

*Perception or Reality:*

Analyzing Political Polarization within Alberta

by

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## **Abstract**

The political culture of Alberta is often understood as containing deep political division. However, the potential exists that Albertans hold exaggerated perceptions surrounding the divide between liberal and conservative viewpoints in the province. This is highlighted through the phenomenon of false polarization, which describes the tendency to overestimate the distance between the positions of two political groups. Building upon current research that has identified Albertans as holding less politically extreme views than assumed, this thesis aims to explore the role that false polarization is playing in shaping the narrative that Alberta is politically polarized. Survey data from the Common Ground research team at the University of Alberta was used to facilitate the research. Respondents were asked to share their own opinions on contentious issues, and then asked for their perception of the perspectives of NDP and UCP supporters on the same issues. If people perceived greater division between supporters of the NDP and UCP than existed in reality, the issue in question was understood as falsely polarized. If the majority of issues surveyed produce results indicating false polarization, this suggests that Albertans may be much more politically unified than suggested by common perceptions.

## Acknowledgments

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This thesis represents the culmination of a year's long interest in the processes that drive political polarization. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to explore something that genuinely interests me at such an in depth level, and equally grateful for the lessons I have learned along the way.

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## Introduction

*“Politics is the distinction between the friend and the enemy.”*

- Carl Schmitt, 1932

The present state of our political culture is increasingly viewed as concerningly divided among political scholars. As stated by Canadian historian Margaret MacMillan, “us vs them politics have not reached their present level of intensity since the 1930s” (Mackinnon 2022, 17). The 2016 election of Donald Trump, the 2020 pandemic, and a variety of other divisive political events have created a time in which pre existing social cleavages appear to be heading towards an irreconcilable juncture. Political scientists Daniel Zibblat and Steven Levitsky argue that “when societies divide into partisan camps with profoundly different worldviews, and when those differences are viewed as existential... [people] come to view each other not as legitimate rivals, but as dangerous enemies” (Wesley 2022, 16). The dangers of this sentiment are illustrated in the opening quote, attributed to Carl Schmitt. Schmitt was a German political theorist, best known for his critiques of liberalism. He was also an active member of the Nazi party. Through the quoted statement, Schmitt clearly showcases a conflation of political beliefs with morality, positioning his political opponents as people that he likely holds no shared beliefs and values with. Sentiments such as these are experiencing a resurgence in the modern era. A 2022 study found that only 15 percent of Americans feel they have “a lot in common” with other Americans (Lee 2022, 1539). This perceived lack of commonality is paired with a widespread perception of division; in 2020, 93 percent of Americans described conflict between Democrats and Republicans as strong or very strong, and 71 percent identified the conflict specifically as *very* strong (Schaeffer, 2020). Similar social discord is additionally playing out on a more localized scale, such as within the province of Alberta. Following the 2023 Alberta provincial election, CBC reported that only 13 percent of people who identify with the New Democratic Party (NDP) would be willing to have a friend who identified with the United

Conservative Party (UCP). Among UCP supporters, this number was only slightly higher, at 16 percent (Weber 2023). This suggests that partisan identifying Albertans are perceiving a high level of difference between the viewpoints of the two major parties, with this perception of difference leading Albertans to categorize who they are willing to socially identify with based solely on their political label. It is crucial to note the distinction between the perceived opinion divide between Democrats and Republicans, or the average NDP and UCP supporter, and the actual opinion divide. The sentiment that one would not want a friendship with someone in the opposing partisan camp, or that one does not share common values with those around them, is rooted in *perception* of the viewpoints of others. As taught by the common saying that perception does not equal reality, perceived assessments of a situation should never be used as a determinant of the truth. However, perception is a powerful force. Perceiving political opponents as having fundamentally different views leads to the distinction drawn by Carl Schmitt; we are either friends, or enemies. There is nothing in between. This thesis will aim to counter that perspective, drawing on the theory of false polarization to argue that perceived political divisions are often much larger than actual ones. It will substantiate this claim by examining the phenomenon in Alberta, providing evidence that there is a discrepancy between the perceived political divide and the actual political divide.

### **Thesis Outline**

This research is structured around the question: to what extent is false polarization driving the narrative that Alberta is politically polarized? The first chapter begins by briefly discussing a history of political polarization, as well as outlining the key concepts of extremism and radicalism and how they shape understandings of polarization. The idea of false polarization is then introduced, and an important connection is made between the theory of false polarization and the current political climate of Alberta. This connection represents the driving focus of this research. The second chapter outlines the methodological approach selected, describing how false polarization within Alberta was investigated

utilizing survey research to identify the difference between Albertan's actual positions on contentious issues and their perceptions of the positions held by those around them. The third chapter provides an in depth analysis of the results from the survey, analyzing the extent to which false polarization is present in different segments of the population for the surveyed issues. Finally, the fourth chapter discusses the implications of the findings within the third chapter, provides direction for future research based on key themes that emerged, and concludes by re-examining the significance of perceived political polarization for broader democratic functioning.

## **Chapter 1: Perceptions of Political Polarization**

### **Literature Analysis**

#### **Defining Political Polarization**

The key concept shaping this research is the idea of political polarization. Therefore, an understanding of the various definitions and conceptualizations of political polarization within the literature is key. The issue of political polarization has been recognized by scholars for decades, with research indicating that political divisions among American voters have been steadily growing since the 1970s (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008, 543). In 1996, DiMaggio et al. identified the growing phenomenon of political polarization in the United States as “both a state and a process”, with the state indicating the extent to which opinions on a certain issue “are opposed in relation to some theoretical maximum”, and the process referring to the increase in this opposition over time (693). The authors then identified four key principles that serve to define the various dimensions of political polarization; the dispersion principle, the bimodality principle, the constraint principle, and the consolidation principle. The dispersion principle and the bimodality principle emphasize the division inherent to political polarization, with dispersion referring to the extent to which opinions on an issue have become dispersed in a manner that disrupts consensus, and bimodality discussing the level at which these opinions are

divided into separate camps that have the ability to cause social conflict (1996, 693). Constraint encompasses the extent to which polarized opinions are ideologically cohesive, or the manner in which holding opinions on one subject is predictive of the opinions an individual will have on an unrelated subject (1996, 693). The final principle, consolidation, discusses how a key marker of polarization is the level at which political attitudes have become correlated with salient individual characteristics (gender, race, etc), as this leads to social conflict. Considering these aforementioned factors, DiMaggio et al. concludes that political polarization is formed when opinions become more dispersed, bimodal, closely associated, and closely linked to salient social identities (1996, 699).

With this overarching definition as a backdrop, scholars have identified various types of political polarization that can take on a number of forms. This research will be situated within two broad categories of political polarization: ideological (issue) polarization and affective polarization. Ideological polarization refers to the extent to which a population is moving away from the center and towards extremes in regards to certain key issues. This can take the form of two political groups moving in opposite, extreme directions, with this known as symmetric polarization, or one group becoming more extreme than the other, with defined as asymmetric polarization (Jost, Baldassarri, and Druckman 2022, 561). Affective polarization occurs when political groups are divided into a favourably viewed in group and a disliked out group, with generalized and often inaccurate inferences made about the other side (Jost, Baldassarri and Druckam 2022, 561). Affective polarization and ideological polarization are notably linked, with increased rates of one type shown to then cause higher likelihood of the other. This is due to a notable relationship between ideological extremity and growing partisanship, with the holding of extreme opinions on key issues shaping how an individual feels about the outgroup that does not hold the same opinion as them (Iyengar et al. 2019, 134). Therefore, affective polarization and ideological polarization fuel one another. Given their inherent connection, this project will focus on both, as well as



the intersection between them. A final key concept in defining political polarization is the distinction between extremism and radicalism, two fundamental ideas that shape the issue. Extremism describes polarization that is “characterized by the tendency of two opposing views toward the extremes of an ideological spectrum” (Almagro 2022, 310). The level of extremism is defined by the distance between at least two viewpoints. Contrasting this, radicalism describes the element of polarization not centered around the separateness of opinion, but rather in the degree and strength of the belief, no matter where said belief is located on the ideological spectrum (Almagro 2022, 310). These two concepts demonstrate two separate pathways from which an individual can become politically polarized, but are included within the broader framework of the issue of polarization. Therefore, political polarization in this research is characterized at the intersection between ideological and affective polarization, and includes both extremism and radicalism within the larger definition of polarization.

### **Perceived Polarization vs Reality**

A key emerging theme in the literature on political polarization is the discrepancy between how individuals perceive the magnitude of polarization compared to its reality. This discrepancy can be understood in the context of a phenomenon known as naive realism. Essentially, naive realism is “the tendency for people to believe that how they perceive the world is the way the world is” (Blatz 2023, 2). Theorists of naive realism posit that because we intrinsically understand our opinions as originating from objective reality, an “informed, unbiased person” would hold the same opinions (Blatz & Mercier 2018). Therefore, when an individual holds a differing opinion, naive realism suggests that this is due to “lack of knowledge, lack of thought, or bias” (Blatz 2023, 2). This characterization of members of the opposing political side as inherently misinformed or uneducated leads to an assumption that one’s opponent is unable to understand the “ambiguities and nuances of an issue” (Blatz & Mercier 2018). Rather, “people believe that their opponents are more extreme and ideologically driven than those opponents really are”

(Blatz & Mercier 2018). Scholars theorize that naive realism has the effect of causing individuals to exaggerate and mischaracterize existing political differences. In 2014, Ahler identified that citizens tended to overestimate the extremism of both liberals and conservatives, with both groups perceived as more polarized in their beliefs than they actually were. This misconception had the effect of causing said individuals to adopt more extreme beliefs than they previously held in response to their perception of the extremism of others, in turn worsening the issue of polarization (617). Westfall et al. argues that these exaggerated perceptions of polarization are shaped by three key factors. Firstly, categorization, or the sorting of individuals into marked partisan groups, with the opposing group viewed as more radical than one's own (2015, 151). Secondly, identification strength, or "the strength of people's personal identification as a member of a partisan group" (2015, 152). Identifying strongly with a partisan group (often in the form of a political party) is associated with heightened levels of categorization, with these individuals more likely to "exaggerate differences between "our group" and the opposing group" (2015, 152). Lastly, the authors discuss attitude extremity, or the strength of people's own perspective on partisan issues. Holding more extreme attitudes causes a projection of extremity onto others, worsening the perceptions of polarization (2015, 154). Westfall et al. found that the more strongly people identify as either left or right wing, the more polarization they perceived between the two groups. This trend was also seen among those who held more radical partisan attitudes, with respondents perceiving greater polarization on the issues that they themselves were most passionate about (2015, 154). Enders and Armaly link the findings of increasing levels of perceptions of polarization to increasing affective polarization, discovering that the influence of perceiving the opposing team as extreme is greater on measures of affective polarization than holding actual extreme views (2019). Enders and Armaly also discuss how perceived polarization alters people's participation in politics, causing them to "participate more and vote more, but trust the government less and obtain less efficacy from the political process"

(2019, 830). In addition to this, when people perceive the opposing political side as extreme, they are more inclined to view their opponents as “selfish... and irrational, and prefer conflict escalating actions over cooperation” (2019, 830). The combination of these findings demonstrates the importance of understanding the role of perception in shaping the larger issue of political polarization, with scholars recognizing the discrepancy between perception and reality through a concept known as false polarization.

### **False Polarization**

False polarization is understood as the inclination individuals hold to overestimate the extent of polarization between two groups. Levendusky and Malhotra define false polarization as the “difference between two quantities”; firstly, the “distance between the perceived positions of Group A and Group B”, and secondly, the “distance between the *actual* positions of Group A and Group B” (2016, 379). Scholars of false polarization argue that in many cases, the perceived distance is larger than what exists in reality. When applied to the political realm, false polarization can be used to describe the difference between the perceived gap of left wing and right wing perspectives and the actual differences between the two positions. A number of researchers have documented the existence of false polarization in the political sphere. In 1995, Robinson et al. investigated perspectives on the issues of abortion and race, finding that both partisans and non partisans “are prone to overestimate the gap between the two sides... and especially the gap between their ideological partners and those of their ideological adversaries” (414). Additionally, respondents “overestimated the extremity and ideological consistency not only of the other side but of their own side as well” (413). This overestimation was especially relevant concerning conservative viewpoints, with both conservative and liberals alike exaggerating the viewpoints of right wing perspectives more than left wing perspectives (413). These findings have been corroborated by a number of studies. In 2012, Boven et al. analyzed perceptions of the recent U.S. Presidential election,

finding that people perceived more polarization regarding opinion surrounding the two candidates than existed in reality. This perception of polarization was heightened when the individual in question was “more extreme in their own support for one presidential candidate” (90). The researchers then attempted to replicate these findings in a controlled setting, constructing a fictional partisan issue regarding the allocation of resources at a university. This study indicated false polarization in a manner that supported their earlier findings, showcasing that those who held polarized perspectives on the partisan issue perceived the most polarization “in the distribution of attitudes” (94). In 2016, Levendusky and Malhotra further examined the issue of false polarization, discovering that on a variety of political issues (taxes, free trade, immigration), “the perceived divide between Republicans and Democrats... is larger than the actual divide” (384). Similar to the findings of Robinson, Levendusky and Malhotra concluded that individuals perceive both members of their own party and the opposing party as more extreme than in reality, with this perception of extremity being exaggerated for the opposing party (384).

Interestingly, recent research has indicated that awareness surrounding the phenomenon of false polarization can have the effect of reducing its impact. Canadian researcher Craig Blatz conducted a study in which participants were divided into an intervention and a non intervention group. Both groups completed a questionnaire gauging their opinion on certain political issues, as well as their estimation of the opinions of others. After this, the intervention group was shown a video explaining false polarization and naive realism. It was found that among the intervention group, perceived polarization was reduced “both of issues discussed and not discussed in the intervention” (2023, 10). This was demonstrated by a follow up survey given to those in the intervention group immediately, as well as a survey administered three weeks after the initial study. Blatz states that among both undergraduate students and among a nationwide sample, the intervention teaching “effectively reduced how extreme people considered others to be” (2023, 10). These results indicate the importance of recognizing false polarization in contexts

where the political culture is viewed as especially polarized or contentious, such as within the province of Alberta.

### Table of Definitions

Ideological Polarization	<p>The extent to which a population is moving away from the center and towards extremes in regards to certain key issues.</p> <p>Symmetric Polarization: Two political groups moving in opposite, extreme directions.</p> <p>Asymmetric Polarization: One political group becoming more extreme than another.</p>
Affective Polarization	<p>When political groups are divided into a favourably viewed in group and a disliked out group, with generalized and often inaccurate inferences made about the other side.</p>
Extremism	<p>The holding of two opposing views toward the extremes of an ideological spectrum. Extremity in an individual is characterized by the distance of their beliefs from others.</p>
Radicalism	<p>Defined by the degree and strength of the belief, no matter where said belief is located on the ideological spectrum. A radical individual is one who holds notably strong opinions compared to the general population.</p>
False Polarization	<p>When the perceived distance of two group positions is larger than the actual distance between the group positions.</p>

### Political Polarization Within Alberta

The 2023 provincial election in Alberta created the impression that the province contains deep political divisions. Shortly after the election, keen observers described Alberta as containing “one of the most polarized electorates in modern Canadian history” (Thomson, 2023). This attitude has been reinforced by Albertan citizens, with a Viewpoint Alberta survey of 1200 residents following the election revealing strong degrees of animosity and factionalism. A mere seven percent of surveyed NDP identifying Albertans stated they would welcome a UCP member into their family by marriage, and 38 percent of surveyed UCP identifiers stated that they viewed elections “like war” (Weber, 2023). While these results suggest a high level of political polarization within Alberta, recent research provides a contradicting narrative. In 2023, researchers with the Common Ground initiative found that over 53% of Albertans actually identify as politically moderate, and 82% of Albertans identify to some extent with both the labels of progressive and conservative (Wesley Alfaro & Hill, 2023). In addition to this, only a quarter of the Albertan population “strongly identifies” with either the UCP or the NDP. (Wesley Alfaro & Hill 2023). Further research by Common Ground corroborates these findings of political moderation, with survey results demonstrating that Albertans tend to exaggerate conservatism in the province regarding issues such as transitioning from oil and gas (Wesley 2023). These findings complicate the dominant messaging of Alberta as a province that is very politically divided. It is possible that the answer to this discrepancy lies in the concept of false polarization, with Albertans perceiving a politically polarized culture and thus reacting accordingly. This would reflect the aforementioned findings of Enders and Armaly suggesting a connection between perceptions of heightened polarization and individual adoption of extreme attitudes. Although both the existence and negative impact of false polarization within politics is increasingly documented in the United States, the issue remains relatively understudied in Canadian (and notably Albertan) contexts. The potential existence of false polarization in Canada was showcased through recent research conducted by Andrew Parkin, who found that sixty seven percent of

Canadians place themselves in the middle of the political spectrum when surveyed. This was 20 percent higher than the forty seven percent of Americans who placed themselves in the political center (2023). These high levels of political moderation within Canada potentially indicates that outward perceptions of polarization may be caused by false polarization, and not reflect the reality of the political spectrum.

### **My Research**

This project will aim to investigate the role of false polarization in shaping the common understanding of Alberta as politically divided. In order to do this, it asks the question: to what extent is false polarization driving the narrative that Albertans are politically polarized? Further shaping the research are two hypotheses.

**H1: Albertans perceive greater divisions on key issues between NDP and UCP supporters than exists in reality.** This hypothesis represents a key element of false polarization. Reflecting the definition of false polarization developed by Levendusky and Malhotra, if the phenomenon exists in Alberta, the divide between the perceived gap of opinions will be larger than the actual divide.

**H2: Albertans perceive other Albertans as more extreme than they themselves are.** This hypothesis reflects the findings of a variety of aforementioned research and how it would likely apply to Alberta if false polarization is in fact occurring. As demonstrated by Robinson, Levendusky & Malhotra, and Common Ground, individuals tend to be more politically moderate than they believe those around them to be. This then leads to false polarization, as a discrepancy is created between where the public actually falls on the political spectrum and their perception of the political distribution. The existence of this hypothesis would indicate that the conditions for false polarization are occurring in Alberta.

If support for both of these hypotheses is found within the research, this would suggest that false polarization is shaping Alberta's political culture at least to a partial extent.

## **Chapter 2: Assessing False Polarization Within Alberta**

## **Methodology**

In order to gauge false polarization within Alberta, this thesis will utilize survey data. Specifically, this research will draw upon the Viewpoint Alberta survey administered by the research initiative Common Ground. Common Ground aims to study political culture across Western Canada, utilizing repeated additions of their Viewpoint Alberta survey in order to track public opinion. The February 2024 addition of the Viewpoint Alberta survey contained a set of questions designed specifically to assess false polarization within the province, with these questions representing the key data shaping this research. The Viewpoint Alberta survey was administered online by Leger, and was conducted between January 22 and February 25, 2024, with an average completion time of 15 minutes. The survey was co led by principal investigators Dr. Jared Wesley and Dr. Feodor Snagovsky, and utilizes data from 1213 respondents.

The merits of survey data as a method of measuring public opinion are widely recognized, with surveys characterized as the “dominant way... to assess public will” (Berinsky 2017). The anonymity provided by surveys allows for observations to be made surrounding a population that are otherwise difficult to obtain. In addition to this, surveys are capable of obtaining information from large samples of the population. The combination of these benefits often causes the survey to be ideal for studying political preferences and behavior. Although survey research is a widely used method in political science, the approach has some potential limitations that are important to address. Firstly, and especially pertinent in online surveys such as Viewpoint Alberta, it can be difficult to ensure that the respondents to the survey are representative of the general population. This is crucial in creating scientifically valid research, meaning that there must be effort made to ensure that the survey is reaching a broad sample. Secondly, surveys contain an inherent potential for bias, “either in the lack of response from intended participants or in the nature and accuracy of responses that are received” (Glasow 2005, 6). To ensure a





Maintaining  
a consumer  
carbon tax  
(2)



Allowing  
safe  
consumption  
sites to  
continue  
operating (3)



Redirecting  
funds from  
police  
department  
budgets to  
social  
programs (4)



Respondents were then asked to what extent they thought the typical Albertan supported or opposed the same policies, to what extent the typical New Democrat Party (NDP) supporter in Alberta supported or opposed the policies, and to what extent the typical United Conservative Party (UCP) supporter in Alberta supported or opposed the policies. The issues of pronoun legislation, a consumer carbon tax, safe consumption sites, and the idea of defunding police budgets were chosen intentionally as ideal political issues to measure false polarization. All of the aforementioned topics are viewed as polarized in the public sphere, representing the center of a considerable amount of debate in the past number of years.

## **Pronoun Legislation**

Issues surrounding LGBTQ+ rights have long been regarded as controversial, with debates surrounding gender identity recently becoming notably contentious in both Canada and the United States. This contention is occurring in the wake of a variety of governments attempting to restrict transgender expression in schools. In the Canadian context, the New Brunswick government sparked controversy with a change to their LGBTQ+ policy requiring students under sixteen to obtain parental consent before being able to use a preferred name and pronouns in school (Stechyson 2023). This policy then inspired similar changes in Saskatchewan, with the province passing legislation also requiring children under sixteen to obtain parental consent before changing their names or pronouns (Langager 2023). In early 2024, premier of Alberta Danielle Smith introduced a similar set of legislation. The policies proposed by Smith, which have been labeled as “targeting and demonizing” transgender children by Federal Justice Minister Arif Virani, include requiring children 15 and under to obtain parental consent before changing their name and pronouns at school (Tasker 2024). The debate sparked by these proposed provincial changes appears to be notably polarizing for the Canadian public, with tense protests occurring nationwide in the latter half of 2023 surrounding the issue. In Alberta, these protests were described as “dueling”, with protesters desiring to “stop the programming” of children in relation to LGBTQ issues met by counter protesters who characterized the opposing side as aiming to “demonize and eradicate LGBTQ people” (King 2023). Research from the United States indicates that beliefs surrounding the rights of LGBTQ individuals are often sharply divided along partisan lines. A 2023 survey indicated that around 50 percent of Democrats would be comfortable with a friend who uses gender neutral pronouns, compared to only 18 percent of Republicans (PRRI 2023). This appears to be true in the Canadian context as well, with 65 percent of federal conservative voters identified as supporting policies of mandated pronoun reporting compared to 20 percent of NDP voters (Angus Reid Institute 2023).

However, recent survey research from Saskatchewan indicates that the public is more united on the issue than common understanding may suggest. 55 percent of Saskatchewan respondents reported believing that teachers should have the discretion as to whether or not parents should be made aware of pronoun changes, and 68 percent stated they disagreed with the intentions of the provincial government to utilize the notwithstanding clause in order to pass the school pronoun policy (Langager 2023). In the Alberta context, 2023 research from Common Ground additionally suggests a potential for lower levels of polarization than often perceived. Although support for policies of pronoun reporting were correlated with partisanship to an extent, over 20 percent of Albertans were unsure whether they supported pronoun disclosure (Snagovsky 2024). These results indicate “that there is a persuadable middle group of voters” (Snagovsky 2024) on this issue, rather than a population strictly divided into polarized factions. The discrepancy between the perceived intense division surrounding pronoun policy and these results from Saskatchewan and Alberta indicates that false polarization may be occurring surrounding the issue, making a survey question focused on pronoun legislation ideal in assessing this topic.

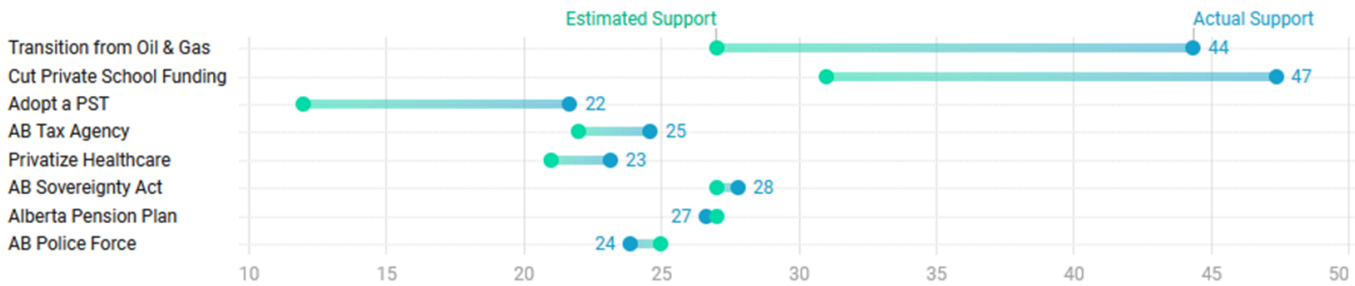
### **Consumer Carbon Tax**

The issue of climate change is also often characterized as one that polarizes the public, with the appropriate role of government in addressing the changing climate consistently positioned as politically contentious. Recent research surrounding the issues that most divide Canadians identifies climate change as “one of the biggest ideological and partisan cleavages in Canadian politics today” (Parkin 2023). This assessment results from findings indicating that climate change is the only political issue that “distinguishes both left from right, and Liberals from Conservatives” (Parkin 2023). While this suggests that views on climate change are deeply divided along party lines, 2023 research from the CBC found that a large majority of Canadians (72 percent) characterize themselves as “worried” or “very worried” about climate change (Rabson 2023). These contradicting results may represent an outcome of false

polarization described by Douglas Ahler, in which individuals perceive a greater divide than actually exists and therefore become more extreme in their own viewpoints. In their reporting, CBC identified Albertans as the least concerned about climate change, with only 55 percent of Albertans either “worried” or “very worried” compared to the aforementioned national number of 72 percent (Rabson 2023). These findings align with the common characterization of Albertans as resistant to environmental policies due to the perceived association of the policies with harm of the dominant oil and gas sector. Within the province, climate policy has a history of representing a contentious political issue. In 2015, the NDP government adopted an energy transition plan known as the CLP (Climate Leadership Plan) that was the target of immense backlash from Conservative officials. Debate surrounding the CLP “was front and center” of the 2019 provincial election, with UCP candidate Jason Kenney discussing the issue of climate change policy in a manner that promoted division and conflict (Bratt 2020, 19). Kenney described his approach as one of “fighting back”, promoting the idea of a “war room” to defend Alberta’s oil and gas sector and promising to “boycott companies who criticized Alberta oil and gas” (Bratt 2020, 19). Under the current government, it is common for premier Danielle Smith to continue Kenney’s framing of energy transition measures in a notably hostile lens. This was showcased in a 2023 tweet from the premier, where she described the federal carbon tax as an “absurd” and “damaging... punishment” (Smith 2023). This rhetoric would arguably suggest that Albertans hold more extreme views on how to approach climate change when compared to the rest of Canada. Canadians from other provinces appear to perceive Albertans as outliers in their views on climate policy, with less than 50 percent of Canadians stating they thought Albertans “[cared] about climate change” in a recent CBC poll. However, this number increased to 60 percent when Albertans were asked if they thought other Albertans “[cared] about climate change” (DeCillia 2023). Although this suggests that Albertans are more likely than the broader Canadian population to believe that other Albertans value addressing climate change, separate

research indicates a significant discrepancy between perceived support and actual support for certain climate policies in the province. Recent research conducted by Common Ground demonstrates a roughly 17 percent difference between the estimated support and actual support within Alberta of transitioning away from oil and gas. Estimated support was placed at roughly 27%, compared to the actual support at 44% (Wesley 2023). This represented one of the largest gaps between estimated and actual support when compared to other policy issues, as is showcased in Figure 1. Although the aforementioned CBC polls reflect a consensus surrounding the strong role of conservatism in Alberta on climate change policy, the inconsistency between the perception of Albertan viewpoints and the actual perspectives of Albertans is notable. When the work of Common Ground and CBC are jointly considered, it suggests that although still legitimately prevalent, the right wing perspective within the province may be exaggerated both by Canadians and other Albertans.

### False Social Consciousness in Alberta



Source: Viewpoint Alberta - Created with Datawrapper

**Figure 1: Wesley 2023**

There is a similar potential for a disconnect between the perception of left wing perspectives on climate change within the province and the actual perspective of left leaning Albertans. Throughout the 2023 election, the UCP consistently classified the NDP as “anti oil and gas”, with the campaign website for the UCP labeling the NDP as “hating our energy industry” (United Conservative Party of Alberta). In

March 2023, UCP energy minister Peter Guthrie referred to NDP supporters as “anti oil and gas activists” who aimed “to destroy the resource sector” (Amato 2023). While this framing suggests that NDP supporters would significantly differ from UCP supporters on the idea of a carbon tax, the 2024 NDP leadership race is suggesting otherwise. Leadership candidate Rakhi Pancholi announced early in her candidacy that as leader she would reject the carbon tax, stating “we have to acknowledge that we have not brought the public along with us on that issue” (Pancholi 2024). Other candidates quickly followed with a dismissal of the carbon tax, suggesting that the idea of a consumer carbon tax is no longer central to Alberta NDP values concerning the appropriate manner of addressing climate change. This suggests that despite the UCP characterization of the NDP as very pro carbon tax, the policy may hold less support from NDP voters than commonly believed. The combined impact of the UCP and the NDP being stereotyped as holding opposing extreme views on climate change policy, and evidence that this perception of extremity does not translate to actual positions, suggests the existence of false polarization.

### **Safe Consumption Sites**

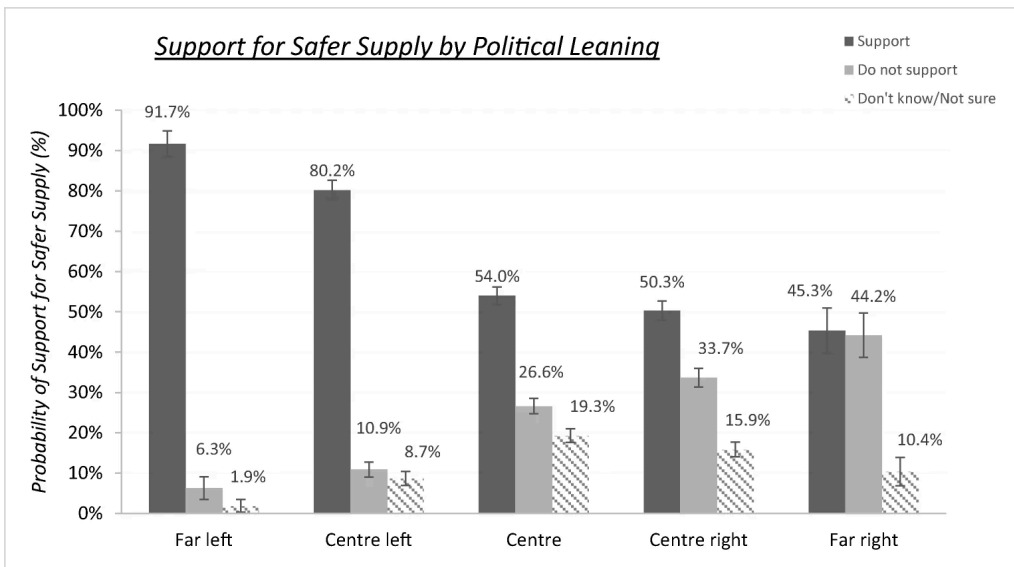
Similarly to debates on the carbon tax, recent policies and rhetoric from the Alberta government assign a divisive nature to the issue of safe consumption sites that may not reflect the reality of the opinions held by the Alberta population. Safe consumption sites are defined as “monitored spaces where people can consume drugs without risk of criminal sanction... and access sterile harm reduction supplies [alongside] health and social supports” (Salvalaggio et al. 2023, 929). While research indicates a large majority of Canadians (85 percent) support “mandatory treatment for anyone dealing with an opioid addiction” (Angus Reid Institute 2019), the idea of safe consumption sites to manage increasing opioid use has sparked controversy, notably in Alberta. In 2019, the Angus Reid Institute reported that 49 percent of Albertans were in favor of supervised injection sites, whereas 51 percent opposed them (Angus Reid Institute). These results from Alberta are unique compared to the Canada wide survey data,

which found that 66 percent of Canadians supported safe consumption sites (Angus Reid Institute 2019). It is likely that this discrepancy has in part been fueled by the actions of political leaders within Alberta. In 2020, Jason Kenney's UCP government released a review assessing the socio economic impact of the seven legally operating safe consumption sites in Alberta, after freezing funding for the establishment of new sites in 2019 (Perrin 2020). This review characterized the sites as dangerous and publically divisive, and described the public as holding a generally negative and fearful view surrounding safe injection sites (Perrin 2020). Danielle Smith's UCP government has similarly framed safe injection sites as causing division, specifically targeting those who support safe injection sites as extreme and damaging to the broader community. In 2023, Smith tweeted that the harm reduction agency Safelink Alberta was teaching teenagers "how to use illicit and deadly drugs", calling their harm reduction methods for youth "outrageous" (Smith 2023). Executive Director of Smith's Premier's office, Rob Anderson, echoed this sentiment in a tweet specifically targeting the NDP, stating that the NDP supported "more hard drugs and injection sites for addicts" (Anderson 2023). Similarly, public safety minister Mike Ellis accused the NDP of "championing extremist leftist policies that would flood our streets with taxpayer funded drugs" (CTV News Calgary) during the 2023 election campaign. In 2019, support for safe consumption sites was shown to be significantly impacted by political affiliation on a Canada wide level, with Angus Reid demonstrating that 85 percent of federal NDP supporters support the use of supervised injection sites, compared to only 15 percent of NDP supporters who oppose the sites. This stands in stark contrast to the 56 percent of CPC supporters who oppose the sites (Angus Reid Institute 2019). As showcased in Figure 2, political affiliation can also be used as a key predictor of support for safe consumption sites within Alberta. Individuals who identify as left wing overwhelmingly report supporting safe supply, whereas support decreases as individuals move further towards the right on the political spectrum. However, all political groups in Alberta, with the exception of those who identify as far right, are showcased as having



50 percent or more of respondents supporting the use of safe supply (Morris et al. 2023). Additionally, Morris et al. found that a significant portion of center and center right Albertans were unsure of their stance on safe supply, indicating that many voters do not hold radical views on the issue. Overall, this research found that a majority of Albertans (63 percent) “support safe supply programs that replace illegal street drugs” (Morris et al. 2023, 487). Of the remaining 37 percent, only 24 percent disagreed, with 12.4 percent stating they either “didn’t know” or were “not sure” (Morris et al. 2023, 487).

Therefore, while the Angus Reid findings indicate that legitimate polarization does exist between left and right wing voters on the topic of safe consumption sites, the Morris et al. research clearly demonstrates that there is a degree of consensus on the topic. This suggests that the continued combative framing of safe injection sites by Alberta’s government may not accurately reflect the viewpoints of Albertans. The possibility exists that the divisive tone taken by Alberta’s political leaders has exaggerated the degree to which Albertans perceive political division on the issue, leading to the potential for false polarization.



**Figure 2: Morris et al. 2023**

**Defunding the Police**

The idea of defunding the police largely emerged as a result of public outrage following the 2020 murder of George Floyd at the hands of a police officer. This incident sparked international debate surrounding racism inherent to policing systems, and to what extent police budgets should continue to be funded at their current rate. In the context of this project, defunding the police describes reallocating funds away from local police budgets and redistributing them to other government services, such as social work, housing, and mental health (Merrifield 2021). With this being said, it is worth noting that the phrase “defund the police” has taken on a variety of different meanings, from the aforementioned redistributing of resources to complete police abolition (Holtby 2020). Although the concept emerged from an American context, a 2020 study showcased that the idea of defunding the police was markedly dividing for Canadians, with 51 percent of Canadians supportive and 49 percent opposed (IPSOS). A separate 2020 study conducted by Angus Reid found that Alberta and Saskatchewan had the highest proportion of individuals opposed to defunding the police. Four in ten Alberta residents were classified as part of the “true blue” Canadians, defined as holding “high levels of pride and trust in police [and] strongly against notions of systemic racism and defunding” (Angus Reid Institute 2020). The study additionally discussed how “some of the starkest divides on this issue are correlated with political partisanship”, with merely 13 percent of previous federal Conservative voters perceiving the treatment of visible minorities by the police as a problem, compared to 67 percent of federal NDP voters (Angus Reid Institute 2020). Rhetoric from Albertan politicians suggests that this partisan divide is distinctly present within the province. Alberta’s UCP have framed a narrative of polarization surrounding the police, with Danielle Smith stating that “Rachel Notley’s NDP refuses to back down from their defund the police rhetoric, [whereas] United Conservatives will continue to support the men and women in blue” (United Conservative Party of Alberta). In the most recent election, the UCP incorporated pro policing policies as a key element of their platform, while continuously suggesting that the NDP was “soft on crime” (United

Conservative Party of Alberta). This characterization of the NDP remained consistent despite the NDP introducing “restoring municipal funding and hiring more officers” as a pillar of their campaign plan (Herring 2023). In 2023, nearly three years after the concept of defunding the police entered mainstream discourse, close to 70 percent of Albertans polled in a Leger survey reported feeling that crime and violence was worse in Alberta compared to pre pandemic levels (Ropchan 2023). Additionally, a separate 2023 Leger poll showed that 81% of Albertans wanted “more policing” to address increasing drug offenses (Hopper 2023). While little updated data exists on Alberta's perception of defunding the police today, the widespread perception of increasing crime suggests that the province may be more united behind the police than political rhetoric suggests. This unity, however, may not be reflected in the perceptions of how Albertans view policing. The University of Lethbridge conducted a 2023 study surveying rural Albertans on policing in the province, and found that only 19 percent of respondents agreed that “youth have a high level of trust in police in Alberta” (Hallstrom & Trussler 10, 2023). Although the study did not include questions surrounding views on the police as determined by political affiliation, this perception of low trust among youth suggests that Albertans perceive divisions surrounding policing in the province that may not exist in reality. This creates the potential for false polarization.

## **Survey Analysis**

### **General Overview**

The initial analysis for this research centers around any disparity between the distribution and strength of people’s own opinions compared to their perception of Albertan, NDP, and UCP opinions. For each question, the results are regarded as polarized if a significant portion of respondents either strongly support or strongly oppose the issue in question, and if very few respondents place themselves as neutral. As stated by scholar Andrew Parkin, “there is nothing dysfunctional in a democracy about people

cheering on their own team and disliking their opponents” (Parkin 2024), meaning that questions in which the majority of respondents either ‘somewhat support’ or ‘somewhat oppose’ will not be viewed as polarizing. If a question elicits results in which the majority of respondents indicate either strong support or strong opposition without an equally significant number selecting the opposite strong opinion, the question will be viewed as producing extreme results. However, it will not be understood as polarizing, as the respondents were not divided in their extreme opinion.

The potential for false polarization is introduced when more polarization is perceived between NDP and UCP supporters than exists in the distribution of people’s own opinions. If respondents perceive NDP supporters as extreme in one direction of support for an issue, and UCP supporters as extreme in the other direction, the issue in question will be regarded as one in which people perceive polarization. If this issue did not contain polarization on the question gauging respondents' own opinions, this will be regarded as potential false polarization. In order to confirm whether false polarization is in fact present, this project draws on data from two additional survey questions.

### **Party + Political Identity**

Firstly, the party identity of the respondent is assessed utilizing the following question:

1. In Alberta provincial politics, do you usually identify with one of the following parties?
  - the New Democratic Party of Alberta
  - the United Conservative Party of Alberta
  - the Alberta Party
  - the Liberal Party of Alberta

- the Green Party of Alberta
- the Wildrose Independence Party
- None of the above

This question was used to understand the distinction between the polarization that actually exists between the NDP and UCP and the perceived polarization between the two parties. The party identity of the respondents will firstly be analyzed alongside their perspective on pronoun policy, the carbon tax, safe consumption sites, and defunding the police. This illustrates where Albertans actually fall on these issues, and how people's perspectives are shaped by their party affiliation. Following this, the respondents party identity will be analyzed alongside their perspective on how the average NDP supporter and UCP supporter views the above issues. This allows for an examination of how people's party affiliation shapes how they perceive party support on contentious issues. If UCP and NDP supporters express more neutrality in their perspectives than is perceived, this would indicate that false polarization is occurring. Additionally, the data from this question allows for an exploration of whether supporters from one party perceive more polarization than supporters from the other party. Although this question includes a variety of parties within Alberta, this project solely focuses on the results of UCP and NDP supporters. This decision was made due to the fact that the UCP and the NDP are the only parties to currently hold seats within the Alberta legislature, and therefore are solely responsible for shaping policy within the province.

2. In politics, people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place **yourself** on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means very left-wing, and 10 means very right-wing?

Similarly to the inclusion of party identification, this question was utilized to showcase how a respondents general political identity shapes both their perspective on the surveyed issues, and their

perception of how NDP and UCP supporters relate to the issues. Although the main goal of this project is to explore actual vs perceived polarization between NDP and UCP supporters, the inclusion of a question specifically assessing the political ideology of respondents adds important nuance. Party affiliation does not necessarily correspond to someone's political ideology, and therefore including the extent to which someone is left or right wing helps to showcase what shapes actual and perceived polarization. For the purposes of this question, a respondent is understood as extreme in their ideology if they assess themselves as a 0/1 (very left wing) or as a 9/10 (very right wing).

The combined results from the general overview and the questions surrounding the respondents party identity will aid in addressing Hypothesis 1. If respondents perceive more polarization between the opinions of the NDP and UCP than is expressed by party supporters, or if party supporters perceive more polarization between the two parties than they express themselves, this will be understood as supporting the first Hypothesis. Hypothesis 2 will be addressed through the general overview and the questions on both the respondents party and political identity. If the questions surrounding perception of opinions produce more extreme responses than those assessing actual opinions, this will be viewed as supporting the second Hypothesis. Within the second Hypothesis, this project will additionally explore whether one political party tends to perceive more extremity than the other, and if certain identities on the political spectrum lead to increased perceptions of extremity in others. If both Hypotheses are supported, this would suggest that false polarization is playing a role in shaping the political culture of Alberta.

### **Alternative Measures for False Polarization: Affective Polarization**

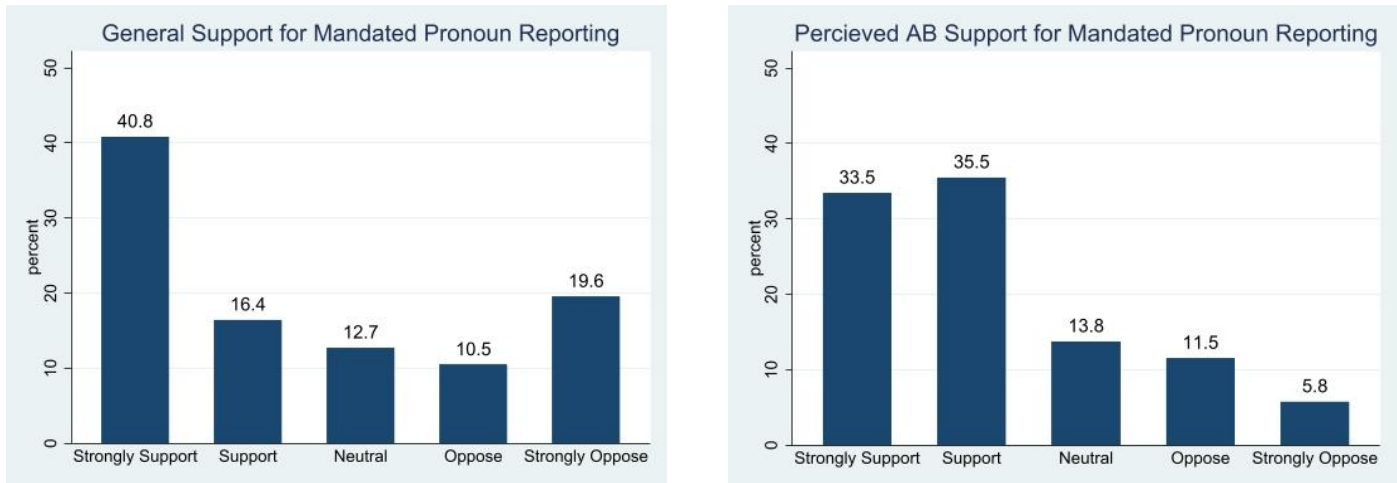
Additionally included in the Viewpoint Alberta survey was a question on the extent to which the respondent liked or disliked supporters of the NDP (from "like a great deal" to "dislike a great deal") and a partner question on the extent to which the respondent liked or disliked supporters of the UCP. By including this question in the analysis alongside people's party affiliation and their perceptions of the

viewpoints of party supporters, this research could have expanded to more directly consider the relationship between ideological polarization and affective polarization in shaping false polarization. Although this would have added an interesting dimension to the analysis of false polarization, the initial measure of false polarization only included questions of ideology (ie, asking the respondent to share their opinion on a set of issues). Thus, restricting the analysis to questions solely focused on ideological, and not affective polarization, helped allow the research to have a more concise and logically consistent focus. The connection of false polarization to affective polarization is explored within the implications and conclusions of the research, which suggest that exaggerated perceptions of ideological polarization can lead to increased levels of actual affective polarization.

### **Chapter 3: Discussing Results**

#### **Pronoun Legislation: General Overview**

The initial results surrounding support for mandated pronoun reporting indicate the existence of both actual and perceived polarization among Albertans on this issue. The question of whether respondents themselves supported schools having to obtain parental consent before a student is allowed to change their pronouns demonstrated extremity and some polarization. 40 percent of respondents stated that they strongly supported mandated pronoun reporting, compared to 16 percent who placed themselves in the less extreme “support” category. This demonstrates that among Albertans who support this policy, many are strongly convicted in this support. After strong support, the second largest response category was strongly opposed, selected by nearly 20 percent (19.6) of respondents. The combined 60 percent of respondents who selected either strongly support or strongly oppose indicates that legitimate polarization does exist surrounding the issue of pronoun reporting. However, close to 13 percent of respondents stated that they neither supported nor opposed mandated pronoun reporting, with this neutrality representing an important factor in mediating the degree to which this issue is considered polarizing.



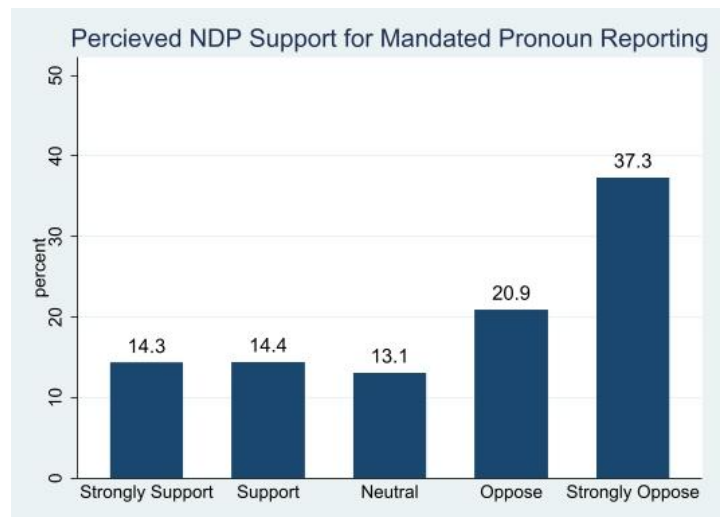
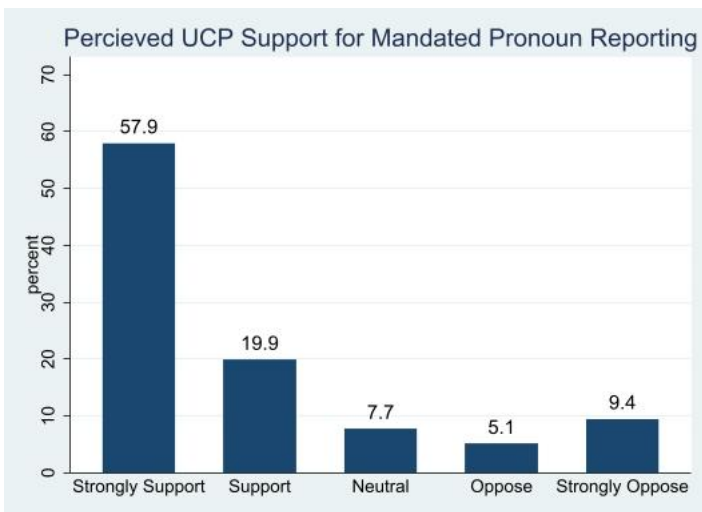
**Figure 3**

Interestingly, people perceived the average Albertan as less extreme and less polarized on this issue than they characterized themselves as being. The most commonly selected response category for the perspective of the average Albertan on mandated pronoun reporting was “somewhat support”, chosen by 35.5 percent of respondents. Respondents were also more likely to perceive the average Albertan as more neutral than themselves, with nearly 14 percent (13.8) of people believing the average Albertan neither supported nor opposed mandated pronoun reporting. Additionally, strongly opposed was the least selected category, at 5.8 percent. This suggests that while people perceive a decent proportion of Albertans as strongly convicted on this issue (33.5 percent strongly supporting), they do not characterize average Albertans as polarized.

The polarization expressed by the respondents themselves was heightened when they were asked to share their perception of the average perspective held by UCP and NDP supporters. Both parties were categorized as extreme in their perspectives, leading to a perception of polarization between the two groups. Respondents perceived the UCP as more strongly convicted than the NDP, with 60 percent believing that the average UCP supporter would strongly *support* mandated pronoun reporting compared to 37 percent who believed that the average NDP supporter would strongly *oppose* mandated pronoun

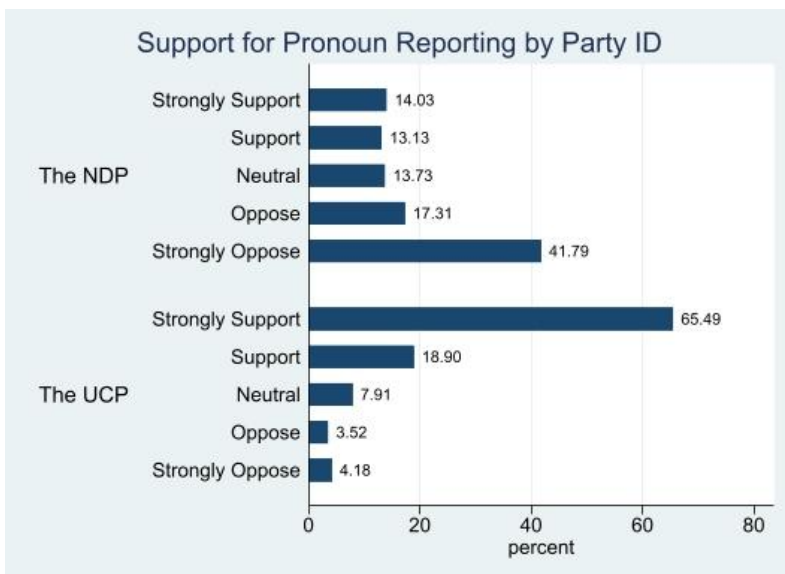


reporting. While strongly opposed was still the most commonly selected category to represent the perspective of the NDP, people were much more likely to perceive neutrality among NDP supporters (13 percent for the NDP to 7 percent for the UCP). Additionally, respondents were more likely to report believing that NDP supporters may hold an opposing perspective on the issue of mandated reporting to what is promoted by NDP party leaders. 28.7 percent of people expressed the belief that the average NDP supporter would support the idea of mandated pronoun reporting to some degree, with this directly contradicting the current messaging of the party as staunchly opposed to Danielle Smith's pronoun legislation (Heidenrich 2024). The results for the UCP suggest that people perceive significantly less variation among UCP supporters, demonstrated by the much smaller number of respondents (14.5 percent) who perceived UCP supporters as opposed to mandated pronoun reporting. When considering the results of the two parties together as is showcased in Figure 4, it is clear that individuals perceive polarization between the party supporters. UCP supporters are perceived as more likely to strongly support mandated pronoun reporting than the strong support expressed in people's actual opinions (57.9 percent to 40.8 percent), and NDP supporters are perceived as more likely to strongly oppose mandated pronoun reporting than the strong opposition expressed by respondents (37.3 percent to 19.6 percent). This indicates that the conditions for false polarization are present within this issue.



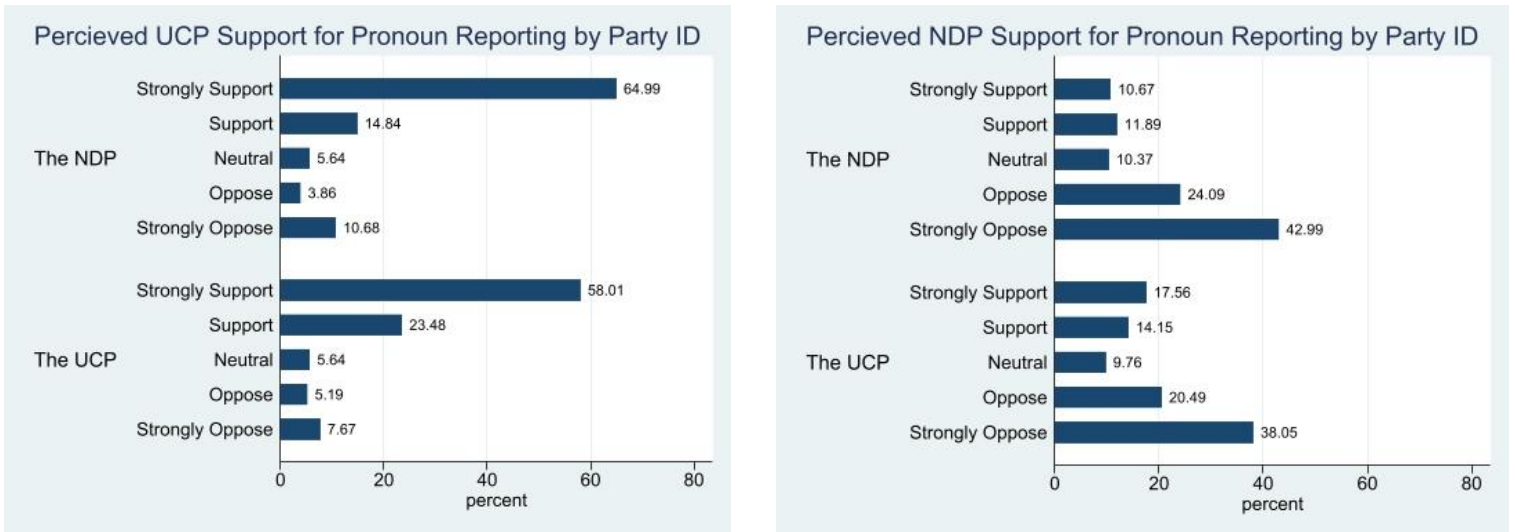
**Figure 4****Pronoun Legislation: Impact of Party Identity**

When analyzing respondents' party identification, it becomes evident that the issue of schools implementing mandated pronoun reporting is not predominantly falsely polarizing between the NDP and UCP, as the initial overview suggested. Instead, it reveals a genuine polarization. As previously discussed, 37 percent of people thought the NDP would strongly oppose mandated pronoun reporting, and 57 percent of people thought that the UCP would strongly support it. This was more divided than the strong support and opposition that existed in the general population, but is less divided than the strong support and opposition held by actual NDP/UCP supporters. 41 percent of people who identify with the NDP strongly oppose mandated pronoun reporting, and 65 percent of those who identify with the UCP strongly support mandated pronoun reporting, as showcased in Figure 5. Rather than these numbers being less extreme than people's perceptions (as the theory of false polarization would suggest), they are more extreme. As was predicted for both parties, the category of strong opinion (either strongly support/strongly oppose) was the most selected category by a significant amount. For the NDP, the next most popular category was "somewhat oppose" at 17 percent, and for the UCP the next most popular category was "somewhat support" at 18 percent. People also correctly predicted UCP supporters as being more strongly convicted than NDP supporters on this issue, with UCP supporters more solidified in their support of the policy and less likely to be neutral.



**Figure 5**

Similar to the disparities found between the perceptions of the general population and the actual viewpoints of UCP and NDP supporters, the supporters of the two parties generally perceived both their own party and the opposing party as *less* extreme than in actuality. Although this trend was true for both parties, supporters of the UCP were especially likely to underestimate the extremity of opinion within the two parties. This is illustrated in Figure 6. 38 percent of UCP supporters reported believing that the average NDP supporter would strongly oppose mandated pronoun reporting, compared to the 42 percent (41.79) of NDP supporters who actually strongly opposed the policy. Similarly, 58 percent of UCP supporters reported believing that members of their own party would strongly support mandated pronoun reporting, compared to the 65 percent of UCP supporters who actually supported the policy. Members of the NDP were more accurate in their assessments, but still underestimated the extremity of both parties by a small amount. Once again, supporters of both parties correctly assessed UCP supporters as holding stronger views than the NDP on the issue of mandated pronoun reporting.



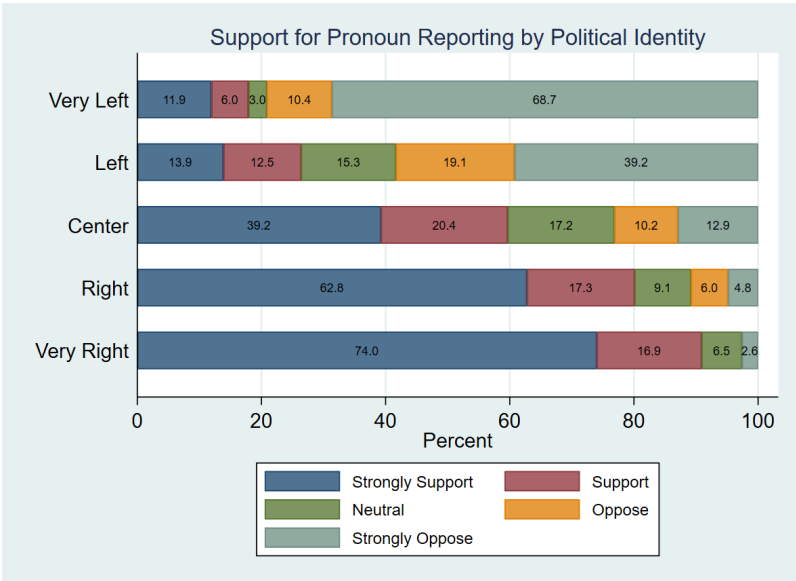
**Figure 6**

These results showcase that when party identity is assessed alongside people’s views on a policy of schools being required to report children’s preferred pronouns to parents, the issue is legitimately,

rather than falsely, polarizing. Alongside this, these results demonstrate that the general public’s perception of the opinion of party supporters on this issue closely aligns with reality.

**Pronoun Legislation: Impact of Political Identity**

As could be expected, where an individual places themselves on the left to right spectrum is correlated with their opinion on mandated pronoun reporting, with legitimate polarization demonstrated between those who identify as left wing vs right wing. Among those who can be classified as very left (0-1), nearly 70 percent (68.7 percent) placed themselves as strongly opposing the policy. This number rises to 74 percent when considering only those who placed themselves at a 0 on the scale (Appendix A). Among those who can be classified as very right wing (9-10), 74 percent were strongly supportive of the policy. At every location on the scale, the most commonly selected category was either strongly supported or strongly opposed (Appendix A), indicating the significant level of division that exists on this issue. This remained true even for individuals who identified themselves as centrists (5 on the scale), with 39.2 percent selecting strongly opposed. However, centrists were also the most likely to neither support nor oppose the policy, at 17.2 percent.

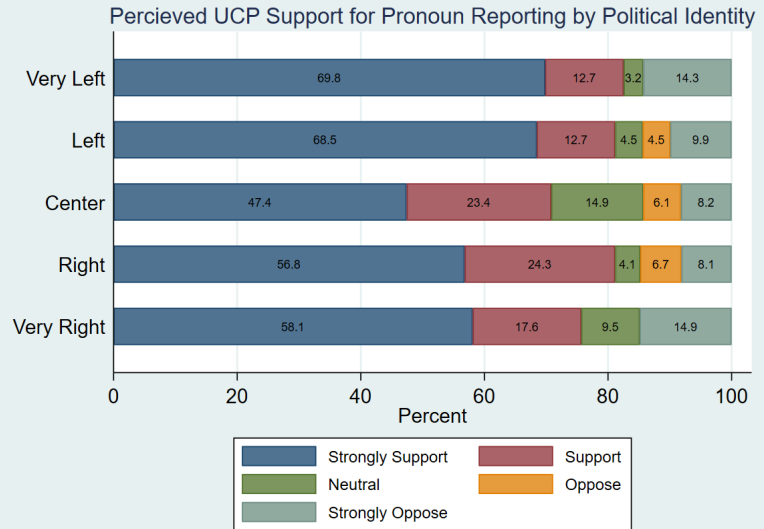
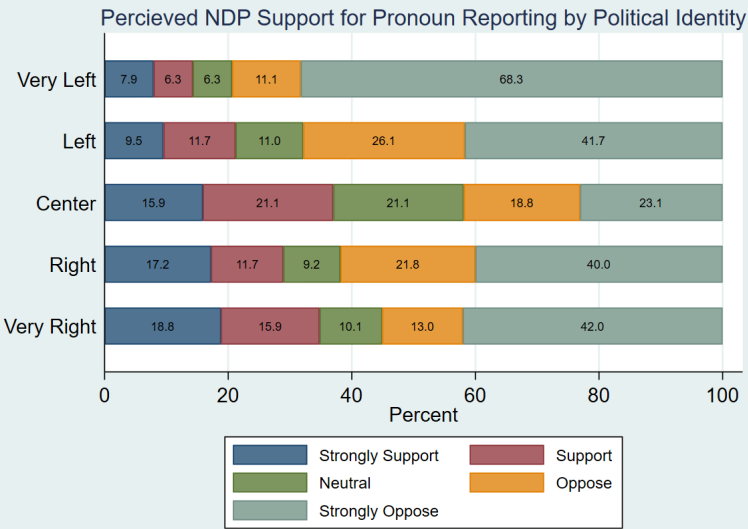


**Figure 7**

Although there was little evidence of false polarization connected to people's party identity, a degree of false polarization on the issue of mandated pronoun reporting occurs in relation to people's political identity. Those who identified either as far left or far right were more likely to perceive party supporters as holding extreme opinions on mandated pronoun reporting, with this especially pronounced for those on the far left. Among those who identified as either a 0 or a 1, 69.8 percent thought that the average UCP supporter would be strongly supportive of mandated pronoun reporting. While this is similar to the actual number of UCP supporters that strongly support the policy (65 percent), other left wing identifiers perceived as high as 73 percent (2 on the scale) and 76 percent (3 on the scale) of UCP supporters as strongly supporting the policy (Appendix A). Alongside this, 0 percent of those who identified as a 1 on the scale perceived UCP supporters as neutral on the issue (Appendix A), compared to the 8 percent of UCP supporters that were actually neutral. Notably, those who identified as very far right (9-10), perceived UCP supporters as less strongly supportive of the policy than in reality, at 58 percent compared to the aforementioned 65. Additionally, among those who placed themselves at a 10 on the scale, 19 percent perceived UCP supporters as strongly opposed to the policy (Appendix A), compared to the only 4 percent of actual UCP supporters who strongly opposed the policy. This number was also exaggerated among the far left respondents, with 14 percent of those who identified either as a 0 or a 1 classifying the UCP as strongly opposed. This suggests that both far right and far left identifiers understand the UCP as containing more internal division than in reality. Contrasting the exaggeration that occurred in some form with both far left and far right respondents, those who identified in the middle of the political spectrum underestimated the extremity of UCP supporters. 47.4 percent of those who placed themselves at a 5 on the political spectrum thought that the average UCP supporter would strongly support pronoun reporting, compared to the 65 percent of UCP supporters who actually strongly support pronoun reporting. Centrists also perceived more neutrality among the UCP than exists in reality, with

nearly 15 percent (14.9) of centrists stating they thought the average UCP supporter would be neutral compared to the 8 percent who are actually neutral.

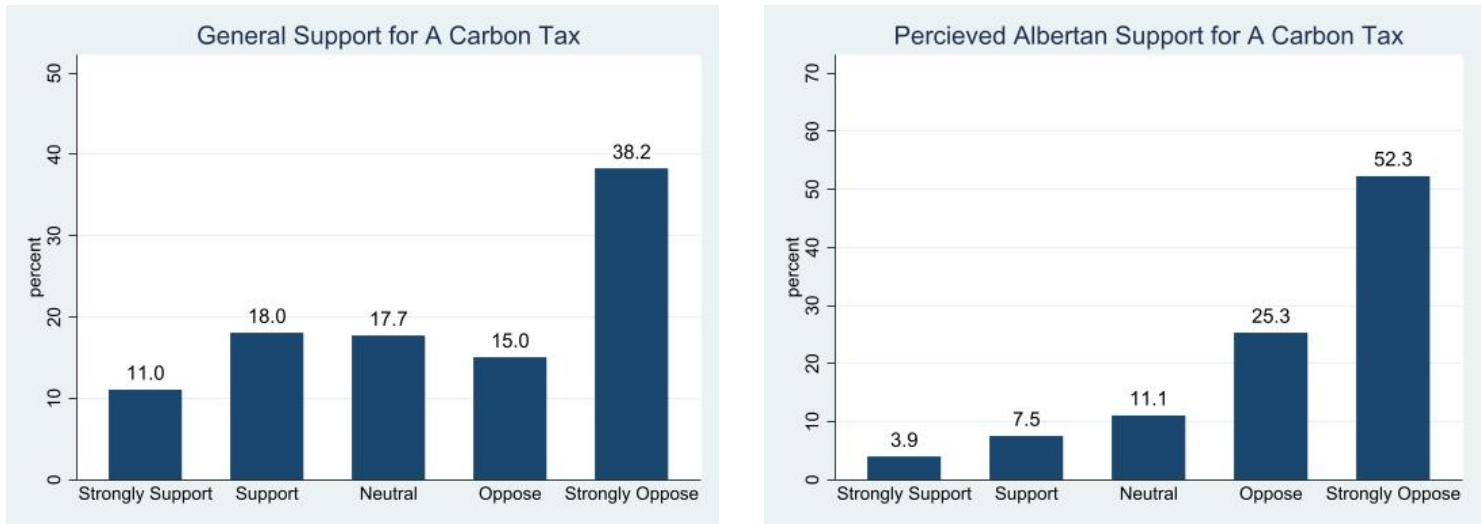
Similar response trends emerged for the relationship between where someone places themselves on the political spectrum and their perception of NDP supporters on this policy. Those on the far left exaggerated the perception of NDP supporters, with 68 percent of those who identified either as a 0 or a 1 believing that the average NDP supporter would strongly oppose the policy, compared to the 42 percent of NDP supporters who actually strongly opposed the policy. However, those on the far right essentially correctly predicted the extreme opposition among supporters of the NDP, with 42 percent of those who identified as either a 9 or 10 believing that the average NDP supporter would strongly oppose the policy compared to the 41.79 percent of NDP supporters who actually strongly opposed the policy. Those on the far right also correctly estimated that a decent portion of NDP supporters would hold the opposing opinion of strongly supporting the policy, with a perception of 16.8 percent compared to the actual number of 14 percent. Among those who placed themselves on the far left, this perceived number was only 7.9 percent. Centrists underestimated the proportion of NDP supporters that strongly oppose mandated pronoun reporting by nearly half, at 23 percent compared to the actual number of 42 percent. Centrists also perceived NDP supporters as more likely to be neutral on the policy than they actually were, with the perceived number at 21 percent compared to the actual number at 13.7 percent. Taken together, these results indicate that those on the far left perceive false polarization between the NDP and the UCP, with both groups perceived as more extreme and less neutral in their positions than they are in reality. However, those on the far right can be understood as largely accurately assessing the degree of polarization between the two parties. Those in the center of the political spectrum perceived the opposite of false polarization; both groups were understood as less extreme and more neutral in their positions than they actually were.



**Figure 8**

**Carbon Tax: General Overview**

General support for a consumer carbon tax does not present a significant level of actual or perceived polarization, but does indicate a degree of extremity. Respondents' actual support for the carbon tax did not indicate that Albertans are strongly polarized on the issue. A significant number of people expressed a neutral perspective (17.7 percent), and it was common to indicate both support and opposition without strongly identifying with the position. However, the most commonly selected response category was still “strongly oppose”, selected by 38 percent of people. This does not indicate polarization because the opposing “strongly support” category was only selected by 11 percent of respondents, but does indicate that many Albertans hold a strong negative position on the issue of a consumer carbon tax.

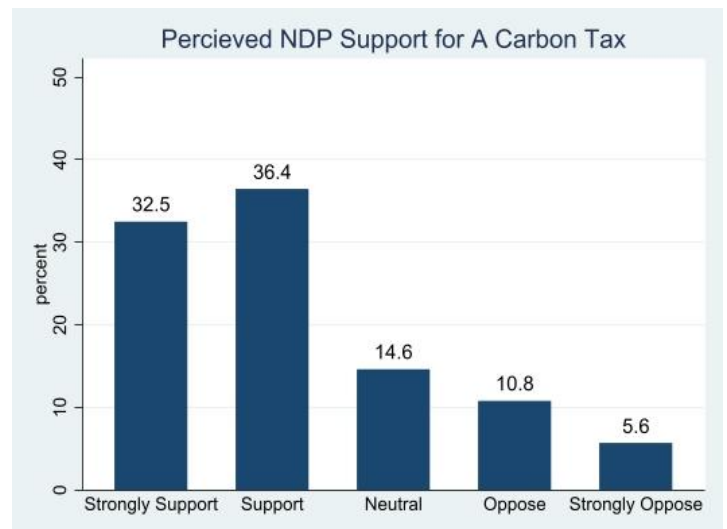
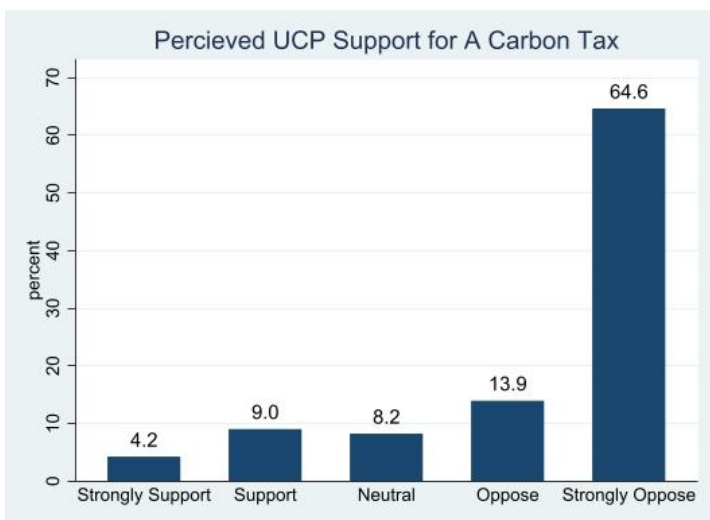


**Figure 9**

Although a large number of people themselves expressed strong opposition to a consumer carbon tax, they perceived more strong opposition among the average Albertan. Over 50 percent of respondents expressed the perception that the average Albertan would strongly oppose a consumer carbon tax. Alongside this increase in strong opposition from people's actual beliefs to their perception of the beliefs of others, respondents also perceived less neutrality in the average Albertan than they expressed themselves (from close to 18 percent to 11 percent). This decrease in neutrality may suggest that people perceive average Albertans to be more polarized alongside being more extreme, however, the very small number of individuals who characterized Albertans as strongly supporting the tax indicates that a perception of polarization was not present. Only 4 percent of people expressed believing that Albertans strongly support a consumer carbon tax. This leads to the overall conclusion that people perceive Albertans to be more opposed to the tax than they themselves are, with 53 percent of people actually opposing the tax to some extent compared to 77 percent of people who characterized Albertans as opposing the tax to some extent.

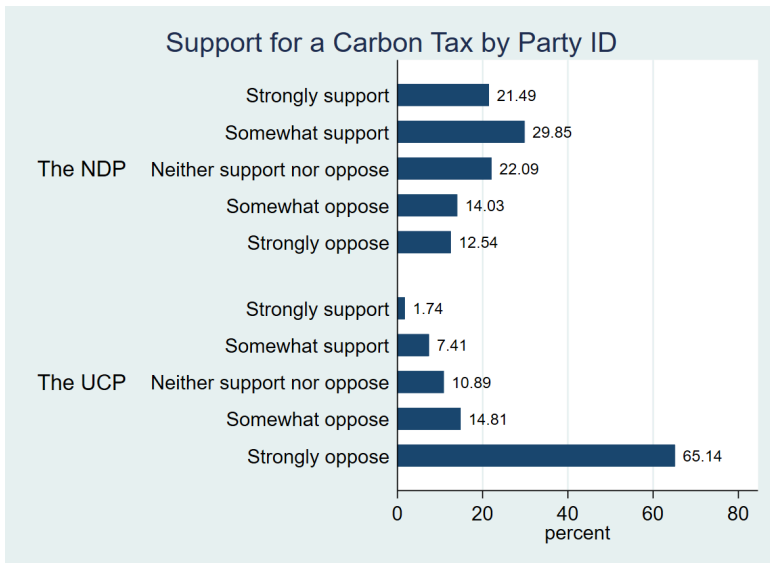


There was a significant discrepancy between how respondents perceived UCP and NDP supporters on the issue of a consumer carbon tax, with the UCP understood as significantly more extreme than the NDP. As indicated in Figure 10, NDP supporters were not viewed as significantly strongly convicted nor polarized. More NDP supporters were characterized as “somewhat supporting” a consumer carbon tax rather than “strongly supporting” (36.4 percent to 32.5 percent). Although this difference is small, NDP supporters were the only group in which the expected direction of opinion was more commonly expressed at the “somewhat” rather than “strongly” level. This suggests that on this issue, people perceive NDP supporters to be less strongly convicted than they themselves are, and less strongly convicted than the average Albertan and the average UCP supporter. This is further supported by the fact that nearly 15 percent of NDP supporters were perceived as neither supporting nor opposing a consumer carbon tax. Contrasting this perception of NDP supporters, a majority of respondents (64.6 percent) understood UCP supporters as strongly opposing a consumer carbon tax. This was by far the most selected response category, followed by “somewhat opposed” at 13.9 percent. Only 8 percent of people viewed UCP supporters as neutral on the issue of a carbon tax, indicating a perception of extremity surrounding the party. If the results for the NDP had mimicked those of the UCP, it could be stated that the issue of a carbon tax held the potential for false polarization. However, the perception of NDP supporters as holding less strong opinions than those expressed by the general population indicates that this issue is not falsely polarized, as the division between the two parties was not perceived as greater than the division in the general population.



**Figure 10****Carbon Tax: Impact of Party Identity**

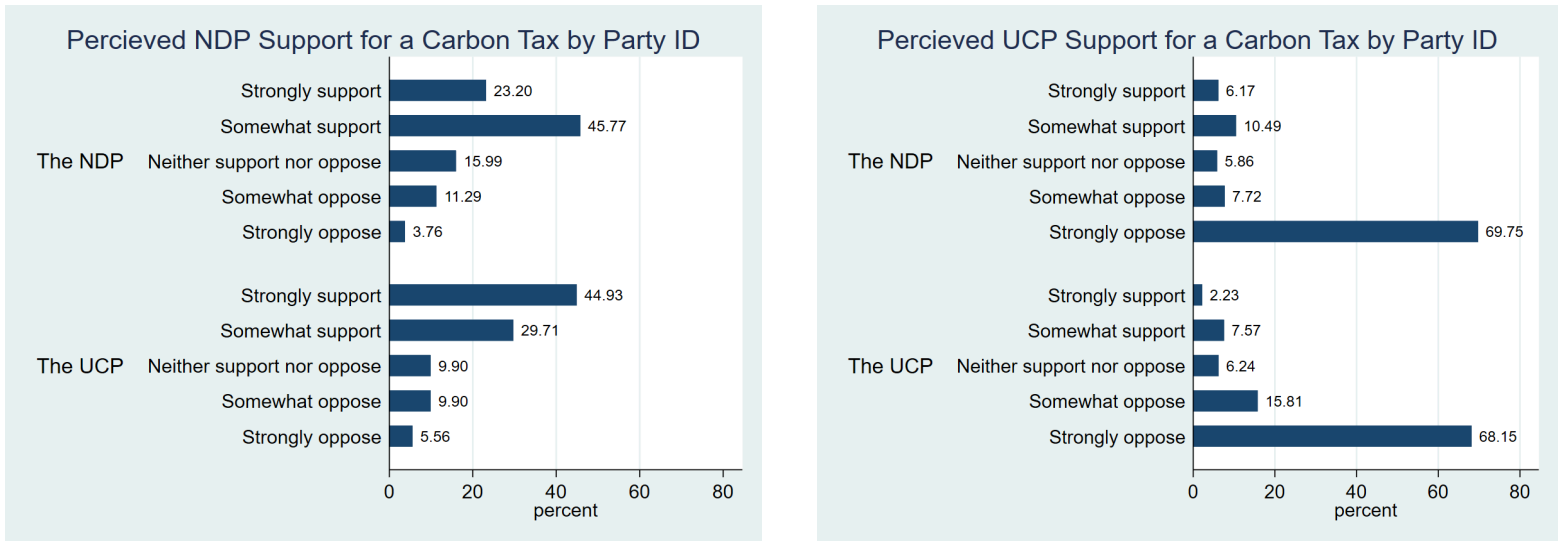
The views held by party supporters on the issue of a carbon tax were shown to generally mirror what was perceived by the broader population, demonstrated in Figure 11. In the case of the UCP, people's perceptions were notably accurate, with 65 percent of UCP supporters strongly opposing a consumer carbon tax, and 64 percent of people believing that the average UCP supporter would strongly oppose the tax. This accuracy was maintained for most categories of UCP support; 13.9 percent of people assessed UCP supporters as somewhat opposing the carbon tax compared to the 14 percent who actually placed themselves as somewhat opposing the tax, and there was only a difference of 2 percent between the amount of UCP supporters perceived as neutral (8.2 percent) and those that actually were neutral (10.8 percent). However, when considering the NDP, people perceived more extremity than existed in reality, even though the NDP was not perceived as especially strongly convicted. Significantly fewer NDP supporters placed themselves as strongly supporting the policy than was perceived, with actual strong support at 21 percent compared to the perceived strong support at 32.5 percent. The most popular response categories for NDP supporters were "somewhat support", at 29.8 percent, and "neither support nor oppose" at 22 percent. This demonstrates that a notable number of NDP supporters are neutral on the idea of a carbon tax. Additionally, supporters of the NDP were more likely than thought to hold the view common among UCP supporters and oppose the tax, with 26.5 percent of NDP supporters opposing the tax to some degree compared to the predicted 16.4 percent. The heightened perception of extremity towards the views of NDP supporters compared to their actual views suggests that some false polarization from the general population is occurring within the issue of a consumer carbon tax. Although the UCP were largely perceived accurately, the exaggerated perception of the strong support among NDP supporters places the two parties as further apart in opinion from one another than they are in reality.



**Figure 11**

The relationship between one's party affiliation and perception of both the UCP and the NDP in relation to a carbon tax also reveals a degree of false polarization not seen in the general overview. Both supporters of the NDP and the UCP positioned their opposing ideological party as more extreme than in reality. When considering how party supporters perceived other supporters of their party, the NDP understood themselves somewhat accurately. Similar numbers of NDP supporters were perceived as strongly supporting the carbon tax to the reality of those that strongly supported the carbon tax (23 percent to 21 percent), with the perceived number being only slightly higher. Additionally, NDP supporters assessed other members of their party as less neutral than in reality (16 percent to 22 percent), although the numbers were decently similar. The largest discrepancy occurred in the "somewhat support" category; 45 percent of NDP supporters assessed the average person in their party as somewhat supporting the tax, compared to the 30 percent (29.85) who actually stated they somewhat supported the tax. The difference in this category can be attributed to the fact that supporters of the NDP tended not to perceive other members of the party as opposed to the tax, when in reality a decent number of NDP supporters were opposed to some extent. Therefore, although the NDP did not perceive themselves as

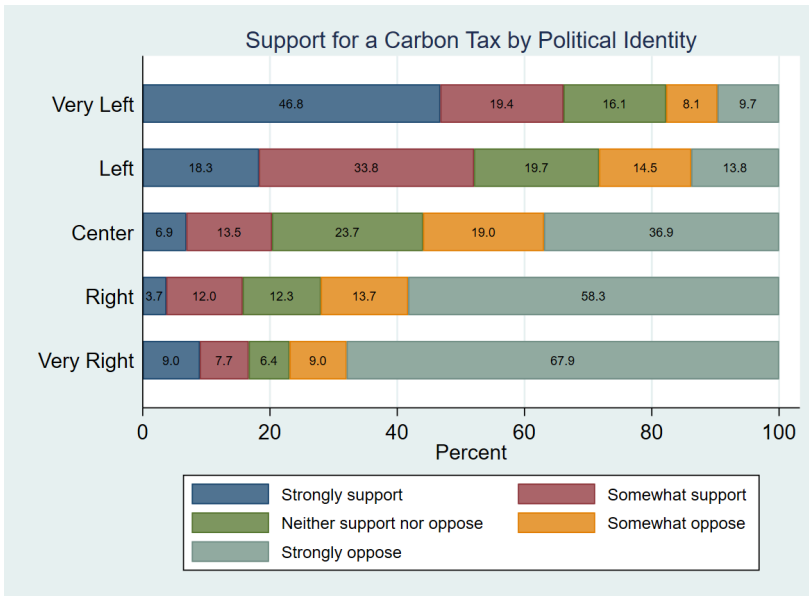
necessarily more extreme than in reality, they did perceive a greater monolith of support for the carbon tax than existed. Similarly, the UCP assessed themselves as slightly more extreme than their actual opinions suggested. Supporters of the UCP were marginally more likely to judge their average party supporter as strongly opposed to the carbon tax than they were to express this view themselves (65 percent to 68 percent). Additionally, UCP supporters perceived less neutrality in their party than existed in reality, with 6 percent of supporters (5.86) assessing other party supporters as neutral compared to the nearly 11 percent (10.89) who actually expressed a neutral perspective. A much greater exaggerated perception of extremity occurred in how parties assessed their opposition. Nearly 45 percent (44.93) of UCP supporters stated that they thought the average NDP supporter would strongly support a consumer carbon tax, compared to the 21 percent of NDP supporters who actually strongly supported a tax. UCP supporters also perceived NDP supporters as significantly less neutral than they were in reality, with 9.9 percent of UCP supporters stating that they thought the average NDP supporter would neither support nor oppose the tax, compared to the 22 percent of NDP supporters who actually expressed a neutral position. Supporters of the NDP were also more likely to exaggerate the positions of the UCP than they were to exaggerate their own positions, although not to the same extent as the UCP. The NDP assessed supporters of the UCP as 5 percent more likely to strongly oppose the tax than the actual strong opposition among UCP members (65 percent to 70 percent). Similarly, there was a difference of roughly 5 percent between the number of NDP supporters who viewed UCP supporters as neutral (5.86 percent) compared to the UCP supporters who actually indicated neutrality (10.89 percent). These results demonstrate that party supporters perceive more polarization between the UCP and NDP than exists in reality, indicating that false polarization is occurring. In this case, the false polarization can largely be attributed to the perception of the NDP held by UCP supporters, with members of the UCP perceiving the NDP as 24 percent (23.9) more likely to hold a strong position, and 12 percent less likely to hold a neutral stance.



**Figure 12**

**Carbon Tax: Impact of Political Identity**

The distribution of people’s beliefs on a consumer carbon tax when divided into left and right wing reflect a similar pattern as they did when divided into their chosen party. Just as the UCP appeared to feel more strongly on the issue, individuals who identify as right wing express more extremity and less neutrality than those on the left. 47 percent of individuals on the very left stated they strongly supported a consumer carbon tax, compared to 68 percent of those on the very right who stated they strongly opposed the tax. Alongside this, those who placed themselves as either a 3 or a 4 (left wing) on the spectrum most commonly stated they “somewhat supported the tax” (38 percent), compared to those who identified as a 7 or an 8 (right wing) who most commonly strongly opposed the tax. Those in the center of the political spectrum expressed the most neutrality, although they still predominantly expressed the position of being strongly opposed to the idea of a consumer carbon tax.



**Figure 13**

Similar themes of false polarization emerged when assessing the impact of one's political identity on perceptions of UCP and NDP supporters concerning the carbon tax. Just as occurred among NDP and UCP identifiers, those on the left exaggerated the viewpoints of the UCP, and those on the right exaggerated the viewpoints of the NDP. Concerning the UCP, both those who identified as very left and left on the political spectrum placed UCP supporters as over 5 percent more likely to hold the extreme position of strongly opposing the carbon tax than in reality (71 and 73 percent to the actual number of 65 percent). Both groups additionally underestimated the neutrality that exists among UCP supporters, with only 3 percent of those on the very left assessing the UCP as neutral compared to the nearly 11 percent of UCP supporters who were actually neutral. Interestingly, the only ideological groups to not overestimate UCP extremity were those in the center and those on the very right, both of whom underestimated the opinion strength of UCP supporters. Among centrists, the difference between perceived strong opposition and actual strong opposition was nearly 15 percent (50.5 to 65.1 percent), as showcased in Figure 14. In the case of perceptions of NDP supporters, those on the right and very right significantly exaggerated the level of strong support that existed for the carbon tax. Among those who identified as either a 9 or a 10

on the political spectrum, the perception of strong support for a carbon tax among NDP supporters was 30 percent higher than the actual strong support. People who placed themselves as either right wing and very right wing also underestimated neutrality among NDP supporters, categorizing neutrality at 8 and 10 percent respectively (Appendix B). This compares to the 22 percent of NDP supporters who actually expressed a neutral position. Although those on the left and people who expressed a centrist position more accurately assessed NDP supporters, these groups still overestimated strong support and underestimated neutrality to an extent. Additionally, all groups underestimated the amount of NDP supporters that opposed the carbon tax, with the highest estimate of opposition (19.3 percent by the centrists) still falling short of the actual opposition at 26.5 percent. Taken together, these results suggest that false polarization exists between the viewpoints of the NDP and the UCP on the carbon tax when people are sorted into both party and political identity. The exaggeration of strong support and the underestimation of neutrality among NDP supporters positions the two parties as further apart than they actually are. Although less pertinent, the perspective of UCP supporters was also generally viewed as more extreme than in reality, further supporting the existence of false polarization.

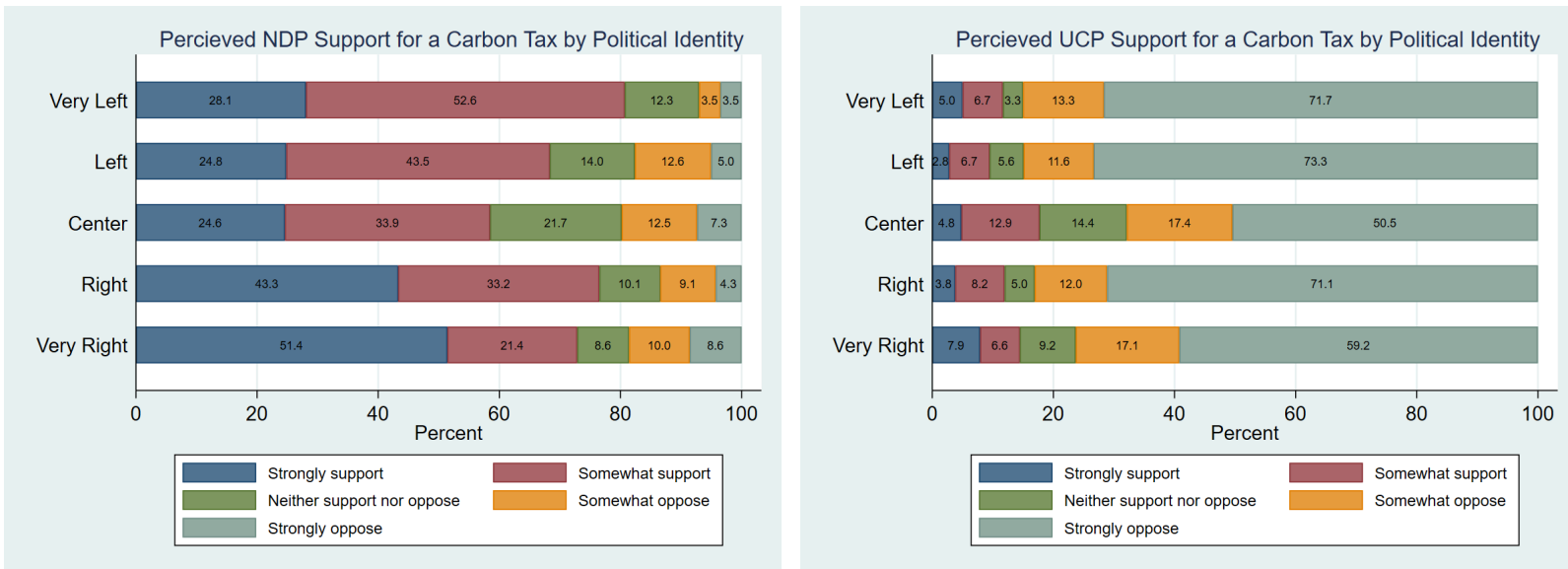


Figure 14

### **Safe Consumption Sites: General Overview**

The initial findings surrounding support for safe consumption sites present more support for the theory of false polarization than the initial results for both pronoun legislation and the carbon tax. When respondents were asked whether they themselves supported the use of safe consumption sites, they answered in a non polarized and non extreme manner, as demonstrated in Figure 15. The most commonly selected response was “somewhat support”, chosen by 26.3 percent of people. This result combined with the significant number of people that stated they did not support or oppose safe consumption sites (nearly 17 percent) indicates that people’s views on safe consumption sites do not reflect what this project has defined as polarized. Alongside this, respondents were almost equally likely to indicate strong support (21 percent) or strong opposition (22 percent), showcasing that this issue also cannot be understood as one in which the majority of people hold one extreme viewpoint.

Compared to their own opinions on safe consumption sites, respondents perceived average Albertans to be slightly more extreme, but less polarized on the issue. Interestingly, while “somewhat oppose” was the category chosen by the fewest people when expressing their own opinion on safe consumption sites, it was the most commonly selected category selected to describe the average Albertan (13.6 percent to 31.7 percent). Respondents characterized Albertans as holding a significantly more negative viewpoint on safe consumption sites than they expressed themselves, with 56.4 percent of people believing that Albertans were opposed to the sites to some extent compared to the 35.9 percent of people who were actually opposed to the sites. This discrepancy is additionally reflected in the gap between the number of people who strongly support safe consumption sites (21.4 percent) and those who believe that the average Albertan strongly supports safe consumption sites (5.9 percent). Interestingly, this was the only surveyed issue in which the general direction of support for the perceived opinion of Albertans did not match the direction of support expressed by the general population. While people



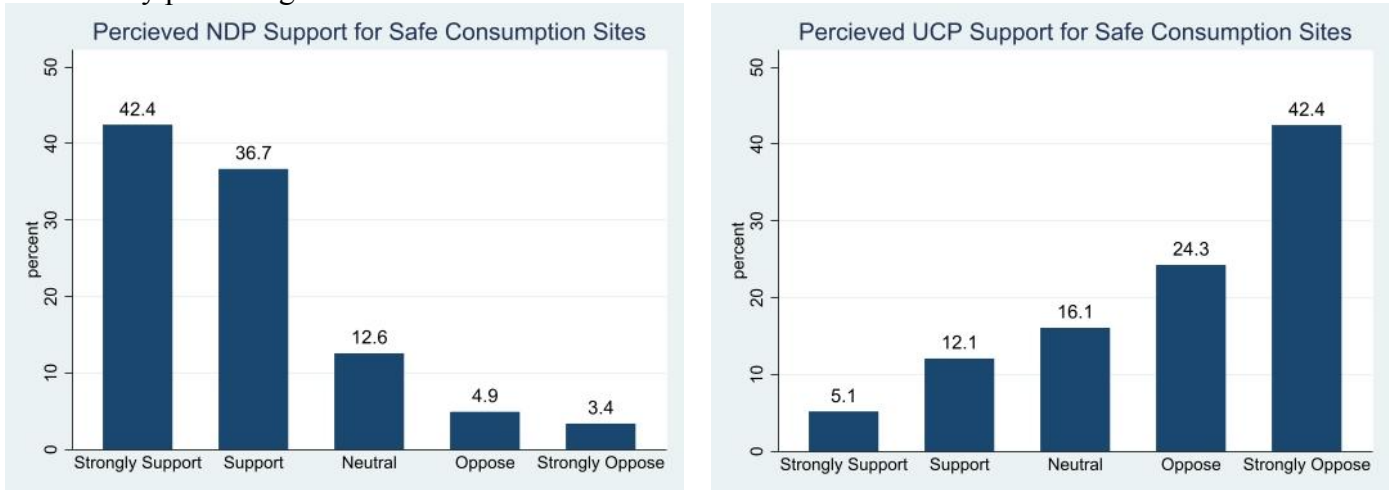
perceived average Albertans as holding a more extreme negative viewpoint than they themselves did, they also understood Albertans as less polarized and more likely to be neutral. A notable number of people (22 percent) believed the average Albertan would neither support nor oppose safe consumption sites, with this representing the second most commonly selected response after “somewhat opposed.”



**Figure 14**

Both NDP and UCP supporters were perceived as extreme in their viewpoints on safe consumption sites, with the combined perception of extremity creating the conditions for false polarization. The parties were perceived to be essentially equally strongly convicted in their viewpoints on the sites, with 42.4 percent of NDP supporters understood to be strongly *supportive* of safe consumption sites, and a mirrored 42.4 percent of UCP supporters understood to be strongly *opposed* to safe consumption sites. For both parties, these were the most commonly selected response categories. The UCP were viewed as having slightly more variation in their perspective than the NDP. 17.2 of people perceived the UCP as supporting safe consumption sites to some degree (with this contradicting the common messaging from the party), compared to only 8.3 percent of people who perceived the NDP as opposing safe consumption sites to some degree. UCP supporters were also perceived as more neutral than NDP supporters, at 16.1 percent to 12.6 percent. This suggests that the NDP was characterized as more extreme than the UCP on this issue. When the perceptions of strong opposition and strong support among party members (the

aforementioned 42 percent each) are compared to the actual strong support (21 percent) and strong opposition (22 percent) that exists in the general population, it is clear that this issue initially appears to be falsely polarizing.

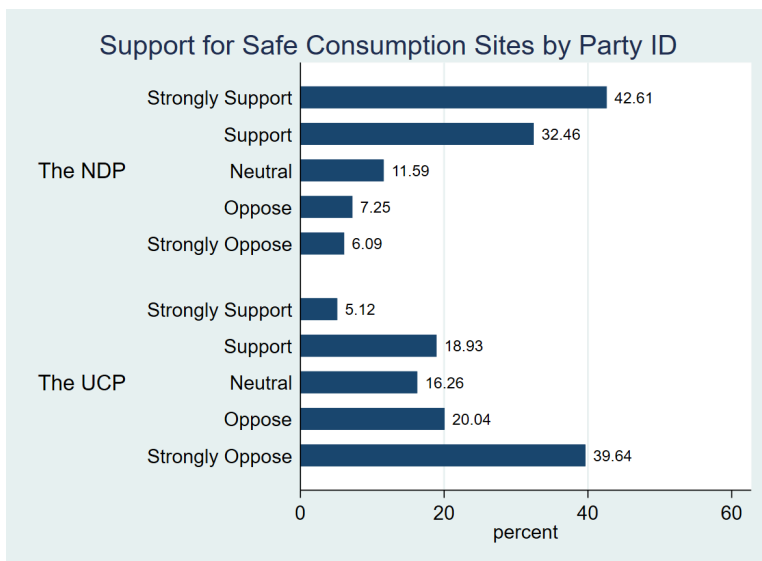


**Figure 15**

### **Safe Consumption Sites: Impact of Party Identity**

Similarly to the results for pronoun reporting and the carbon tax, people's perceptions of the party supporters in the general overview were actually largely accurate. This accuracy mitigates the initial appearance of false polarization that occurred in the general overview, however, false polarization re-emerges in the discrepancy between the actual opinions of party supporters and how they perceive one another. General perceptions of the NDP and the actual opinions held by NDP supporters very closely reflected one another. As shown in Figure 15 and Figure 16, 42 percent of people believed the average NDP supporter would strongly support safe consumption sites, and 42 percent of actual NDP supporters strongly supported safe consumption sites. Respondents also accurately assessed the neutrality that existed among NDP supporters, with perceived neutrality at 12.6 percent compared to actual neutrality at 11.5 percent. One discrepancy concerning the NDP was the amount of opposition that exists to safe consumption sites, with NDP supporters slightly more likely to oppose the sites to some extent than believed (8.3 to 13.3 percent). While this somewhat points to false polarization, the overall perceptions of

the NDP were not falsely polarized due to their general accuracy. Perceptions of the extremity that exists among UCP supporters were slightly overestimated when compared to the reality, but once again still generally accurate. 39.6 percent of UCP supporters expressed a strong opposition to the sites, compared to the perceived 42 percent. Similar to the NDP, neutrality was accurately assessed (both at 16 percent). People also underestimated the proportion of UCP supporters that held the non-traditional party stance of supporting the sites, with 24 percent of UCP supporters supporting safe consumption sites to some extent, compared to perceived support at 17.2 percent. Once again, this indicates some degree of false polarization, but it is difficult to make a strong case for false polarization having a significant effect due to the accurate perceptions that exist otherwise. Therefore, it can be concluded that polarization along party lines concerning safe consumption sites legitimately, not falsely, exists.

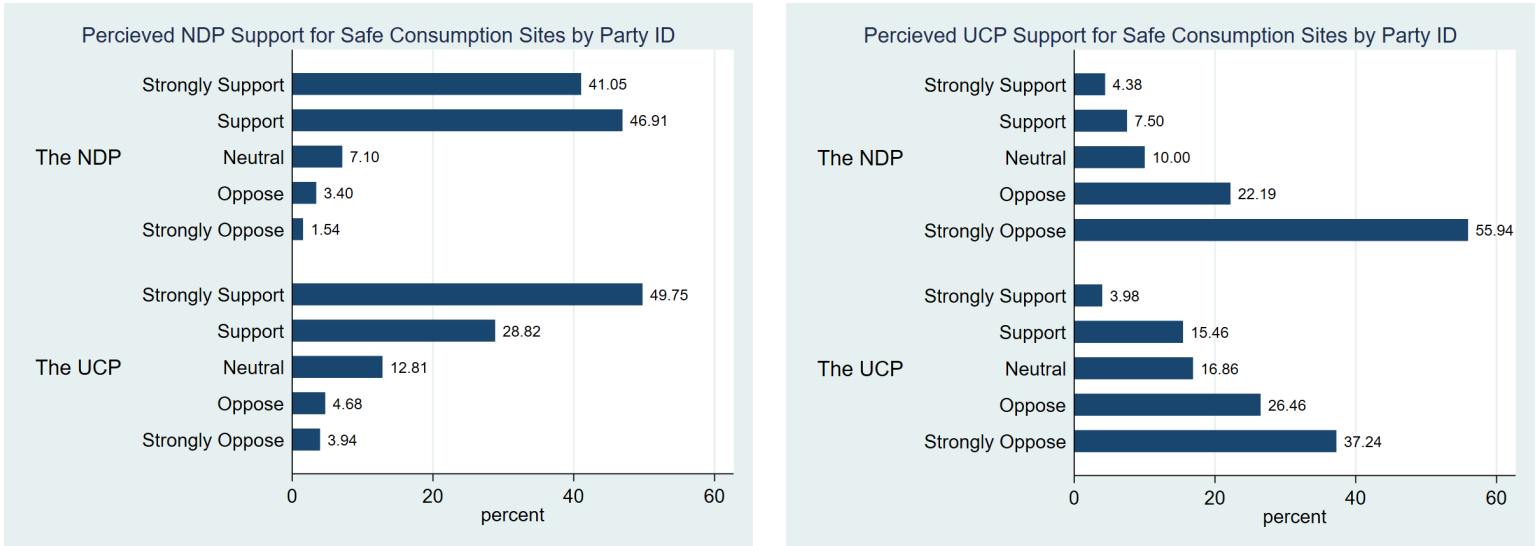


**Figure 16**

Although the issue of safe consumption sites is not falsely polarized when considering the general population, people who identify as both supporters of the UCP and the NDP perceive party perspectives on this issue as more divided than in reality. Supporters of both parties are more likely to perceive supporters of the opposing party as more extreme than they actually are. The most significant exaggeration of extremity occurred towards UCP supporters from NDP supporters, with supporters of the

NDP assessing nearly 60 percent (59.6) of UCP supporters as strongly opposed to safe consumption sites. The discrepancy between perception and reality in this case was 20 percent, with 39.6 percent of UCP supporters actually strongly opposed to the sites. Supporters of the NDP additionally assessed UCP supporters as 6 percent less neutral than in reality (10 to 16 percent), and 12 percent less likely to support the sites to some degree than was expressed by UCP supporters (24 percent to 11 percent). This shows that NDP supporters generally understood UCP supporters as more extreme and more monolithic than in actuality. Contrasting this, UCP supporters understood the perspectives of other UCP supporters generally accurately. 37 percent of UCP supporters perceived other UCP supporters as strongly opposing safe consumption sites, compared to the 39.6 percent who actually strongly opposed the sites. Alongside this, UCP supporters assessed 16 percent of other UCP supporters as neutral on safe consumption sites, with this mirroring the 16 percent of UCP supporters who expressed a neutral position. While UCP supporters understood their own position well, they somewhat inflated the extremity of NDP supporters. There was a 7 percent difference between UCP supporters' perception of strong support for the carbon tax among the NDP and actual strong support, with perception of strong support at nearly 50 percent (49.75) and actual strong support at 42.6 percent. Other discrepancies between UCP perception of NDP support and actual NDP support were minimal. UCP supporters perceived a similar proportion of NDP supporters as neutral when compared to the actual proportion, and only slightly underestimated the amount of NDP supporters that opposed the tax (9 percent compared to the actual number of 13 percent). NDP supporters more accurately assessed their own strong support than UCP supporters, but also perceived other supporters of the NDP as less likely to be neutral and less likely to take the opposite stance of opposing safe consumption sites. The combination of these results indicates that false polarization is occurring surrounding safe consumption sites from party supporters. Greater distance of opinion was perceived

between the two parties than existed in reality, with this most predominantly driven by the NDP exaggerated perception of strong opposition among supporters of the UCP.

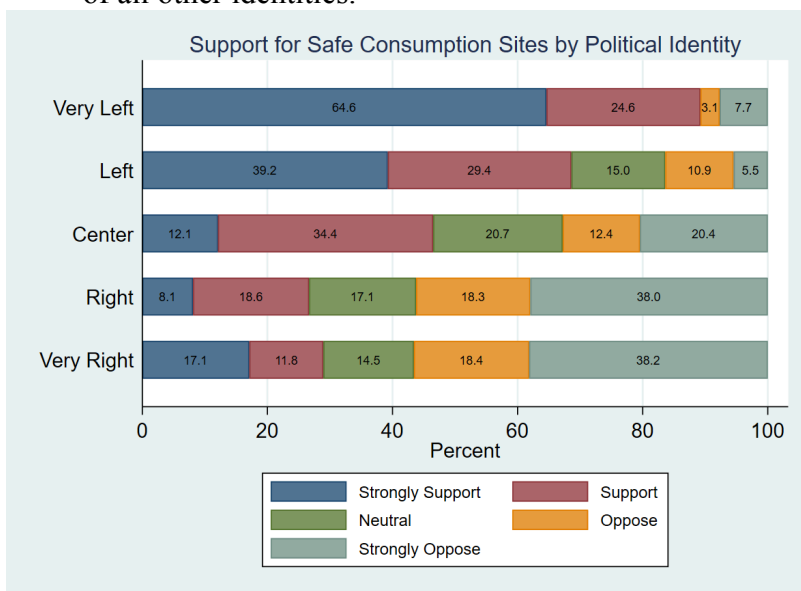


**Figure 17**

**Safe Consumption Sites: Impact of Political Identity**

Just as was reflected in the results for NDP and UCP supporters, those on the left feel slightly more strongly about safe consumption sites than those on the right. Those on the far left expressed the strongest opinions on the sites; no individuals who identified as a 0 or a 1 on the political spectrum expressed a neutral opinion. The most passionate support for safe consumption sites came from those who placed themselves at a 2 on the spectrum, with 71 percent of these respondents stating they strongly supported the sites. Similar results emerged for those who identified as a 0 or a 1, with 63 percent and 65 percent of these individuals strongly supporting the sites respectively. Right wing individuals also felt strongly about the sites, but to a lesser extent than left wing individuals. Just as for those on the very left, the most common response category for those on the very right was a strong opinion (strong opposition). However, this category was selected by 32 percent of individuals who placed themselves at a 9 and 42 percent of people who placed themselves at a 10, compared to the aforementioned 63 and 65 percent for

those who identified as a 0 and a 1. Those on the right of the spectrum also had more variation in their perspective, with 28.9 percent of those on the very right and 26.7 percent of those on the right supporting safe consumption sites to some extent, compared to only 10 percent of those on the very left and 16.4 percent of those on the left who opposed the sites to some extent. Reflecting the results for both the carbon tax and pronoun reporting, centrists held the least strong opinions on safe consumption sites. Over a quarter of centrists (5 on the spectrum) expressed a neutral position, the highest level of neutrality out of all other identities.



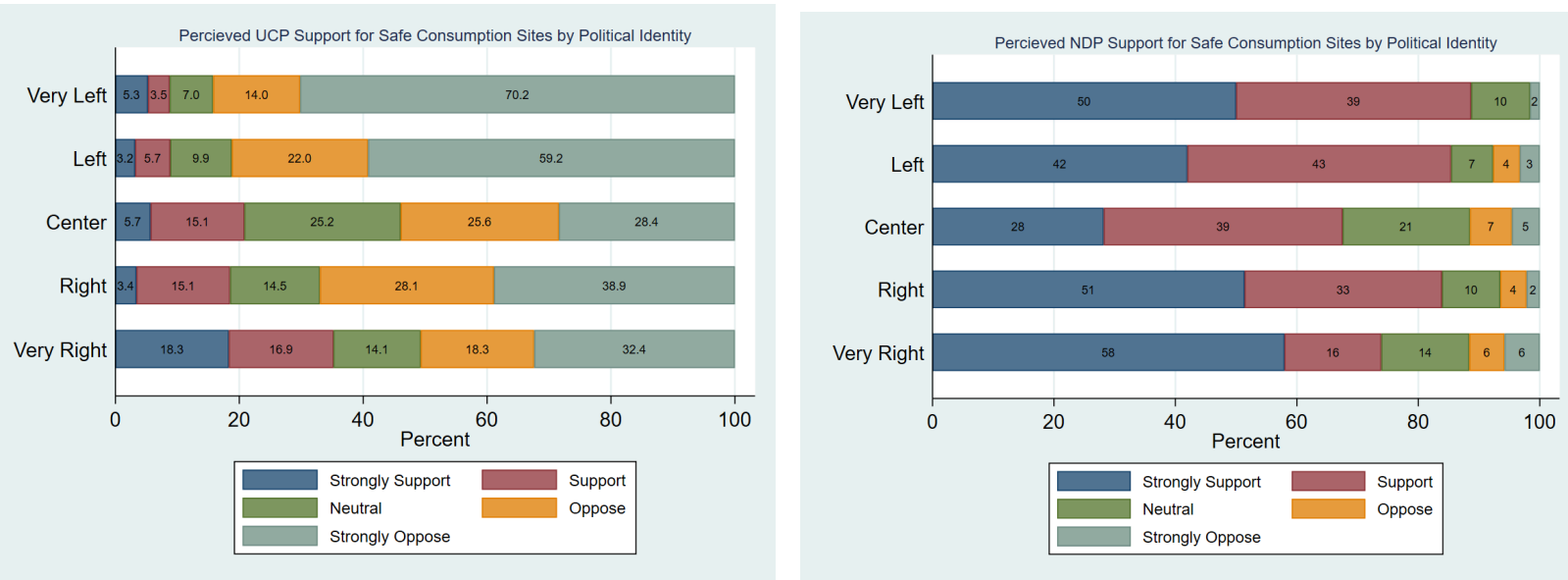
**Figure 18**

Similarly to the results that emerged when exploring party identity, both left and right wing individuals perceive more polarization between the NDP and the UCP than actually exists. Those on the left perceived stronger opinions among UCP supporters than those on the right, and those on the right perceived stronger opinions among NDP supporters than those on the left. Similarly to what occurred for party identity, the largest disparity between perception and reality was observed in the perception of UCP supporters by those on the left of the political spectrum. Those who placed themselves as a 0 on the spectrum were the most likely to overestimate the strength of opinion among UCP supporters, with 77 percent of these individuals placing the average UCP supporter as strongly opposing safe consumption

sites (Appendix C). This is 38 percent higher than the actual strong opposition expressed by UCP supporters, at 39 percent. While this discrepancy was the most notable exaggeration of the perspectives of UCP supporters, every left leaning category on the political spectrum (0-4) inflated the opposition of UCP supporters. The smallest difference between perceived opposition and actual opposition among left wing individuals was still 12 percent, with those who placed themselves at a 4 on the political spectrum estimating the strong opposition of UCP supporters at 51 percent compared to the aforementioned 39 (Appendix C). Those on the left also underestimated the portion of UCP supporters that were neutral on the issue of safe consumption sites. Individuals categorized as very left (0-1) placed UCP neutrality at 7%, and left wing individuals (2-4) placed it at 10 percent (9.9). In reality, 16.2 percent of UCP supporters stated that they neither supported nor opposed safe consumption sites. Those on the right of the political spectrum more accurately assessed the opinions of UCP supporters. Among those who placed themselves on the right of the political scale (6-10), only those who identified as an 8 overestimated the amount of UCP supporters that strongly oppose safe consumption sites (41 percent compared to 39 percent). All other right wing response categories underestimated the strong opposition of UCP supporters. Those on the right also more accurately assessed the neutrality of UCP supporters, and were more likely to correctly assume that a decent portion of UCP identifying individuals support safe consumption sites rather than oppose them. Just as those on the left were more likely to overstate UCP perspectives, those on the right were more likely to overestimate NDP perspectives. While 42 percent of actual NDP supporters indicated that they strongly supported safe consumption sites, those on the right (6-8) estimated this strong support at 51 percent, and those on the very right (9-10) placed NDP strong support at 58 percent. Those on the very left also exaggerated NDP strong support but to a lesser extent, placing it at 50 percent. More central left wing individuals (2-4) on average accurately assessed NDP strong support, placing it at 42 percent. All groups correctly presumed that opposition to safe

consumption sites among NDP supporters was quite low. Additionally, the neutrality of NDP supporters was also correctly assessed as being relatively small, with the only exception to this trend being among centrists. Those who placed themselves at a 5 on the political spectrum estimated NDP neutrality at 21 percent, with only 11 percent of actual NDP supporters expressing a neutral position. Centrists also overestimated the neutrality of UCP supporters, and underestimated the strong support of the NDP as well as the strong opposition of the UCP. Therefore, centrists did not engage in false polarization for this issue, but rather underestimated the polarization that exists between NDP and UCP supporters.

Contrasting this, both left and right wing individuals can be classified as perceiving false polarization regarding safe consumption sites, left wing individuals to a larger extent. Both groups understood at least one party as holding a more strong and less neutral stance than in reality, therefore creating the conditions for false polarization.



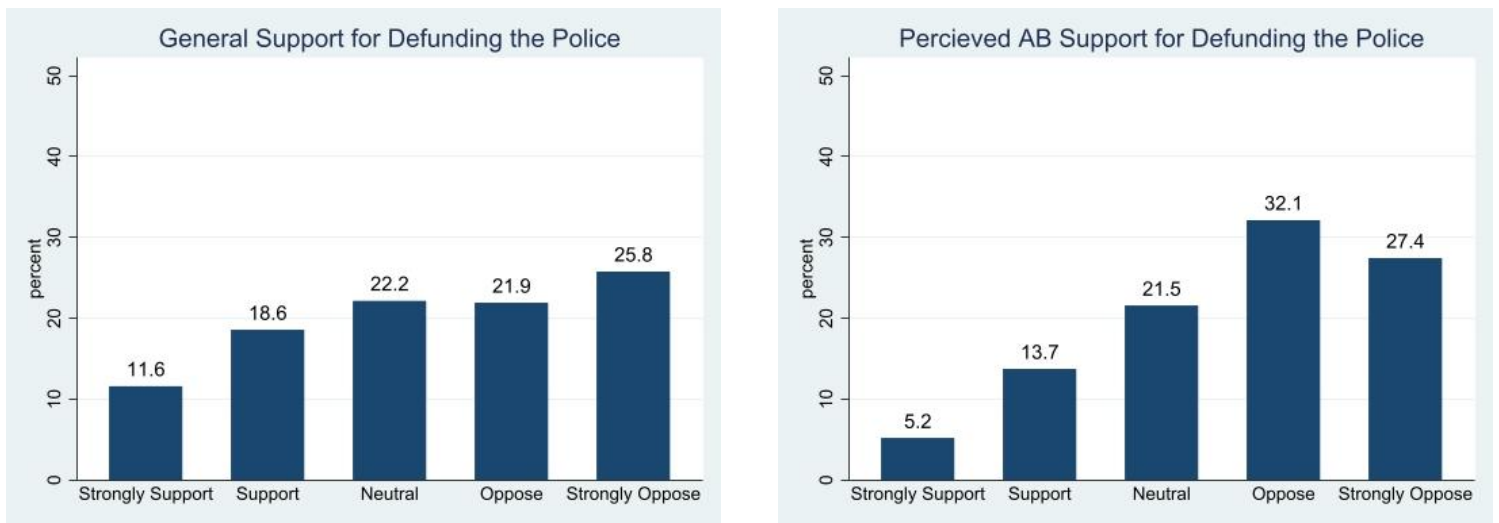
**Figure 19**

**Defunding the Police: General Overview**

General support for defunding the police does not indicate a high level of division among the public. Although the most commonly selected category was strongly opposed at 25.8 percent, nearly a



quarter of respondents expressed a neutral position (22.2 percent), with this representing the second most popular response category. Additionally, it was common for respondents to select both somewhat oppose (at 21.9 percent) and somewhat support (at 18.6 percent), showing that a significant number of people do not appear to hold a strong opinion on the issue. The combination of individuals who neither supported or opposed defunding the police, or appeared to hold an opinion without a deep conviction, suggests that the general public is not polarized on this issue.



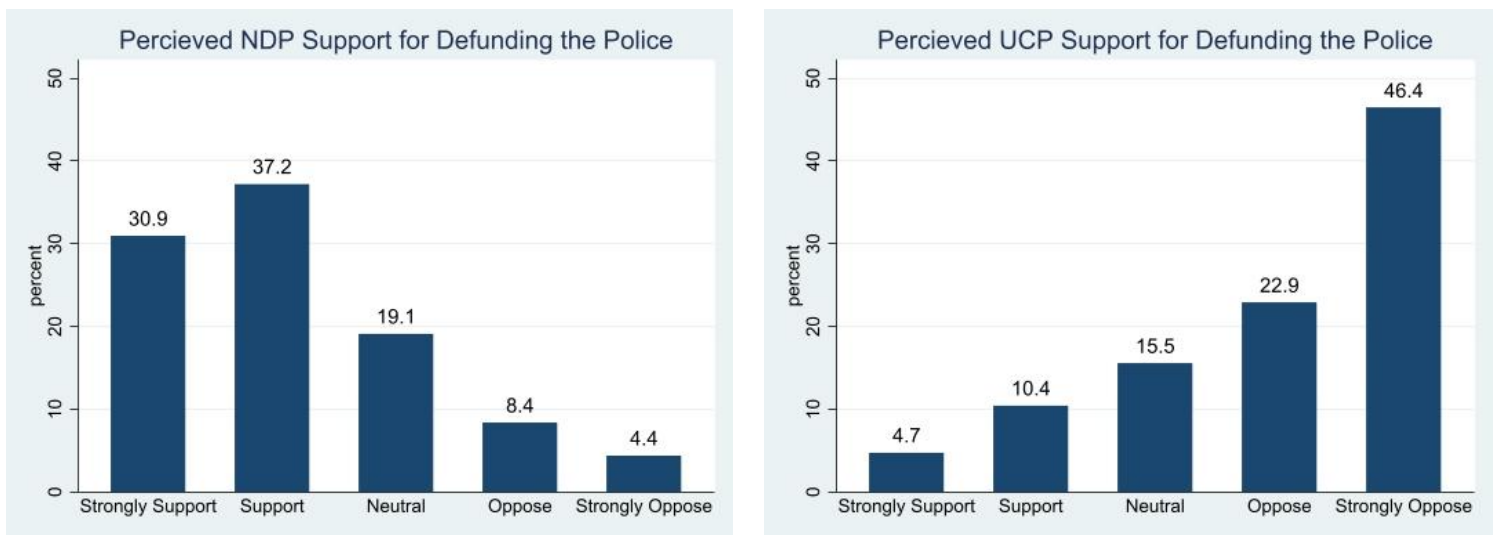
**Figure 20**

Respondents perceived the average Albertan as slightly more opposed to defunding the police than they were themselves, and understood this opposition to be stronger than it was in reality. Nearly 60 percent of people perceived the average Albertan as opposed to defunding the police to some extent, compared to 47.7 percent of people who were actually opposed. The majority of this difference existed in the somewhat opposed category, with 32 percent of people categorizing the average Albertan as somewhat opposed to defunding the police, compared to the 21.9 percent who were actually somewhat opposed. However, people also understood Albertans as slightly more strongly opposed than they themselves were, with 27.4 percent of Albertans understood as strongly opposed compared to the actual number at 25.8 percent. The increased level of perceived opposition corresponded to a decreased level of

perceived support, with 18.9 percent of people classifying Albertans as supporting defunding the police, and 30 percent of people actually supporting defunding the police. The neutrality of Albertans was accurately assessed, with a small difference of 1 percent between perceived and actual neutrality. Therefore, Albertans were understood as holding a more all encompassing opposition to defunding the police than the general public, but were not understood as more polarized.

The initial results for the issue of defunding the police suggest a degree of false polarization, as people perceive more strong opinions and less neutrality among party supporters than is expressed by the general population. This was largely driven by the perception of extremity among UCP supporters. The perception of NDP supporters was generally consistent in terms of strength as to what was expressed by the general population, although NDP supporters were characterized as holding the opposite direction of opinion predominantly expressed by most people. 37.2 percent of NDP supporters were perceived as somewhat supportive of defunding the police, with this representing the most popular response category. This partially indicates that NDP supporters are perceived as holding less strong opinions than people do in reality, as the most popular response category chosen by the general public when expressing their own opinions was strongly disagree. However, NDP supporters are understood as slightly less neutral than the general public, with 19 percent of people classifying NDP supporters as neither supporting or opposing safe consumption sites compared to the 22 percent of people who are actually neutral. The combination of these two findings indicates that people generally understood the NDP as holding a similar strength of opinion to what they themselves expressed. If similar results had occurred for the UCP, the issue of defunding the police could not be classified as having the initial appearance of being falsely polarized. But, this was not the case. The UCP were perceived as both less neutral and more strong in their opinions than was expressed by respondents. 46.4 percent of people classified the average UCP supporter as strongly opposing defunding the police, compared to the aforementioned 25 percent of people who

actually strongly opposed defunding the police. Alongside this, 15 percent of people perceived UCP supporters as neither supporting or opposing defunding the police, compared to the 22 percent of people who actually expressed a neutral position. When the generally correct assessment of the NDP is combined with the exaggerated perception of the UCP, this can be understood as falsely polarized as a higher degree of polarization is perceived between the two groups than exists within the general public. Therefore, the issue of defunding the police can initially be classified as falsely polarizing.

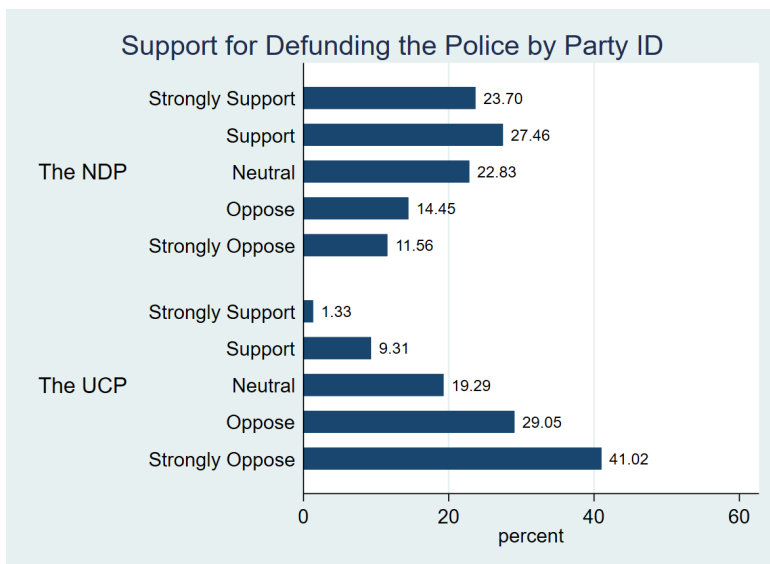


**Figure 21**

### **Defunding the Police: Impact of Party Identity**

When considering the opinions of party supporters on defunding the police, the results from the general analysis are confirmed as demonstrating false polarization. For both the NDP and the UCP, stronger conviction and less neutrality was perceived than existed in reality. The difference between perception and reality was not large for either group, but the combined exaggeration of both perspectives creates false polarization. UCP supporters were viewed as more likely to strongly oppose defunding the police than they actually were, with 41 percent of UCP supporters strongly opposed to the policy compared to the perceived number of 46 percent. Similarly, NDP supporters were understood to be more likely to strongly support defunding the police than expressed by supporters themselves; nearly 31 (30.9)

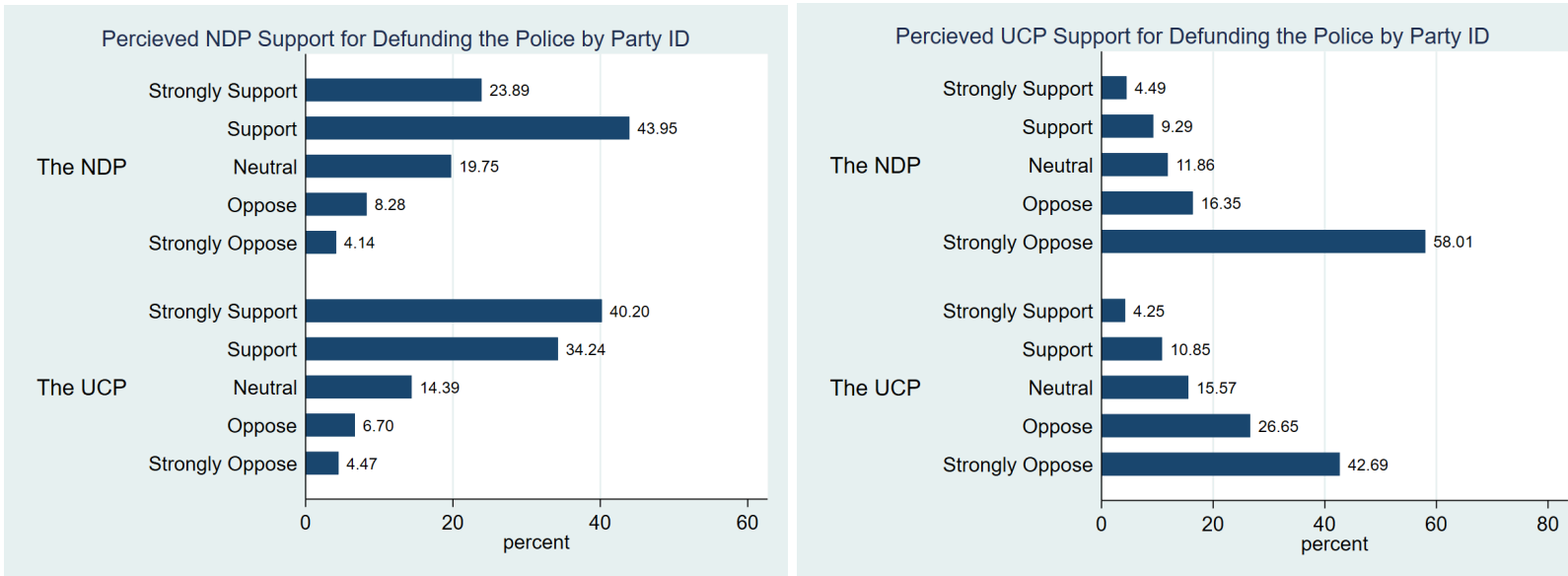
percent of respondents perceived NDP supporters as strongly supportive, whereas 23.7 percent of NDP supporters were actually strongly supportive. Both parties were additionally slightly more likely to be neutral than perceived, although this difference was not substantial, with both groups 3-4 percent more likely to be neutral than assessed. Supporters of the NDP were also more likely to hold an opposite position from the dominant group within their party than was perceived. 26 percent of NDP supporters were opposed to defunding the police to some extent, whereas the perceived number of NDP supporters opposed to defunding the police was only 12 percent. The only instance in which these results did not support the theory of false polarization was concerning the proportion of UCP supporters that held the non dominant position within their party. 15 percent of UCP supporters were perceived as supporting defunding the police to some extent, but among the actual supporters, this number was only 10.6 percent. However, the overall pattern of these results indicate that the general public perceived more polarization between the NDP and the UCP than legitimately existed, as the two parties were characterized as further apart in opinion than they actually were.



**Figure 22**

Party supporters also understood the division that exists between the NDP and the UCP to be more polarized than in reality. As was the case for previous issues, supporters of each party characterized supporters of the opposing party as more extreme than they actually were, as demonstrated in Figure 23. This was most prominent in the perception held by UCP supporters of NDP supporters. There was a difference of 17 percent between the actual strong support for defunding the police among NDP supporters (23 percent) and the perceived strong support of NDP supporters from UCP supporters (40 percent). Supporters of the UCP additionally perceived 14 percent of NDP supporters as neither supporting nor opposing defunding the police. This number was 8 percent higher among actual NDP supporters, with 22 percent classifying themselves as neutral. Finally, supporters of the UCP were significantly less likely to perceive NDP supporters as potentially straying from the dominant position of their party. While 26 percent of NDP supporters expressed opposition for defunding the police, only 11 percent of UCP supporters believed that NDP supporters would hold this position. Supporters of the NDP similarly exaggerated the position of UCP supporters, with some key deviations. NDP supporters estimated that 58 percent of UCP supporters would strongly oppose defunding the police, with this being 17 percent higher than the 41 percent of UCP supporters who actually strongly opposed defunding the police. Matching the overestimated perception of strong support was the underestimation of neutrality; 11 percent of NDP supporters characterized the UCP as neutral, compared to 19 percent of UCP supporters who actually placed themselves as neutral. While these results almost exactly mirror the false perception of extremity projected by UCP supporters onto NDP supporters, NDP supporters correctly assessed that only a small portion of UCP supporters would support defunding the police to some extent. 13.7 percent of NDP supporters assessed UCP supporters as supportive of defunding the police, with this slightly larger (and therefore not indicative of false polarization) than the 10.6 percent of UCP supporters who actually supported the policy. Therefore, both parties perceived the opposing party as more extreme than

they actually were, but this perception of extremity was somewhat stronger among supporters of the UCP. Contrasting their perceptions of the opposing party, both NDP and UCP supporters assessed other members of their own party fairly accurately. NDP supporters correctly placed their own strong support at 23 percent, but were more likely to understand their party as “somewhat supportive” of defunding the police. This category had a difference of nearly 20 percent (16.46), with the perceived number being 43.9 percent and the actual number being 27.4 percent. The exaggeration that occurred concerning support corresponded with an underestimation of the proportion of NDP supporters opposed to defunding the police. 12 percent of NDP supporters perceived other members of the party as opposing the policy, compared to the aforementioned 26 percent of NDP supporters who actually opposed the policy. However, NDP supporters understood their own neutrality quite accurately (19 percent to 22 percent), making the overall perception decently accurate. While NDP supporters had a discrepancy between their perception and the actual distribution of opinions within their party, UCP supporters accurately understood how their fellow party members fell into all response categories. The difference between the perceived and actual numbers for each category was no more than 3 percent, and for strong opposition, was less than 1 percent. Consequently, the issue of defunding the police was only falsely polarized when considering the viewpoints of supporters of both parties concerning the opposing party.

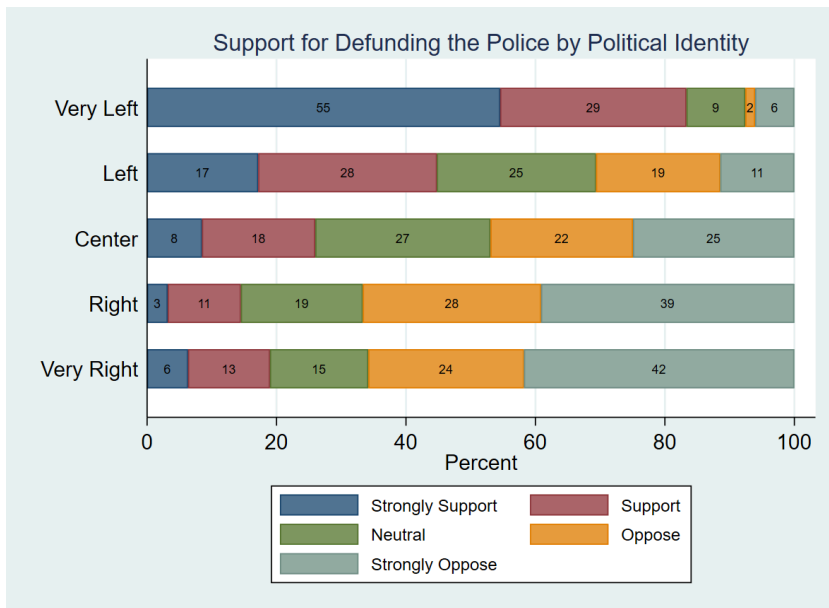


**Figure 23**

### **Defunding the Police: Impact of Political Identity**

Considering political identity alongside support for defunding the police reveals interesting discrepancies surrounding the beliefs of left wing individuals. While the opinion distribution of those on the right closely reflected the previously discussed opinions of UCP supporters, there was a large opinion gap between very left individuals and more center left individuals. 55 percent of those on the very left (0-1) strongly supported defunding the police, with this number as high as 67 percent among those who placed themselves at a 0. Very left individuals also expressed low neutrality (averaged to 9 percent), and were unlikely to express any degree of opposition to defunding the police (averaged to 8 percent) (Appendix D). These numbers change considerably with the results for those who placed themselves from a 2-4 on the spectrum. Strong support for these individuals averaged to 17 percent, much lower than the aforementioned 55. Additionally, they were much more likely to identify as neutral (25 percent), or oppose defunding the police (30 percent). The difference in opinion between “very left” and “left” individuals suggests that there is significant variation in opinion towards defunding the police on the left of the political spectrum, perhaps explaining why NDP supporters were significantly more varied in their

perspective than UCP supporters. Compared to left wing individuals, those on the right expressed consistently strong opposition to the proposed measure. 42 percent of those on the very right (9-10) and 39 percent of those on the right (6-8), strongly opposed defunding the police. Alongside this, the two groups expressed similar levels of neutrality (15 percent and 19 percent), as well as similar moderately low levels of support for defunding the police (19 percent and 14 percent). Centrists, or those who placed themselves at a 5 on the spectrum, were the most likely to identify as neutral, at 27 percent. However, this neutrality was paired with a clear opinion preference; centrists were much more likely to oppose defunding the police (47 percent) than to support it (26 percent).



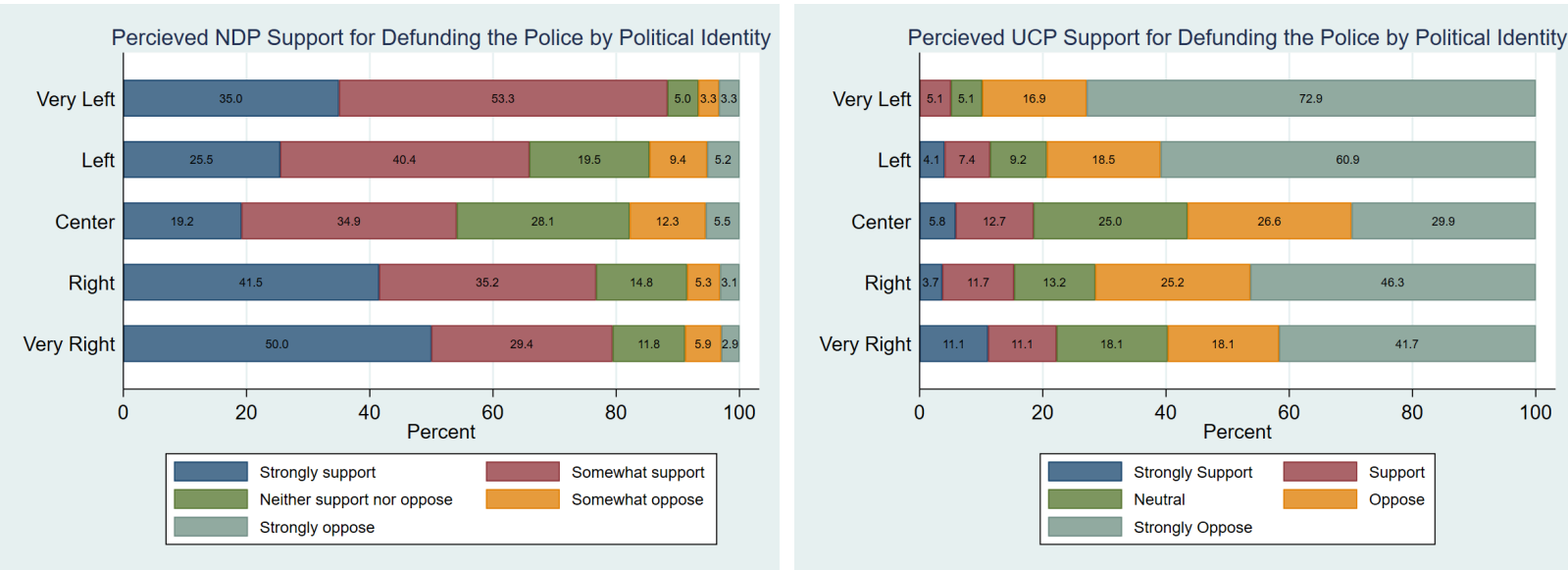
**Figure 24**

Reflecting a pattern that has occurred with previous issues, left wing individuals were more likely to exaggerate the perspectives of the UCP, and right wing individuals were more likely to exaggerate the perspectives of the NDP. The combination of these two effects means that the division between NDP and UCP supporters on defunding the police is perceived as more polarized by both those on the left and the right than in actuality. The largest gap between actual and perceived perspectives occurred among those



on the left concerning the viewpoints of UCP supporters. Among individuals classified as “very left” (0-1), 72.9 percent perceived the average UCP supporter as strongly opposing defunding the police. Among those who placed themselves at a 0 on the spectrum, this number was 82 percent (Appendix D). In reality, 41 percent of UCP supporters strongly oppose defunding the police, with there being a difference of 31 percent between the averaged perception of very left individuals and the actual number. The proportion of UCP supporters that are strongly convicted in their opposition to defunding the police was similarly exaggerated by other left wing identities on the political spectrum, with those who identified from a 2-4 averaging to believe that 60.9 percent of UCP supporters strongly opposed defunding the police. Among those who placed themselves at a 2, this number was 76 percent (Appendix D). These inflated perceptions of strong opposition among UCP supporters were paired with underestimations of how many UCP supporters were neutral, with 5 percent of those on the “very left” and 9 percent of those on the “left” perceiving UCP supporters as neutral, compared to actual UCP neutrality at nearly 20 percent (19.2). The combination of these results indicate that those on the left perceived UCP supporters as holding much more extreme positions than were actually expressed. Right wing individuals similarly misperceived NDP supporters as holding stronger positions than in reality, although the numbers were not quite as stark. 50 percent of those on the “very right” and 41 percent of those on the “right” estimated that the average NDP supporter would strongly support defunding the police. In reality, this number was 23 percent, meaning that it was overestimated by 27 percent for those on the very right and by 18 percent for those on the right. Just as occurred among left wing individuals concerning the UCP, this overestimated support was paired with underestimated neutrality. 11 percent of those on the “very right” and 14 percent of those on the “right” perceived the average NDP supporter, as neither supporting nor opposing defunding the police, compared to the 22 percent of NDP supporters who actually expressed this stance. Individuals on the right additionally underestimated the proportion of

NDP supporters who opposed defunding the police (8 percent for both right wing groups, and 26 percent for actual NDP supporters), adding to the misperception of NDP supporters as monolithically supporting defunding the police to a strong extent. Interestingly, those on the very left also overestimated the extent to which NDP supporters support defunding the police. 35 percent of those on the very left perceived the average NDP supporter as strongly supporting defunding the police (12 percent higher than in reality), and placed overall NDP support for defunding the police at 88 percent, compared to actual overall support at 50 percent. Those on the “left” (2-4 on the spectrum) more accurately assessed NDP perspectives, although they still exaggerated overall support, placing it at 65.9 percent. Therefore, with the exception of centrists, all groups on the ideological spectrum overestimated NDP support to some extent. This was not true for UCP supporters, as right wing individuals characterized their perspectives fairly accurately. Those on the “very right” and those on the “right” both estimated UCP strong opposition to defunding the police within 5 percent of the correct number (41 percent and 46 percent to actual strong opposition at 41 percent). Additionally, the perceived proportion of UCP supporters among both groups that were neutral closely matched the actual percentage of UCP supporters that were neutral (18 percent and 13 percent to actual neutrality at 19 percent). Therefore, right wing individuals can largely be characterized as accurately understanding the perspectives of UCP supporters on defunding the police. Despite this caveat, the issue of defunding the police can be understood as falsely polarized by both left and right wing individuals, with both groups perceiving more division between the NDP and the UCP than truly exists. The only ideological group that did not engage in false polarization was centrists, who perceived both the NDP and the UCP as holding less extreme perspectives than they did in reality.



**Figure 25**

**Overall Findings**

This analysis measured false polarization in three key ways. Firstly, it assessed whether the general public’s perception of NDP and UCP supporters was falsely polarized on the surveyed issues. Secondly, it assessed whether party supporters’ perception of the relationship between their party and the opposing party was falsely polarized. Finally, it examined whether individuals’ placement on a left-to-right political spectrum influenced their perception of polarization between supporters of the NDP and the UCP.

**False Polarization Among the General Public**

Of the four surveyed issues, only one can definitively be classified as falsely polarized at this level of analysis. This issue was defunding the police, with the results indicating that the general public perceived more division between party supporters than actually existed. In this case, both NDP and UCP supporters were perceived as holding more extreme views than they actually did, with this fulfilling the conditions of false polarization. The results for mandatory pronoun reporting and safe consumption sites were *not* falsely polarized at this level of analysis. For both issues, people perceived both the NDP and

the UCP as holding extreme views (strong support/opposition, very little neutrality, and a small proportion of support for the dissenting opinion from the party), and this perception aligned with the actual opinions held by party supporters. The results for the consumer carbon tax were slightly more complex. UCP supporters were accurately classified as holding a strong opposition to the tax, but NDP supporters were perceived as more extreme than in reality. This suggests that a degree of false polarization did occur surrounding the carbon tax, but not to the same extent that it did for defunding the police. For all issues, respondents accurately estimated which party would hold the strongest position. UCP supporters expressed stronger opinions regarding mandated pronoun reporting, the carbon tax, and defunding the police than NDP supporters did, with this correctly showcased through people's perceptions. Safe consumption sites were the only issue in which NDP supporters held a stronger conviction than UCP supporters, and the only issue in which respondents perceived the NDP as holding a stronger conviction. Therefore, while false polarization was present with defunding the police and somewhat with the carbon tax (meaning that more division was perceived than actually existed), the general public accurately assessed which issues would draw the strongest responses from party supporters. People's propensity to perceive the UCP as holding more extreme positions than the NDP is consistent with the findings of Robinson et al. (1995), in which the authors demonstrated that people are more likely to perceive extremity among conservatives. However in this case, the perception of UCP supporters as holding stronger opinions on 3 of the 4 issues was matched by actual strong opinions among UCP supporters.

### **False Polarization Among Party Supporters**

When only the responses from NDP and UCP supporters are considered, three out of the four issues become clearly falsely polarizing. Mandated pronoun reporting was the only issue that remained not falsely polarized. For mandated pronoun reporting, both members of the NDP and the UCP

underestimated the opinion strength held by supporters of the two parties, with this trend especially prevalent among UCP supporters. Therefore, these results indicated the opposite of false polarization, as less division was perceived than existed in reality. Contrasting this, party supporters perceived more division between the NDP and UCP on the issues of the carbon tax, safe consumption sites, and defunding the police than truly existed. This is indicative of false polarization. For all three issues, this exaggerated perception of polarization was driven by how party supporters perceived the opposing party; members of both the UCP and the NDP tended to exaggerate the views of the other party while generally correctly classifying their own views. This somewhat contradicts the theory of false polarization as presented by Levendusky & Malhotra (2016) and Robinson et al. (1995), who both conclude that people tend to overestimate the ideological extremism of their political opponents but also overestimate the ideological extremism of others within their party.

The issue that produced results most clearly demonstrating false polarization was defunding the police. This was due to the fact that both supporters of the NDP and the UCP significantly overestimated the conviction of the opposing party, with the UCP characterizing NDP supporters as 17 percent more likely to strongly *support* defunding the police than in reality, and NDP supporters characterizing the UCP as 17 percent more likely to strongly *oppose* defunding the police than in reality. For both the carbon tax and safe consumption sites, one party's supporters were much more likely to wrongly perceive the opinions of the opposing party than the other. In the case of the carbon tax, this was the UCP, who exaggerated the strong support among NDP supporters by 24 percent and underestimated neutrality by 12 percent, compared to NDP supporters who exaggerated UCP strong opposition by 5 percent and underestimated neutrality by 5 percent. For safe consumption sites, this was the NDP, who exaggerated strong opposition to the sites among UCP members by 20 percent, compared to UCP supporters who exaggerated NDP support by 7 percent. With the exception of safe consumption sites, UCP supporters

were more likely to wrongly characterize the viewpoints of the opposite party in some fashion, as well as their own party to a degree. This was shown in the results for mandated pronoun reporting, the carbon tax, and defunding the police, although in the case of mandated pronoun reporting opinions were underestimated, not overestimated. This may suggest that holding strong viewpoints on an issue is correlated with not accurately characterizing the viewpoints of others on the issue, as the one issue where NDP supporters held stronger views than UCP supporters, safe consumption sites, was also the only issue where they were more likely to not accurately perceive the views of others. This is consistent with the findings of Westfall et al. (2015) and Boven et al. (2012), who both find that perceptions of polarization become less accurate as individuals become more strongly convicted in their positions.

### **False Polarization and Political Identity**

For all surveyed issues, where an individual placed themselves on the left-right political spectrum appeared to influence the extent of polarization they perceived between the NDP and the UCP. The results surrounding safe consumption sites, the consumer carbon tax, and defunding the police demonstrated that left wing individuals were more likely to exaggerate the perspectives of UCP supporters, and right wing individuals were more likely to exaggerate the perspectives of NDP supporters. These findings once again indicate that people are more likely to perceive their opposing political side as more extreme than those they are politically aligned with, as the left is typically associated with the NDP and the right with the UCP. However, this trend was not present in the results for mandated pronoun reporting, in which the left exaggerated the perspectives of both parties, and those on the right accurately assessed both parties. The issue that appeared to be most falsely polarizing across the political spectrum was defunding the police. Those on the very left estimated UCP opposition to defunding the police at 31 percent higher than it actually was, and those on the very right estimated NDP support for defunding the police at 27 percent higher than it actually was. While defunding the police was

the most falsely polarizing issue due to this exaggeration from both ends of the spectrum, safe consumption sites produced the largest misconception between actual and perceived perspectives, with individuals who placed themselves at a 0 on the spectrum estimating UCP opposition as 38 percent higher than it actually was. As these results indicate, placing oneself at either end of the political spectrum, either very left wing or very right wing, appeared to cause a heightened perception of extremity towards the party the individual in question was not ideologically aligned with. This was true to some extent for all four issues. Concerning mandatory pronoun reporting, only the very left were especially likely to perceive extremity, but for the other three surveyed issues, the ideological groups that consistently perceived the most extremism within the opposing ideological party were those who placed themselves as a 0 or a 1 and those who placed themselves as a 9 or a 10. Those on the very left (0-1) additionally overestimated the perspectives of NDP supporters in the results for pronoun reporting, safe consumption sites, and defunding the police, with this representing the only pattern of over exaggeration among ideologically similar groups. Concerning mandated pronoun reporting, those on the very left overestimated the amount of NDP supporters who strongly supported the policy by 26 percent. However, those on the very right either accurately understood or underestimated the strength of UCP positions for all four issues. This suggests that those on the very right may have a better understanding of the opinion divide between the two parties than those on the very left, and contrasts the results of party supporters, in which UCP identifiers were more likely to mis-characterize their own party. Diverging from left and right wing identifiers, centrists consistently perceived *less* polarization between the NDP and the UCP than existed in reality, countering the theory of false polarization. This was the case concerning both parties for all four issues, with the exception of the carbon tax where centrists overestimated NDP conviction. For all other issues, those who identified as a 5 on the political spectrum generally perceived supporters of both the UCP and NDP as holding less strong views and being more neutral than in reality. The

combination of these results suggests that perceptions of false polarization are at least partly determined by the strength of one's own political convictions. It appears that those who placed themselves towards the extremes of the ideological spectrum perceived others (generally their ideological opponents) as more extreme than they truly were, and that those who classified their own political stance as more neutral perceived more neutrality among others.

### **Discussion: Hypothesis 1 & 2**

**H1: Albertans perceive greater divisions on key issues between NDP and UCP supporters than exists in reality.**

When considering the general Albertan population, this hypothesis was only correct for the issue of defunding the police. For all other issues, greater division was not perceived than existed in reality. However, supporters of both the NDP and the UCP perceived greater division than existed for the majority of issues surveyed (with the exception of pronoun reporting). This indicates that in Alberta, perceiving false polarization is at least somewhat determined by one's party affiliation. Additionally, the results from the analysis of political identity showcased that both those on the left and those on the right generally perceived more division between NDP and UCP supporters than existed in reality.

**H2: Albertans perceive other Albertans as more extreme than they themselves are.**

This hypothesis was partially correct, with some important distinctions. For all surveyed issues, the general population tended to perceive party supporters as holding more extreme views than they expressed themselves. However, for three out of the four surveyed issues this perception was correct; therefore, their perception was not indicative of false polarization but rather was an accurate assessment of legitimate polarization. H2 was most directly confirmed within the results for party supporters. Generally, party supporters understood the opposing party as holding stronger views, being less neutral, and being more staunchly convicted in their views than they understood themselves to be. Taken together,



this suggests people understood other Albertans, specifically their ideological opponents, as more extreme than they did themselves. Finally, considering the perception of UCP and NDP supporters alongside where one placed themselves on the political spectrum contradicted this hypothesis in an interesting way. Rather than people consistently perceiving others as more extreme than themselves, specifically identifying with the very ends of the ideological spectrum (0 or 1, 9 or 10) appeared to increase the likelihood that you would perceive others as extreme. Contrasting this, identifying with a centrist political position (5 on the spectrum), appeared to increase the likelihood that you would perceive others as neutral. This suggests that rather than all Albertans perceiving others as more extreme than themselves, the extent to which one believes that others are extreme is determined at least partially by the strength of their own beliefs and convictions.

Considering the results from these two hypotheses, we can return to the research question shaping this project: to what extent is false polarization driving the narrative that Albertans are politically polarized? The results of this project have demonstrated that false polarization *does* exist in the Alberta political context, most prominently among those who identify as supporters of either the UCP or the NDP, and those who identify as either very right or very left. The extent to which this false polarization was present varied significantly from issue to issue, and specifically in the case of mandated pronoun reporting, tended to be eclipsed by actual polarization. However, the consistent presence of false polarization within the issues of safe consumption sites, the consumer carbon tax, and defunding the police in the second and third levels of analysis confirmed the existence of the phenomenon within the province of Alberta.

## **Chapter 4: Final Thoughts**

### **Directions for Future Research**

The principal goal of this project was to assess whether or not false polarization is playing a role in shaping Alberta politics. By assessing the difference between the perceived divide of NDP and UCP

positions and the actual divide on four key issues, the results of this project showcased that certain segments of Albertans do perceive more polarization than exists on certain topics. However, these results simply demonstrated *that* false polarization exists, not *why* it exists. This is an important question to address when considering where future research on this topic could be directed. There are a variety of mechanisms that may be leading to the false polarization present in Alberta that have not been thoroughly examined within the confines of this project. One of these is the role of political elites in portraying the political climate as polarized (often exaggerating the extremity of the opposing political side) in order to garner support. This was showcased within the previously discussed statements of UCP officials concerning NDP perspectives on safe consumption sites (director of Danielle Smith's Premier's office, Rob Anderson, claiming that the NDP supported "more hard drugs"), as well as NDP perspectives on defunding the police (Danielle Smith claiming that the NDP "refused to back down from their defund the police rhetoric"). Given that the results of this thesis showcased that false polarization largely originated from party supporters perceiving the opposing political side as more extreme than they actually were, it is possible that this exaggerated portrayal from politicians is internalized as reality by their followers. However, further research is needed to analyze whether this is truly the case. A secondary potential cause of false polarization is the influence of partisan media, with this often cited as a powerful contributor in literature from the U.S. context. When discussing media as a potential mechanism, it is worth noting the differences between the role of partisan media in Canada and the United States. As discussed by University of Toronto scholar Erik Merkley, "there is experimental and real world evidence in the United States that partisan media has contributed to polarization", however "the rise of partisan media has been much more limited in Canada" (Merkley 2023). Merkley discusses how Canadians across the political spectrum demonstrably prefer "credible mainstream sources", and concludes that "the story of Canadian polarization is likely not a story of the changing media landscape" (2023). While it is not necessarily the

case that Canadian media would have the same lack of influence on false polarization as it reportedly does on actual polarization, it is unlikely that Albertans are obtaining an exaggerated perception of polarization from media that does not take a partisan stance. This indicates that mainstream media may not play as large of a role in Canadian false polarization as it is theorized to do in the US; however, there is the possibility that Canadians may be similarly influenced by social media characterizing the political landscape as polarized. Just as with the possibility of political elites contributing to false polarization, this potential requires further research.

Additionally, the results of this thesis indicate that more exploration is needed into the specific types of political issues that produce false polarization, as well as the demographics of people that are susceptible to becoming falsely polarized. As showcased in Chapter 3, the extent to which false polarization is contributing to the narrative that Albertans are politically polarized differs significantly from issue to issue. The results for defunding the police indicated definitive false polarization, whereas the results for mandated pronoun reporting illustrated that the Albertan public was legitimately polarized on the issue. Given that these policies are viewed as similarly controversial, the question is created as to why people perceive more division than exists in reality on one of the issues but accurately perceive (and to an extent underestimate) the division on the other. Connected to the remaining question of the causes of false polarization, this thesis did not discuss whether certain segments of the population are more prone to perceiving false polarization than others. The results demonstrating that those who identify towards the ends of the political spectrum (very left/very right) are more likely to engage in false polarization, and that centrists often perceive less polarization that truly exists, showcases that the impact of false polarization is not uniform across a population. This creates the question as to whether other demographic factors (education level, gender, race, religion) contribute to the extent to which someone overestimates the polarization between two political groups. Research into this would also aid in

answering the broader question of what ultimately causes false polarization. Therefore, further examination is needed to determine exactly when and why Albertans become falsely polarized, and which Albertans are most susceptible to false polarization.

### **Implications of Findings**

What do the results of this thesis mean for the broader political culture within Alberta? The fact that supporters of both the NDP and the UCP repeatedly perceived more polarization between the two parties than actually exists suggests that finding stable political common ground amongst Albertans will remain a difficult task. As stated by scholar Amber Hye-Yon Lee, “people’s own perception of a given phenomenon are powerful in shaping their attitudes, often more so than actual, objective reality” (2022, 1536). This logic is supported by research indicating that people’s perceptions of their political opponents are key in shaping their overall attitudes, and that perceiving one’s opponent as extreme or radical can create the belief that your worldview is fundamentally misaligned with theirs (Ahler 2014). These findings are illustrated pertinently in the attitudes of Albertans following the 2023 provincial election, with one Albertan voicing the opinion that “if you voted Rachel Notley, you don’t support Alberta” (Weber 2023). An erosion in the perception of shared values within a population is theorized to ultimately lead to a reduction in “generalized social trust.” Generalized social trust is based on the “the belief that most people have good intentions and adhere to a [shared] set of norms” (Lee 2022, 1536). This trust is important for “social interactions in complex, diversified societies” (Stoelle 2002, 399), facilitating cooperation within the democratic process. However, the more people perceive division over “core values regarding how society should function” (Lee 2022, 1537), the less likely they are to share this important social trust with those around them. This presents the key issue that the presence of false polarization poses to Alberta, and broader democratic society at large; the more extreme we perceive those around us to be, the lower our social trust becomes, and by extension cooperation across political

lines becomes difficult. Mediating this will require an increased understanding that perception does not always equate to reality, and recognition that a reality of shared values amongst Albertans may currently be masked by a perception of division.

## **Conclusion**

This thesis began by outlining the concept of false polarization, and the potential way in which it may be contributing to the current understanding of Albertan politics as deeply divided. Through survey research, false polarization was confirmed as existing within Alberta's political context; in many instances, people perceived greater division between supporters of the province's two dominant parties, the United Conservative Party (UCP) and the New Democratic Party (NDP) than truly existed. If properly addressed, this knowledge of false polarization within Alberta may be key for beginning to reconnect a deeply divided province. A significant level of affective polarization (a favourably viewed in group and a disliked out group) has taken hold in Alberta politics. This is showcased through the previously emphasized incredibly small number of UCP and NDP supporters who would be willing to have a member of the opposing party as a friend, as well as numbers showcasing that only 16 percent of UCP identifiers and 19 percent of NDP identifiers are comfortable with members of the opposing party as 'fellow Albertans' (Wesley, Alfaro and Hill 2023). The results of this research suggests that these high levels of affective polarization may be fueled by a misperception of the extent of ideological polarization within the province. As past research into false polarization consistently finds, perceiving a loss of shared political opinion results in increasing negative emotional sentiments towards political opponents. Therefore, combatting the current affective polarization within Alberta may be achieved through growing awareness that ideological polarization between supporters of the NDP and the UCP may not be as substantial as commonly believed. The merits of education on false polarization are demonstrated through the previously discussed research of Craig Blatz, who highlights the long term positive impact of

interventional teaching on false polarization (2018, 2023). When considering the work of Blatz alongside the results of this thesis, the importance of increased recognition of the false polarization within Alberta becomes clear. Albertans need to be reminded that they are not ideologically divided to the extent that they are either friends or enemies; political cohesion requires some form of middle ground.

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**Appendix A:**

**Question #1; Tabulation of left-right scale and support for mandated pronoun reporting**

In politics, people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on this scale?	To what extent do you support or oppose the following policies? - Requiring schools to obtain parental consent before a student can change pronouns					
	Strongly support	Somewhat support	Neither support nor oppose	Somewhat oppose	Strongly oppose	Total
0 - Very left wing	3	3	0	2	23	31
	9.68	9.68	0.00	6.45	74.19	100.00
1	5	1	2	5	23	36
	13.89	2.78	5.56	13.89	63.89	100.00
2	0	3	7	5	29	44
	0.00	6.82	15.91	11.36	65.91	100.00
3	17	17	17	20	49	120
	14.17	14.17	14.17	16.67	40.83	100.00
4	23	16	20	30	35	124
	18.55	12.90	16.13	24.19	28.23	100.00
5	146	76	64	38	48	372
	39.25	20.43	17.20	10.22	12.90	100.00
6	65	24	18	11	10	128
	50.78	18.75	14.06	8.59	7.81	100.00
7	92	25	9	8	4	138

	66.67	18.12	6.52	5.80	2.90	100.00
8	64	12	5	2	3	86
	74.42	13.95	5.81	2.33	3.49	100.00
9	24	6	1	0	1	32
	75.00	18.75	3.12	0.00	3.12	100.00
10 - Very right wing	33	7	4	0	1	45
	73.33	15.56	8.89	0.00	2.22	100.00
Total	472	190	147	121	226	1156
	40.83	16.44	12.72	10.47	19.55	100.00

**Question #2:  
Tabulation of  
left ring scale  
and perceived**

### NDP support for pronoun reporting

In politics, people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place your self on this left right scale?	To what extent do you think the typical New Democratic Party (NDP) supporter in Alberta [supports mandated pronoun reporting]?					
	Strongly support	Somewhat support	Neither support nor oppose	Somewhat oppose	Strongly oppose	Total
0 - Very left wing	2	2	2	3	20	29
	6.90	6.90	6.90	10.34	68.97	100.00
1	3	2	2	4	23	34
	8.82	5.88	5.88	11.76	67.65	100.00
2	2	5	1	9	27	44
	4.55	11.36	2.27	20.45	61.36	100.00
3	10	9	12	36	52	119
	8.40	7.56	10.08	30.25	43.70	100.00

4	15	19	18	29	39	120
	12.50	15.83	15.00	24.17	32.50	100.00
5	49	65	65	58	71	308
	15.91	21.10	21.10	18.83	23.05	100.00
6	24	15	11	31	37	118
	20.34	12.71	9.32	26.27	31.36	100.00
7	19	16	12	29	54	130
	14.62	12.31	9.23	22.31	41.54	100.00
8	13	7	7	11	39	77
	16.88	9.09	9.09	14.29	50.65	100.00
9	3	6	3	4	14	30
	10.00	20.00	10.00	13.33	46.67	100.00
10 - Very right wing	10	5	4	5	15	39
	25.64	12.82	10.26	12.82	38.46	100.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>151</b>	<b>137</b>	<b>219</b>	<b>391</b>	<b>1048</b>
	14.31	14.41	13.07	20.90	37.31	100.00

**Question #3:  
Tabulation of  
left-right scale  
and perceived  
UCP support  
for pronoun  
reporting**

In politics, people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on this scale?	To what extent do you think the typical United Conservative Party (UCP) supporter in Alberta [supports mandated pronoun reporting]?					
	Strongly support	Somewhat support	Neither support nor oppose	Somewhat oppose	Strongly oppose	Total
0 - Very left wing	20	4	2	0	3	29
	68.97	13.79	6.90	0.00	10.34	100.00

1	24	4	0	0	6	34
	70.59	11.76	0.00	0.00	17.65	100.00
2	33	4	2	1	5	45
	73.33	8.89	4.44	2.22	11.11	100.00
3	93	12	4	2	11	122
	76.23	9.84	3.28	1.64	9.02	100.00
4	74	21	7	10	13	125
	59.20	16.80	5.60	8.00	10.40	100.00
5	156	77	49	20	27	329
	47.42	23.40	14.89	6.08	8.21	100.00
6	66	36	3	8	14	127
	51.97	28.35	2.36	6.30	11.02	100.00
7	83	30	8	8	7	136
	61.03	22.06	5.88	5.88	5.15	100.00
8	47	18	3	7	7	82
	57.32	21.95	3.66	8.54	8.54	100.00
9	19	6	4	0	3	32
	59.38	18.75	12.50	0.00	9.38	100.00
10 - Very right wing	24	7	3	0	8	42
	57.14	16.67	7.14	0.00	19.05	100.00
Total	639	219	85	56	104	1103
	57.93	19.85	7.71	5.08	9.43	100.00



## Appendix B

### Question #1: Tabulation of left-right scale and support for a consumer carbon tax:

In politics, people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on this scale?	To what extent do you support or oppose the following policies? - Maintaining a consumer carbon tax:					
	Strongly support	Somewhat support	Neither support nor oppose	Somewhat oppose	Strongly oppose	Total
0 - Very left wing	18	4	1	3	4	30
	60.00	13.33	3.33	10.00	13.33	100.00
1	11	8	9	2	2	32
	34.38	25.00	28.12	6.25	6.25	100.00
2	12	14	9	6	2	43
	27.91	32.56	20.93	13.95	4.65	100.00
3	16	42	22	17	23	120
	13.33	35.00	18.33	14.17	19.17	100.00
4	25	42	26	19	15	127
	19.69	33.07	20.47	14.96	11.81	100.00
5	26	51	90	72	140	379
	6.86	13.46	23.75	19.00	36.94	100.00

6	6	20	18	20	65	129
	4.65	15.50	13.95	15.50	50.39	100.00
7	3	13	19	20	82	137
	2.19	9.49	13.87	14.60	59.85	100.00
8	4	9	6	8	57	84
	4.76	10.71	7.14	9.52	67.86	100.00
9	1	2	3	4	22	32
	3.12	6.25	9.38	12.50	68.75	100.00
10 - Very right wing	6	4	2	3	31	46
	13.04	8.70	4.35	6.52	67.39	100.00
Total	128	209	205	174	443	1159
	11.04	18.03	17.69	15.01	38.22	100.00

**Question #2: Tabulation of left-right scale and perceived NDP support for a consumer carbon tax**

In politics, people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on this scale?	To what extent do you think the typical New Democratic Party (NDP) supporter in Alberta supports the maintenance of a consumer carbon tax?					
	Strongly support	Somewhat support	Neither support nor oppose	Somewhat oppose	Strongly oppose	Total
0 - Very left wing	7	15	2	1	2	27
	25.93	55.56	7.41	3.70	7.41	100.00
1	9	15	5	1	0	30
	30.00	50.00	16.67	3.33	0.00	100.00

2	13	19	5	5	1	43
	30.23	44.19	11.63	11.63	2.33	100.00
3	28	53	14	12	8	115
	24.35	46.09	12.17	10.43	6.96	100.00
4	28	49	20	18	5	120
	23.33	40.83	16.67	15.00	4.17	100.00
5	77	106	68	39	23	313
	24.60	33.87	21.73	12.46	7.35	100.00
6	44	51	15	10	2	122
	36.07	41.80	12.30	8.20	1.64	100.00
7	53	41	11	16	9	130
	40.77	31.54	8.46	12.31	6.92	100.00
8	45	17	7	4	3	76
	59.21	22.37	9.21	5.26	3.95	100.00
9	14	8	3	2	3	30
	46.67	26.67	10.00	6.67	10.00	100.00
10 - Very right wing	22	7	3	5	3	40
	55.00	17.50	7.50	12.50	7.50	100.00
Total	340	381	153	113	59	1046
	32.50	36.42	14.63	10.80	5.64	100.00

**Question #3: Tabulation of left-right scale and perceived UCP support for a consumer carbon tax**

In politics, people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on this scale?	To what extent do you think the typical United Conservative Party (UCP) supporter in Alberta would support the maintenance of a consumer carbon tax?					
	Strongly support	Somewhat support	Neither support nor oppose	Somewhat oppose	Strongly oppose	Total
0 - Very left wing	2	0	1	3	22	28
	7.14	0.00	3.57	10.71	78.57	100.00
1	1	4	1	5	21	32
	3.12	12.50	3.12	15.62	65.62	100.00
2	1	1	0	3	39	44
	2.27	2.27	0.00	6.82	88.64	100.00
3	3	9	4	13	89	118
	2.54	7.63	3.39	11.02	75.42	100.00
4	4	9	12	17	81	123
	3.25	7.32	9.76	13.82	65.85	100.00
5	16	43	48	58	168	333
	4.80	12.91	14.41	17.42	50.45	100.00
6	6	9	5	15	91	126
	4.76	7.14	3.97	11.90	72.22	100.00
7	5	14	8	20	89	136
	3.68	10.29	5.88	14.71	65.44	100.00
8	2	5	4	6	64	81
	2.47	6.17	4.94	7.41	79.01	100.00
9	0	1	4	8	19	32
	0.00	3.12	12.50	25.00	59.38	100.00
10 - Very right wing	6	4	3	5	26	44

	13.64	9.09	6.82	11.36	59.09	100.00
Total	46	99	90	153	709	1097
	4.19	9.02	8.20	13.95	64.63	100.00

## Appendix C

### Question #1: Tabulation of left-right scale and support for safe consumption sites

In politics, people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on this scale?	To what extent do you support or oppose the following policies? - Allowing safe consumption sites to continue operating:					
	Strongly support	Somewhat support	Neither support nor oppose	Somewhat oppose	Strongly oppose	Total
0 - Very left wing	19	7	0	1	3	30
	63.33	23.33	0.00	3.33	10.00	100.00
1	23	9	0	1	2	35
	65.71	25.71	0.00	2.86	5.71	100.00
2	30	7	2	3	0	42
	71.43	16.67	4.76	7.14	0.00	100.00
3	48	42	16	13	6	125
	38.40	33.60	12.80	10.40	4.80	100.00
4	37	37	26	16	10	126
	29.37	29.37	20.63	12.70	7.94	100.00

5	45	128	77	46	76	372
	12.10	34.41	20.70	12.37	20.43	100.00
6	13	27	26	23	41	130
	10.00	20.77	20.00	17.69	31.54	100.00
7	10	24	25	26	47	132
	7.58	18.18	18.94	19.70	35.61	100.00
8	5	13	8	14	43	83
	6.02	15.66	9.64	16.87	51.81	100.00
9	2	6	4	9	10	31
	6.45	19.35	12.90	29.03	32.26	100.00
10 - Very right wing	11	3	7	5	19	45
	24.44	6.67	15.56	11.11	42.22	100.00
Total	243	303	191	157	257	1151
	21.11	26.32	16.59	13.64	22.33	100.00

**Question #2: Tabulation of left-right scale and perceived NDP support for safe consumption sites**

In politics, people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on this scale?	To what extent do you think the typical New Democratic Party (NDP) supporter in Alberta supports the maintenance of safe consumption sites?					Total
	Strongly support	Somewhat support	Neither support nor oppose	Somewhat oppose	Strongly oppose	
0 - Very left wing	14	12	2	0	1	29
	48.28	41.38	6.90	0.00	3.45	100.00
1	17	12	4	0	0	33

	51.52	36.36	12.12	0.00	0.00	100.00
2	25	15	2	1	0	43
	58.14	34.88	4.65	2.33	0.00	100.00
3	45	57	5	3	4	114
	39.47	50.00	4.39	2.63	3.51	100.00
4	45	47	12	8	5	117
	38.46	40.17	10.26	6.84	4.27	100.00
5	86	120	64	21	14	305
	28.20	39.34	20.98	6.89	4.59	100.00
6	54	45	11	5	2	117
	46.15	38.46	9.40	4.27	1.71	100.00
7	69	42	11	6	3	131
	52.67	32.06	8.40	4.58	2.29	100.00
8	43	18	9	3	2	75
	57.33	24.00	12.00	4.00	2.67	100.00
9	14	6	5	2	2	29
	48.28	20.69	17.24	6.90	6.90	100.00
10 - Very right wing	26	5	5	2	2	40
	65.00	12.50	12.50	5.00	5.00	100.00
Total	438	379	130	51	35	1033
	42.40	36.69	12.58	4.94	3.39	100.00

**Question #3: Tabulation of left-right scale and perceived UCP support for safe consumption sites**

In politics, people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on this scale?	To what extent do you think the typical United Conservative Party (UCP) supporter in Alberta would support the maintenance of safe consumption sites?					
	Strongly support	Somewhat support	Neither support nor oppose	Somewhat oppose	Strongly oppose	Total
0 - Very left wing	1	2	1	2	21	27
	3.70	7.41	3.70	7.41	77.78	100.00
1	2	0	3	6	19	30
	6.67	0.00	10.00	20.00	63.33	100.00
2	0	0	3	11	30	44
	0.00	0.00	6.82	25.00	68.18	100.00
3	5	9	9	18	74	115
	4.35	7.83	7.83	15.65	64.35	100.00
4	4	7	16	33	63	123
	3.25	5.69	13.01	26.83	51.22	100.00
5	18	48	80	81	90	317
	5.68	15.14	25.24	25.55	28.39	100.00
6	3	17	18	32	47	117
	2.56	14.53	15.38	27.35	40.17	100.00
7	4	22	17	40	47	130
	3.08	16.92	13.08	30.77	36.15	100.00
8	4	10	12	19	32	77
	5.19	12.99	15.58	24.68	41.56	100.00
9	2	5	6	8	9	30
	6.67	16.67	20.00	26.67	30.00	100.00
10 - Very right wing	11	7	4	5	14	41



	26.83	17.07	9.76	12.20	34.15	100.00
Total	54	127	169	255	446	1051
	5.14	12.08	16.08	24.26	42.44	100.00

## Appendix D

### Question #1: Tabulation of left-right scale and support for defunding the police

In politics, people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on this scale?	To what extent do you support or oppose the following policies? - Redirecting funds from police budgets to social programs.					
	Strongly support	Somewhat support	Neither support nor oppose	Somewhat oppose	Strongly oppose	Total
0 - Very left wing	21	4	3	0	3	31
	67.74	12.90	9.68	0.00	9.68	100.00
1	15	15	3	1	1	35
	42.86	42.86	8.57	2.86	2.86	100.00
2	16	14	7	7	1	45
	35.56	31.11	15.56	15.56	2.22	100.00
3	22	42	28	20	14	126
	17.46	33.33	22.22	15.87	11.11	100.00
4	13	26	38	30	19	126

	10.32	20.63	30.16	23.81	15.08	100.00
5	32	66	102	83	94	377
	8.49	17.51	27.06	22.02	24.93	100.00
6	3	24	24	37	39	127
	2.36	18.90	18.90	29.13	30.71	100.00
7	4	10	28	39	55	136
	2.94	7.35	20.59	28.68	40.44	100.00
8	4	5	13	19	41	82
	4.88	6.10	15.85	23.17	50.00	100.00
9	1	4	6	10	12	33
	3.03	12.12	18.18	30.30	36.36	100.00
10 - Very right wing	4	6	6	9	21	46
	8.70	13.04	13.04	19.57	45.65	100.00
Total	135	216	258	255	300	1164
	11.60	18.56	22.16	21.91	25.77	100.00

**Question #2: Tabulation of left-right scale and perceived NDP support for defunding the police**

In politics, people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on this scale?	To what extent do you think the typical New Democratic Party (NDP) supporter in Alberta supports redirecting funds from police budgets to social programs?					Total
	Strongly support	Somewhat support	Neither support nor oppose	Somewhat oppose	Strongly oppose	
0 - Very left wing	12	12	0	1	2	27
	44.44	44.44	0.00	3.70	7.41	100.00

1	9	20	3	1	0	33
	27.27	60.61	9.09	3.03	0.00	100.00
2	13	18	8	2	1	42
	30.95	42.86	19.05	4.76	2.38	100.00
3	28	49	21	8	5	111
	25.23	44.14	18.92	7.21	4.50	100.00
4	27	41	23	15	8	114
	23.68	35.96	20.18	13.16	7.02	100.00
5	56	102	82	36	16	292
	19.18	34.93	28.08	12.33	5.48	100.00
6	43	44	18	6	2	113
	38.05	38.94	15.93	5.31	1.77	100.00
7	50	45	19	8	6	128
	39.06	35.16	14.84	6.25	4.69	100.00
8	39	23	10	3	2	77
	50.65	29.87	12.99	3.90	2.60	100.00
9	13	11	2	3	0	29
	44.83	37.93	6.90	10.34	0.00	100.00
10 - Very right wing	21	9	6	1	2	39
	53.85	23.08	15.38	2.56	5.13	100.00
Total	311	374	192	84	44	1005
	30.95	37.21	19.10	8.36	4.38	100.00

**Question #3: Tabulation of left-right scale and perceived UCP support for defunding the police**

In politics, people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on this scale?	To what extent do you think the typical United Conservative Party (UCP) supporter in Alberta would support redirecting funds from police budgets to social programs?					
	Strongly support	Somewhat support	Neither support nor oppose	Somewhat oppose	Strongly oppose	Total
0 - Very left wing	0	1	1	3	23	28
	0.00	3.57	3.57	10.71	82.14	100.00
1	0	2	2	7	20	31
	0.00	6.45	6.45	22.58	64.52	100.00
2	0	1	3	6	33	43
	0.00	2.33	6.98	13.95	76.74	100.00
3	6	9	7	20	69	111
	5.41	8.11	6.31	18.02	62.16	100.00
4	5	10	15	24	63	117
	4.27	8.55	12.82	20.51	53.85	100.00
5	18	39	77	82	92	308
	5.84	12.66	25.00	26.62	29.87	100.00
6	5	16	16	31	48	116
	4.31	13.79	13.79	26.72	41.38	100.00
7	3	16	19	33	62	133
	2.26	12.03	14.29	24.81	46.62	100.00
8	4	6	8	18	41	77
	5.19	7.79	10.39	23.38	53.25	100.00
9	2	3	7	7	11	30
	6.67	10.00	23.33	23.33	36.67	100.00

10 - Very right wing	6	5	6	6	19	42
	14.29	11.90	14.29	14.29	45.24	100.00
Total	49	108	161	237	481	1036
	4.73	10.42	15.54	22.88	46.43	100.00