

ALBERTA UNITED CONSERVATIVE PARTY LEADERSHIP RACE

AUGUST 19, 2022



WHERE WE ARE

On the evening of May 18, 2022, Alberta Premier Jason Kenney stepped down as leader of the United Conservative Party (UCP) after winning the party's leadership review vote with just 51.4% support in voting results. Initially he had said if he received less than 50% of the vote he would resign, but he told supporters that the number is not what he hoped for and was not enough for him to continue as leader.

Ultimately Kenney's handling of the COVID-19 Pandemic became his Achilles heel that insider opponents grabbed onto and wouldn't let go as their rallying point, as many UCP members felt he went too far with his government COVID measures and restrictions.

After an extended caucus meeting on May 20, 2022, UCP caucus chair Nathan Neudorf released a statement announcing Premier Jason Kenney will remain as leader "until such time as a new leader is chosen, the timing of which will be determined by the Party."

By the July 20, 2022 candidate deadline, ten leadership contestants submitted their applications and were accepted by Elections Alberta. But in the month of July, three of the ten candidates, Jon Horsman, Bill Rock, and Raj Sherman withdrew from the race, leaving seven candidates.

The candidates currently still in the race are Leela Aheer, Brian Jean, Todd Loewen, Rajan Sawhney, Rebecca Shultz, Danielle Smith, and Travis Toews.

According to Mainstreet Research's most recent polling data (August 17, 2022) the top three candidates are Danielle Smith (42.3%), Travis Toews (28.8%), and Brian Jean (13.5%).

KEY DATES

- August 30, 2022 – Second Debate
- September 2, 2022 – Ballots mailed out to UCP members
- October 3, 2022 – Deadline for mail-in ballots to be returned
- October 6, 2022 – In person voting at five stations and election of the new leader

EMERGING ISSUES

As it stands, Danielle Smith is the front runner and is dominating the race. Following the first debate on July 27th, the narrative that Smith would be the party's next leader, and Premier of Alberta started making its way into the media. Her content and policy promises including her proposed "Alberta Sovereignty Act" continue to dominate leadership conversations and headlines in the media, a clear strategy that has pushed her to the top.

In tandem to Smith's rise in Alberta, is Pierre Poilievre's rise as the top candidate for the federal Conservative leadership. Poilievre's rise in popularity and rhetoric in Alberta continues to help fuel Smith's candidacy as they share similar voter bases.

In second place is Travis Toews, who most recently served in Kenney's cabinet as Minister of Finance. Toews is seen as the compromise candidate, but is also faced with a unique challenge. Having served as a key Minister under Kenney, Toews needs to demonstrate to UCP voters that as a leader he is different from Kenney and that a vote for Toews is not a vote for more of the same.

A number of current UCP MLAs have endorsed Smith and Toews. While Toews currently has 21 endorsements, just recently Service Alberta Minister Nate Glubish and former minister Devin Dreeshen announced their change in support moving from Toews' camp to Smith's.

On August 17, Smith released an almost three-minute video titled "UNITED!" where she stated that as leader she will "take into consideration the voices and talents of all caucus members and those who are in the race and incorporate them in the plan going into the next election" promoting a united conservative front.

This leadership race is happening on the heels of Alberta's election happening on May 29, 2023. In the months leading up to Kenney's announcement, the UCP's according to Leger's most recent provincial poll, had a steady 30% to 34% of the vote, trailing on average 10 points behind the NDP. But July's numbers show an increase in support to 41%. While this increase appears hopeful from the outset, it should be noted that parties in midst of leadership races tend to poll higher as respondents vote with their preferred candidate in mind, therefore a decrease in support should be expected once a new leader is named.



CANDIDATES



DANIELLE SMITH

Jumping into politics in 2009 as the leader of the Wildrose Party, Danielle Smith did not become an MLA until the 2012 Alberta provincial election, where she took the Wildrose Party to Official Opposition status before crossing the floor to the Progressive Conservatives (PC) in 2014, and subsequently losing her PC riding nomination in 2015 ahead of the 2016 provincial election.

Smith's most prominent leadership pledge is to put Alberta on a path of independence from the federal government by creating the "Alberta Sovereignty Act" which would allow the province to pick and choose which federal laws, court rulings and regulatory decisions it chooses to follow. On Saturday August 14, Jason Kenney stated that Smith's proposed "Sovereignty Act" is "just nuts" and "would massively drive away investment."

Despite the criticisms, Smith remains the top contender to become the new UCP leader, replacing Kenney.

TRAVIS TOEWS



Travis Toews served as Alberta's Minister of Finance for three years, before resigning to seek the UCP leadership. During his time as Minister of Finance, the government put forth a platform of reform positioning Alberta's economy and presented the first balanced budget in over a decade. Toews describes himself as a social conservative and says that he believes in humility as a guiding principle in government.

Toews has distanced himself from Jason Kenney, as Kenney managed to alienate a large part of Toews' rural voter base because of their disgruntlement with pandemic management and his response to the federal government's influence over pandemic measures.

Prior to entering politics, Toews served on the board of directors of The Peace River Bible Institute, which banned witchcraft, sorcery, and homosexuality in its code of conduct, as well as yoga, because it was considered to be a demonic activity. Toews has said, however, that he would respect the social status quo when it comes to bringing his beliefs into government.

BRIAN JEAN



Brian Jean is a former leader of the Wildrose Party and co-founder of the UCP, and currently serves as the MLA for Fort McMurray-Lac La Biche. He has also served as leader of the opposition, and as a Member of Parliament from 2004 to 2014, during which time he served three terms as Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure, and Communities. Prior to entering politics, he was a partner at a law practice in Northern Alberta.

A former rival of Kenney, Jean is running on an "autonomy for Albertans" platform, which increases his appeal to the western separatist movement. He says that he will move forward on constitutional negotiations to have the equalization program removed from the constitution. Speaking about his campaign, he said "Imagine with me for a moment all the improvements we can make to Canada over and above fixing equalization. We can repair the imbalances in political representation. We can ensure that no province can prevent another from selling its goods and services to the rest of the world. We can fix inadequate health-care funding."

His last attempt at the party leadership resulted in RCMP investigations into the legitimacy of the race, namely an alleged vote-rigging scheme, which Jean denied.

REBECCA SCHULZ



Rebecca Schulz was elected in 2019 as the MLA for Calgary-Shaw, and most recently served as the Minister of Children's Services. She has been involved in politics since 2009, when she was a staffer for former Saskatchewan Premier Brad Wall. She has also served on the treasury board and several legislative committees.

She has described herself as a fiscal conservative. During her time as Minister of Children's Services, she made cuts to child welfare services, and successfully negotiated a deal on childcare with the federal government. She has said that she believes unity in the conservative movement is critical to ensure free-market, pro-growth governments can succeed. She said that she is ready to work to take back Alberta's place as an economic leader, and get the party back on track where freedom, a strong economy, and fiscal responsibility are at the heart of the conservative movement.

CANDIDATES CONTINUED



TODD LOEWEN

Todd Loewen was first elected in 2015 in the riding of Central Peace-Notley and was re-elected in 2019. He also served as the UCP Caucus Chair for two years, before calling for Jason Kenney’s resignation and stepping down as chair, resulting in his removal from caucus. In his letter to Kenney Loewen said that he no longer had confidence in Kenney’s leadership and asked him to resign so that they can begin putting the province back together again.

Loewen has criticized the federal government’s handling of the pandemic and felt that Kenney’s response to the, as he described, “hostile” federal government was ineffective. He also described Kenney’s response to Ottawa as “weak-kneed”.

Loewen has said that he wants to bring trust, transparency, and accountability to the Alberta government and his three main priorities are His priorities for Alberta are creating and Alberta first agenda, making life affordable for all Albertans, and protecting Albertan’s liberties and rights.

LEELA AHEER



Elected in 2015, Leela Aheer serves as the MLAs for Chestermere-Rockyview. At the time, she was one of only two female MLAs in the Wildrose party to be elected to the Alberta Legislature and the first ethnic woman to run and be elected in a rural riding.

Once Deputy leader of the Party, Minister of Multiculturalism and the Status of Women Aheer fell out with party leadership after calling on Kenney to apologize for violating COVID-19 rules in June 2021.

Speaking about the nature of her campaign, Aheer says it’s “real, truthful, honest, hardworking, grassroots” and she doesn’t have “the Harper machines or Kenney machines” behind her. Her campaign priorities include transparency and integrity focusing on stopping the need for “gatekeepers” in order to be able to talk to the Premier’s Office, ensuring that MLAs are at the centre of decision-making, stopping the cut and spend cycles and focusing on efficiencies and value for money.



RAJAN SAWHNEY

Elected in 2019, Rajan Sawhney has held two cabinet roles, first as Alberta’s Minister of Community and Social Services and most recently as Minister of Transportation. Sawhney spent two decades working in Alberta’s energy industry as an economist and entrepreneur before becoming an MLA.

A Sawhney UCP would focus on Alberta’s energy sector with the goal of protecting, defending and promoting it, this includes traditional and new types of energy such as hydrogen. Sawhney also committed to launching a full, open, transparent and independent public inquiry into Alberta’s COVID-19 response in order to better understand the economic and mental health impacts on Albertans from the pandemic.

Additionally, while she was Minister of Community and Social Services, the government de-indexed Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) payments from inflation in 2019, but has committed to reverse the decision now that the province is in better fiscal standing.



DARCY WALSH
 President, Edelman Global Advisory (Canada)
 General Manager, Ottawa
 Darcy.Walsh@edelmanega.com



HON. JAMES MOORE, P.C.
 Senior Advisor
 Edelman Global Advisory,
 Canada



MATT GORDON
 Managing Director,
 Edelman Global Advisory
 Western Canada
 Matt.Gordon@edelmanega.com

