



GRADUATE
STUDENTS'
ASSOCIATION

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

UCGSA'S THANKSGIVING REFERENDUM SURVIVAL GUIDE

How to have political-charged
conversations with your family around
Alberta's upcoming referendum

Thanksgiving Referendum Survival Guide

Background:

On October 19th, Albertans will vote on **ten** referendum questions.¹ The one everyone is focusing on is whether Alberta should remain in Canada or begin the formal process to have a separation referendum. But there are nine other ones that will reshape Alberta almost as drastically as separation.

Five of these questions are related to immigration. You can find the text of them at the back of this guide.

The Premier has made comments that suggest she doesn't consider international students to be economic migrants.² Any immigration restrictions brought in by the provincial government have a high change of targeting international students in particular. This would be terrible for undergraduates but devastating for graduate programs in the province. Approximately **32%** of graduate students are international,³ with **76%** of those students being concentrated in Schulich, the Faculty of Science, or Cummings School of Medicine.⁴ This means a significant chunk of research (especially medical, engineering, and natural science research), teaching, commercialization, and mentorship on campus is done by students born outside of Canada.

The other questions pose a risk to international students as well. If study permits are not considered to be "Alberta-approved immigration status," then Ballot Question #2 would cause international students to lose access to healthcare and educational services in the province. For healthcare, this would include GSA and SU health and dental plans, as you must have a valid provincial healthcare card in order to access these services. For education, approximately 1/3rd of graduate students have dependents, which includes caring for children. International students with families would face an immediate spike in costs; it would also disproportionately affect women graduate students, who are less able to leave their children behind when pursuing higher education. Ballot Question #3 and #4 would similarly lead to price spikes for international graduate students and make Alberta significantly less attractive as a destination for top research talent.

Domestic students should care about this too. In addition to losing colleagues, friends, mentors, research partners, and teachers, a loss of international students will negatively impact your financial situation. Removing international students from the insurance pool will require an increase in premiums to keep the fund solvent, for example.

¹ <https://albertareferendum2026.ca/immigration-questions/>

² <https://www.alberta.ca/article-premiers-address-to-the-province-february-2026>

³

<https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrljoiNmM1Y2Q4M2YtNzlhZC00OTc5LWJhZjMtNDc3YzI0MTBiYTQxliwidCI6ImM2MDlhMGVjLWE1ZTMtNDYzMS05Njg2LTE5MjI4MGJkOTE1MSJ9>

⁴ *Ibid.*

How to talk to your family:

Political scientists have been investigating how Albertans feel about these questions and how they respond to different counterarguments. A report by the Common Ground Initiative, led by Dr. Jared Wesley and Samuel Goertz, used a mixed-methods study (quantitative survey and qualitative focus group feedback) to determine what the typical Albertan thinks of the referendum questions.⁵ Their focus group feedback led to a series of recommendations on how federalists and pluralists can best argue against the ten questions. They recommend that:

“Pluralist opponents of the immigration and constitutional proposals should focus on consequences and feasibility. Humanizing the effects of immigration restrictions is likely to resonate more than abstract arguments about jurisdiction ... The broader response should be to defend pluralism rather than the status quo. Albertans want to feel heard and represented. Pluralist messaging recognizes legitimate disagreement, acknowledges Alberta’s grievances and feelings of political powerlessness, and rejects the idea that any one faction can define who the ‘real’ Albertans or Canadians are.”⁶

The following talking points, then, are crafted with this in mind: humanizing the impacts of immigration restrictions, recognizing Albertans grievances with the immigration system, focusing on concrete actions rather than abstract arguments, but still vigorously defending immigration as an essential feature of Albertan political life.

Defending Immigration:

1. It makes sense to be concerned about our public services, but immigrants aren’t the problem:
 - a. They pay taxes on their salaries, pay GST, and pay property taxes. Denying them services means the government’s taking their money and then not letting them use it.
 - b. Graduate students are workers and earn paychecks, so they fall into this category as well.
2. Wanting to make sure that Albertans are taken care of is noble, but immigrants help with that:
 - a. They create jobs through their spending and entrepreneurialism. This is especially true for international graduate students thanks to their research and partnerships with local businesses.
 - b. Immigrants have as much a sense of community as native-born Albertans do, being active volunteers and philanthropists.
 - c. Different countries have different solutions to the same problems we all face, like homelessness, unemployment, and community safety. It’s good to learn from other places and

⁵ https://drive.google.com/file/d/1UqTLUBB-NtzUBu-7g8bzXWC_Kky7f5RH/view

⁶ *Ibid*, pg. 4.

the best way to do that is to make sure we don't chase people away. Lots of international graduate students in the Arts come here bringing in-depth research on how to address these social issues.

3. Our population is aging, which means less working-age people who can support Alberta's social services. Without attracting young immigrants to come to Alberta, we'll either have to raise taxes or cut services.
4. If international students are denied access to provincial health insurance, then the cost of supplementary insurance will go up for everyone:
 - a. These students will lose access to supplementary health insurance provided by student associations. Associations or universities themselves will then have to purchase expensive private insurance from American healthcare providers to cover otherwise essential treatment. Tuition and student dues will have to be raised by a substantial amount to cover this cost, which will be passed down to domestic students and their parents.
 - b. On top of that, international students will exit the existing insurance pool for supplementary care. Fees will have to increase, or services will have to be rolled back, to ensure these funds are solvent.
5. Alberta is a place where everyone can succeed if they want to put the work in, and immigrants absolutely want to put the work in,
 - a. Especially international graduate students. They face substantially higher (and unregulated) tuition, aren't eligible for a lot of financial aid supports or scholarships, aren't always given accurate information about the cost of living in Canada or the true costs of their programs, and have to navigate bureaucratic complexity around their families and their status in Canada. And yet they're some of our most talented researchers, sessional instructors, and entrepreneurs, starting businesses in Canada at a higher rate than faculty members.
 - b. The immigration system needs serious reform, but punishing immigrants who are willing to risk it all to come to Canada isn't going to help anyone.
6. Alberta is a place where people can build a better life for their children, which is precisely why immigrants come here. It's against Albertan values to shut them out. And given what international graduate students do for the economy, we'd be denying Alberta-born families the chance to make a better life for their kids, too.

Immigration Question:

- **Ballot Question #1:** Do you support the Government of Alberta taking increased control over immigration for the purposes of decreasing immigration to more sustainable levels, prioritizing economic migration and giving Albertans first priority on new employment opportunities?
- **Ballot Question #2:** Do you support the Government of Alberta introducing a law mandating that only Canadian citizens, permanent residents and individuals with an Alberta-approved immigration status will be eligible for provincially-funded programs, such as health care, education and other social services?
- **Ballot Question #3:** Assuming that all Canadian citizens and permanent residents continue to qualify for social support programs as they do now, do you support the Government of Alberta introducing a law requiring all individuals with a non-permanent legal immigration status to reside in Alberta for at least 12 months before qualifying for any provincially-funded social support programs?
- **Ballot Question #4:** Assuming that all Canadian citizens and permanent residents continue to qualify for public health care and education as they do now, do you support the Government of Alberta charging a reasonable fee or premium to individuals with a non-permanent immigration status living in Alberta for their and their family's use of the health care and education systems?
- **Ballot Question #5:** Do you support the Government of Alberta introducing a law requiring individuals to provide proof of citizenship, such as a passport, birth certificate or citizenship card, to vote in an Alberta provincial election?