

Defending Our Minds Against Manipulation.

The Alberta Referendum Through a Cognitive Security Lens

How perception warfare turns neighbours into opponents, and how Albertans and all Canadians can protect their ability to decide for themselves.



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Non-partisan analysis. This report does not recommend how anyone should vote.

Contents

Introduction

Before any ballot is marked

01

Two Visions, More in Common Than We Think.

What Albertans are voting on, and the shared values underneath both positions

02

How Perception Warfare Turns Difference into Distrust.

Seven tactics of manipulation used in perception warfare

03

Who Benefits?

Who gains when Canadians stop trusting one another

04

Why Our Brains Can Be Manipulated.

Twelve mental shortcuts, and why being smart does not protect us

05

Cognitive Security: Defence Tools for Modern Cognitive Warfare.

Practical habits for thinking clearly under pressure

06

A Way Forward

What is worth protecting, and what Canada can learn from others

Closing

A country strong enough to disagree

THE REPORT IN ONE MINUTE

- On October 19, 2026, Albertans vote on ten questions. The separation question would begin a legal process. It would not make Alberta independent on its own.
- People on both sides of the debate share many of the same values and fears. They disagree about where the threat comes from.
- Perception warfare exploits that gap. It turns shared values into weapons and fellow citizens into enemies.
- Cognitive security is the defence. It does not tell anyone how to vote. It protects every citizen's ability to decide for themselves.

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INTRODUCTION

Before Any Ballot Is Marked

The independence debate reveals something larger than Canada’s constitutional divide: how fear, algorithms and influence can turn people with many of the same hopes into political enemies.

On October 19, Albertans will answer ten referendum questions. The most consequential question asks whether Alberta should remain a province of Canada or begin the legal process toward a future binding referendum on separation. It is important to be precise. Albertans are not voting to leave Canada on October 19. They are voting on whether that process should begin.

But another question deserves to be asked before any ballot is marked:

“*Are we still making political choices freely, or are increasingly powerful information systems helping make those choices for us?*”

This is the emerging problem of **cognitive security**: protecting human judgment, perception and decision-making from manipulation. And Alberta may be one of the most important Canadian examples of why it matters.

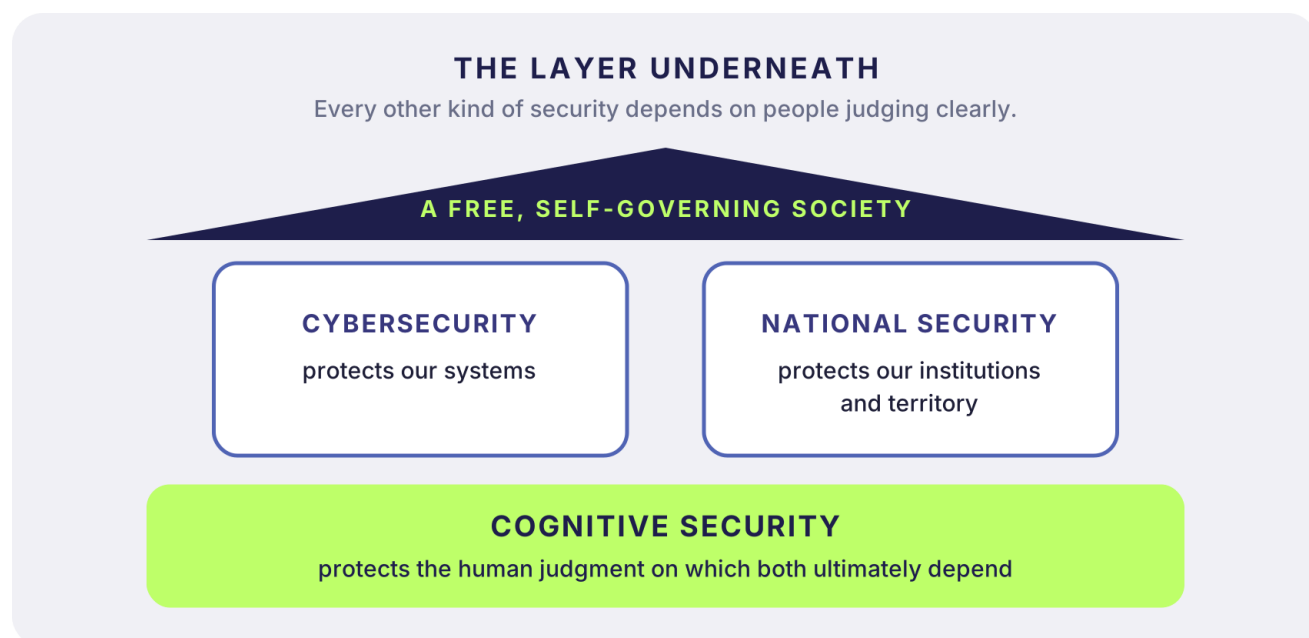
Both sides raise legitimate concerns

Supporters of greater Alberta autonomy	Canadians working to keep the country together
• Control over resources • Frustration with federal decision-making • Economic opportunity • Local representation • Personal freedom • The feeling that decisions affecting Alberta are too often made somewhere else	• Economic security • Protection from geopolitical pressure • National strength • Stable institutions • Shared prosperity • The fear that fragmentation could leave everyone weaker

These positions can look irreconcilable. Look underneath them, though, and something interesting appears.

“Both groups fear losing control over their future. Both want freedom. Both want security. Both want prosperity for their families. Both want governments that respect them.”

They disagree profoundly about where the threat comes from and which structure provides protection. That distinction matters, because one of the oldest tricks of influence is turning people who share fundamental interests into enemies by convincing each group that the other represents the danger.



Modern technology makes this easier. NATO now openly studies what it calls cognitive warfare: attempts to influence, disrupt or manipulate individual and collective cognition (Cognitive Warfare NATO Chief Scientist Research Report, 2025). These operations can exploit emotion, identity, information overload and existing divisions. Their objective does not always need to be persuading everyone to believe one particular idea. Sometimes weakening trust and making a society unable to agree on reality is victory enough.

Canada's own security agencies have warned that foreign actors use disinformation, artificial intelligence and online networks to amplify social division (Communications Security Establishment Canada, 2024). That does not mean every angry political post is foreign propaganda. Nor does it mean legitimate Alberta grievances are manufactured. That conclusion would itself be dangerously simplistic.

Manipulation works best when it attaches itself to something real.

Algorithms add another problem. The information most likely to travel is often the information most likely to make us react. One large study of social media found that each moral or emotional word added to a post increased its spread by roughly 20 percent (Brady et al., 2017). "Those people are destroying your future" travels considerably better than "the situation is complicated and several competing interests deserve consideration."

Anger travels.

Fear travels.

Humiliation travels.

That creates an enormous opportunity for political actors, influencers, platforms and hostile foreign states. They do not need to invent Canada's divisions. They merely benefit from making them deeper. This is why cognitive security must become part of democratic literacy.

Its purpose is not telling Albertans how to vote. Quite the opposite. Its purpose is making sure the vote belongs to them.

Two Visions, More in Common Than We Think

What are Albertans actually voting on?

The Alberta referendum is not only a vote about independence. On October 19, 2026, Albertans will vote on ten separate questions. The questions cover immigration, access to provincially funded services, voting identification, and constitutional reform. The final question asks whether Alberta should remain part of Canada or whether the provincial government should begin the legal process needed to hold a future binding referendum on separation.

A “yes” vote on this question would not make Alberta independent immediately. It would only begin the first steps towards a long, drawn-out legal and political process that could eventually lead to another referendum. Results of this referendum aren’t legally binding but can help surface sentiments of the population.

This distinction is important because political messages can make the referendum seem simpler than it really is. Some supporters may describe it as a direct vote for Alberta’s freedom or independence. Some opponents may describe it as a direct vote for separation. However, the ballot contains several different questions, and each one has its own legal, economic, and social effects. Voters therefore need to examine each question separately rather than treating the entire referendum as one emotional choice.

The referendum is also a debate about important values. These values include freedom, security, prosperity, representation, sovereignty, and identity. People on both sides generally care about these values, but they disagree about how best to protect them.

The Independence Perspective

People who support greater Alberta autonomy or independence often believe that the federal government has too much control over decisions that affect the province. They may point to federal policies involving energy, environmental regulation, taxation, immigration, and equalization. From this perspective, Alberta contributes a great deal to Canada but does not receive enough political influence in return.

Independence supporters may believe that Alberta should have more control over its natural resources, taxes, laws, and economic relationships. They may argue that the province would be better able to protect its interests if it could make decisions without federal interference. For some supporters, independence also means keeping more of Alberta’s resource wealth in the province and creating policies that place Albertans first.

This perspective is not based only on economics. It can also come from feelings of political frustration and cultural insecurity. Some Albertans believe that their concerns are ignored or misunderstood by the rest of Canada. For them, independence represents self-respect, local control, and the right to decide Alberta’s future.

However, supporters of independence do not all have exactly the same goals. Some focus mainly on resource revenues and economic control. Others focus on constitutional reform and Western alienation. Still others connect independence to personal freedom, local government, or the protection of Alberta's cultural identity. These different motivations should not be treated as one single position.

The Perspective of Remaining in Canada

People who support remaining in Canada may share many of the same concerns but reach a different conclusion. They may agree that Alberta needs a stronger voice in national decisions, but they believe this can be achieved within the Canadian federation. They may see reforming federal-provincial relations as safer and more practical than leaving Canada.

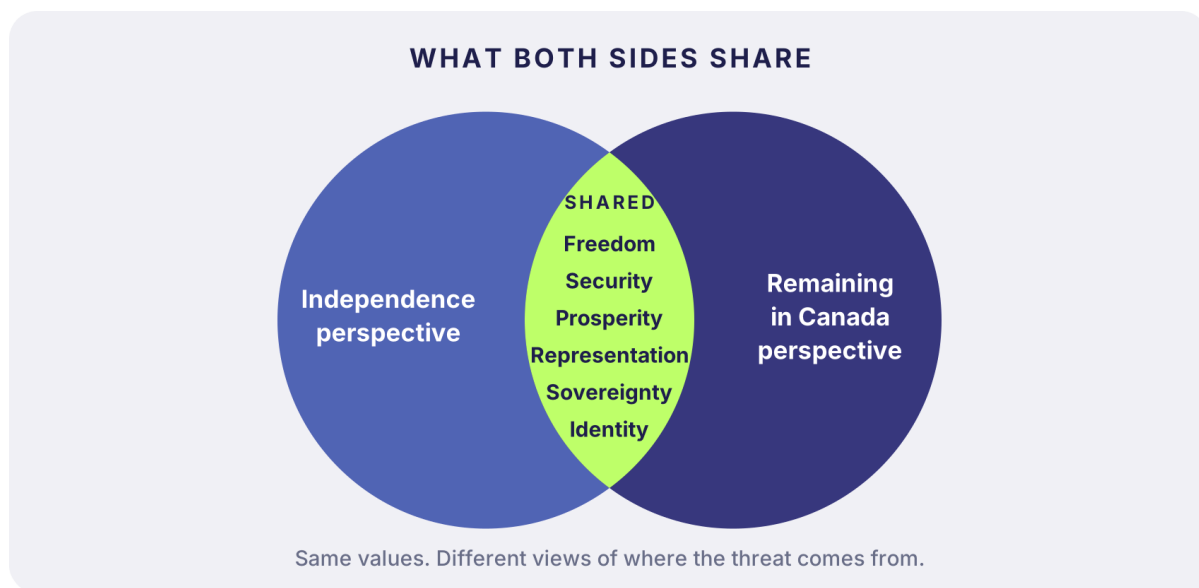
Federalist supporters often emphasize the benefits of belonging to a large country. Canada provides national institutions for trade, defence, financial regulation, diplomacy, and legal cooperation. Remaining in Canada also allows Alberta to share risks with other provinces and to benefit from established national systems.

Some federalists argue that Canada's large internal market creates economic stability. They may also believe that Alberta would have more influence as part of Canada than it would have as a small, landlocked country negotiating with larger powers. From this perspective, separation could create uncertainty about trade, currency, debt, borders, transportation, and international recognition.

For many federalist supporters, the issue is also connected to identity and social relationships. Alberta's families, businesses, communities, and institutions are connected to the rest of Canada. They may fear that separation would create economic uncertainty and deepen divisions among Albertans. They may therefore support cooperation and reform within Canada instead of constitutional separation.

What If Both Sides Share the Same Fears?

Although independence supporters and federalists disagree about the best political solution, they may share many of the same fears. Both groups may worry about losing control over their future. Both may be concerned about rising living costs, limited economic opportunities, political disrespect, and the future prospects of their children. Both may also feel that important decisions are being made by distant institutions that do not understand Alberta's local conditions.



The difference may be less about the fear itself and more about how each side explains the cause of the problem. Independence supporters may believe that Alberta’s problems are mainly caused by excessive federal control. Federalist supporters may believe that the problems are caused by global economic pressures, poor policy decisions, or political polarization. One side may see Canada as the main source of vulnerability, while the other may see Canada as a source of protection.

For example, both sides may want security, but they may define security differently. Independence supporters may believe that local control would allow Alberta to respond more quickly to its own needs. Federalists may believe that Canada’s larger economy, military, and diplomatic network provide stronger protection. Both groups value security, but they disagree about which political structure can provide it.

The same pattern applies to prosperity. Independence supporters may believe that Alberta should retain more of the wealth produced by its resources. Federalists may believe that access to Canadian markets and national institutions creates greater economic stability. The disagreement concerns the best way to achieve prosperity, not necessarily whether prosperity is important.

Shared Values and Different Interpretations

The following table shows how the same value can lead to different political interpretations:

Shared value	Independence interpretation	Federalist interpretation
Freedom	Ottawa has too much control over Alberta’s decisions.	Canada’s combined strength protects individual and collective freedom.
Security	Local control would help Alberta protect its own interests.	Canada provides stronger economic, military, and diplomatic protection.
Prosperity	Alberta should control more of the wealth produced by its resources.	Integrated Canadian markets create greater economic stability.
Representation	Alberta’s interests are weakened by the larger populations of other provinces.	Federal representation reflects Canada’s overall population and diversity.

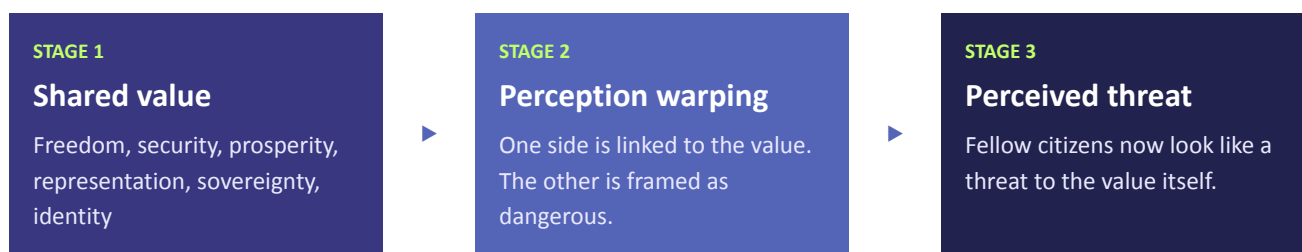
Shared value	Independence interpretation	Federalist interpretation
Sovereignty	Alberta should control its own laws, resources, and political future.	Shared Canadian sovereignty gives Alberta more influence and protection.
Identity	Alberta's culture and political traditions need stronger protection.	Albertan and Canadian identities can exist together.

This comparison shows that political disagreement does not always mean that people have completely different values. Often, people value the same things but understand threats differently. They also disagree about which institutions can best protect those values.

Shared Value, Perception Warping, and Perceived Threat

Perceptual warfare can exploit shared values by changing how people understand political threats. A value such as freedom can be connected to very different messages. One side may argue that freedom requires independence from Ottawa. The other may argue that freedom is protected by the strength and stability of Canada. Both messages appeal to the same value, but each presents the other side as a possible danger.

This process can be understood in three stages:



- 1 Shared value:** People begin with a principle that most citizens support, such as freedom, security, prosperity, representation, sovereignty, or identity.
- 2 Perception warping:** A political message connects that value to one explanation of events and presents other explanations as dangerous or unacceptable.
- 3 Perceived threat:** Citizens begin to see the opposing position as a threat to the shared value.

For example, a person may be concerned about the financial, legal, or practical risks of separation. Instead of answering those concerns directly, a supporter may describe the person as being against Alberta's freedom. Similarly, someone who supports more provincial control may be described as threatening Canada's security or social stability. In both cases, the original policy question is replaced by a judgment about the person's loyalty.

This is how a shared value can become a tool for polarization. Words such as freedom, security, and sovereignty are powerful because most people support them. The manipulation occurs when one political side claims that it alone represents the value and that the opposing side threatens it. Citizens may then stop asking which policy is most effective and begin asking which side appears more loyal, courageous, or patriotic.

A more careful approach is to recognize that both sides may be expressing legitimate concerns. The important question is not which side owns a value, but which policy is most likely to protect that value in practice. For example, instead of asking whether independence or federalism represents freedom, voters could ask:

Which political arrangement would give Albertans meaningful control while also protecting economic stability, personal rights, public safety, and democratic accountability?

This approach does not require voters to treat all arguments as equally strong. It requires them to separate shared values from political claims and then examine the evidence for each proposed solution. **By recognizing shared fears and shared goals, Albertans can disagree about political structures without treating one another as enemies.** This is an important part of cognitive security: protecting the ability to think clearly when political messages are designed to create fear, anger, or distrust of the other side.

PART 02

How Perception Warfare Turns Difference into Distrust

How do ordinary disagreements become anger, hatred and distrust?

From One Phone Call to a Whole Province

Before looking at the tactics, it helps to see the bigger picture. **Cognitive security** is the protection of human judgment from manipulation. **Perception warfare** is the deliberate effort to shape and manipulate how people see reality, so that they reach the conclusions someone else wants them to reach.

The same psychological levers are used at every scale. A scammer who convinces a grandparent that a grandchild needs money today is using fear and urgency. A criminal who sends a fake email from “the boss” is using trust and authority. A coordinated campaign that turns neighbours against each other is using fear, belonging and repetition. The target grows. The playbook stays remarkably similar.

Artificial intelligence changes the economics. One person can now produce what used to take a newsroom: fake images, cloned voices and thousands of convincing posts tailored to each audience. The good news is that the defence also scales. A person who learns to recognize a tactic once can recognize it everywhere, whether it arrives in a phone call, an inbox or a news feed. That is what building cognitive resilience means.

Seven Ways Perception Warfare Deepens the Divide

Perception warfare turns normal political differences into anger, hatred, and distrust. It does this by shaping how people receive information before they have time to think carefully. The goal is not always to make people believe one specific lie. Sometimes the goal is to make people distrust the other side, reject compromise, or believe that political opponents are dangerous.

During the Alberta referendum, these tactics could affect how voters understand questions about independence, immigration, provincial authority, taxation, and Canada’s future. The following sections explain seven ways perception warfare can deepen political divisions.



Emotional Priming

Make people feel first, so they think second.

Emotional priming means making people feel angry or afraid before presenting them with information. Once people are emotional, they may interpret the next message through that emotion. Someone who feels threatened may be more likely to accept information that confirms the threat and reject information that challenges it.

For example, one political message might describe Ottawa as an enemy that is taking Alberta's rights away. Another message might describe separatism as a reckless threat that could damage families, jobs, and public services. After hearing this language, people may interpret later facts through fear or anger instead of examining the evidence calmly.

Research on political misinformation suggests that strong emotions and political loyalties can affect how people judge information, especially when the information supports their existing beliefs (Sharek, 2025).

EXAMPLE

A message might say, "Alberta is under attack, and this may be our last chance to defend ourselves." After reading this, a person may see a debate about taxation or constitutional law as a battle for survival instead of as a complex policy discussion.



Selective Truth

A true fact can still tell a false story.

Selective truth occurs when someone presents true information but leaves out important context. The speaker may not need to invent a lie. Instead, they can choose facts that support a particular conclusion and hide facts that might lead people to think differently.

This can be compared to the story of the blind men and the elephant. Each person touches one part of the elephant and describes what they feel. Their descriptions may be accurate, but they do not understand the whole animal. In the same way, political messages can present one real part of an issue while hiding the rest.

EXAMPLE

A message may correctly state that Alberta has valuable natural resources and contributes significantly to Canada's economy. However, it may leave out questions about trade agreements, transportation routes, currency, debt, international recognition, and the cost of creating new institutions. The audience may then conclude that independence would automatically bring prosperity.

The opposite can also happen. A message may focus only on the risks of separation while ignoring legitimate concerns about federal control, regional representation, or Alberta's desire to manage its own resources.



False Binaries

Two doors, no hallway.

False binaries reduce a complicated issue to two extreme choices. They suggest that people must choose one side completely and reject the other side entirely. This turns a political position into an identity.

Examples may include:

- “You either support Alberta or Ottawa.”
- “You are either Canadian or a separatist.”
- “You are either for freedom or tyranny.”
- “You either support independence or you support weakness.”

These statements ignore the possibility that someone may support Alberta’s interests while also supporting Canada. They also ignore the possibility that a person may want more provincial control without supporting separation.

EXAMPLE

A citizen may believe that Alberta should have more control over immigration or natural resources but may also believe that remaining in Canada provides greater economic and security benefits. A false binary treats this balanced position as impossible. The person is pressured to choose a political identity instead.

False binaries deepen division because they make disagreement feel personal. Once a political position becomes part of someone’s identity, changing their mind can feel like betraying their community or political group.



Synthetic Consensus

A small crowd, dressed up as a stadium.

Synthetic consensus occurs when coordinated accounts, bots, or selective amplification make an opinion appear more popular than it really is. People may then believe that “everyone” supports one side or that “nobody serious” supports the other.

This tactic uses the human tendency to treat majority opinion as evidence. If a person sees thousands of similar comments, likes, reposts, or videos, they may assume that the position is widely accepted. However, online activity may be artificially produced, coordinated, or amplified by platform algorithms.

The Government of Canada’s Rapid Response Mechanism describes foreign information manipulation and interference as intentional and coordinated efforts to alter the information environment for political or strategic purposes (Global Affairs Canada, 2026). The government has also documented online influence operations involving coordinated accounts and inauthentic activity (Global Affairs Canada, 2023).

EXAMPLE

A network of accounts might repeatedly post messages such as, “Everyone is waking up,” or, “No reasonable Albertan supports staying in Canada.” Even if the accounts represent only a small group, their activity can create the impression of a large public movement.

Another network could create the opposite impression by suggesting that support for independence is limited to extremists. In both cases, the public is encouraged to judge an idea by its apparent popularity instead of by its evidence.



Repetition

Familiar is not the same as true.

Repetition can make a claim feel familiar, and familiar claims can feel more believable. This does not mean that repeating a lie makes it true. It means that repeated exposure can create a feeling of truth, especially when people do not have time to verify the claim.

This effect is known as the **illusory truth effect**. A 2026 review examined 182 studies, 366 effect sizes, and 31,184 participants. It found a small but reliable increase in perceived truth when people were exposed to statements repeatedly (Ye et al., 2026).

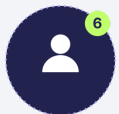
EXAMPLE

A claim such as “Alberta sends all its money to Ottawa” may be repeated in speeches, videos, memes, and comments. Even if the claim is incomplete or misleading, repeated exposure may make it feel familiar and therefore more credible.

The same process can occur with claims about separation. A repeated message that independence would automatically lead to prosperity may begin to sound like an established fact. Repetition can also be used against independence supporters through repeated claims that they are all extremists or that separation is impossible.

DEFENCE

Repetition can be resisted by checking the original source, looking for independent evidence, and asking whether a claim is being repeated more often than it is being supported.



Identity Capture

When a belief becomes who you are.

Identity capture happens when a political belief becomes closely connected to a person’s sense of self. The belief is no longer simply an opinion. It becomes part of who the person believes they are.

For example, the statement may change from “I support Alberta independence” to “I am an Albertan who refuses to kneel.” Similarly, the statement may change from “I believe remaining in Canada is economically stronger” to “I am a real Canadian fighting extremists.”

These statements are more powerful because they connect politics to pride, loyalty, courage, and belonging.

EXAMPLE

If a person’s support for Canada becomes part of their identity, evidence about federal mistakes may feel like an attack on the country itself.



Cognitive Overload and Cognitive Surrender

The mental DDoS attack.

Cognitive overload happens when people receive more information than they can process. During a major political debate, this can include news articles, videos, polls, statistics, political advertisements, social media posts, memes, and emotional comments. The problem is not simply that some of the information is false. Even true information can become difficult to understand when it arrives too quickly and in excessive amounts.

Winn Schwartau, who serves as the Director of Special Projects at the Cognitive Security Institute, mentions in his book 'Meta War' (highly recommended read) that this kind of attack can be compared to a denial-of-service attack, or a **mental DDoS attack**. In cybersecurity, a DDoS attack overwhelms a system with so many requests that it cannot respond properly. In cognitive warfare, an information flood overwhelms people with so many claims that they cannot check, compare, or understand them all. The target is not necessarily persuaded by one particular message. Instead, the target becomes confused, tired, and unable to make a confident judgment.

Cognitive surrender occurs when people become so overwhelmed that they stop trying to evaluate information. They may decide that nothing can be trusted, believe the loudest or most repeated message, or simply follow the opinion of their political group. Information overload can therefore weaken independent thinking without requiring the attacker to convince people of one specific idea.

A physical attack damages infrastructure, while a cyberattack may damage digital systems. A cognitive attack can create a sudden or gradual shift in how a person, organization, or society understands reality. The danger is that people may not notice the attack while it is happening. Their beliefs may change slowly as they are exposed to repeated messages, emotional content, and misleading interpretations.

EXAMPLE

A mental DDoS attack could occur when a person's social media feed contains hundreds of conflicting claims in a short period of time. One post may say that independence would immediately improve Alberta's economy. Another may claim that separation would cause financial collapse. A third may say that both claims are lies. After seeing this repeatedly, the person may stop checking sources and conclude that no one can know the truth.

Information overload can also affect journalists, public servants, researchers, and political opponents. If they must respond to every claim, they may spend all their time correcting individual statements instead of explaining the larger issue. This gives the person creating the information flood an advantage because producing claims is faster than investigating them.

Urgent language can make the problem worse. Posts may say, "You have only hours to share this," "The media will never tell you this," or, "Everything you know is a lie." Other messages may describe the referendum as "the final chance to save Alberta" or warn that, "If you do not act now, it will be too late." These messages reduce the time available for careful thinking and push people to share first and verify later.

COGNITIVE DEFENCE

The main defence is not to consume every piece of information. It is to practice **critical ignoring**, the ability to decide what does not deserve immediate attention. Critical ignoring does not mean ignoring important facts or refusing to learn. It means protecting mental attention from content designed mainly to provoke, distract, or overwhelm.

During the Alberta referendum, citizens can reduce cognitive overload by focusing on one referendum question at a time and using a small number of reliable sources. They can pause before sharing urgent or emotional content and ask whether a message provides evidence or only creates fear and anger. They can separate important information from repetitive commentary and check the original source before accepting a statistic, quotation, or video.

People can also take breaks from political content when it begins to affect their concentration or mood. Writing down the main claims and evidence can be more useful than relying only on memory. It is also important to accept that not every claim requires an immediate response.

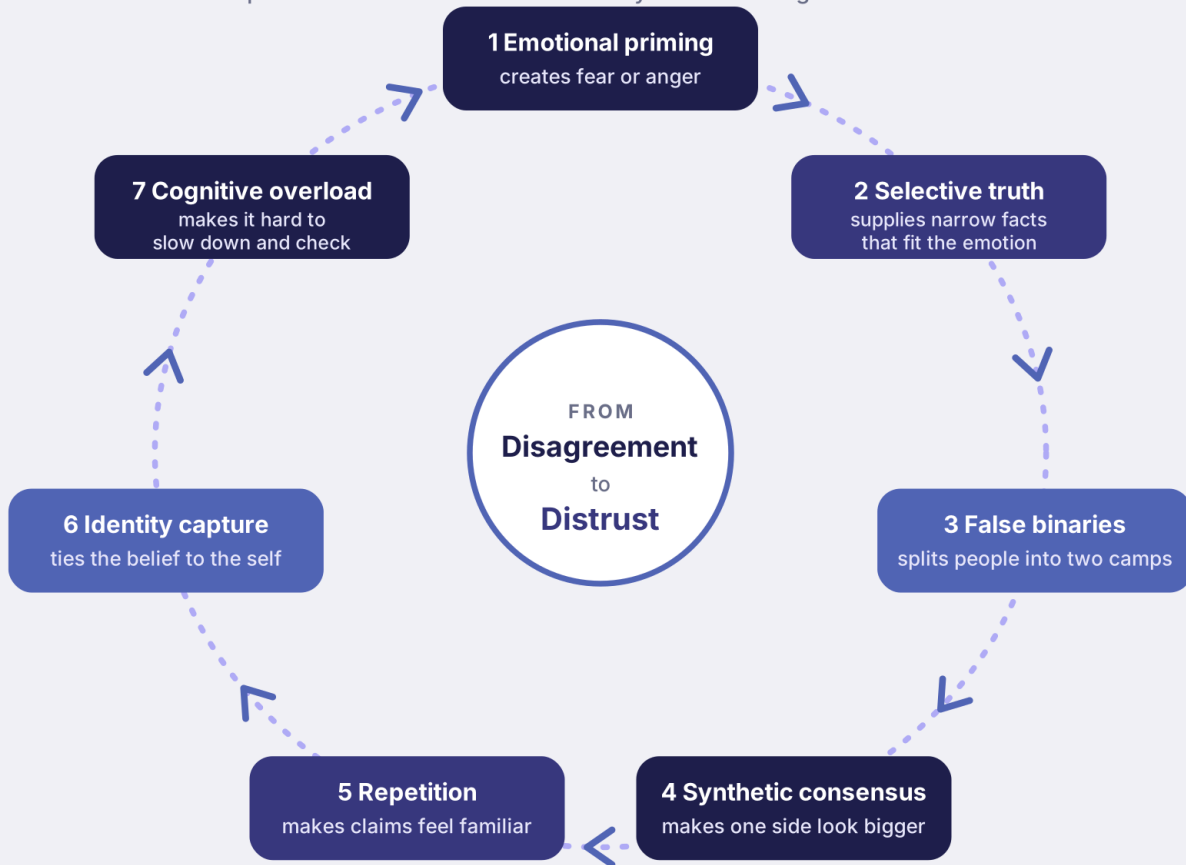
The goal is not to know everything. In an overloaded information environment, trying to know everything can make people more vulnerable. The goal is to preserve enough attention and calm judgment to identify the important questions, examine the strongest evidence, and make a decision without surrendering control of one's own thinking.

How These Tactics Work Together

These tactics often operate as a connected cycle. Emotional priming creates fear or anger. Selective truth then provides a narrow set of facts that appears to confirm the emotion. False binaries divide the public into opposing groups. Synthetic consensus makes one side appear larger and more legitimate. Repetition makes its claims feel familiar. Identity capture makes the political position part of a person's sense of self. Cognitive overload then makes it harder to slow down, check sources, or reconsider the original message.

HOW THE TACTICS WORK TOGETHER

Each step makes the next one easier. The cycle turns disagreement into distrust.



The result is a movement from disagreement to distrust. People begin with different opinions about Alberta's future. Political messages connect those opinions to fear, anger, or pride. Opponents are described as threats rather than fellow citizens. Repeated and selective messages make one interpretation feel obvious. Political beliefs become tied to personal identity. Large amounts of information create exhaustion and confusion. Finally, compromise begins to feel like betrayal, and people either become cynical or surrender their judgment to their political group.

In this environment, the political question is no longer simply, "Which option is more practical?" It becomes, "Which side are you on?" That change is central to perception warfare. It turns a disagreement about institutions, economics, and law into a struggle between identities.

Protecting democratic discussion therefore requires more than checking whether individual claims are true. It also requires recognizing how emotions, selective information, repetition, identity, perceived group pressure, and information overload shape the way people understand those claims. **Cognitive security begins when citizens protect their attention, question emotionally powerful narratives, and remain willing to see political opponents as people who may share many of the same fears and goals.**

The Seven Tactics at a Glance

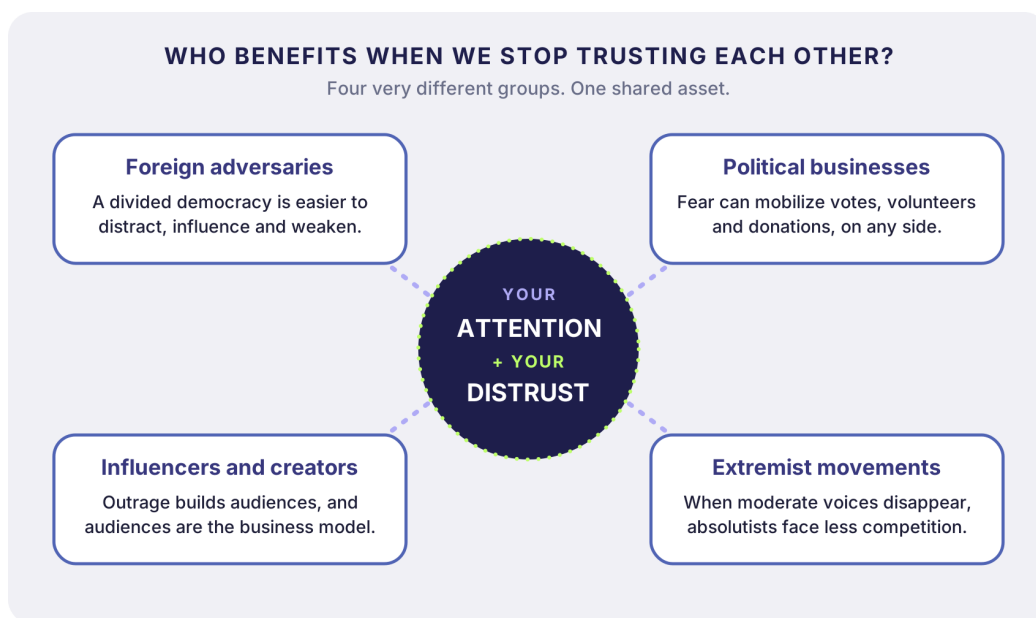
QUICK REFERENCE

Tactic	What it does	Ask yourself
1. Emotional priming	Makes you angry or afraid before you see the facts.	What am I feeling right now, and who made me feel it?
2. Selective truth	Shows a true piece of the story and hides the rest.	What else do I need to know?
3. False binaries	Squeezes a complex choice into two extreme camps.	Is there a middle position this message is hiding?
4. Synthetic consensus	Makes an opinion look more popular than it is.	How many real people actually hold this view?
5. Repetition	Makes a claim feel true because it feels familiar.	Have I seen this proven, or just seen it a lot?
6. Identity capture	Turns an opinion into who you are.	Could I change my mind on this and still be myself?
7. Cognitive overload	Floods you until you stop checking.	What are the one or two things that really matter here?

Who Benefits?

Who benefits when Canadians stop trusting one another?

Division is rarely an accident. When a society turns on itself, someone, somewhere, is usually better off for it. That does not mean every angry voice is bought or scripted. Most are sincere. But it is worth asking, plainly, who gains when the debate over Alberta's future moves from disagreement into distrust. Four groups stand out.



1. Foreign Adversaries

A divided democracy is easier to distract, influence, and weaken, and Canada's rivals understand this. Foreign adversaries invest heavily in monitoring and manipulating Canada's information environment. Their goals point in the same direction: weakening social cohesion, deepening domestic divisions, and reducing trust in democratic institutions (Kolga et al., 2026). Existing frustrations about energy, regional fairness, and federal power are exactly the kinds of divisions that hostile states look to widen.

This is documented, not hypothetical.

WHAT RESEARCHERS HAVE FOUND

- Researchers at the Canadian Digital Media Research Network identified a network of at least twenty near-identical YouTube channels promoting Alberta separatism and U.S. annexation. The channels used fake images of Mark Carney and Danielle Smith, AI-generated voiceovers, and outright fabrications. One channel had more than 90,000 subscribers and over 15 million views (Groh, 2026).
- A 2025 report by the security firm Recorded Future linked a Russian influence operation known as Storm-1516 to pro-separatist websites as early as May 2025 (Kolga et al., 2026).



83.3%

of identified Russian disinformation targeting Canadians was spread by ordinary users. Not bots. Not foreign accounts. Ordinary Canadians became the unwitting delivery system (Kolga et al., 2026).

This may be the most important finding in this section. A foreign campaign does not need millions of fake accounts if real people will share its content for free. Every share, however well meant, can extend the reach of a message that was designed somewhere else.

• They are further down this road than we are

This activity is not improvised. For Russia, targeting separatist movements in Western countries is part of a deliberate approach. A 2024 FBI affidavit, drawing on documents from Russia's Presidential Administration, described a playbook: identify polarizing issues, then amplify them through falsehoods and fabricated content (Kolga et al., 2026).

China combines domestic propaganda with foreign influence operations and runs dedicated military units for this work. One example is Base 311, which conducts influence operations aimed at Taiwan (Falkheimer & Pamment, 2026). China's "Three Warfares" concept, which covers psychological warfare, public opinion warfare, and legal warfare, dates to 2003. Its roots go back to a 1999 military text called Unrestricted Warfare. It has since grown into what China's military calls "cognitive domain operations": using information to shape how an adversary thinks, from everyday opinion in peacetime to decision-making in war (Beauchamp-Mustafaga, 2019).

PUT SIMPLY

Imagine a hockey team that has spent over twenty years studying film, running drills, and building a special unit for one kind of play. Now imagine the other team has only just started practising its defence against that play. That is roughly where many democracies stand. The first team is not unbeatable. But the second team needs to start practising now, and it needs every player on the ice, not only the goalie.

2. Political Businesses

Polarization can reward politicians and movements that convince voters that only they can protect them from an existential danger. Fear mobilizes volunteers, donations, and votes. This incentive exists on every side of the debate, and it does not mean that any particular leader is acting in bad faith. It means citizens are wise to notice when a message works harder to raise their temperature than to inform their judgment.

3. Influencers, Creators, and the Breakdown of Trust in Legacy Media

Outrage builds audiences, and audiences are the business model. Followers, donations, subscriptions, and personal brands tend to reward heat over light. A November 2025 study by the Media Ecosystem Observatory found that in Canada, online influencers now command more attention, and far greater reach, than either news media or politicians' own accounts (Kolga et al., 2026). That is the ground on which this debate is now taking place.

- **Most are not paid agents, but incentives matter**

It is not reasonable to assume that most influencers or commentators are on a foreign payroll. The overwhelming majority are not. What is fair to say is that many play to their base, and in a politics increasingly sorted into Left versus Right, changing your position can be costly.

It is also worth remembering that the loudest voices online do not always reflect the wider public. Support for separation stood at 27% in April 2026, the highest in five years but still a minority (Kolga et al., 2026). A June 2026 Ipsos poll found that 19% of Albertans said they would vote to hold a binding referendum (Groh, 2026). Just as importantly, the separation movement was not created by foreign actors. It rests on real grievances about energy policy, federal-provincial relations, and economic fairness (Kolga et al., 2026).

- **Audience capture: when changing your mind costs you your audience**

Creators earn a living by keeping their audience engaged. If they change their position, they risk losing followers or being called a sell-out or a traitor. Writers and researchers describe this as **audience capture**: a feedback loop in which a creator, chasing approval, is gradually pushed toward more extreme positions by the very audience they built (Bhagal, n.d.).

The lesson applies to every side of this debate. A creator who has built a brand around one position on Alberta's future may find it very difficult to change that position, even when the facts change, without being punished by their own audience.

- **No newsroom, no correction**

Professional journalism has a code of ethics. It is imperfect and sometimes bent, but it is real. The Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics asks reporters to seek truth, act independently, and acknowledge and correct mistakes promptly and prominently (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014). That correction mechanism is the immune system of trustworthy information. Most influencer content has no equivalent: no editor, no corrections policy, and no accountability except to the algorithm.

This is why the “**three truths and one lie**” technique works so well online. Malign influence exploits mental shortcuts, including the feeling of truth created by repetition, emotional impact, and content designed to feel memorable and confirming (Falkheimer & Pamment, 2026). Wrap one falsehood in three verifiable truths and the lie borrows the credibility of its neighbours. In a newsroom, an editor is supposed to catch that one lie. In a creator’s feed, it simply circulates. Knowing the technique exists is already part of the defence.

FACT

FACT

FALSE

FACT

Four claims. Three are true. One is not. Can you spot it at scrolling speed? Neither can most people. That is the point.

- **The collapse of trust is the opening**

All of this lands on ground that is already giving way. Trust in news has fallen to 37% globally, the lowest level the Reuters Institute has recorded since it began measuring in 2015 (Reuters Institute, 2026). For the first time, social media and video platforms have overtaken news organizations’ own websites as people’s main gateway to news. Yet audiences still rate creators as less trustworthy and less impartial than traditional outlets (Reuters Institute, 2026).



35%

Trust in news among English-language Canadian news consumers has dropped to an all-time low, roughly 21 points lower than in 2018 (Menzies, 2026; Reuters Institute, 2026).

The distrust is not irrational, as legacy media has earned some of it. News organizations face many of the same business pressures as creators: the need to capture attention, clickbait headlines, and stories framed to appeal to a particular audience. These practices raise fair questions about media standards.

Recent events have added to those questions. In the United Kingdom, BBC Director-General Tim Davie and BBC News CEO Deborah Turness resigned in November 2025 after criticism that a Panorama documentary had misleadingly edited a speech by U.S. President Donald Trump (BBC News, 2025). The episode deepened distrust of legacy media, especially publicly funded broadcasters.

In Canada, the federal response to the 2022 Freedom Convoy protests remains a source of distrust for many. Ottawa invoked the Emergencies Act, which allowed authorities to freeze participants’ bank accounts. In 2024, the Federal Court ruled that the invocation was unreasonable and violated Charter rights, and the Federal Court of Appeal upheld that ruling in January 2026. The question is not fully settled: an earlier public inquiry reached a different conclusion, and the federal government has sought to appeal to the Supreme Court (CBC News, 2026).

Whatever one’s view of these events, the space left by falling trust is being filled by a largely ungoverned environment: the wild west of cognitive manipulation, where the correction mechanism does not exist.

4. Extremist Movements

When moderate voices disappear, absolutist movements face less competition. They inherit the space that reasonable disagreement used to occupy. This risk exists at both ends of the political spectrum. It also harms the

many people on every side who hold their views thoughtfully and sincerely, because the loudest fringe can end up defining how everyone else is seen.

Two Things Are True at Once

The manipulation is real, and concerns about trust on both sides are real. Recognizing the first does not require dismissing the second, and acknowledging the second does not excuse the first. What Canada needs is not for one side to “win” the information war. It needs the whole conversation to be conducted on accurate, honest, and verifiable information, so that whatever Albertans and their fellow Canadians decide, they decide it themselves, from sound minds, and not because outside forces who profit from the split have quietly engineered the outcome.

THE COMMON THREAD

The common thread across all four groups is the same asset: **your attention and your distrust.** Adversaries, opportunists, brands, and extremists are all, in their own way, profiting from the same thing: the erosion of Canadians’ confidence in one another and in the institutions meant to inform them. Recognizing who profits is the first step to refusing to hand it over.

Why Our Brains Can Be Manipulated

If manipulation only worked on gullible people, it would not be a national security issue.

Intelligence Does Not Immunize Us

It is tempting to believe that manipulation only works on other people: the gullible, the uninformed, the ones who “fell for it.” The research says otherwise. Manipulation works because it targets the normal mental shortcuts every human brain uses to get through the day. These shortcuts are not character flaws. They exist because nobody has time to research every decision from scratch. The problem is that anyone who understands these shortcuts can use them.

In some cases, being more capable can make the problem worse. In one well-known study, people who were strongest with numbers were better at reading data correctly when the topic was neutral. When the same data touched a politically charged topic, the most numerate people became the most polarized. They used their skills to defend their side rather than to read the numbers (Kahan et al., 2017). Other research found that people with more political knowledge were more biased when judging arguments, not less (Taber & Lodge, 2006), and that more cognitively sophisticated people were no better at spotting their own biases (West et al., 2012).

PUT SIMPLY

Think of intelligence as a truck’s engine. A bigger engine does not keep you on the road. If the steering is off, it just gets you into the ditch faster. **Intelligence is the engine. Awareness is the steering.**

The twelve conditions below are grouped into four families. You do not need to memorize them. You only need to recognize the feeling of one being pressed.

Family	The shortcut it exploits	Conditions
1. What we already believe	We protect what we think and who we are.	Confirmation bias, motivated reasoning, identity-protective cognition
2. What others think	We look to the crowd and to experts.	Social proof, authority bias, in-group and out-group thinking
3. What we feel	Emotion and danger grab attention first.	Negativity bias, emotional arousal, threat sensitivity
4. How much we can handle	Our mental bandwidth is limited.	Repetition and fluency, cognitive overload, need for certainty

FAMILY 1

What We Already Believe

We are wired to protect our beliefs and our place in the group.

1. Confirmation bias

WHAT IT IS	We notice and remember information that agrees with what we already believe, and skim past what does not (Nickerson, 1998).
IN REAL LIFE	You are sure the refs robbed your team. You replay the bad call ten times. The penalty your own player got away with? You barely remember it.
SIGNS TO WATCH FOR	Your feed only ever proves you right. You feel relief, not curiosity, when you read something.
QUICK CHECK	What would I expect to see if I were wrong? Have I looked for it?

2. Motivated reasoning

WHAT IT IS	We start with the conclusion we want and then work backwards to find reasons for it. The brain acts like a lawyer defending a client, not a judge weighing evidence (Kunda, 1990).
IN REAL LIFE	You have already fallen for the truck. Suddenly the poor reliability ratings “do not count,” and one good review from a buddy is gospel.
SIGNS TO WATCH FOR	You hold evidence you like to a lower standard than evidence you dislike.
QUICK CHECK	Would I accept this evidence if it pointed the other way?

3. Identity-protective cognition

WHAT IT IS	When a fact threatens the group we belong to, we resist the fact to protect our place in the group. Being wrong feels safer than being pushed out (Kahan et al., 2017).
IN REAL LIFE	At a family dinner, agreeing with “the other side” on anything feels like betraying the family.
SIGNS TO WATCH FOR	Disagreement feels like an insult, not a difference of opinion.
QUICK CHECK	Is this about the facts, or about who I would be if I changed my mind?

FAMILY 2

What Others Think

When we are unsure, we borrow our confidence from other people.

4. Social proof

WHAT IT IS	When we are unsure, we look at what others are doing and assume they know something we do not (Asch, 1956; Cialdini, 2021).
IN REAL LIFE	Two restaurants side by side. One is packed, one is empty. You pick the packed one without knowing a thing about the food.
SIGNS TO WATCH FOR	"Everyone is saying..." "Thousands agree..." Big numbers of likes and shares doing the convincing.
QUICK CHECK	How many real people actually believe this, and how would I know?

5. Authority bias

WHAT IT IS	We give extra weight to people who look or sound like experts, sometimes even outside their field (Milgram, 1963).
IN REAL LIFE	An actor in a lab coat selling vitamins. A famous athlete explaining the economy.
SIGNS TO WATCH FOR	Titles, uniforms, a confident tone, "insiders reveal," "experts agree."
QUICK CHECK	Is this person an expert on this specific topic? Who else agrees who has nothing to gain?

6. In-group and out-group thinking

WHAT IT IS	We sort people into "us" and "them." We give "us" the benefit of the doubt and assume the worst about "them" (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).
IN REAL LIFE	When your player lays a big hit, it was a "hard, clean check." When the other team does it, it was "dirty."
SIGNS TO WATCH FOR	"Those people," "they all," "real Albertans," "real Canadians."
QUICK CHECK	Would I judge this the same way if my side did it?

FAMILY 3

What We Feel

Emotion arrives before analysis. Danger arrives before emotion.

7. Negativity bias

WHAT IT IS	Bad news hits harder and sticks longer than good news of the same size (Baumeister et al., 2001).
IN REAL LIFE	Ten kind comments on your work and one mean one. Guess which one you are thinking about at 2 a.m.
SIGNS TO WATCH FOR	Your feed feels like a disaster reel. Headlines built around loss, collapse, and betrayal.
QUICK CHECK	What is the good, or simply boring, part of this story that is not being told?

8. Emotional arousal

WHAT IT IS	When we are worked up, we rely more on gut feeling and less on careful checking. People who lean on emotion are more likely to believe false headlines (Martel et al., 2020).
IN REAL LIFE	Saying something in a heated argument that you would never say calmly.
SIGNS TO WATCH FOR	Heart rate up. Thumb hovering over “share.”
QUICK CHECK	Would I still share this in an hour?

9. Threat sensitivity

WHAT IT IS	The brain is built to spot danger fast. Threats grab our attention before we have decided whether they are real (Öhman et al., 2001).
IN REAL LIFE	You jump at a garden hose that looks like a snake, and only then notice it is a hose.
SIGNS TO WATCH FOR	“They are coming for your...,” “last chance,” “before it is too late.”
QUICK CHECK	What exactly is the threat, how likely is it, and who is telling me?

FAMILY 4

How Much We Can Handle

Our attention is a small room. Whoever fills it controls what we see.

10. Repetition and fluency

WHAT IT IS	Things that are easy to process feel true. Hearing something again makes it easier to process, so it feels truer (Hasher et al., 1977; Ye et al., 2026).
IN REAL LIFE	A jingle you have heard a hundred times. You cannot remember deciding to trust the brand, but somehow you do.
SIGNS TO WATCH FOR	The same phrase, slogan, or number showing up everywhere, word for word.
QUICK CHECK	Have I seen this proven, or have I just seen it a lot?

11. Cognitive overload

WHAT IT IS	Our working memory is small. When too much arrives at once, we stop analysing and start guessing (Sweller, 1988).
IN REAL LIFE	A salesperson throws ten add-ons, three financing plans, and a deadline at you in five minutes.
SIGNS TO WATCH FOR	You feel tired, foggy, and convinced that “nobody knows anything.”
QUICK CHECK	What are the one or two things that actually matter here?

12. Need for certainty

WHAT IT IS	Uncertainty is uncomfortable, so we grab the first clear answer, even a wrong one (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996).
IN REAL LIFE	A forecast that says “maybe rain” is annoying. One that says “definitely sunny” feels better, even when you get soaked.
SIGNS TO WATCH FOR	Simple answers to complicated questions. “It is obvious.” “Wake up.”
QUICK CHECK	Am I allowed to say “I do not know yet”?

Cognitive Security: Defence Tools for Modern Cognitive Warfare

How do we think clearly when messages are designed to stop us?

“

Cognitive Security is the defence of mental processes against external manipulation, degradation, and unauthorized influence. It focuses on maintaining the integrity of independent judgment when making decisions.
(Purdy & Cook, 2026)

It shapes how people perceive information, evaluate evidence, make decisions, and respond to pressure in environments impacted by artificial intelligence, social engineering, persuasive technology, and information warfare.

In the Alberta referendum, cognitive security would help citizens examine political messages without allowing anger, fear, humiliation, or group pressure to make their decisions for them. **It does not tell people how to vote. It helps them protect their ability to decide for themselves.**

Multiple Truths and the Whole Elephant

One important tool for cognitive security is recognizing that an issue can contain more than one valid perspective. This does not mean that every claim is true or that evidence does not matter. It means that one person or political group may see part of the situation without seeing the whole picture.

The blind-men-and-the-elephant story provides a useful example. Each person touches a different part of the elephant and describes it differently. One feels the trunk and thinks it is a snake. Another feels the leg and thinks it is a tree. Their experiences are not completely false, but they are incomplete. The mistake occurs when one limited experience is treated as the entire truth.

The same problem can occur in political debates. Independence supporters may correctly identify concerns about federal control, regional representation, and Alberta's resource wealth. Federalist supporters may correctly identify concerns about trade, security, economic uncertainty, and the difficulty of creating a new country. Each side may

see something real. **The danger is believing that one side possesses the entire truth and that the other side sees nothing of value.**

A cognitively secure person can say:

“I may be seeing something real, but I may not yet be seeing the whole picture.”

This sentence creates space for further investigation. It does not require a person to abandon their position. It encourages them to ask what information may be missing, what assumptions they are making, and what the strongest opposing argument might be.

Non-Attachment to Views, Escaping Identity Capture

Another tool is non-attachment to views. This means holding an opinion without allowing it to become a fixed part of one’s identity. A person can strongly support an idea while remaining open to new evidence.

Non-attachment does not mean being indecisive or having no principles. It means understanding that an opinion is a conclusion based on the information currently available. If new and reliable evidence appears, a person should be able to revise their conclusion without feeling that they have betrayed themselves or their community.

This is especially important in political debates. If a person says, “I support this argument because the evidence currently supports it,” they leave room for reflection. If the person says, “Anyone who disagrees with me is an enemy,” evidence becomes less important than loyalty.

Non-attachment protects people from identity capture. It helps citizens distinguish between:

An opinion	A captured identity
<i>“I support Alberta independence.”</i>	<i>“I am a real Albertan only if I support independence.”</i>
<i>“I support remaining in Canada.”</i>	<i>“I am a good Canadian only if I reject every argument for provincial autonomy.”</i>

When political beliefs become identities, contradictory evidence can feel like a personal attack. Non-attachment makes it easier to consider information without treating every disagreement as betrayal.

Developing Discernment

Discernment is the ability to distinguish between information that is useful and information that is misleading, incomplete, emotional, or irrelevant.

DISCERNMENT INVOLVES ASKING SEVERAL QUESTIONS

- What exactly is being claimed?
- What evidence supports the claim?
- Is the evidence from a reliable and independent source?
- What information has been left out?
- Is the message trying to inform me, frighten me, flatter me, or anger me?
- Does the conclusion actually follow from the facts?
- What would change my mind?
- What is the strongest reasonable argument on the other side?

Discernment is different from automatic skepticism. A person who distrusts everything is not necessarily thinking clearly. Total distrust can also make people vulnerable because they may eventually follow the loudest or most familiar voice. Discernment means evaluating claims carefully rather than accepting or rejecting everything automatically.

In a referendum, discernment means separating facts from predictions, values from evidence, and legal possibilities from political slogans. For example, the statement “Alberta has valuable resources” is a factual claim. The statement “Therefore, an independent Alberta would immediately prosper” is a prediction. The second claim requires additional evidence and should not be treated as if it were proven by the first.

Critical Ignoring and Information Filtering

Modern information environments make attention a limited resource. People may encounter more articles, videos, statistics, advertisements, notifications, and political opinions than they can reasonably process. When information becomes too complex, fast, or emotionally intense, it can reduce the quality of decision-making (Frontiers in Network Physiology, 2026).

This is where **critical ignoring** becomes important. Critical ignoring means deliberately deciding what not to pay attention to. It is not laziness, carelessness, or rejection of knowledge. It is a way of protecting attention from poor-quality, manipulative, or irrelevant information.

Winn Schwartau describes information overload as a mental DDoS attack. In cybersecurity, a distributed denial-of-service attack overwhelms a system with too many requests. In cognitive warfare, a person can be overwhelmed by too many claims, arguments, images, and emotional demands. When this happens, the person may stop checking information and accept whatever message is easiest to understand or most emotionally powerful (Schwartau, 2025).

Nature and biology also use forms of filtering. Living systems cannot respond equally to every signal in their environment. They must identify what matters, ignore much of the background noise, and direct limited energy toward important threats and opportunities. Human attention works in a similar way. Selective attention is not a weakness by itself. It is necessary for survival and effective action. **The problem occurs when other actors manipulate what receives our attention.**

DURING THE ALBERTA REFERENDUM, CRITICAL IGNORING MIGHT MEAN

- Not responding to every provocative post.
- Ignoring headlines that provide no evidence.
- Refusing to share content designed only to create panic.
- Limiting exposure to repetitive political commentary.
- Checking a few reliable sources instead of following every online argument.
- Focusing on the referendum question rather than on insults between political groups.

The goal is not to know everything. The goal is to protect enough mental space to think clearly about what matters.

The Middle Path

A useful approach to cognitive security is the middle path between blind trust and total distrust. Blind trust makes people easy to manipulate because they accept claims without checking them. Total distrust also creates problems because people may reject reliable evidence and assume that every institution is corrupt.



The middle path involves careful openness. A person can remain open to information while still asking for evidence. They can respect an opponent without accepting every argument. They can recognize uncertainty without concluding that nothing is knowable.

In the Alberta referendum, this middle path could look like the following:

"I am willing to consider arguments for independence, but I want evidence about its legal and economic consequences."

Or:

"I support remaining in Canada, but I recognize that Alberta may have legitimate concerns about representation and federal power."

These positions are not weak. They show that a person can have principles without closing the door to evidence. The middle path also helps prevent false binaries. It allows a citizen to support Alberta's interests without treating Canada as an enemy. It allows a person to value Canadian unity without dismissing concerns about provincial autonomy. It creates room for disagreement without hatred.

Cognitive Security at a Glance in the Case of the Referendum

Cognitive security provides a practical way to respond to perception warfare. It does not require citizens to avoid political disagreement. Democracy depends on disagreement. Instead, it helps citizens disagree without losing their ability to evaluate evidence or recognize the humanity of others.

A cognitively secure approach to the referendum would involve several habits:

1	Identify any perception warfare tactics at play. Use the seven tactics in Part 2 as a checklist.
2	Identify the value being used. Ask whether the message is appealing to freedom, security, prosperity, identity, or sovereignty.
3	Separate the value from the proposed solution. Supporting freedom does not automatically prove that independence is the best way to protect it. Supporting security does not automatically prove that every federal policy is effective.
4	Look for missing context. Ask what legal, economic, historical, or social information has been left out.
5	Hold views without becoming trapped by them. Be willing to revise a position when reliable evidence changes.
6	Use critical ignoring. Do not allow every post, insult, or urgent headline to claim your attention.
7	Practice equanimity. Notice anger, fear, and humiliation before allowing them to guide a decision.
8	Seek the whole elephant. Compare the strongest arguments from both sides rather than relying on caricatures.

The strongest defence against manipulation may begin with the capacity to say:

“ I may be seeing something real. But I may not yet be seeing the whole elephant.

That statement protects curiosity without requiring indecision. It allows people to recognize genuine problems while remaining open to additional facts. It also makes it harder for political actors to turn difference into hatred.

Cognitive security is therefore not about making citizens think alike. **It is about protecting their ability to think independently, remain open to evidence, and make political choices without surrendering judgment to fear, anger, identity, or information overload.**

A Way Forward

What, exactly, are we trying to protect?

The earlier sections describe what we stand to lose. This one is about what we stand to keep. The thing under threat is not a border or a flag. It is our **cognitive sovereignty**: the ability of Canadians to make political decisions freely, without foreign coercion or manipulation (Kolga et al., 2026).

Put more simply, it is our right to reason together: to disagree, to be persuaded by evidence, and to reach conclusions that are genuinely our own. That right belongs to every Albertan, whatever they decide on October 19. It is what makes a society hard to divide, hard to deceive, and worth defending.

Canada is more than a map. It is a political structure in which extraordinarily different people have, however imperfectly, figured out how to share institutions, markets, public infrastructure, national defence, citizenship, democratic power, languages, cultures, identities, and disagreements, without requiring sameness.

“

Canada’s greatest strength is not unity. It is the capacity to remain a country despite profound disagreement.

So What Can We Do About It?

- **Start with yourself**

The first line of defence is personal. Each of us has a stake in understanding how cognitive security works, for our own wellbeing and for that of our families, friends, and coworkers. Understanding how manipulation works makes people more resilient to financial scams, to narratives designed to divide us, and, ultimately, to ending up on the losing side of a conflict most people never realize they are in.

The research supports this. Malign influence succeeds by exploiting predictable mental shortcuts: the feeling of truth created by repetition, emotionally charged content, and messages tailored to what we already believe (Falkheimer & Pamment, 2026). Because everyone is wired a little differently, everyone is vulnerable in a slightly different way. This is why generic advice is not enough.

The team at MindShield has been building solutions that help people understand themselves first, so they can recognize and withstand manipulation aimed at their own blind spots. With this understanding, employees are less

likely to fall for a cyberattack, seniors are less likely to become victims of fraud, and, most importantly, Canadians on every side of this debate can stay connected by something deeper than agreement: a shared pursuit of truth.

● **Resilience can be taught**

A large body of research on inoculation, also called prebunking, shows that briefly exposing people to manipulation techniques in a controlled, low-stakes way builds lasting resistance to the real thing. The effect has been found across very different cultures (Falkheimer & Pamment, 2026). The one caveat is that the effect fades over time and needs periodic “booster shots” to last. Resilience is a habit, not a one-time inoculation.

TWO WAYS TO PICTURE IT

It helps to think of it the way we think of a vaccine. Expose someone to a small, clearly labelled dose of a manipulation tactic, show them how the trick works, and the mind builds antibodies against the real thing. You do not wait to be attacked to learn the defence. You practise it in advance.

Think of a seasoned salesperson. They rarely fall for high-pressure sales tactics because they know every move in the playbook: the false urgency, the manufactured scarcity, the “this offer is only for you” close. It does not make them immune. It makes them harder to fool. They have seen the trick from the other side, so it loses its grip.

The same logic scales to a whole country. The more Canadians learn to recognize the tactics of manipulation, the better our collective odds of not buying the snake oil, no matter how polished the pitch.

What Other Countries Are Already Doing

Sweden	Finland	Taiwan
Whole-of-society defence. A dedicated Psychological Defence Agency since 2022, a national strategy, and a preparedness booklet mailed to every household.	Education first. Media literacy in the national curriculum since 2014, starting as early as preschool.	Defence under pressure. Cognitive warfare defence placed at the centre of its 2025 defence report and civil defence handbook.

● **Sweden: a whole-of-society model**

Sweden offers the clearest example. In 2022, it created a dedicated government body, the Swedish Psychological Defence Agency, to identify and counter hostile information influence (New Eastern Europe, 2024). Sweden has since launched its first national strategy for psychological defence. Carl-Oskar Bohlin, the minister for civil defence, described its purpose as strengthening the country’s “resilience in the cognitive domain” (Mueller, 2026).

Sweden also does something strikingly practical: it sends its citizens a booklet. In late 2024, more than five million Swedish households received an updated edition of *In Case of Crisis or War*, which covers practical preparedness and how to recognize disinformation (Mueller, 2026). This is not a panic measure. It continues a tradition dating back to 1943 (Falkheimer & Pamment, 2026). The message Swedes are taught to remember is simple: if the country is attacked, any claim that resistance has stopped is false (Mueller, 2026).

Sweden is not alone. Taiwan, which faces constant cognitive pressure from China, placed societal resilience and defence against cognitive warfare at the centre of its 2025 National Defense Report and its 2025 civil defence handbook. Both explicitly teach citizens to recognize and resist disinformation and “narrative warfare” (Irregular Warfare Initiative, 2025). The common thread is that cognitive defence is treated as everyone’s job, not only the government’s.

● **Teaching it in schools: Finland**

If Sweden shows the whole-of-society approach, Finland shows the education approach. Finland built media literacy into its national core curriculum in 2014. Students learn to evaluate information critically from as early as preschool. They study historical propaganda, learn how statistics can mislead, and create their own media to see how persuasion works from the inside (thisisFINLAND, n.d.). The results show up in international rankings: Finland has placed first on the European Media Literacy Index, which rates countries on their resilience to disinformation, since the index began in 2017 (World Economic Forum, 2019).

What Canada Can Do, Starting Now

Canada may not be in a position to mail a preparedness booklet to every household without creating unnecessary fear. Our situation is different from that of a country near Russia’s border. But we can begin building cognitive security into the education of young people, and into the places adults already learn.

Where	What it could look like
Schools	Short, practical lessons on recognizing manipulation and checking sources, added to the digital citizenship and cyberbullying programs schools already run.
Workplaces	Expand the security awareness training most mid-sized and large organizations already provide, moving beyond phishing links to the wider landscape of cognitive manipulation.
Communities and government	Seminars and targeted training for public servants, community leaders, and seniors’ organizations.
Information gatekeepers	Support for the journalists, librarians, and educators who help the public make sense of events.

The cost of not preparing our society for these threats is far too high. Alberta may prove to be one of the clearest examples of that cost being paid in real time (Kolga et al., 2026).

Why Canada, and Why Now

Start with what is at stake. For all its imperfections, Canada is one of the freest societies on earth. It scored 97 out of 100 in Freedom House’s 2025 assessment, with near-perfect marks for political rights and civil liberties (Freedom House, 2025). That is not a boast. It is the very thing manipulation campaigns work to wear down. The freedoms protected by the Charter, to speak, to assemble, to dissent, and to vote, are what allow Albertans to press their grievances, organize, and hold a referendum in the first place. A society where people can openly argue and freely decide their own future is far harder to divide than one held together by force.

Here is the case for optimism. Canadians are educated, resilient, and innovative, with a well-earned reputation for friendliness. Canada has already helped shape the future once. Many of the foundations of modern artificial intelligence were laid by researchers working in Canada, including Geoffrey Hinton at the University of Toronto and Yoshua Bengio in Montreal. Their work earned computing's highest honour, the Turing Award, and, for Hinton, a Nobel Prize (Association for Computing Machinery, 2019; Nobel Prize Outreach, 2024). A country that helped teach machines to learn can certainly teach its citizens to tell truth from fabrication.

With a population of roughly 41 million (Statistics Canada, 2026), Canada can seem small next to the giants. In this respect, that scale is an advantage, the same advantage Sweden and Finland have used so well. A country our size can become a genuinely cognitively resilient society: one that is not easily manipulated, and wise enough to understand that truth is discovered through exploration.

Canada is, in some ways, a young country still forming its personality and its skills, with much of its story ahead of it. The ability to tell falsehood from reality is not a defensive chore. It is a superpower, and it could give this country an extraordinary advantage in the world that is coming.

That is what is worth protecting: not only the land, but the clear-eyed, curious, and free minds of the people who live on it.

CLOSING

A Country Strong Enough to Disagree

Albertans should have difficult conversations about sovereignty. Canadians should have difficult conversations about whether Confederation is working equally well for every region.

People advocating independence should not automatically be treated as disloyal. People defending Canada should not automatically be treated as enemies of freedom. **Those shortcuts are precisely where manipulation begins.**

The harder work is asking what sits underneath the argument. What are we afraid of losing? What kind of country, province, and life are we actually trying to build? Where does the other side have a point? What evidence would change our own position? And who benefits when we become incapable of asking those questions of one another?

The answer to Canada's current division is not forced agreement. It is stronger thinking. Cognitive security begins when we understand that the most effective manipulation rarely tells us what to think. It narrows what we are able to see, amplifies what we already fear, attaches beliefs to identity, makes another citizen appear to be the enemy, and wraps a lie in a veil of truth.

The antidote is not censorship. It is agency.

It is learning to recognize influence while it is happening. It is becoming capable of holding two uncomfortable truths at once. Alberta can have legitimate grievances with Canada, and separation can carry serious risks. Canada can be worth preserving, and its institutions can require reform.

A political opponent can be deeply wrong about one issue and still be acting from a fear or hope remarkably similar to our own. The people on opposite sides of Canada's current debate may discover that they are touching different parts of the same elephant.

And if that is true, perhaps the question before us is larger than whether Alberta ultimately stays or leaves. **It is whether Canadians can build a democracy mature enough to see the whole animal before someone else convinces us that the person holding another part of it is our enemy.**

*Because before a country can defend its borders, institutions, or sovereignty,
its citizens must retain sovereignty over something even more fundamental:*

their own minds.

ABOUT US



MindShield™
AWAKENING DIGITAL RESILIENCE

MindShield is a Canadian cyberpsychology company focused on cognitive security: protecting human judgment from manipulation. We help people and organizations understand how their own minds can be targeted, so they can think clearly under pressure, whether the threat is a phishing email, a financial scam, or a campaign designed to divide a country.

We are not in the business of telling people what to think. We are in the business of protecting our ability to think for ourselves without coerced influence.

You can learn more about us at www.mindshield.org

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