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Alberta's referendum is both business and personal for ranchers on both sides

Here's how some Alberta ranchers are approaching the referendum

[Collin Gallant](#) · CBC News · Posted: Sep 27, 2026 9:00 AM EDT | Last Updated: September 27

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Leaning in the wind, a sign supporting a vote for Alberta to advance separating from Canada sits by a roadside near Jenner, Alta., northwest of Medicine Hat. (Collin Gallant/CBC)

Brad Osadczuk moved his bulls to new pasture and had horses standing by, ready to help bring in calves for auction, when he stopped to talk politics.

There's a seasonal rhythm of work on this native prairie ranch near Jenner, Alta., an hour's drive north of Medicine Hat. It's been a family tradition for nearly 80 years, with tough decisions that require an enterprising and entrepreneurial spirit, says Osadczuk.

And it's those values that are guiding how he'll vote in this fall's Alberta sovereignty referendum.

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He says he's voting Option 2 — to move toward a binding referendum on independence.

"I would like to see us go to the next step," he told CBC News.

"I wouldn't call myself a separatist by any means, but I'm interested in what that might look like, I have to admit."

The square-jawed, plain-speaking, third-generation rancher is one of dozens of ranchers in southern Alberta CBC News contacted to understand how different communities of Albertans feel about the debate on separatism.

Rural ridings in this part of southern Alberta have sent conservatives to Ottawa for decades.

Ranchers here are quick to complain about historic issues with the Liberal Party, such as the long-abandoned National Energy Program and the Canadian Wheat Board, or their beef with recent Liberal policies like carbon pricing, gun control and even a ban on strychnine for gopher control.



Brad Osadczuk ranches near Jenner, Alta., and says he will vote in favour of holding a binding referendum on separating from Canada. (Mantai Chow/CBC)

But polling and personal conversations suggest opinions on separatism are split.

There's broad support for change and a desire to address long-standing frustrations, with some seeing an initial vote for independence as just a way to gain a new relationship for Alberta within Canada.

Others have no time for talk of separation, and say creating a new country is impractical.

Osadczuk says the idea of remaking Canada — forcing a re-examination of political and bureaucratic power centralized in Ottawa — underlines his reasons for supporting separation next month, as does his personal experience.

Rancher wants relationship overhauled

Osadczuk was one of only a few ranchers who agreed to a formal interview with CBC News. But he says he doesn't mind talking with the media, not after the intense coverage he experienced when a portion of his herd contracted bovine tuberculosis in 2016.

To halt the spread of the disease, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency ordered his cattle to be culled.

He was eventually compensated for the animals, but Osadczuk told a Commons committee in 2016 the process was lengthy and added huge debt to his business, along with personal stress.

WATCH | Rancher says inflexible regulations threatened his livelihood in 2016:



Rancher Brad Osadczuk tells Ottawa the bovine TB quarantine has mired him in hundreds of thousands of dollars of debt

► November 22, 2016 | 0:32

A cattle rancher in southeastern Alberta at the centre of the bovine tuberculosis outbreak told politicians in Ottawa Tuesday that the federal response has been marked by a lack of urgency or transparency.

Instead of collecting most of his annual income from fall auction sales that year, he had to borrow money to buy hay and feed cattle that were under quarantine well into the winter.

The experience, he said this month, was an example of an unresponsive bureaucracy in Ottawa that might change if the province took more control.

"If we were to run Alberta and Canada like a business, we would want to look at every option. I don't think there's anything wrong with exploring change," he said.

"It doesn't feel like we're always treated in the kind of the way the East is treated — there's a lot of people frustrated with that.

"I would like to have some tougher conversations with Ottawa (about) how things might look if we became a little more independent."

His vote is also a negotiating strategy. Osadczuk wants to give maximum leverage to the provincial government as it pushes for more autonomy. He feels less Ottawa would improve his life.

Motivations differ in heavily conservative region: polls

Janet Brown Opinion Research ran a large poll for CBC News this month that broke down the differences between how people in rural and urban areas feel about separation.

Support for separation was higher in rural parts of Alberta than in Edmonton or Calgary, but was still less than a majority. In small towns and rural areas, 25 per cent said they would vote to separate, 69 per cent said they would vote to stay and six per cent were unsure. Support was highest in smaller cities such as Red Deer and Medicine Hat.

The poll also illustrated the divide among people who self-identify as right-wing on the political spectrum. Within the group, 48 per cent said they would vote for separation, 47 per cent said they would vote against and five per cent were unsure.

EXCLUSIVE

With time running out, new poll suggests Alberta separatism support is slipping

A random sample of 1,200 Albertans were polled from Sept. 8 to 21. The poll had a margin of error of +/- 2.8 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

Like Osadczuk many who support voting Option 2 — starting the process to hold a binding referendum on independence — don't necessarily want to leave. According to an [Abacus Data poll earlier this month](#), about half of those who say they will select Option 2 in October say their goal is to "send a message to Ottawa" or "get a better deal in Canada."

'Remain' stance driven by personal, practical experience

About 150 kilometres east of Osadczuk's spread, Elizabeth Hargrave looks from her front door across the low, treeless hills into Saskatchewan. The provincial boundary is marked by hay bales.

Maintaining her operation is deeply personal, as well.

Hargrave grew up in southern Manitoba, but is at home at a ranch established in 1888 — almost two decades before the Alberta-

Saskatchewan boundary was created — that was inherited by her late husband, James Hargrave. Well-known as a beef industry and ranchers advocate, he died in 2018 when the water hauler he was driving as a volunteer firefighter rolled over en route to a grass fire.



Elizabeth Hargrave ranches near Walsh, Alta, at the Alberta-Saskatchewan boundary. She says she wants stability and to find reasonable solutions to provincial-federal issues that affect the cattle industry. (Mantai Chow/CBC)

"I think we really need to think about business sustainability," Elizabeth Hargrave said. "We've had this business for 138 years. It's my husband's legacy and my children's future.

"It has to be at the forefront of all my decisions."

Hargrave says she's decided to vote Option 1 — to remain a province of Canada — because despite the challenges ranchers face, separation seems unrealistic and the debate, unproductive.

"There's been no conversation about how we're going to manage the border — even as simple as daily operations, let alone actual marketing or transporting of animals," she said.

"I wish that we were really figuring out — using this time, energy and money — to figure out long-term solutions."

As Alberta separatism referendum looms, flags become symbol of voting intention — and tension

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Rather than moving Alberta ahead, she says she's worried the current debate on separatism is dividing communities, and that its volume is causing people to shut each other out. Using an example from

parenting, she says the louder and angrier people are, the less other people hear.

"We still have to all work together, live together, be a community together," she said. "How do we make sure that that can happen?"

Conversation goes quiet in beef sector

Separatist leaders often reference Alberta's oil production and the need for pipelines, but agriculture is also a significant industry in the province.

Alberta exported \$5.5 billion in beef and live cattle to other provinces and the United States in 2025 — almost as valuable as Alberta wheat and canola exports combined.

The Alberta Cattle Feeders' Association and Alberta Beef Producers told CBC News they have not analyzed potential impacts of the referendum, and wouldn't take a political position.



Long-horned brown and white cattle graze along a fenceline near Jenner, Alta. on August 21, 2026. (Collin Gallant/CBC)

Beef sector analyst Kevin Grier is based in Ontario, but he says he's heard little concern from commodity traders or industry executives about the referendum.

"That's probably [because] people assume it's not going to pass, or if it does, then it would be business as usual," said Grier, describing Alberta as home to the majority of Canada's domestic beef supply and processing capacity.

The system is highly integrated across the continent, and currently operates without tariffs.

"It is a wide-open, free market in both cattle and beef — north, south, east and west," said Grier.

Most of the ranchers who spoke to CBC were confident the beef sector — currently riding near-record prices — would be insulated from any trade uncertainty, especially as high prices are now making up for years of drought.

Opinion is more nuanced than polls, says 'Stay' supporter

Driving the secondary highways in southern Alberta, provincial flags and pro-independence signs on farm gates are common.

But many driveways have no flags at all. Some in rural Alberta tell CBC News that communities are divided over this question, and it's a contentious topic many people shy away from discussing publicly.

WATCH | Before the 2025 Election, the National spoke with Medicine Hatters about separation:



Are people talking about western separatism?

► April 8, 2025 | 2:29

The National's Adrienne Arsenault asks voters in Medicine Hat, Alta., how they feel about talks of western separation from Canada.

"It's a difficult conversation," said Cathy Hogg, whose family ranches near Medicine Hat, where she was an Alberta NDP candidate in the 2023 provincial election.

She is strongly in the federalist camp, and said rural Albertans shouldn't be painted with a "broad brush" as separatists.

She feels many people with different political leanings are wary of separatism, but are also worried about discussing the "divisive topic" in

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isolated rural areas where good neighbour relations are important.

"People are nervous to talk about where they stand on things," she told CBC. "Sometimes political things are — and maybe now — more sensitive than ever. Maybe people want to avoid those."

That can mean an accurate evaluation of support for separatism is dependent on who you talk with.

Lorne Taylor, the Cypress-Medicine Hat MLA from 1993 to 2004, and until recently owner of a family cattle auction business, told CBC he's heard strong support for holding this fall's vote.

"I think we need a new relationship with the federal government — currently, it's not working very well," he said. "I'll vote to move to a binding referendum. Albertans need to have a say."

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