

So happy, yet so restless in Alberta

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After 41 years of Progressive Conservative government, Albertans appear to be in the midst of a political shakeup. The polls show a more competitive election than most would have expected even a few months ago. Suddenly, voters' traditionally rock-solid support of the PCs looks softer, and many appear to be taking a hard look at the Wildrose alternative. How does all this line up with Albertans' overall mood and their attitudes on policy issues? Not all that well, according to Environics' wide-ranging Focus Canada surveys.

First, the province is in a chipper mood. Albertans are the most likely of all Canadians to believe the country is on the right track (72 per cent). They are also upbeat about the economy, with more than two-thirds (65 per cent) saying they are not worried about the economic situation – putting the province in a tie with Saskatchewan for the highest levels of optimism. This is not exactly the mood of a population looking for someone to punish.

One might argue that Albertans are simply happy with their economy and glad to have a Western-based, right-of-centre party in power in Ottawa, but that they disagree with their own provincial government on major issues. But that doesn't seem to be the case either. Wildrose has positioned itself as the party of smaller government. But most Albertans are not especially hostile to government. At 61 per cent, Albertans are among the most likely of all Canadians to say that government “often does a better job than it gets credit for.”

Nor are Albertans unwilling to pay for government through taxes. Offered two opposing statements – one saying taxes are mostly positive because “they are how we pay for the important things that make our quality of life good, such as health care, education and roads” and the other, that taxes are mostly negative because they “take money out of people's pockets and hold back economic growth and the creation of wealth” – eight in 10 (80 per cent) chose the pro-tax position. That's the highest proportion in the country.

Three-quarters (74 per cent) agree that “governments in Canada should actively find ways to reduce the gap between wealthy people and those less fortunate,” only slightly below the national average. And more Albertans say they would favour more government and more services (48 per cent) over smaller government and fewer services (38 per cent).

So much for government being the problem and not the solution.

It doesn't appear that social issues would drive most Albertans to vote against the government either. Two-thirds agree, for example, that every woman who wants an abortion should be able to have one. The same proportion support same-sex marriage. If anything, social issues have helped the PCs, who have emphasized (to Wildrose's detriment) the Wildrose position on letting government employees opt out of delivering services to minority groups (notably gays) for reasons of "conscience."

If Albertans are mostly happy with how things are going and are not itching to slash government, why the current poll numbers?

One explanation may be a desire for more efficient, rather than less, government. Consider Albertans' views on health care (not unlike those of other Canadians): Many more attribute problems in the health system to inefficient management (66 per cent) than to a lack of funding (24 per cent).

The belief that governments can do more with the resources available may well have driven the election in Toronto of Mayor Rob Ford, whose constant campaign refrain was that he would cut waste. What Mr. Ford calls "efficiencies," many of his critics call a scorched-earth approach to vital services, and even Mr. Ford's supporters seem to have gotten more scorching than they bargained for – hence Toronto's fractious politics these days.

Which party Albertans will trust to bring sound management to government remains to be seen. But for a bunch of satisfied, optimistic people who agree with their current government on most fiscal and social issues, voters sure look restless.

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