtedly helped create an internal dynamic suggesting that unpopularity could be transformed by a new leader.¹² Major Albertan and Canadian parties are not known for consistent policy positions and one of the easiest ways of changing policies is to change the leader. This is a lesson the Alberta centre-right has embraced.

Conservative dominance in Alberta from Klein's election in 1992 through the election of Jim Prentice in 2014 followed a path that has often been missed by causal observers of the province's election results. With the elections of Ralph Klein, Ed Stelmach, Alison Redford, and Jim Prentice, the party changed its leader, but avoided victories for more right-wing candidates within the party. In each case, a more moderate

candidate emerged victorious and, until Prentice in 2015, went on to win the provincial election and maintain the Tory dynasty.

These victories were not, however, completely popular within the party. Many felt the openness of the party's leadership process allowed it to be infiltrated by voters who were not truly conservative in their views and prevented the PC party from presenting the more coherent right-wing platform these critics believed Albertans would welcome.¹³ These critics wanted a clear shift to the right in party policy.

The perception that the Albertan PCs were not sufficiently conservative can be traced as far back as the Lougheed regime, when in 1982, almost 12 per cent of the vote went to the Western Canada Concept Party. The vagaries of the electoral system, and the popularity of the Lougheed government, resulted in no seats for this contender, but it provides evidence of some dissatisfaction with a government that tried to create a big-tent centrist party.

Klein, for a time, was able to contain such divisions and in 1993 won an election in which there was essentially a two-party competition with no real opposition on the right. Only Liberals and PCs were elected in the 1993 election and together they took almost 85 per cent of the vote.

As the Klein government continued in office and lost its initial focus on spending cuts, dissatisfaction on the right again emerged. In the 2004 election the PC popular vote fell below 50 per cent for the first time since 1993 and the right-wing Alberta Alliance party obtained almost 9 per cent of the popular vote (see Table 4.1). Klein indicated that he would not again lead his party in an election, ushering in an era of unprecedented leadership change in the province.

One of the other factors underlying PC dominance of Alberta was the competition on the centre-left. As Peter McCormick explained, "Alberta does not typically have a governing party, an opposition party, and fragments on the fringes, but a governing party and several opposition fragments."¹⁴ Only in the 2012 election where the PCs pulled off a surprise come-from-behind victory was the combined Liberal-NDP vote below 30 per cent and it appears that the vote was low that year because many former NDP and Liberal voters selected the PCs to keep Wildrose from power. In short, the vote on the centre-left of the Alberta spectrum was never as weak as often assumed and the PCs benefitted from this division.

Table 4.1. Electoral Support in Alberta 1993–2019

Election Year	PC Popular Vote	Other Right Vote	Liberal/NDP Vote	Alberta Party
1993	44.5	Social Credit 2.4	50.7	---
1997	51.2	Social Credit 6.8	41.6	---
2001	61.9	Less than 1%	35.4	---
2004	46.8	Alberta Alliance 8.7	39.6	---
2008	52.7	Wildrose Alliance Less than 1%	34.9	---
2012	44.0	Wildrose 34.3	19.8	1.3
2015	27.8	Wildrose 24.2	44.8	4.2
2019	54.9 (UCP)	Less than 1%	33.7	9.1

Sources: “Historical Results, Summary Tables,” Elections Alberta. <https://www.elections.ab.ca/elections/election-results/historical-results/> (accessed 6 August 2022).

The election of the UCP in 2019 was based on a popular vote that was actually below the combined centre-right vote in 2008 and 2012 and only 3 per cent points higher than the combined 2015 total.

The centre-right’s dominance of Alberta politics this century has not, as was often the case historically, been based on a single leader. Instead, divisions on that side of the political spectrum resulted in almost constant leadership change. Klein was the last PC leader to lead in two successive elections, and he was forced from office earlier than he had wanted by a very tepid leadership review vote in 2006. Ironically, a review vote in which his support actually exceeded that won by Kenney in 2022.

The more right-wing side of the equation was also far from immune from leadership change with new leaders and often new party names on the ballot from 2004 through 2015. For both parties, the incumbent leader left his or her position in a climate of substantial unhappiness with their performance.¹⁵

In short, the tenure of conservative leaders has been quite brief and most left their position under pressure from their own party. With this history, the challenges faced by Jason Kenney and the divisions on the conservative side do not appear particularly surprising or new. The fact that the UCP will be led by a new leader in the next election is consistent with the dynamics on the right since the end of the Klein regime.

Table 4.2. Centre-Right Political Party Leaders in Elections 2001–2019

Election Year	PC Leader	Other Right-of-Centre Leader
2001	PC Ralph Klein	Less than 1%
2004	PC Ralph Klein	Alliance Randy Thorsteinson
2008	PC Ed Stelmach	Wildrose Alliance Paul Hinman
2012	PC Alison Redford	Wildrose Danielle Smith
2015	PC Jim Prentice	Wildrose Brian Jean
2019	UCP Jason Kenney	Others less than 1%

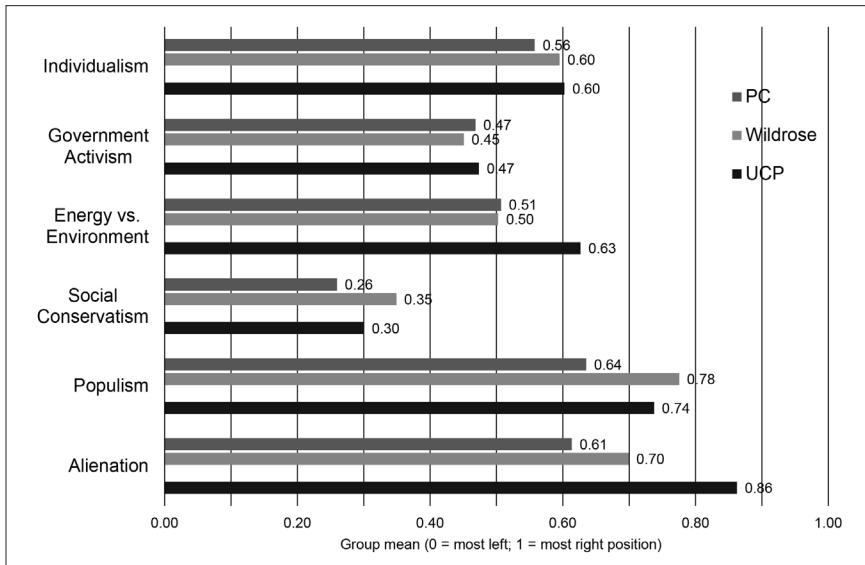
Sources: Calculated by the authors from Elections Alberta data at <https://www.elections.ab.ca/elections/election-results/historical-results/> (accessed 6 August 2022).

Following the 2015 Alberta election the PC party was faced with an existential challenge. The party could continue with its general pattern and contest the next election as a pragmatic big tent party or it could move more to the right and present a more ideological approach. As we argue in *Orange Chinook*¹⁶ the resolution of this dilemma emerged from a leadership election. The party made the decision to hold a leadership convention, rather than a primary, a switch that almost certainly ensured a more ideological electorate and Jason Kenney, a former federal cabinet minister, entered the race with a proposal to unite the right and rid the province of the “accidental” NDP government. Kenney easily won that leadership election, negotiated a merger with the Wildrose party, won that party’s initial leadership election, and led the party to victory in the 2019 election.

One way to examine the evolution of conservative parties in Alberta and understand the divisions within conservatism is to compare the attitudes of 2019 UCP voters with the 2015 PC and Wildrose voters. This comparison is based on voter surveys conducted following the two elections that asked largely the same series of attitudinal questions. In *Orange Chinook* we report on the attitudes of party voters in a series of elections and we are not going to recapitulate that discussion here. However, we will point out that PC voters in 2015 were often as close in opinion to the 2015 NDP voters as they were to the 2015 Wildrose voters so the merger was not an inevitable outcome.

Figure 4.1 presents the positions of party voters on a number of scales by presenting the mean location of party votes on a 0–1 spectrum with 0

Figure 4.1. Ideological Scale Means of Party Identifiers, PC or Wildrose 2015, UCP 2019



Note: Survey weights applied. (There are no substantive changes from the unweighted results.)

indicating a more leftist position and 1 a more right-wing position. The questions on which the scales are based try to capture key elements of Alberta’s political culture by examining attitudes relating to individualism, government activism, prioritizing energy or the environment, social conservatism, populism, and western alienation.¹⁷ We will discuss the positioning on each of these scales in turn. It is also worth keeping in mind that the positioning of PC voters in 2019 is likely to be further to the right than in the past since a large number of 2012 PC voters actually switched to the NDP in 2015.¹⁸

The first three scales: individualism, support for an activist government, and prioritizing energy rather than the environment show that conservative voters may not be as far to the right as many assume. For individualism, the votes do not go beyond 0.6 on the scale at any point and for government activism, even in 2019, they are almost exactly at the scale’s midpoint. Even on energy versus the environment, the voters were at the midpoint in 2015 and the movement to the right in 2019 was likely

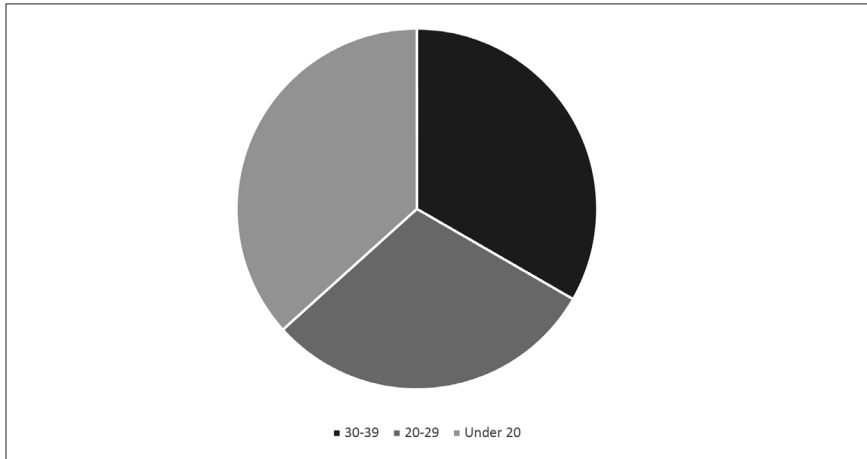
based on the increased salience of pipelines in the election campaign and Kenney's critique of the NDP government for not getting pipelines built. In 2015 the positioning of Wildrose and PC voters is almost identical on each of these scales and the real movement in 2019 comes on the energy scale where there is a much more pronounced pro-energy position.

The next three scales are more revealing of divisions within conservative politics. Questions relating to social conservatism were limited, focusing on abortion choice and gay and lesbian marriage. Again, the positioning on this scale suggests that conservative voters are far from socially conservative and are essentially in the bottom third. In 2015 we see that Wildrose voters are noticeably more socially conservative than PC voters and the 2019 results indicate that the new party has landed somewhere in the middle—more socially conservative than 2015 PC voters but less socially conservative than 2015 Wildrose voters. Unlike the three previous scales, the position of PC party voters is more moderate than that of Wildrose voters.

The same result can be seen with respect to populism, a concept long argued to be a key component of Alberta politics.¹⁹ In 2015, perhaps unsurprisingly given the campaign of the Prentice PCs, PC voters placed much lower on the populism scale than the Wildrose voters. Losing the populist position from their electoral repertoire is something we believed contributed to the party's defeat in that election. The UCP voters in 2019 were marginally less populist than Wildrose voters in 2015, but farther from the position of 2015 PC voters. Overall, the UCP voters were just below the top quartile for populism.

More dramatic is the positioning relating to western alienation. Like populism, western alienation has long been a key component of Alberta's political culture and provincial governments have often conducted provincial election campaigns as if their major competitor was the federal government, rather than their actual fellow provincial parties.²⁰ The ability to run against the federal government was critical in the historical success of Alberta governing parties. It is likely significant that when the success of provincial PCs was threatened in 2012 and 2015, the federal government was led by a united Conservative party that held almost every federal seat in the province, making campaigning against them quite difficult. In 2019, Jason Kenney faced no such problem and campaigned as much against the

Figure 4.2. Policy Convention Consensus Scores



Sources: Calculated by authors from United Conservative Party data. See note 6.

federal Liberals as the provincial New Democrats. In this environment it is no surprise that UCP voters were more clearly alienated than either the PC or even Wildrose voters in 2015.

The 2019 UCP voters were somewhat more socially conservative, more pro-energy, and substantially more populist and alienated than the 2015 PC voters. They were also more pro-energy and very much more alienated than the 2015 Wildrose voters. However, they were less socially conservative than Wildrose voters. There were really no differences worth discussing in relation to individualism and government activism either between elections or between the 2015 PC and Wildrose voters.

In an effort to further understand the divisions within Alberta conservatism, we move beyond the views of voters to explore the opinions of activists. In this context we make use of the votes at the UCP policy convention in 2020.

We try here to fit the policy resolutions debated and approved by delegates into the areas we examined with ordinary voters. Instead of focusing as much on the policy (all were approved) we focus on the degree of internal consensus on the various policies. We use a Consensus Index (CI) that measures the nature of division within the party. If there is perfect

consensus for or against a policy, everyone takes the same position, the CI is 50. If there is an even 50–50 split, the CI score would be 0. Simply put, the higher the CI score, the more consensus that exists within the party.

Figure 4.2 shows that there is much room for disagreement within the party. None of the 30 policy resolutions generated a CI score of over 40 and the largest number of resolutions generated scores of under 20.

Table 4.3 presents each of the basic policy resolutions debated at the convention using the number provided by the party. We see again that there is a good deal of internal disagreement with a mean CI score of 23.6, just below the midpoint of the range from 0 (where half support and half oppose a motion) to 50 (where everyone either supports or opposes the motion). To get a better sense of the nature of agreement we attempt to position some of the policy resolutions similar to the way we treated voter attitudes, by looking first at policies relating to individualism and government activism.

Given the way the CI measure works, it is a little easier to think in terms of agreement. A high CI score indicates high levels of agreement, and low the obverse. It is these low scores that are of most interest. Low levels of agreement correspond with high levels of division. On these measures we see levels of agreement that range from a low of 2.71 to a high of 36.51. The lowest level of agreement—or highest degrees of disagreement—was with regard to support for privately funded and managed health care, which nearly evenly split the party (CI 2.71). Although it was adopted, 46 per cent of those voting opposed the policy. The highest level of consensus was on equitable transfer and a referendum on equalization (CI 38.93) with government operating within its means and reducing the debt (CI 36.51) the second most agreed upon policy.

Almost two-thirds of the delegates supported ensuring adequate housing and supportive care for seniors (CI 32.04) yet strong majorities supported making Alberta a right-to-work jurisdiction (CI 30.77), not allowing regulations to create a barrier to economic growth (CI 32.04) and contracting out non-essential and ancillary services (CI 31.45). There was a good deal of suspicion directed at teachers' unions, with almost 85 per cent believing that teacher organization should not be involved in collective bargaining (CI 34.16) and around three-quarters calling for the creation of a self-governing regulatory association for Alberta teachers (CI 26.74).

Table 4.3. United Conservative Party Policy Votes 2020 AGM

Policy Question	Yes	No	CI
1. Operate within means and reduce debt	86.51	13.25	36.51
2. Equitable transfer and hold referendum	88.93	10.59	38.93
3. Make Alberta a right-to-work jurisdiction	80.77	18.98	30.77
4. Facilitate private pipeline and infrastructure developments	80.54	18.97	30.54
5. Out of court for non-criminal traffic matters	85.18	14.2	35.18
6. Control spending and reduce size of government	72.55	27.06	22.55
7. Contract out non-essential and ancillary services to private sector	81.15	18.1	31.15
8. Withdraw from Canada Pension Plan (CPP) and start Alberta pension plan	67.13	32.49	17.13
9. Ensure quality of care for elderly, monitor and enforce	82.04	17.21	32.04
10. Collect Alberta taxes directly	64.4	34.57	14.4
11. Support privately funded and managed healthcare option	52.71	46.53	2.71
12. Ensure regulatory environment does not create barriers to growth	81.45	17.66	31.45
13. Balance environmental objectives with need for economic growth	76.3	22.81	26.3
14. Make Alberta global hub for technological innovations	75.74	23.75	25.74
15. Ensure safety of community is priority in consumption sites	78.8	20.69	28.8
16. Create Alberta provincial police	71.1	28.22	21.1
17. Create new vision for K-12 curriculum	62.91	36.96	12.91
18. Remove cap on number of publicly funded surgeries	64.56	35.18	14.56
19. Adopt recall for members of the legislative assembly (MLAs)	71.8	27.83	21.8
20. Work with feds on one-window regulatory approval	80.13	19.35	30.13
21. Develop petroleum reserve and expand storage capacity	60.76	38.58	10.76
22. Ensure publicly funded organizations do not encroach on free enterprise	65.93	33.68	15.93

Table 4.3. (continued)

Policy Question	Yes	No	CI
23. Professional teacher organizations can't be involved in collective bargaining	84.16	15.59	34.16
24. Repeal Bill 10 Public Health Emergency Powers Act	78.73	21	28.73
25. Increase investment and oversight of care facilities for seniors	63.66	35.81	13.66
26. Use natural gas resources for growth in petrochemicals	70.57	28.76	20.57
27. Adopt citizen initiated referendums	66.41	32.95	16.41
28. Create self-governing regulatory association for Alberta teachers	76.74	22.75	26.74
29. Prevent municipalities from running budget deficits	68.44	31.17	18.44
30. Support and protect family and small businesses	68.88	30.05	18.88
	73.63267	25.82467	-23.63267

Sources: United Conservative Party. See note 6.

On measures relating to energy and the environment, about one delegate in five always disagreed with the policies approved. Nineteen per cent of the delegates opposed facilitating private sector pipelines and infrastructure and a simplified one-window regulatory approval process. Almost one in four opposed balancing environmental objectives with economic growth, and almost 30 per cent opposed a role for government in encouraging downstream growth in petrochemicals. Disagreement was most intense over the development of strategic petroleum reserves and expanding storage with almost 40 per cent rejecting this position. What is striking is that in an avowedly conservative government majorities were in favour of an enhanced government role in the energy industry.

Perhaps surprisingly there were few policy questions relating to social conservatism. What we do see is a good deal of resistance to a new K-12 curriculum with 37 per cent opposing this development. Populist measures were also a source of some division. Around three delegates in ten opposed the recall of MLAs and citizen initiatives, but only half that number were opposed to placing restrictions on teachers' unions. The latter is

a measure that might fit better with individualism. Thirty per cent were also opposed to measures for supporting and protecting family and small businesses.

Finally with respect to western alienation: almost 90 per cent approved calls for a more equitable system of transfers and a referendum on equalization. As well, in relation to measures tied to the decades old idea of a firewall to protect Alberta from the federal government, there was considerable disagreement. Twenty-eight per cent rejected the creation of an Alberta police force, and around one third opposed withdrawing from CPP and launching an Alberta pension plan and collecting Alberta taxes directly.

Overall, the highest levels of consensus came on the idea of a referendum on equalization, operating within means and reducing debt; creating an out-of-court option for non-criminal traffic matters; keeping professional teacher organizations out of bargaining; and ensuring, monitoring, and enforcing quality care for elderly. The lowest consensus levels related to private health care, the development of petroleum reserves, and creating a new vision for a K–12 curriculum.

Although all of the policy resolutions were approved, the actual votes demonstrate considerable differences of opinion within the party and indicate a conservative party that is far from unified.

General surveys relating to the performance of the government since 2019 indicate a good deal of public dissatisfaction with the UCP. For instance, an Angus Reid survey taken in June 2021 revealed that the percentage indicating that the government was doing a good job in handling various policy areas never reached 50 per cent. Just 39 per cent felt the performance was good in handling the environment and climate change, and only a third felt that health care and the response to COVID-19 were positive. These numbers predated the government's self-admitted mismanagement of COVID that summer. Even on issues like energy and government spending less than 30 per cent felt the performance was good.²¹ In short there was much unhappiness with the UCP on policy matters.

This dissatisfaction spilled over into evaluations of the premier's performance. Shortly after the election in June of 2019 Kenney's approval rating was over 60 per cent but by February 2020 it had fallen below 50 per cent and did not really recover. In June 2021, fewer than one Albertan in three approved of his performance, and he ranked last out of the ten

premiers on this measure.²² In September 2021, *Calgary Herald* columnist Don Braid suggested that the rating of his performance had fallen even more with a Leger poll suggesting only 23 per cent approved of his handling of the pandemic.²³

The discussion of divisions within the UCP in this chapter has, to this point, not picked up on issues relating to the COVID-19 crisis, and it is perhaps instructive that there were virtually no policy resolutions directly relating to this at the 2020 policy convention. Protecting seniors and a relatively strong resistance to private health care provide some hints of party divisions on this issue.

The divisions within the UCP relating to COVID-19 were strong and stark and included something of an internal caucus revolt by sixteen MLAs,²⁴ two MLAs kicked out of caucus for their criticism of pandemic policies,²⁵ the resignation of the caucus chair,²⁶ and the removal of the deputy premier from her position shortly after criticizing the premier for a dinner that seemed to violate health rules.²⁷ As well, Brian Jean, the former Wildrose leader who was runner-up to Kenney in the 2017 leadership election, emerged as a major critic of the premier and successfully sought the UCP nomination for a by-election in 2022. He ran on a platform calling for the premier to step down. His success both in the nomination and in winning the March 2022 by-election helped put even more wind in the sails of the anti-Kenney groups within the party.²⁸

Obviously, internal consensus was badly lacking in the government's approach to the pandemic. Polling suggested that the majority of Albertans were supportive of strong measures to manage the pandemic and unhappy with the government's performance. As Kost wrote in early September 2021:

Seventy-seven per cent of Albertans surveyed said they would either somewhat or strongly support a vaccine passport system requiring proof of vaccination for non-essential services such as bars, restaurants, gyms and festivals. We found that Albertans are not far out of step with Canadians across the country," said Leger vice-president Andrew Enns. Meanwhile, Kenney ranked lower than any other premier in Canada in regard to his handling of the pandemic, according to the same Leger poll. Six-

ty-five per cent of Albertans said they were either somewhat or very dissatisfied with the measures Kenney has put in place to fight COVID-19.²⁹

Dissatisfaction with the government was split between those who felt the response had not been strong enough and those who felt the government had gone too far. The problem for the UCP was that most of those who opposed restrictions were generally among those expected to support the party. In essence a good portion of the party's base of supporters were out of step with the views of most Albertans. The challenge for the government was that they could not win re-election without these voters, but sympathy to them might also endanger the prospect of re-election.³⁰ Public dissatisfaction formed the backdrop for the internal conflict within the party. The premier's attempts to manage the issue led to Kenney providing something of an apology for suggesting in the summer of 2021 that the pandemic was over and the then mayor of Calgary, a city the UCP must win to remain in office, calling the UCP government the most incompetent he had seen.³¹

Attempts to resolve conflict within the party proved unsuccessful. An agreement to hold a leadership review in the early spring of 2022 descended into controversy when the vote was postponed. An in-person vote was scheduled to be held in Red Deer but "That changed to mail-in voting after more than 15,000 people seemed ready to descend on the city."³² Even the rules surrounding how votes would be cast and ballots delivered generated controversy. Kenney initially indicated that even a modest win would enable him to retain the leadership but, in the end, his support was a little too modest and his resignation announcement removed the danger of complaints about the nature of the review. Complaints that might well have kept issues relating to controversy about the conduct of the 2017 election front and centre.³³

In 2017 Kenney was elected leader with more than 35,000 votes. In 2022, the overall number of voters in the leadership review was actually lower than just Kenney's 2017 total and his actual support was about half what he had won just five years previously. Many of those who enthusiastically supported him in 2017 were unwilling to vote to keep him in the same position for another election. Indeed, the number supporting

Kenney in 2022 was smaller than the number who supported Brian Jean in his losing leadership run in 2017.³⁴

In the aftermath of his disappointing showing in the leadership review, Kenney gave a clear indication that he felt the pandemic issue was critical. As Don Braid explained, “Kenney blamed ‘a small but highly motivated, well-organized and very angry group of people who believe that [he] and the government have been promoting a part of some globalist agenda, and vaccines are at the heart of that. [He doesn’t] think most of these people have ever before been involved in a mainstream centre-right party and [he] suspect[s] many of them won’t be in the future.’”³⁵ Braid went on to indicate that Kenney’s opponents had a different take on the opposition, with one constituency association president suggesting that the problem related to “the party being all about Kenney [was that] there wasn’t respect paid to the grassroots, there was a very ivory-tower atmosphere where MLAs and even ministers were out of the loop. There is a top-down attitude to government. The fact that his party said “we don’t want you,” and he’s still trying to blame it on those few anti-vaccination people, it doesn’t help anybody.”³⁶ As the party moves on to seek a new leader, there is not even a clear agreement on what created the opposition to Kenney. The premier’s decision to serve as leader until his successor is chosen has also generated some conflict within the party as some, including some in the caucus, would have preferred a more immediate departure.³⁷

Throughout this period of turmoil, not surprisingly, polling suggested that the opposition NDP were ahead of the UCP in voter preference. Another indicator of growing NDP strength is their success in fundraising. As Lisa Johnson reported in November of 2021, “The NDP has out-fundraised the UCP in every quarter since the end of 2020. For the first nine months of this year, the NDP brought in just over \$4 million compared to the UCP’s total of about \$2.6 million.”³⁸ All of this relates to the dilemma in which the UCP found itself. The party was essentially created by the efforts of Jason Kenney and his campaign brought them to power. But he and his policies grew increasingly unpopular. The recent history of Alberta conservative parties is clear: when the leader is not in a position to lead them to victory, the leader goes. This is not just an Alberta phenomenon. Writing in 2005 on the personalization of power in political parties, Poguntke and Webb suggest “a shift towards personalized

leadership which may be very strong as long as it is successful electorally, but which is likely to be vulnerable in times of impending or actual electoral defeat.”³⁹ The creation of the UCP was in part based on a desire for a more ideological and less pragmatic approach to government. With such preferences, party insiders may be more likely to prioritize particular policy positions to increase electability, although in Alberta there seems to be an assumption that only a fluke can prevent a conservative party from winning elections.

In this context, it was unsurprising that Jason Kenney’s leadership of the party was in grave danger. As Carty and Cross have argued elsewhere, “one of the ways in which party members can change party policy is indirect—through a change in personnel. They argue that leadership elections ‘represent contests over competing orientations on important social, economic and constitutional issues.’”⁴⁰ UCP members can get new policies and perhaps a better hope of re-election with a new leader. Ed Stelmach, Alison Redford, and even Ralph Klein provide evidence that Alberta’s governing conservatives see no problem in getting rid of a sitting premier. With a more ideological party, the impetus for change was almost certainly stronger. It remains unclear who will lead the UCP in the next election and somewhat ironically, two of the candidates who may well contest the leadership are former leaders of the Wildrose party who have already lost provincial elections. If they were to prove successful it would seem that the party has decided to shift in a more populist and right-wing direction and ironically, for the first time since Klein, a conservative leader would contest more than one election.

A new leader is not, however, a panacea. As Gary Mason indicates, a new leader will still face challenges:

[W]hoever wins will have the same problem Mr. Kenney had when he took over: the UCP is an amalgam of two political philosophies, two ideological forces. They are often at odds. To put it another way, the old Wildrose forces often disagree and resent the old Progressive Conservative types. Their interests aren’t aligned. They don’t like one another. Old war wounds have not healed and may never heal.⁴¹

Danielle Smith re-entered Alberta politics on October 6, 2022, with a 54 to 46 per cent victory over her main rival, Travis Toews, on the sixth ballot. It is not clear whether the leadership race put the united back in United Conservative, or if Smith is the sort of leader who can boost the party's electoral chances in 2023. Smith's floor crossing from Wildrose to the PCs in 2014 damaged the leadership of Jim Prentice and helped precipitate the collapse of the Tory dynasty. It earned Smith the enmity of members of both parties and led her to move on to work in talk radio. Whether her victory signals the welding together of this coalition into a political force driven by the need to defeat the NDP or a marriage of convenience susceptible to internal dissension is as yet unknown. Untested, too, is her ability to move beyond the narrow focus of her strident leadership campaign to become a successful Premier.

NOTES

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- 5 Data from Alberta Election Survey of 1500 voters conducted online in the week following each of the 2015 and 2019 provincial elections.
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- 8 David K. Stewart, "Primaries and the Personalization of Party Leadership," in *The Personalization of Democratic Politics and the Challenge for Political Parties*, eds.

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- 9 André Siegfried, *The Race Question in Canada*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1966 [1907]).
 - 10 David K. Stewart and R.K. Carty, "Does Changing the Party Leader Provide an Electoral Boost? A Study of Canadian Provincial Parties: 1960–1992," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 26, no. 2 (1993): 313–330.
 - 11 See David K. Stewart and Keith Archer, *Quasi-Democracy: Parties and Leadership Selection in Alberta* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000).
 - 12 *Ibid.*
 - 13 Ted Morton, "Leadership Selection in Alberta, 1992–2011: A Personal Perspective," *Canadian Parliamentary Review* 26, no. 2 (2013): 31–8.
 - 14 Peter McCormick, "Voting Behaviour in Alberta: The Quasi Party System Revisited," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 15, no. 3 (1980): 85–98, 90.
 - 15 See Bratt, "Death of a Dynasty."
 - 16 Sayers and Stewart, "Out of the Blue."
 - 17 The scales are based on answers to a number of questions and converted to a 0–1 scale with 1 indicating the most supportive positions. The individualism scale is based on responses to the following questions: government regulation stifles drive, most unemployed could find jobs, those willing to pay should get medical treatment sooner, a lot of welfare and social programs unnecessary. The activist-government scale is based on responses to the following questions: government should ensure decent living standard, government should ensure adequate housing, government should limit amount of rent increases, government should take over auto insurance. The pro-energy scale is based on responses to the following questions: oil and gas companies have too much say in provincial politics, Alberta should slow pace of oil sands development, tough environmental standards should take precedence over employment, Alberta needs to take firm action to combat global warming, Alberta should increase royalties on natural gas and oil. The social conservatism scale is based on responses to the following questions: abortion is a matter between a woman and her doctor, gays and lesbians should be allowed to marry. The populism scale is based on responses to the following questions: trust ordinary people more than experts, solve problems if government is brought back to grassroots, need government to get things done with less red tape. The western alienation scale is based on responses to the following questions: Alberta is treated unfairly by the federal government; Alberta does not have its fair share of political power in Canada; the economic policies of the federal government seem to help Quebec and Ontario at the expense of Alberta; because parties depend on Quebec and Ontario, Alberta usually gets ignored in national politics.
 - 18 Sayers and Stewart, "Out of the Blue," 412.
 - 19 See for instance Jared J. Wesley, *Code Politics: Campaigns and Cultures on the Canadian Prairies* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011).
 - 20 Wesley, *Code Politics*; McCormick, "Voting Behaviour in Alberta"; David K. Stewart and Anthony Sayers, "Albertans' Conservative Beliefs," in *Conservatism in Canada*, eds. James Farney and David Rayside (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).

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- 22 *Ibid.*
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- 24 Lisa Johnson, "Quarter of UCP MLAs speak out against Alberta's latest COVID-19 restrictions," *Edmonton Journal*, 7 April 2021, <https://edmontonjournal.com/news/politics/fifteen-ucp-mlas-say-kenneys-latest-covid-19-restrictions-move-alberta-backwards> (accessed 24 September, 2021). For a more historical analysis see also Duane Bratt and Bruce Foster, "UCP caucus revolt latest in a long history of splintering conservative parties in Alberta," *CBC Opinion*, 13 April 2021 (accessed 24 September 2021).
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- 26 Dean Bennett, "UCP caucus chair calls on Kenney to resign," *Calgary Herald*, 13 May 2021. <https://calgaryherald.com/pmn/news-pmn/canada-news-pmn/alberta-premier-jason-kenney-faces-call-from-senior-caucus-backbencher-to-resign/wcm/ea98edd4-ec1b-4f33-9d28-96641f5c9a71> (accessed 24 September 2021).
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- 28 Carrie Tait and Emma Graney, "Alberta Premier Jason Kenney to resign after winning slim majority in UCP leadership review," *Globe and Mail*, 18 May 2022, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/alberta/article-alberta-premier-jason-kenney-announces-resignation-after-poor/> (accessed 30 May 2022).
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- 30 Excellent discussion of these issues is provided by Graham Thomson, "Not so united conservatives," *CBC News*, 9 April 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/not-so-united-conservatives-kenney-being-punished-politically-for-doing-the-right-thing-1.5980772>; Lisa Young, "Polarization, politics and policy failure: Alberta's response to COVID-19," *CBC Opinion*, 10 April 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/road-ahead-alberta-polarization-covid-lisa-young-1.5981824>; Gary Mason, "COVID-19 has exposed Alberta as Canada's other distinct society," *Globe and Mail*, 27 April 2021, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-covid-19-has-exposed-alberta-as-canadas-other-distinct-society/>; Chris Nelson, "We are not in this together, we were never in this together," *Calgary Herald*, 6 May 2021, (all accessed 24 September 2021).

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