

MEMO #2: COVID-19 Misinformation and Protester Violence

Canadian Election Misinformation Project

The Canadian Election Misinformation Project is a civil society and academic partnership led by [McGill University's](#) Media Ecosystem Observatory and the [University of Toronto's](#) [Policy, Elections & Representation Lab](#) (PEARL).

It aims to rapidly identify and respond to mis- and disinformation incidents during the 44th Canadian Federal Election while evaluating the extent to which these incidents impact the attitudes and behaviours of Canadians. It also seeks to develop understanding of the types and consequences of misleading and false information circulating in the public sphere in addition to supporting world-class research into the dynamics of the information ecosystem and the broad impacts of misinformation on Canadian democracy.

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Canadians agree on the need for widespread vaccination and continued concerted efforts to combat the pandemic and none of the major political parties have focused their election campaigns on opposition to COVID-19 vaccines, vaccine passports, or lockdowns. However, there is an important and vocal subset of the public who support disrupting (sometimes with violence) political rallies. Their actions—often fuelled by misinformation—and the subsequent media coverage has driven attention to these issues during the 2021 federal election.

At the [Canadian Election Misinformation Project](#), we have been tracking and analyzing COVID-19 misinformation since the beginning of the pandemic. We know that Canadians who spend large amounts of time on social media and come into repeated contact with COVID-19 misinformation tend to hold [many misperceptions](#) about the virus, efficacy of the vaccine, and the necessity of masking and social distancing. What has become very clear in the past two weeks, however, is this same misinformation is contributing to aggressive political action. We investigated this category of misinformation due to its spread and an already-large impact on the election.

Since Aug. 27 when Trudeau's event in Bolton, Ont. was [cancelled due to security concerns](#), headlines across news organizations in Canada have heavily featured information about the protests and protesters. We pulled all headlines from Canadian news organizations from Aug. 27 to Sept. 9 (totalling 8,709 headlines) and found 3.1 percent contained reference to the protests (representing 268 stories during that period). Coverage of these events far exceeds that of other major stories during this period including Afghanistan (2.3 percent) and gun control (2.3 percent).

Despite the media prominence of these protests, there are only a small number of Canadians participating or supporting them. Less than 4% of Canadians indicate that they have or intend to participate in any kind of rally, protest, or demonstration during the election campaign.

Our team of researchers has been tracking a large number of groups, pages, channels, and platforms where these protests and the actions of the participants (including the throwing of gravel and the disruption of public services) are being celebrated: - The ministry of truth is pushing hard to make you believe this is about your health and not control. BS - Trudeau is visibly upset and condemning YOU as dangerous, but the push back against him is glorious - He shouldn't be able to go into any town without protesters - You missed your opportunity, next

time use big rocks. . . - Too bad no one had a slingshot, a biblical stoning seems an appropriate end to him.

Debates on social media are polarized, however, with many other Canadians decrying what they see as an uncivil behaviour, especially during an election: - I am not a Trudeau fan but I find the protesters sickening - And you can say you hate him for whatever reasons, but you're still a garbage human if you try to attack a man or agree with these mobs!! - [The protests are] great. But please no more rock throwing, let's not stoop to his level. Let's win the right way.

While these debates have played out on social media, we fielded a nationally representative survey to understand how these protests and associated social media debates are perceived among the broader Canadian public.

Our research shows that most Canadians are strongly against the protesters' objectives. A large majority support vaccine passports (73 percent) and stronger federal intervention to stop the spread of variants (69 percent). They consider healthcare and COVID-19 to be the first and second most important issues in this election.

Moreover, many Canadians are not pleased with the actions of the protesters. When asked specifically about the protests directed at Trudeau, people were most likely to report feeling disgust (37 percent) or anger (26 percent). Canadians also believe candidates should be able to speak freely, even when they disagree with what they have to say (78 percent).

However, there is a non-negligible proportion of Canadians who react positively to the escalating protests. For example, 10 percent of respondents indicated feeling amusement and seven percent indicated feeling happiness in regards to the hostile protests disrupting Liberal campaign events. Importantly, we find that Canadians are significantly more likely to have a positive reaction to the protesters interrupting the Liberal campaign if they hold COVID-19 misperceptions, subscribe to conspiracy theories, or oppose vaccine passports. Those reacting positively to the protests are twice as likely to hold COVID-19 misperceptions as compared to those who don't.

When presented with a hypothetical protest campaign event, almost half of respondents say they would support a protest where protesters are peacefully showing their disagreement with a party's platform by carrying signs, even if the protest is disruptive. However, the level of support decreases significantly when protesters are yelling insults, and even further when the hypothetical protests include death threats to politicians. These dramatic shifts in support are compounded when the protesters are there because of misinformation.

A vocal minority of Canadians has been able to push their unpopular concerns about COVID-19 vaccinations, masks, and lockdowns into the center of this election campaign. This is despite broad agreement amongst the political parties and a large majority of Canadians that continued action on COVID is warranted. This vocal minority of protesters have been able to push their agenda using tactics that a large majority of Canadians strongly disagree with and many find disgusting. Misinformation often polarizes and can sometimes powerfully motivate people.

Findings shown here based on a Media Ecosystem Observatory analysis of headlines of news articles shared on the Facebook pages of 161 Canadian media organizations and surveys of 1740 Canadian voters between August 31 and Sept. 6 (reactions to the protests) and 4074 respondents between August 23 and September 8 (opinions about COVID-19 and vaccine passports).