

# Perceptions of Alberta's Public Libraries

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## Briefing Note and Recommendations

**Polling partner:** Janet Brown Opinion Research / Trend Research (TrendWatch Alberta omnibus)

**Field dates:** January 16–28, 2026

**Sample:** n=900 Albertans (18+); margin of error  $\pm 3.3$  percentage points, 19 times out of 20 (95% CI)

**Prepared by:** New West Public Affairs

**Date:** 2026-02-06

This report presents findings from targeted research commissioned by the library coalition in partnership with Janet Brown Opinion Research, using her widely-read, and highly renowned quarterly Alberta omnibus. As you know, a coalition of Alberta public libraries and library systems have been working with New West Public Affairs to develop and execute a government relations strategy and plan to advance for increased funding for public libraries and library systems. To better inform our messaging, identify opportunities, and determine our next steps, we felt it was important to get a clear read on where Albertans are on a few core issues:

- who they trust to make decisions about library materials (local libraries versus the Government of Alberta);
- whether they prefer those decisions to stay under local board governance or be set through province-wide rules;
- where the public lands on potential provincial restrictions and the idea of using funding as an enforcement tool; and
- what Albertans expect from the province in terms of operating support for public libraries and regional library systems.

We also included a basic library-use question so we could interpret the results within the right context.

## Executive summary

This research provides strong, defensible public opinion evidence for the coalition's two central messages:

- 1) Albertans trust public libraries and prefer local, board-governed decision-making on collections and materials; and
- 2) Albertans overwhelmingly expect provincial library funding to keep pace with population growth and inflation.

## Key topline (what to remember)

| Measure                                | Topline result (Jan 2026)                                                                                      |
|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Trust on library materials decisions   | 82% trust public libraries vs 46% trust the Government of Alberta.                                             |
| Who should decide on library materials | 69% prefer local decisions by trained staff guided by local boards; 22% prefer province-wide government rules. |
| Provincial restrictions on access      | 60% oppose provincial law/regulations restricting access; 35% support.                                         |
| Withholding funding for non-compliance | 64% say government should NOT withhold funding; 32% say it should (if restrictions were passed).               |
| Funding expectation (next budget)      | 82% want funding increased at or above population growth + inflation (67% match; 15% above).                   |
| Household library use                  | 70% report household use at least a few times per year; 47% use weekly or monthly.                             |

*Note: totals may not equal 100 due to rounding in the omnibus.*

## Methodology

Respondents were initially contacted by live telephone interviewers and given the option to complete the survey immediately by phone, complete it later by phone, or receive an online link. The initial sample list contained approximately 70% cellphones and 30% landlines, with up to five contact attempts per number. Data collection was conducted out of Trend Research's centralized CATI facility in Edmonton with standard quality-control monitoring.

Janet Brown describes her methodology in detail in her attached report.

## Findings and what they mean

### 1) Trust: libraries have a major credibility advantage

Albertans are much more likely to trust public libraries than the Government of Alberta to make appropriate decisions about what materials are available. This creates a clear advocacy foundation: libraries are seen as credible, community-serving institutions, and the public starts from a position of trust.

### 2) Governance: strong preference for local decision-making

By a wide margin, Albertans prefer decisions about materials to be made locally by trained library staff, guided by policies set by local library boards. This supports a consistent message about local accountability, professional practice, and board oversight.

### 3) Restrictions and enforcement: public is cautious and dislikes "funding as a weapon"

Most Albertans oppose the province passing laws or regulations that restrict access to certain materials in public libraries. Even in a hypothetical scenario where restrictions were introduced, a clear majority reject withholding operating funding as an enforcement tool. This supports a 'don't punish communities' frame and reinforces the importance of keeping operating funding stable and non-political.

#### 4) Funding: strong mandate for inflation + population growth indexing

Public expectations on funding are unusually clear: the mainstream view is that libraries should receive an increase that at least matches population growth and inflation. There is also headroom for 'above' inflation/population increases depending on how investment is framed (growth pressures, service demand, cost escalation, and municipal tax impacts).

#### 5) Usage: broad relevance, not a niche service

A large majority of Albertans report that someone in their household uses public libraries at least a few times per year, and nearly half use libraries monthly or weekly. This matters for advocacy because it signals that any decision impacting public libraries will be felt deeply by most Alberta households.

#### Cross-tab insights are encouraging

The cross-tabs are particularly helpful for anticipating how this issue could play inside the government's own coalition. While right-leaning respondents are more open to province-wide action than the overall population, they are not unified — and that lack of consensus is strategically important.

- **Right-leaning Albertans still trust libraries:** 76% of right-leaning respondents expressed at least some trust in local libraries to make collections decisions, essentially on par with their trust in the provincial government. They were also more likely to express stronger trust in libraries than in government (30% vs 24%).
- **Local control remains majority-held on the right:** 53% of right-leaning respondents said libraries (trained staff and local boards) should set these policies.
- **No consensus on provincial restrictions within the right:** Among right-leaning respondents, support for provincial action was 51% but opposition was also high at 43%, indicating polarization rather than a settled view — a dynamic that can create internal political risk for government if it chooses to legislate in this space.
- **Funding increases remain popular even among right-leaning respondents:** Nearly three-quarters of right-leaning respondents supported a funding increase over or at inflation + population.
- **Electorally important regions are not receptive to provincial intervention:** In Calgary, nearly 70% believe libraries should control these decisions and over 60% oppose provincial action, roughly on par with results from Edmonton. Majorities outside Calgary/Edmonton also oppose provincial action.
- **Parents are not automatically "for" restrictions:** Among respondents with children, a majority opposed provincial action (54% oppose; 40% support).

Why this matters: partners should not treat 'right-leaning' results as a single, unified block. The data suggests there is meaningful space to persuade conservative-aligned audiences with frames centred on local control, professional governance, parental choice, and avoiding politicization of funding.

### Implications for coalition advocacy (practical guidance)

**Lead with trust and local accountability:** Start materials-related conversations from the public's baseline: libraries are trusted, and Albertans prefer local boards and trained staff to make these decisions.

**Treat province-wide restrictions as politically risky:** Overall opinion is net-opposed, and within right-leaning audiences views are polarized, suggesting internal stakeholder risk for government rather than a 'safe' consensus position.

**Draw a clear line on funding weaponization:** The public rejects withholding funding as an enforcement tool; the coalition can credibly argue against punishing communities or politicizing operating funding.

**Make the funding ask 'mainstream' and measurable:** Use 'match population growth + inflation' as the simplest, defensible benchmark; it aligns with the largest share of respondents and is easy for officials to act on.

**Use Calgary and parents as confidence points:** Calgary results and the parent subgroup both undercut assumptions that intervention would be electorally 'easy' or broadly popular.

## **Recommended talking points (boards and coalition partners)**

### **A. One-minute script (use in MLA/official meetings)**

Alberta-wide omnibus research shows clearly that Albertans trust public libraries far more than the Government of Alberta to make appropriate decisions about library materials. By a strong margin, they want these decisions made locally by trained library staff guided by local library boards, not through province-wide political rules. Most Albertans oppose the province passing restrictions on access to materials, and even if such restrictions were introduced, they do not support withholding operating funding as an enforcement tool. On funding, Albertans overwhelmingly believe libraries should receive increases that at least keep pace with population growth and inflation. Our request aligns directly with public expectations: keep libraries whole as Alberta grows, and protect locally governed, professionally guided decision-making.

### **B. Short soundbites (15 seconds)**

- Albertans trust their libraries and want decisions made locally by trained staff and local boards.
- Most Albertans oppose province-wide restrictions on access to library materials.
- Albertans don't want funding used as a political enforcement tool.
- The public expectation is clear: at minimum, library funding should keep up with inflation and population growth.

### **C. Funding messages (budget-focused)**

- Our core ask is that provincial operating funding keeps pace with inflation and Alberta's population growth — the mainstream public view.
- Stable provincial operating funding reduces pressure on municipal property taxes and helps maintain consistent service levels across communities.
- This is not a 'nice-to-have' request; it is about keeping everyday community infrastructure reliable as Alberta grows.

### **D. Materials / collections messages (governance-focused)**

- Albertans prefer local governance: trained library staff and local boards, with clear policies and accountability.
- Libraries already manage concerns through structured, transparent reconsideration processes — and the public trusts libraries to do that work.
- This is not a partisan issue. Even right-leaning Albertans are not aligned on provincial intervention, and many favour local decision-making.

#### **E. If asked: 'What about kids?'**

Parents and families are central to library service design. The polling shows parents are not uniformly supportive of provincial intervention. A majority of respondents with children opposed provincial action. A strong response is to emphasize family choice, developmentally-appropriate library collections, and local accountability through boards and policies — without politicizing or centralizing decisions.

#### **F. If asked: 'Should funding be withheld for non-compliance?'**

Public opinion is clear that withholding operating funding is the wrong tool. It would punish communities, reduce service access for families, seniors, and students, and create instability in a core community service. The coalition supports stable funding and local governance rather than punitive approaches.

#### **G. How to describe the research (credibility statement)**

These questions were fielded through Janet Brown Opinion Research and TrendWatch Alberta, a monthly omnibus survey of 900 Albertans. Respondents were initially contacted by live interviewers and could respond by phone or online. The margin of error is  $\pm 3.3$  percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

## **Appendix: quick reference numbers**

- **Trust on materials decisions:** 82% trust public libraries vs 46% trust the Government of Alberta.
- **Who should decide on materials:** 69% prefer local decisions by trained staff guided by local boards; 22% prefer province-wide government rules.
- **Provincial restrictions on access:** 60% oppose provincial law/regulations restricting access; 35% support.
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