



PoliVolume is a joint initiative launched by [Dr. Jared Wesley](#) (University of Alberta, Political Science) and [Darkhorse Analytics](#). We measure the volume of tweets during an election campaign as a gauge of how well parties are setting the political agenda. Here's the theory and method behind our work.

Election campaigns are seldom “great debates” over public policy. (1)

Few elections feature battles over public versus private health care, for instance, or strict environmental conservation versus all-out economic development. (2)

Society has reached consensus over how to address the biggest of these policy questions. Political parties know this, and are highly unlikely to defend the unpopular side of the debate. (3)

Instead, parties compete to set the political agenda - to focus attention on a favourable set of issues. (4)

The electorate has a firm sense of which parties they trust to handle particular issues. They may feel left-leaning parties are better at handling social issues, for example, while right-wing parties are better at managing the economy. This is known as “issue ownership”. (5)

Parties compete to ensure their owned issues are talked about most often. This increases the chance that voters will enter the ballot booth thinking about how their party can solve the most important challenges facing society. (6)

For parties, success means people are talking about their owned issues. (7)

By measuring which issues are being discussed most often, we can determine which party is most successful in setting the political agenda. (8)

By observing which issues parties are emphasizing over the course of the campaign, we can tell who is winning this part of the contest. (9)

The dials at [PoliVolume.com](https://polivolume.com) show which issues are being talked about most on Twitter, over the course of the 2019 Alberta Provincial Election.

We're tracking all of the major hashtags (#ableg, #abvote, #abelxn).

Every tweet is analyzed using the Policy Agendas coding scheme from [Lexicoder](https://lexicoder.com). This categorizes each tweet as belonging to one or more policy categories. (10)

We test conventional assumptions about issue ownership in Canada. In general, Canadian voters are viewed as trusting left-leaning parties to handle social and environmental issues, and right-leaning parties to handle the economy and public safety.

If these assumptions hold true in Alberta, it means the New Democratic Party (NDP) has an edge when voters are talking about social and environmental issues, and the United Conservative Party (UCP) is successful when people are talking about the economy and budgets. This is backed up by a [GlobalNews/IPSOS poll](https://globalnews.ca/news/4588888/) at the outset of the 2019 provincial election campaign. These assumptions are open to challenge, and will be tested through our research.

Research suggests that Canadians' views on issue ownership change periodically, and do not always follow the conventional left/right divide. (11) This research has been completed at the federal level, where the presence of a strong centrist party (the Liberals) has complicated the picture considerably.

Our own Alberta Provincial Election Project survey will assess which parties voters trust to handle which sets of issues.

Many conversations on Twitter focus on things other than policy. While the data below doesn't touch on elements like leadership, it contributes to a broader picture about how each party is faring in the election campaign.

For more details:

- (1) Ian Budge and Dennis J. Farlie, *Explaining and Predicting Elections Issue Effects and Party Strategies in Twenty-three Democracies* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1983); William H. Riker, *Agenda Formation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993).
- (2) Harold D. Clarke, Allan Kornberg, and Thomas J. Scotto, *Making Political Choices: Canada and the United States* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).
- (3) Ian Budge et al, *Mapping Policy Preferences: Estimates for Parties, Electors, and Governments, 1945-1998* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

- (4) John R. Petrocik, "Issue Ownership in Presidential Elections, with a 1980 Case Study" (*American Journal of Political Science*, 40:3, 1996).
- (5) Eric Belanger and Bonnie M. Meguid, "Issue salience, issue ownership, and issue-based vote choice" (*Electoral Studies*, 27:3, 2008).
- (6) Stuart N. Soroka, *Agenda-Setting Dynamics in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2002).
- (7) Joanne M. Miller et al., "The Origins of Policy Salience" (in *Political Psychology: New Explorations*, edited by Jon A. Krosnick et al, New York: Routledge, 2017).
- (8) Christoffer Green-Pedersen, "The Growing Importance of Issue Competition" (*Political Studies*, 55:3, 2007).
- (9) Anja Neundorff and James Adams, "The Micro-Foundations of Party Competition and Issue Ownership" (*British Journal of Political Science*, 48:2, 2018); Ian Budge, "Issue Emphases, Saliency Theory and Issue Ownership" (*West European Politics*, 4:1, 2015).
- (10) Economic policy issues include: agriculture, fisheries, banking and finance, energy (including pipelines*), foreign trade, macroeconomics, science/technology/communications, transportation. Environmental issues include: environment, public lands and water management, fire/accidents and natural disasters. Governmental issues include: government operations, intergovernmental relations, local government, and international affairs. Social policy issues include: aboriginal rights, arts/culture/entertainment, civil rights (including Gay Straight Alliances, GSAs*), education, healthcare, housing and community development, labour, and social affairs. The following issues were not classified as falling within those categories: church and religion, crime and law, and immigration. [*issues added to Lexicoder dictionary]
- (11) Eric Belanger, "Issue Ownership by Canadian Political Parties, 1953-2001" (*Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 36:3, 2003); Richard Nadeau et al., "Issue-Based Strategies in Canadian Campaigns" (*Political Communication*, 27:4, 2010).