

MEMO #3: Misinformation Spillover from the United States

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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Mistrust of the voting system is growing among Canadian voters, particularly on the far right of the political spectrum, where misinformation is taking root. Many of the trends of democratic distrust observed during the 2020 U.S. election are finding sympathetic ears among Canadians.

Misinformation about the Canadian electoral process has spread in darker corners of online discourse, across major social media channels, and ultimately found purchase in the minds of Canadians. Fewer than a third of Canadians know that all ballots cast in a federal election are counted by hand. And the trustworthiness of mail-in ballots is questioned by many Canadians and maps closely to their partisan affiliation, which suggests a deepening partisan split on the legitimacy of Canadian democracy.

At the [Canadian Election Misinformation Project](#), we have been looking into rising fears among certain segments of the population about the integrity of the election, fears which often find their roots in American election discourse. We have found that a sizable number of Canadians finds the electoral system, and particularly the use of mail-in ballots, untrustworthy. We investigated these narratives due to their spread, their relevance for this election, and their potential long-term negative impact on the Canadian democratic process.

Through extensive ethnographic investigation of social media platforms where discussions of the Canadian election are occurring, wide scale monitoring of large social media platforms and traditional media outlets, and a survey with a large nationally representative sample, we thoroughly investigated these false and misleading claims and assessed the extent to which they have potentially impacted the attitudes of Canadians.

Many Canadians, of all political stripes, have misconceptions about how the federal voting system in Canada works. Of those surveyed, only 29 percent knew that all votes are counted by hand by Elections Canada officials, 13 percent incorrectly believed votes were counted only by machines, while 34 percent believed ballots were counted both by hand and by machine. Another 24 percent did not know how ballots were counted. This lack of knowledge invites the circulation of false information on this issue.

An illustrative example concerns the role of Dominion voting machines, blamed by some for Donald Trump's loss in the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election. We have seen a similar style of

conspiracies voiced in Canada—some of which come directly from political candidates—suggesting that Elections Canada uses those machines to count their votes.

There are also points of mistrust in how votes are collected. Sixteen [times the normal number](#) of mail-in ballots were ordered from Elections Canada for this election, and trust in the method is low among large groups of Canadians. These trends echo those we have seen in the United States after the recent presidential election and are a harbinger of deepening democratic mistrust. We find voters on the right of the political spectrum tend to be more distrustful of voting by mail. This aligns with [similar trends observed in the United States](#) among Republican voters.

More than a quarter of respondents (27 percent) believe voting by mail is less trustworthy than voting in person, while only a slim majority of respondents (56 percent) believe mail-in voting is equally trustworthy. Distrust is highest amongst supporters of the People’s Party of Canada, among whom about two-thirds (66 percent) said they found mail-in ballots less trustworthy, with only 22 percent finding them just as trustworthy. Supporters of the major parties tended to be much more trusting of mail-in ballots, with 68 percent of Liberal supporters, 60 percent of NDP supporters, 51 percent of BQ supporters, and 48 percent of Conservative supporters considering that voting by mail is equally as trustworthy as voting in person.

Our survey shows 15.7 percent of NDP supporters report that they have voted or will vote by mail, compared to 12.4 percent of Liberals, 10.7 percent of Conservatives, 8.5 percent of Bloc Quebecois, and only 5.7 percent of People’s Party supporters. Partisan and ideological differences in trust in mail-in ballots make some partisans much less likely to vote by mail.

Uncertainty about basic factual information and a large amount of polarization make for fertile grounds for misinformation to thrive. We conducted a broad survey of major social media platforms used by Canadians to discuss the election and found numerous persistent examples of vote-based misinformation. This monitoring was done through a combination of manual ethnographic monitoring and keyword based searches for discussion of the Canadian election and specifically electoral fraud. These misleading or false narratives were detected across Twitter, Facebook, Tik Tok, Telegram, and 4Chan.

There are important differences across and within platforms. On Facebook, tolerance for election integrity misinformation varies by the type of group. For local communities, misinformation tends to be shut down, while groups centred on specific issues (e.g. gun rights groups, anti-vaccine groups) tend to offer little pushback to misinformation. For example, when a comment in a community page argued that Justin Trudeau controlled “the courts”, the responses were a post of a fact check and another response that simply read “BS.”

On Twitter, this type of content tends to be shared by accounts with low numbers of followers and misinformation-sharing accounts tend to bombard other more popular users and posts with similar messages. For example, in a comment directed at a national columnist, a user wrote: “Only way for Biden to win was to cheat. Anyone think Trudeau wouldn’t?” These types of low-credibility accounts tend to not attract a lot of attention but their content can be found by someone scrolling through the comments to reaffirm existing beliefs.

On TikTok, videos spreading misinformation tend to be from smaller accounts that support right-leaning views, typically support the PPC, and are critical of Trudeau. Often the videos containing false or misleading information have comment sections rife with conspiratorial thinking. One user wrote, “this election is a trick put forth by Justin Trudeau and his minions, to get the

house majority, welcome to Chinada where the votes don't count and the rules don't matter."

The two platforms where the bulk of this misinformation can be found are 4chan's /pol/ imageboard and the encrypted messaging app, Telegram. In general, discussion on fringe platforms speaks to a sense of disillusionment with the election and the electoral process. As one 4chan user put it, "if you think stealing the election only happens in the US, you are sorely mistaken Canada has been a model country for deep corruption for decades." Mistrust in voting appears to be centred around mail-in ballots, which are seen as "basically ensuring fraud." Posters on 4chan also argue, incorrectly, that Canada follows the same regulations as the U.S. One Canadian user wondered if this election will see Trudeau "pull a Biden and get 20 million mail-in votes." Distrust of mail-in ballots is compounded by the widespread sentiment that ballot counters and poll workers are themselves involved in election fraud.

On both 4chan and Telegram, Canadians engaged with conspiracy theories around the use of Dominion voting machines. The bulk of this conversation is taking place in QAnon-affiliated Telegram channels, which exhibit a general distrust in politics, politicians, and the electoral process. Users on 4chan have engaged in detailed incorrect discussions of how Elections Canada allegedly uses Dominion machines and the Dominion algorithm, and leaders across the political spectrum have been accused of using the company's machines. Claims that Erin O'Toole used Dominion to win the 2020 CPC leadership vote have been found in several Telegram channels.

The density and cross-platform spread of vote-related misinformation is troubling in the Canadian context and is driving, at least in part, misperceptions and false beliefs. The Canada Elections Act forbids counting any ballots until after polls close and the larger-than-usual number of mail-in ballots ordered by voters this election may cause a delay in the announcement of the election result. Partisan differences in intentions to use and trust in mail-in ballots could provide fertile ground for misinformation to thrive. We have seen this type of misinformation continuing to circulate in the United States for many months and years post-election.

Information provided by Elections Canada and media organizations has not effectively addressed the problem. Elections Canada has published ads [on Facebook](#) and through other avenues encouraging Canadians to vote by mail, but few of them discuss the safeguards that keep mail-in ballots secure and prevent voter fraud (for example, safeguards against double voting). There has also been occasional media coverage of mail-in ballots, how safe they are, and the fact that it could take longer before knowing the result of the election, but the reach of these stories has been limited. While this information may have reached some Canadians, the survey and social media data show that misperceptions and misinformation persist.

Confidence in the results of an election is of paramount importance in a democracy and any threats to that should be addressed swiftly.

Survey shown here based on a Media Ecosystem Observatory survey of 5,482 Canadians collected from August 23 to September 13. Social media findings based on ethnographic research by a team of Canadian Election Misinformation Project researchers and 7,424,353 election-related tweets collected from August 15 to September 14.