

PUBLIC EDUCATION IN AN AGE OF POPULISM

Presentation to NCTCA | February 6, 2026



Jared Wesley, PhD

University of Alberta

Slides: jaredwesley.ca/nctca

Teachers' Strike: Most Albertans side with teachers as they criticize UCP's handling of education

Three-in-five say Smith government has done poor job on education

The 'nuclear option': How Alberta's UCP quelled teacher unrest ... for good? | About That

October 29, 2025 | [News](#) | 11:59

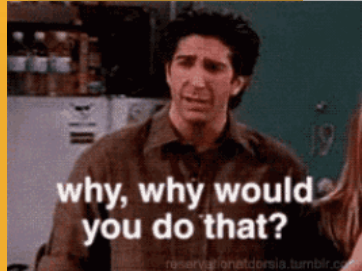
Braid: Alberta shrinks school book ban, minister insists it was all a 'misunderstanding'

Big changes in ministerial order come down to one little word: visual

UCP under fire for K-4 curriculum plans that suggest leaving out residential schools

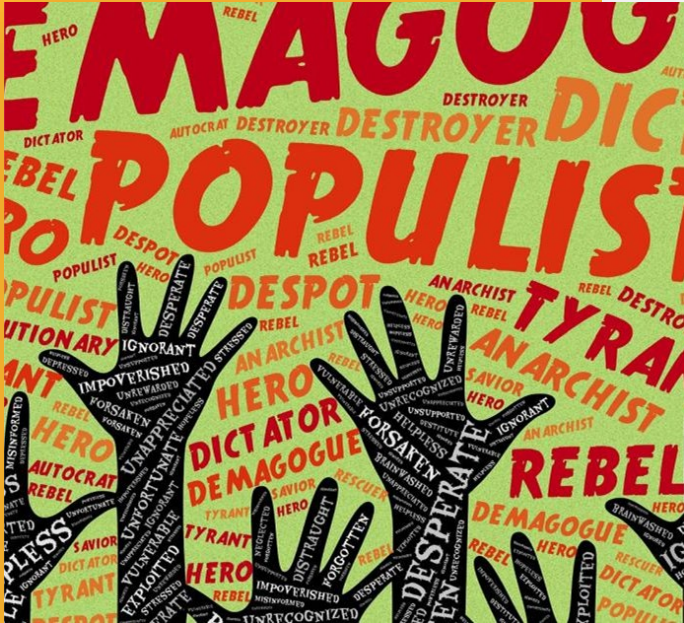


Slides: jaredwesley.ca/nctca



It's not *their* fault.





Learning Objective

Understand what
public educators owe
liberal democracy today.



Our Agenda

01

The Current Moment

02

Pluralism vs Populism

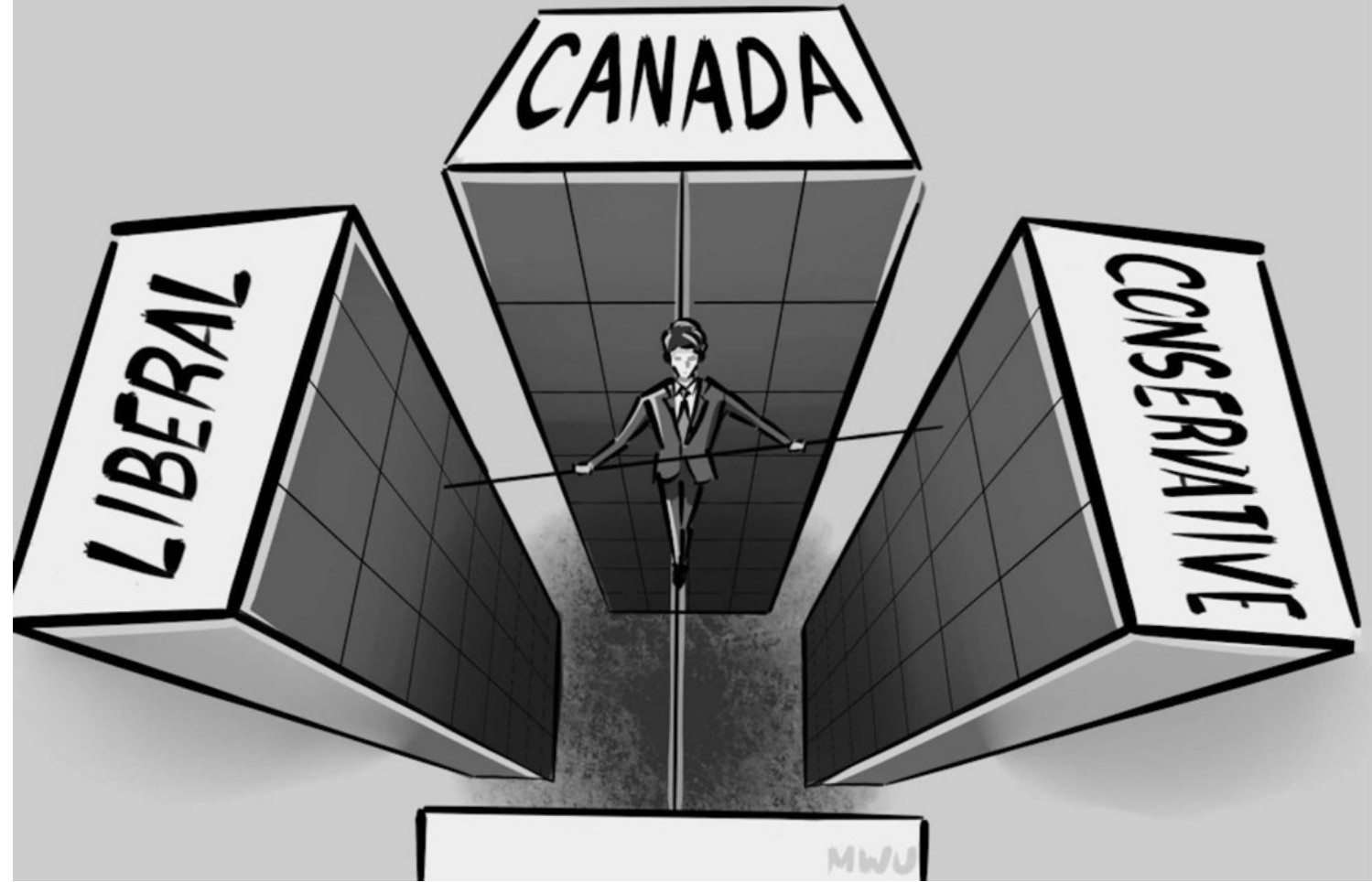
03

Navigating this Space



The Current Moment

How are we divided, and how divided
are we?



The Current Moment

Schools have become a front-line of the “culture war”.

“Parents rights” has reframed public education.

Curriculum reform sidelines expertise.

Policy focus has shifted to surveillance & control.

Teachers & schools are expected to remain “neutral”.



The Current Moment

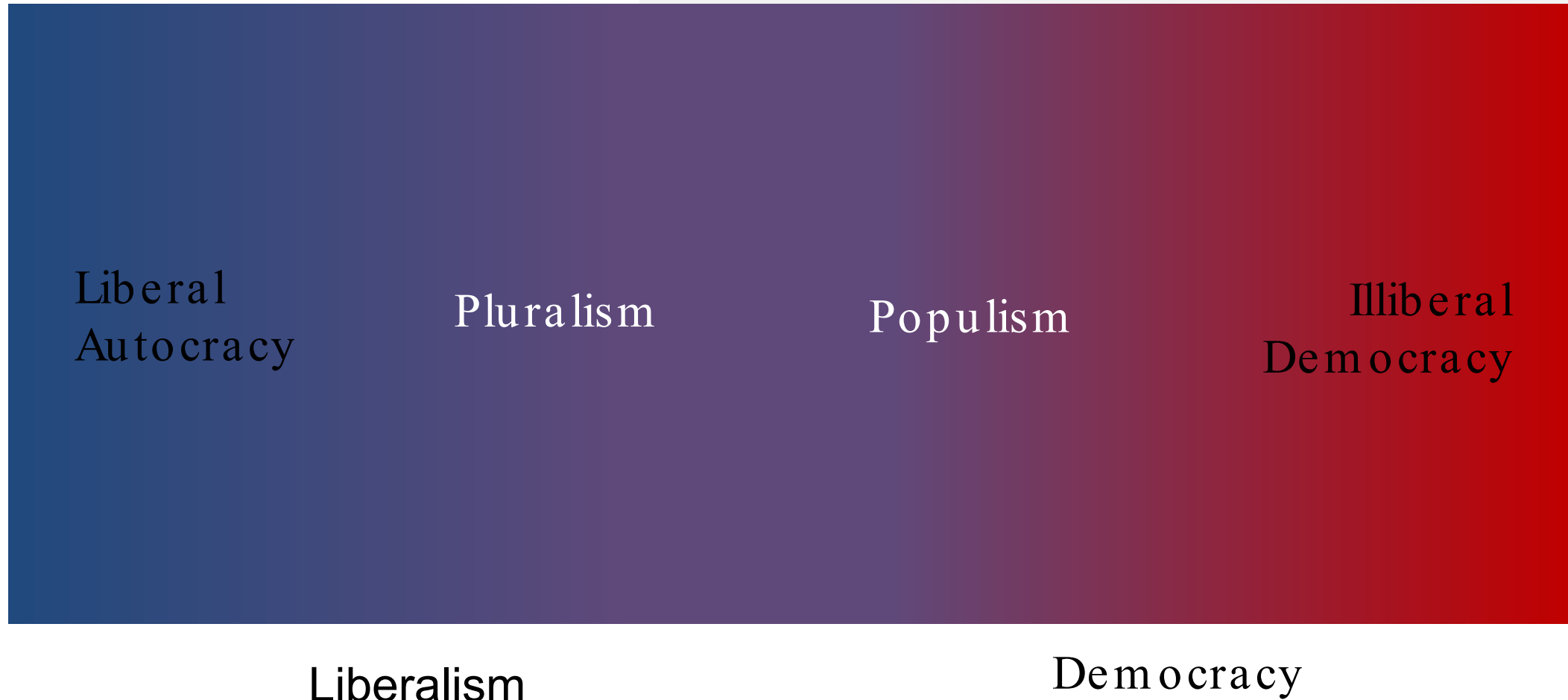
The **liberal -democratic paradigm** is being challenged in countries throughout the world.

Critics point to the inherent inconsistencies between **liberalism** and **democracy** .

These tensions are pitting **pluralism** against **populism**.



Liberal Democracy





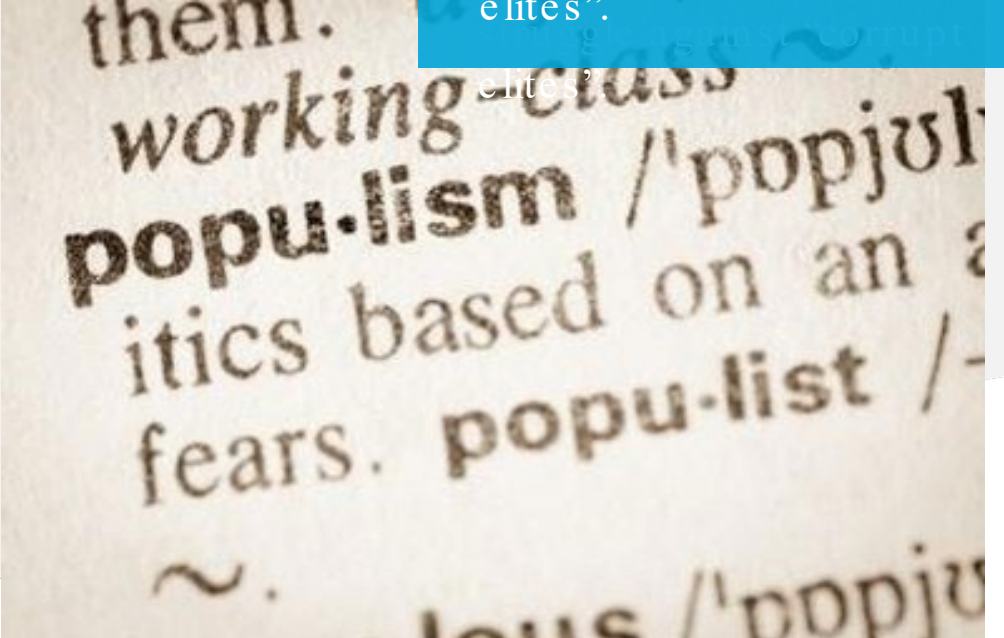
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Pluralism

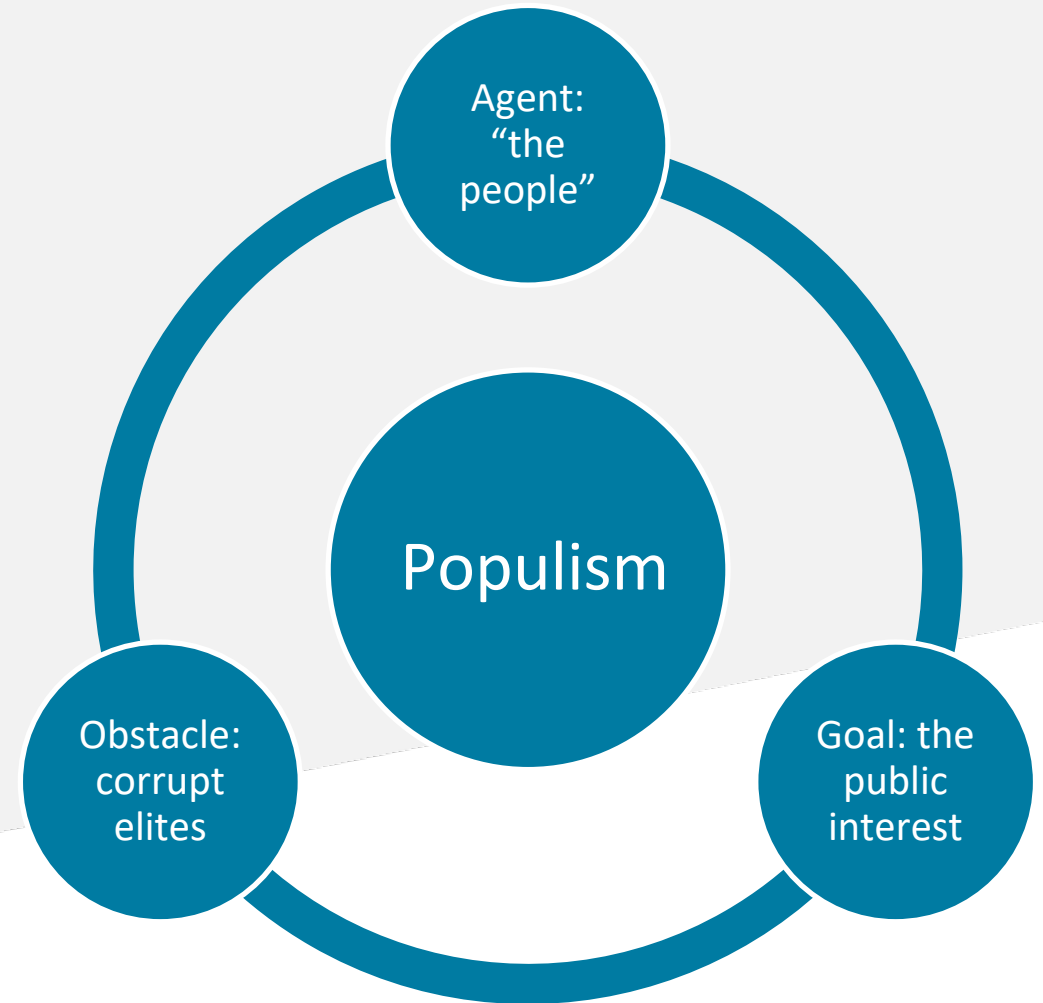
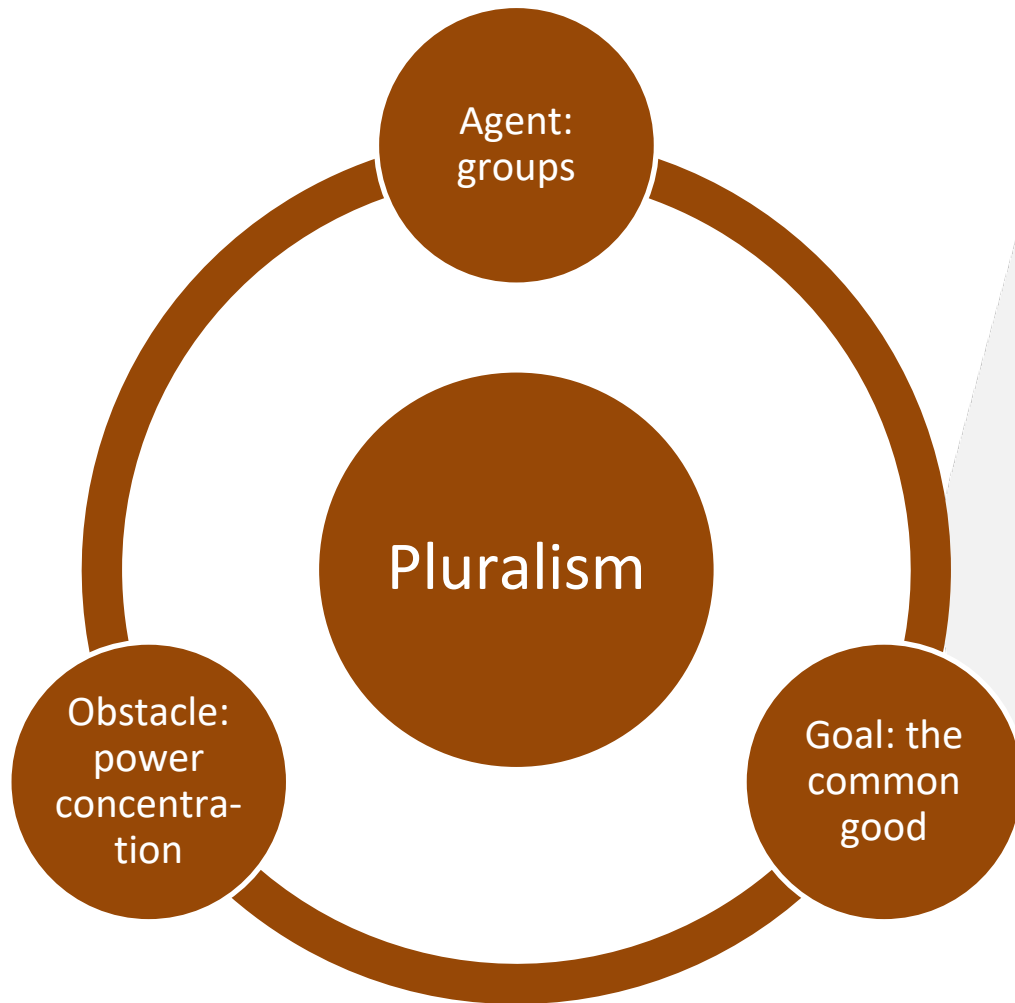
A governing approach that emphasizes many groups, shared rules, and negotiated coexistence.

Populism

An ideology that pits “the people” in a moral struggle against “corrupt elites”.



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popu-lism /'popju
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Pluralism and populism in Canada today

Governments across Canada employ distinct approaches to policymaking. This goes beyond “left” versus “right”.

The Two Paradigms

Pluralism and populism are both *liberal democratic* ideologies.

Feature	Pluralism	Populism
Key Agent	societal groups (plural)	“the people” (singular)
Key Goal	the common good: constructed, contested, evolving	the public interest: inherent & embodied in the leader
Key Obstacle	concentration of power	corrupt elites
Democracy	decentralized, checks & balances	consolidated, majoritarian*
Rights	freedoms & obligations positive rights & groups	differentiated & contingent rights negative liberties & individuals
Politics	means-focused: negotiation & consensus	ends-focused: conflict & zero-sum
Focus	debate, dialogue (paralysis)	loss, crisis (impulsiveness)
Outcome	greatest good for the greatest number	minimum winning coalition

Trade-Offs

What are the upsides and downsides of each?



Responsiveness & Timeliness

Equity & Rights

Capacity & Expertise

Stability & Durability

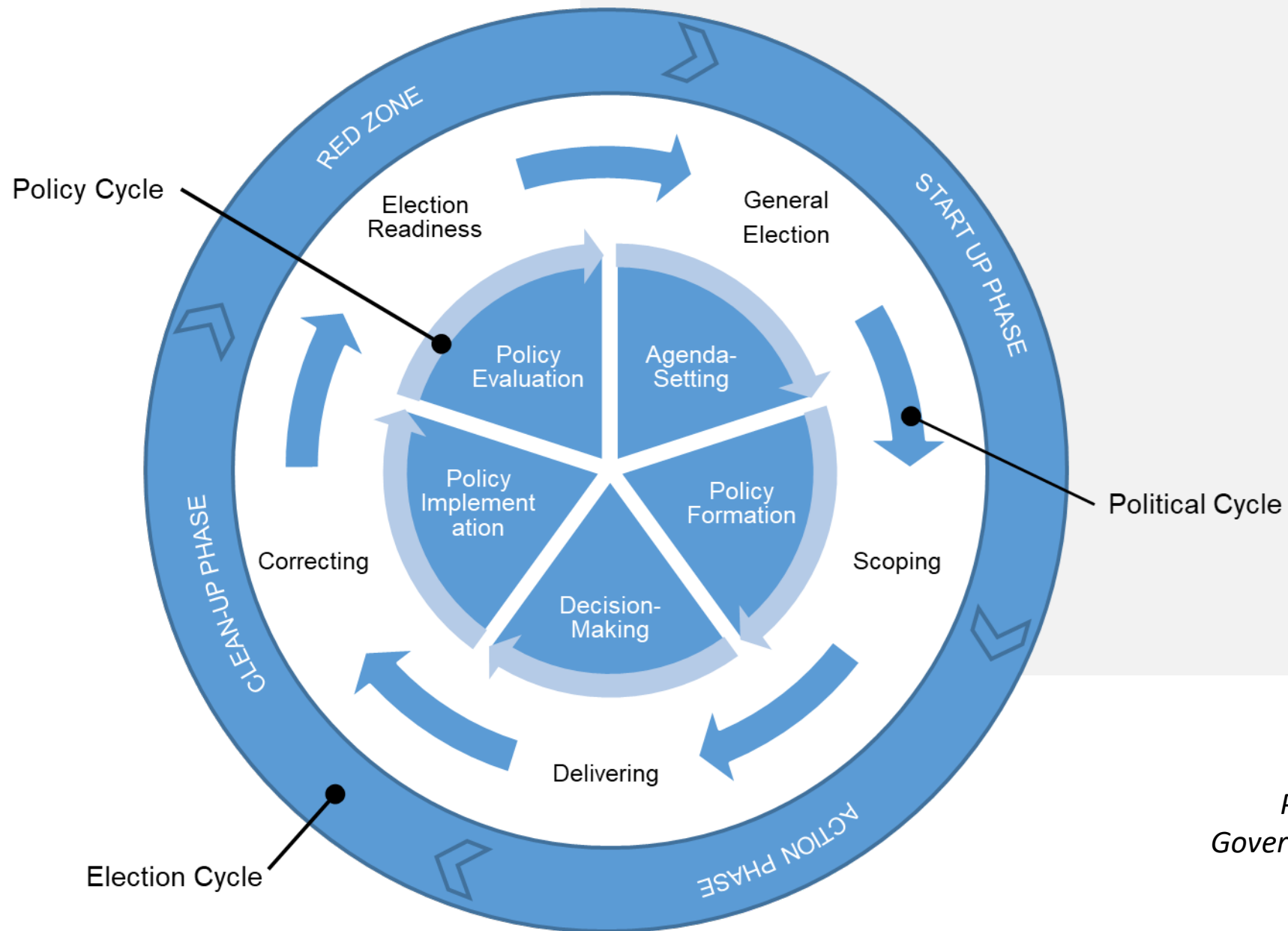
Innovation

Civic Culture



Policymaking

How do pluralists and populists approach the policymaking process differently?



Marland and Wesley,
*Public Servant's Guide to
Government in Canada* (2025)

Different Approaches to Policymaking

Voices that
matter

Sources of
legitimacy

Conflict

Bureaucracy's
role

Evidence that
matters

Engagement

Accountability

Implementation

What matters most?

How do pluralists and populists differ in terms of their priorities?

Pluralists

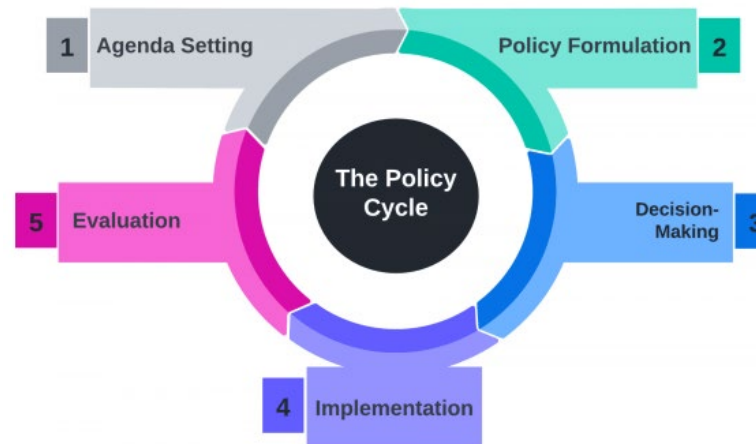
Platform Commitments

Provincial & National Unity

Institutional Forbearance

Ideology

Public Opinion



Jared Wesley and Ken Boessenkool: Danielle Smith is not a conservative

Her politics amount to libertarian-laced populism, directly opposed to the sort of principled, incrementalist politics Albertans have had before.

APR 28, 2023

Poll suggests half of Albertans oppose government's use of notwithstanding clause in dispute with teachers

Leger poll finds more respondents think teachers' association handled dispute better than government



[Janet French](#) · CBC News · Posted: Nov 11, 2025 7:00 AM MST | Last Updated: November 14, 2025

'We need less politicization, not more': Alberta's push for local political parties proving to be unpopular

The results of the government's survey show widespread opposition to adding parties to municipal election ballots and ABMunis is now calling on the province to scrap the idea

Matthew Black

Published Feb 22, 2024 • Last updated Feb 22, 2024 • 4 minute read

Albertans want federal climate regulation – just don't tell Danielle Smith

JARED WESLEY

CONTRIBUTED TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED SEPTEMBER 15, 2023

Poll shows strong Alberta support for RCMP as opposition to provincial force grows

By Jon Tupper

🕒 Oct 20, 2025 | 3:02 PM

Majority of Albertans rejected provincial pension in 2023 survey

Government fought release of results for nearly two years



[Michelle Bellefontaine](#) · CBC News · Posted: Jun 19, 2025 2:31 PM MDT | Last Updated: June 19, 2025

Most Albertans would vote to stop taxpayer dollars from going to private schools, poll suggests

Education minister says he wants parents to have choice for their kids



[Cameron MacCuish](#), [Nicholas Frew](#) · CBC News ·

Posted: Dec 14, 2025 6:08 PM MST | Last Updated: December 15, 2025

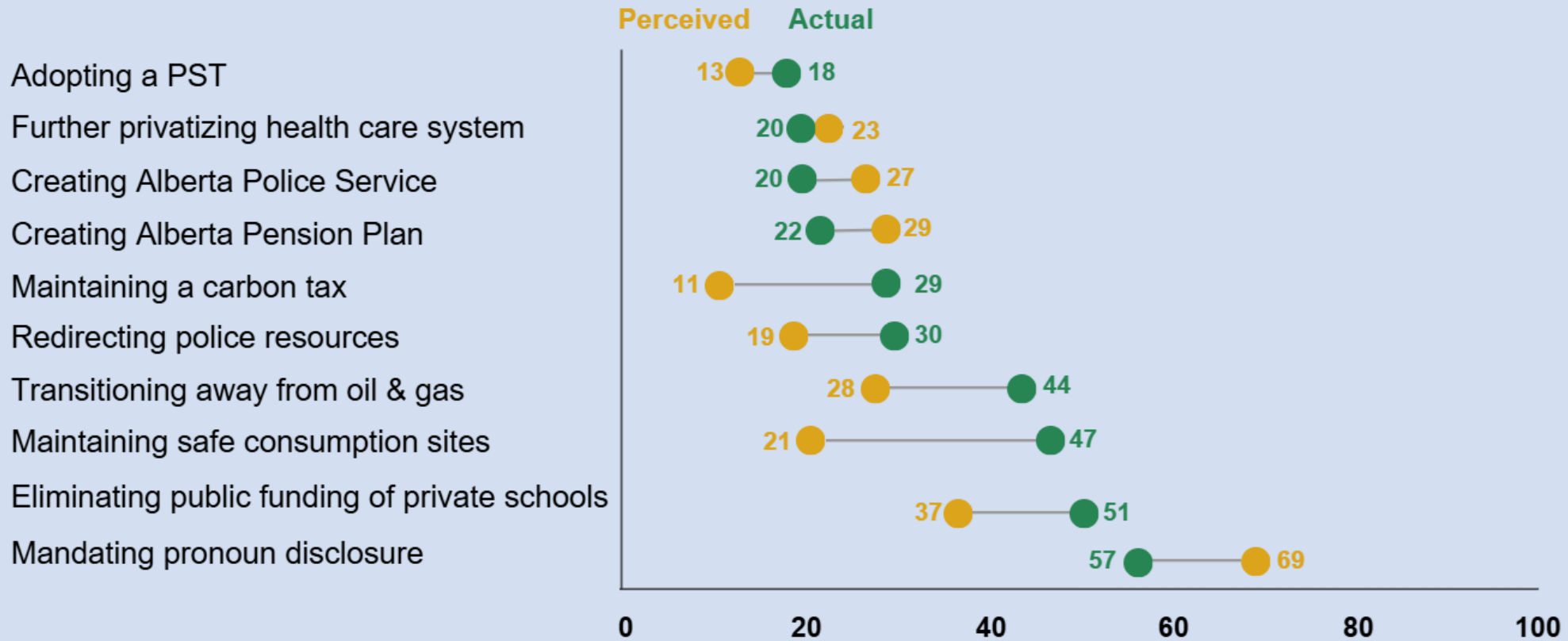
Experts won't count out Alberta separation referendum despite low support in recent poll

By [Timm Bruch](#)

Published: May 09, 2025 at 7:33PM EDT

Figure 2

Actual vs. perceived issue positions of Albertans



Source: Viewpoint Alberta survey (n = 1,213), January 2024.

What matters most?

How do pluralists and populists differ in terms of their priorities?

Pluralists

Platform Commitments

Provincial & National Unity

Institutional Forbearance

Ideology

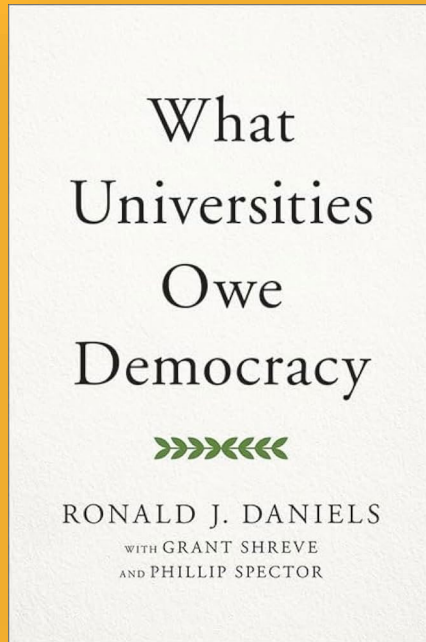
Public Opinion

Populists

Maintaining the Majority*

Maintaining Party Unity





What do public schools owe democracy?

NEUTRALITY IS NOT AN OPTION

- **Schools should be non-partisan.** And committed to pluralism.
- **Public education is a pillar of liberal democracy.** It must remain firm.

EDUCATING DEMOCRATIC CITIZENS

- **Return to basics.** We cannot take pluralism for granted.
- **Teach the “why”.** Explain the virtues and risks of our institutions.

DIALOGUE ACROSS DIFFERENCE

- **Focus on empathy.** Seek first to understand, then persuade.
- **Pluralism isn’t agreement.** It’s engaging division.





UNIVERSITY
OF ALBERTA



Peter Lougheed School of Politics and Democracy



Peter Lougheed School of
Politics and Democracy



Pillar 1
IGNITE
UNDERSTANDING

Building awareness of pressing democratic challenges through courses, guest speakers, research and public dialogue.



Pillar 2
CONFRONT
COMPLEX
SOCIETAL
CHALLENGES

Equipping students and professionals to solve problems collaboratively, with hands-on, community-engaged learning.



Pillar 3
CULTIVATE A BROAD
COMMUNITY OF
CHANGE

Creating an informed, engaged citizenry on campus, across Canada and beyond through accessible applied learning and collaboration.



Pillar 4
EMBRACE
PLURALISM

Fostering dialogue and collaboration across identities, perspectives and beliefs through events, roundtables and interdisciplinary engagement.

uab.ca/plspd

Lougheed's **vision.**

His name on the School reflects a conviction that universities should **develop leaders for the public good**, not just credential graduates.



Peter Lougheed School of Politics and Democracy

A photograph of a diverse group of students sitting around a table, engaged in a discussion. Some are looking at a laptop, while others are gesturing or listening intently. The image is partially obscured by a yellow text box.

Peter Lougheed School of Politics and Democracy



Takeaways

What sticks with you?

The Current
Moment

01

Pluralism vs
Populism

02

Navigating
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03



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