

The Role of Misinformation in the 2022 Quebec Election: Mid-Election Analysis

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The purpose of the Quebec Electoral Misinformation Project is to analyze the role of misinformation in the 2022 Quebec provincial election. Since the beginning of the campaign, the Project has conducted both automated- and human-monitoring of social media to identify and analyze misinformation related to the election. The Project also uses a daily survey to examine the spread and effects of misinformation on Quebecers' attitudes and behaviours as well as to assess their perceptions of the misinformation in question.

This mid-election analysis summarizes our main observations since the beginning of the campaign. In general, we note that discussions of misinformation on social media focus on three main topics: (1) perceptions of polls and media coverage as biased; (2) misinformation related to the electoral process, and; (3) misinformation related to COVID-19 and an anticipated authoritarian shift should the Coalition Avenir Québec be re-elected. Quantitative analysis of social media data shows that some misinformation content appeared among the most retweeted tweets about Quebec politics during the campaign. Our survey data suggests that Quebecers perceive misinformation as a serious issue in the election but are nonetheless confident that the election will be administered fairly. About one-quarter of them consider that they were exposed to misinformation in connection with the election. Nearly half of Quebecers find it difficult to distinguish between factual information and misinformation, and more than 40% of respondents say they are unsure whether or not they had been exposed to misinformation during the campaign.

Analysis of social media discourse

Trust in polls and media

Throughout the election, polls have been repeatedly targeted, particularly the Léger polls, which are seen as biased against the Quebec Conservative Party. Although this distrust was present before the election started, the rhetoric was further fuelled by the comparison of a Léger poll and a Mainstreet poll. The Léger poll was released on August 24 and placed the Conservative Party in fourth place at 14% support, while a Mainstreet poll on August 27 placed the Conservative Party in second place at 21% (see Figure 1; interestingly, Mainstreet revised Conservative Party voter intentions, shifting them down to 18% the next day). Several internet users have compared crowd sizes at party leader rallies as proxies for indicating levels of support for the Conservative Party. Some have also created their own polls and circulated them within their own networks (see Figure 2); these results typically show that the Conservative Party is leading among voting intentions because they reflect the echo-chambers of individual social networks.

In a video published by Radio-Québec on August 29, Alexis Cossette-Trudel asked the Chief Electoral Officer at Elections Québec to investigate the links between the Coalition Avenir Québec and the polling firm Léger. This was followed by a citizens' initiative on Facebook, Twitter and Telegram inviting people to file a complaint with Elections Québec on the basis that Léger's polls were paid for by Coalition Avenir Québec campaign budget. Note: Elections Québec does not have the authority to regulate election polls. Several dozen internet users commented in posts on social media saying that they had filed a complaint.

This distrust of polls was accompanied by a broader distrust of the media, reflected in the idea

that the media were part of a government conspiracy (see Figure 3). Several media outlets were accused of being on the government's payroll whether for fear of running out of funding or because of alleged ties to the Coalition Avenir Québec. These allegations were based in part on the fact that Quebecor's Pierre-Karl Péladeau was recently made an officer of the Ordre national du Québec. Several bloggers, alternative media and internet users have also alluded to a tendency for media to single out Éric Duhaime and the Conservative Party of Quebec. For example, some suggested that the media's focus on allegations that Éric Duhaime encourages violence and allegedly failed to pay municipal taxes were examples of biased media coverage.

Misinformation surrounding the electoral process

Much of the misinformation that has circulated since the beginning of the campaign has been about the electoral process and voting. Consistent with the previously mentioned idea that polls predicting a Coalition Avenir Québec victory were inaccurate, many users critical of the government's health measures and management of the pandemic argued that if the Coalition Avenir Québec were re-elected, it would be as a result of electoral fraud (see Figure 4).

The mistrust in the electoral process itself was evidenced in examples at each stage of voting. Allegations included: - The use of lead pencils in marking a ballot could allow election administrators to change votes (despite the fact the boxes are opened and the votes counted in front of scrutineers from each party); - The use of mail-in ballots altogether (despite the fact that this method of voting is only available to a small number of voters); - Advance voting could allow boxes to be changed between the time of voting and the time of counting (despite the fact that the ballot boxes are sealed); - The use of vote-counting machines could be programmed to favour one party over another (despite the fact that all votes are counted by hand in front of scrutineers); - The alleged removal of unvaccinated individuals from the voters' list or a requirement to be vaccinated in order to vote (despite the fact that there is no vaccination requirement to vote and that any eligible voter is able to register to vote if he or she finds that they are not on the list); - The need to take a picture of oneself with one's ballot to prevent fraud.

This misinformation was sometimes associated with a desire to withdraw from the voting system altogether, such as by requesting to be removed from the list of electors (see Figure 5) or by mailing back the voter registration card. However, the overwhelming majority of messages on this topic were about encouraging citizens to vote in order to make their voices heard.

In general, these narratives do not seem to reflect deeply held beliefs, but rather a lack of knowledge about electoral administration in Quebec. Our survey data reveals, for example, that almost half of voters (47.2%) do not know that all ballots are counted by hand in Quebec. Similarly, less than one in five electors (18.6%) are aware that voting by mail will only be permitted for certain categories of electors in the current election (see Figure 6). This lack of knowledge about the electoral process opens the door to narratives that question the administration of the election. It should be noted that elections in Canada are considered by experts to be among the most reliable and well-managed in the world.

Authoritarian decline if the Coalition Avenir Québec is re-elected

There was a great deal of speculation during the campaign, especially among groups opposed to COVID-19 health measures, about what would happen if the incumbent Coalition Avenir Québec were re-elected. Many individuals in these groups accuse the Coalition Avenir Québec

government of being a dictatorship (see Figure 4) and warn of an authoritarian decline in Quebec should it be re-elected.

These concerns relate firstly to the fear of a return to COVID-19 restrictions, including the return of the vaccine passport and a new province-wide lockdown (see Figure 7). Some content creators spread fear by suggesting a re-elected CAQ government will introduce measures that go much further than those previously in place, such as the construction and use of concentration camps (see Figure 8).

There is also a concern that the newly adopted Youth Protection Act (Bill 15), which includes a clause about parental primacy, could be used to place children in protective custody if parents refuse to vaccinate their children or choose to home school their children as a way of avoiding health measures (or government indoctrination). Rebel News, for example, produced a story on the subject, describing the case of a family that felt forced to move to Manitoba to avoid Bill 15 (see Figure 9). This story was re-shared among specific groups, especially those opposed to COVID-19 measures and vaccination. It should be noted that Bill 15 aims to clarify that the child's best interest should be prioritized above all else; clauses specifying the involvement of child services remain unchanged.

Some allegations also relate to the climate crisis and the use of digital technologies such as facial recognition and digital identity used to monitor, evaluate and penalize citizens based on their lifestyle choices.

Whether related to health measures, the use of digital technologies or the climate crisis, these lines of discourse all allege that the government's primary goal is to control the population and that a gradual infringement on individual freedoms will lead to the complete decline of democracy in Quebec in the near future.

Volume of misinformation in public discourse

Since the start of the campaign, the Project has extracted all tweets that include certain keywords related to the Quebec election in order to evaluate the type of content being propagated on the platform. Among these election-related tweets, the Project pulled the 30 tweets that were the most reshared on each day of the campaign.

The Project's findings show that several tweets containing misinformation were among those most shared on a daily basis throughout the election period thus far. A significant proportion of these tweets were about COVID-19 (pandemic management, vaccination, future health measures) or questioned the impartiality of media coverage or polling data. Many of the most shared tweets came from the same handful of users. Our human monitoring suggests that most of the misinformation circulating remained concentrated among small communities online and rarely reached the larger public. The fact that some misinformation still appears among the most shared tweets about Quebec politics may reflect the high level of activity of individuals who tend to believe misinformation on social media.

Perceptions surrounding the issue of misinformation

Our survey included questions about Quebecers' perceptions about misinformation and whether they consider it to be a concern. As shown in Figure 10, a strong majority of Quebecers (63.1%) somewhat or strongly agree that misinformation is a serious problem in the 2022 provincial

election. Despite this perception that misinformation is a serious problem, only 28.3% think they have seen, read or heard misinformation in connection with the election, while 40.9% of respondents are unsure. This high level of uncertainty may be due to the fact that about half of Quebecers (49.9%) agree that it is difficult to distinguish factual information from misinformation. Although Quebecers perceive misinformation as a serious problem during the election, more than three-quarters of voters are confident that the election will be administered fairly, a percentage comparable to that observed during the federal election in 2021.

When asked about what kinds of misinformation respondents believed they had been exposed to during the campaign, the most frequent themes were the pandemic and vaccination (9% of responses), the fight against climate change (4% of responses), state infrastructure and related spending (4% of responses), and the parties' commitments on public spending and taxes (4% of responses). Many respondents also expressed distrust in the Conservative Party of Quebec and its leader (16% of responses) as well as the media (8% of responses), identifying these actors as key sources of misinformation. Respondents who said they had been exposed to misinformation expressed a similar level of trust in the electoral process as other respondents, but have a stronger impression that misinformation is a serious problem in the current provincial election.

Methodology

The survey was created on Qualtrics and administered to a sample of 1,722 Quebecers from the Leger web panel between August 30 and September 15, 2022. Approximately 100 respondents completed the survey each day of the campaign. This sample was representative of the Quebec population within the sampling margin. To ensure representativeness, the data analyzed is weighted by age, gender and the administrative region in which respondents live.

Twitter data was collected using the Twitter API and a set of keywords related to the 2022 Quebec general election. In total, 1,654,939 tweets were collected from August 28 to September 17, 2022. Each day, two human coders manually classified each of the 30 most shared tweets over a 24-hour period into two categories (1 = misinformation, 0 = no misinformation). A total of 630 tweets were manually classified. Tweets are considered to contain misinformation when classified as such by both coders. The proportion of most shared tweets containing misinformation is the number of tweets containing misinformation divided by the number of tweets analyzed each day (30).