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Social Media and Political Engagement in Canada

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About this Report

This report was produced by the Social Media Lab (SocialMediaLab.ca) at Ted Rogers School of Management, Ryerson University and is part of the Social Media Data Stewardship Project (SocialMediaData.org). The report was written by Elizabeth Dubois, Anatoliy Gruzd, Jenna Jacobson and Philip Mai. It is based on a census-balanced online survey of 1,500 online Canadian adults conducted between June 1–July 15, 2017.

About the Social Media Lab

The Social Media Lab is an interdisciplinary research laboratory at Ted Rogers School of Management at Ryerson University. The lab studies how social media is changing the ways in which people communicate, share information, conduct business and form communities, and how these changes impact society. The broad aims of the lab's research initiatives are to provide decision makers with additional knowledge and insights into the behaviours and relationships of online network members, and understand how these interpersonal connections influence our choices and actions.

About the Authors

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Foreword

Throughout much of the world, social media use is widely embraced as a tool to learn about news and politics. From individuals sharing ideas and opinions to organizations—such as political parties, governments, and news media—to making use of citizens’ digital trace data, social media platforms are now an integral part of the modern political communication ecosystem.

The next Canadian Federal Election will be held in 2019 and important questions are being raised about who is likely to engage politically online, how Canadians feel about their data being used for political purposes, and whether Canadians are encountering the kinds of information they need to make informed choices.

This is the third and final report based on an online survey of 1,500 Canadian Internet users that investigates the ways online Canadian adults are engaging politically on social media. The other two reports in this series are: [*The State of Social Media in Canada 2017*](#) and [*Social Media Privacy in Canada*](#).

In this report, we examine:

1) To what extent do online Canadian adults share and/or self-censor their political opinions on social media?

2) Are online Canadian adults exposed to diverging views on social media?

3) How comfortable are online Canadian adults with political actors examining and using their social media data?

The results show that:

- Despite concerns of young voter apathy, young Canadians are more purposeful and active posters on social media than older generations.
- Most online Canadian adults exercise some form of political self-censorship—i.e., they sometimes choose not to post political messages on social media.
- Some online Canadian adults engage in strategic friending, and most are exposed to a variety of perspectives on social media.
- Online Canadian adults frequently agree with what their friends post on social media, but they also frequently disagree.
- While the use of social media to infer public opinion has increased as political groups and journalists have embraced social media as a data source, online Canadian adults are generally not comfortable with this type of data use.

Highlights

Sharing political opinions

- **43%** share political opinions (all ages)
- **56%** of 18–24 year olds share political opinions

Self-censorship

- **58%** choose not to post because a political comment might upset another person
- Women (**64%**) are more likely to engage in self-censorship than men (**51%**)

Echo chamber

- **70%** at least sometimes agree with what their friends post
- **73%** at least sometimes disagree with what their friends post

Intentional friending

- **23%** likely to friend or follow people with **shared** political views
- **19%** likely to friend or follow people with **different** political views

Social media data use by political parties

- **17%** are comfortable with political parties using their social media
- **65%** are uncomfortable with political parties using their social media

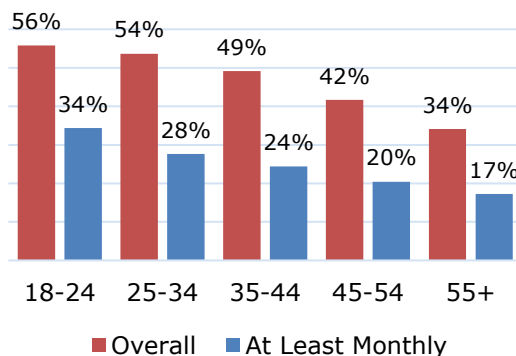
1. Sharing political content

1.1 Expressing political opinions

43% of online Canadian adults share political opinions on social media, and 23% of our participants do so monthly or more frequently. This means that the majority of Canadians do not: 57% of Canadians indicate that they have never shared political opinions on social media, including 6%¹ of participants who do not have any social media accounts.

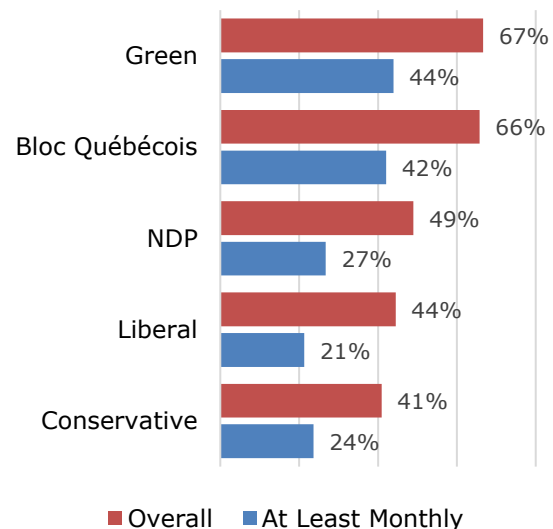
When analyzing the age break down, we consistently see that younger online Canadian adults are more politically engaged on social media in comparison to older cohorts. For example, 56% of 18–24 year old Canadians share their political opinions on social media, compared to only 34% of those aged 55 and older.

Share political opinions on social media, by age group



Among respondents who self-identified with one of the federal political parties (n=1,185), the supporters of smaller parties (in terms of the number of seats in the House of Commons as of Fall 2018) tend to be more active on social media. For example, 67% of the Green Party supporters and 66% of the Bloc Québécois supporters share political opinions via social media, compared to only 44% of Liberals and 41% of Conservatives.

Share political opinions on social media, by party affiliation



¹ See Gruz, Jacobson, Mai, & Dubois. (2018). The State of Social Media in Canada 2017. DOI:[10.5683/SP/AL8Z6R](https://doi.org/10.5683/SP/AL8Z6R)

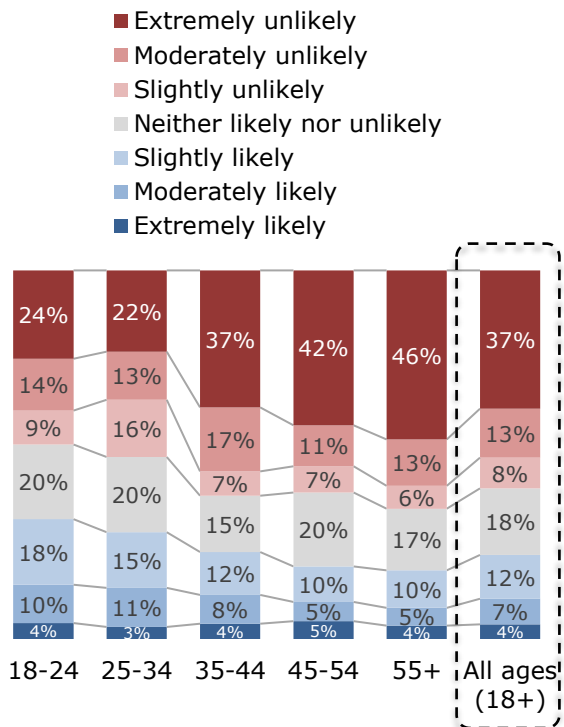
1.1 Expressing political opinions (continued)

Political expression on social media can take multiple forms. In addition to asking how often people share political opinions on social media, we also asked how likely online Canadian adults are to “like” or “comment” on the political posts of others.

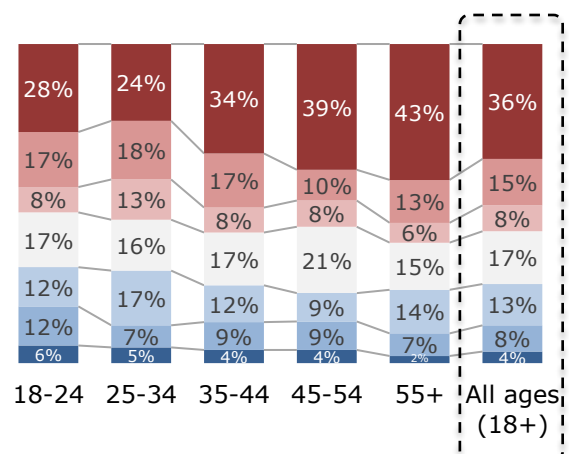
These kinds of political expression online are fairly uncommon among participants. Only 23% reported any likelihood of “liking” political posts and 25% reported any likelihood of “commenting” on political posts.

Again, we see that younger online Canadian adults are more likely to engage politically on social media. 18–24 year olds are more likely to “like” (33%²) and “comment” (30%) on political posts than those 55+ (19% and 23% respectively).

Likelihood of “liking” political posts, by age group



Likelihood of “commenting” on political posts, by age group



² 32.5% rounded up to 33%

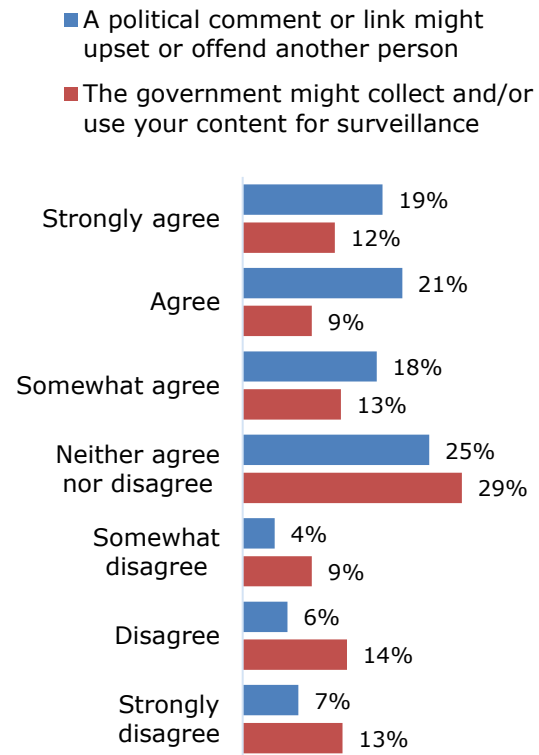
1.2 Political self-censorship

To examine questions about whether online Canadian adults are engaging in self-censorship, we consider when people elect **not** to post or share information on social media.

Most online Canadian adults are engaging in some level of political self-censorship on social media. 58% of Canadians choose not to post on social media because a political comment or link might upset or offend another person³. Interestingly, women (64%) are more likely to engage in this self-censorship practice than men (51%).

In comparison, a smaller percentage of participants (35%⁴) sometimes choose not to post to social media because of the concern the government will collect and use their data for surveillance.

Self-censorship on social media because....



³ This includes the following responses: "Strongly agree", "Agree", and "Somewhat agree"

⁴ 34.5% rounded up to 35%

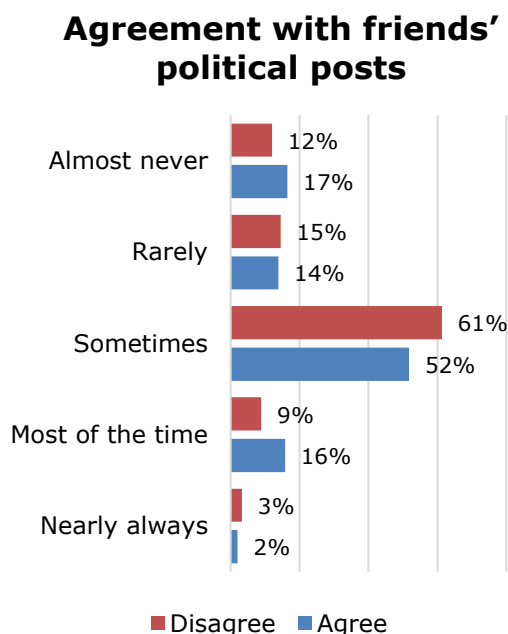
2. Are Canadians in echo chambers?

2.1 Agreeing and disagreeing with friends online

The echo chamber refers to when people only encounter information that conforms to their existing beliefs. Online Canadian adults report that they frequently agree with what their friends post on social media, but they also frequently disagree.

Our survey shows 70% of participants at least sometimes⁵ agree with what their friends post, although only 2% report nearly always agreeing. At the same time, 73% at least sometimes disagree while 3% nearly always disagree with what their friends post.

This data in isolation cannot tell us whether Canadian social media users are in echo chambers, but it does lend support to the idea that people are exposed to a variety of perspectives on social media.



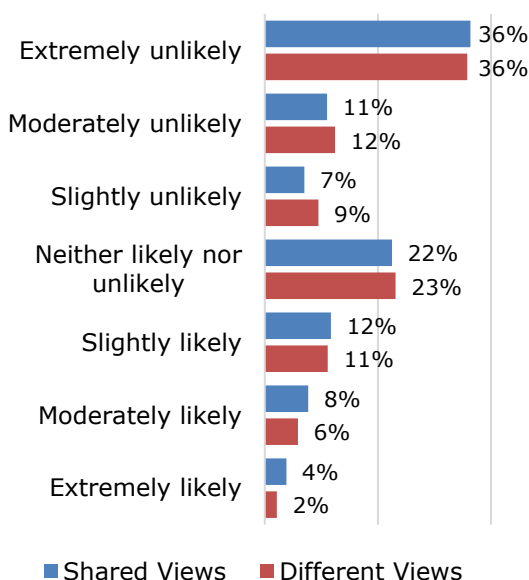
⁵ This includes the following responses: "Sometimes", "Most of the time" and "Nearly always"

2.2 Selecting friends for their political views

We also asked people to report how likely they are to friend or follow someone because that person has the same or different political views.

Our participants are relatively equally likely to friend or follow people because they have shared (23%⁶) or different political views (19%)⁷.

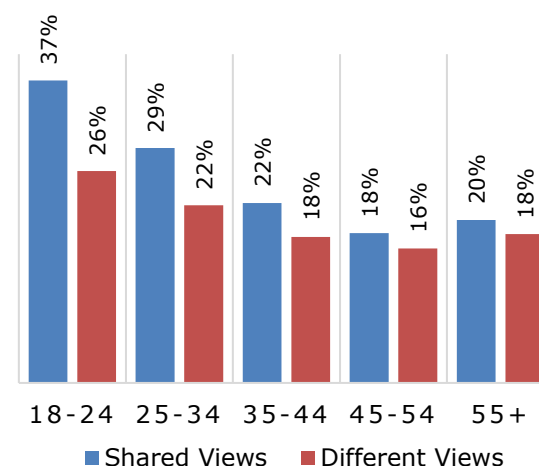
Likelihood of friending or following based on shared/different political views



We found that young people tend to be more intentional in their friending and following practices as they relate to political opinions.

Of people aged 18–24, 37% are at least slightly likely to friend or follow because someone shares their political views and 26% are at least slightly likely to friend or follow because someone has different views. In contrast, only 20% and 18% of those 55+ intentionally friend or follow for these reasons, respectively.

Likely⁷ to friend or follow based on shared/different political views, by age group



⁶ 23% consists of 11.7% ("Slightly likely") + 7.7% ("Moderately likely") + 3.8% ("Extremely likely")

⁷ This includes the following responses: "Slightly likely", "Moderately likely" and "Extremely likely"

3. Comfort with social media data use

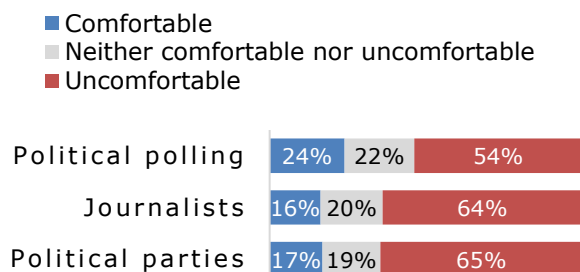
3.1 Social media data use by political parties, journalists, and pollsters

The use of social media to infer public opinion and report the public's voice has increased as political groups and journalists have embraced social media as a data source. We asked participants about their comfort level with this emerging practice in the context of "publicly available" social media data (referring to data that third parties can access and mine without users' consent).

Online Canadian adults are generally uncomfortable with their social media data being used to report public opinion—even if the data is publicly available⁸. In fact, the majority of participants are uncomfortable with political parties (65% uncomfortable), journalists (64% uncomfortable), or political pollsters (54% uncomfortable) using their social media data.

At the same time, there is a segment of the Canadian population who are less concerned about this kind of social media data use. Specifically, 24% of online Canadian adults indicate that they are comfortable with their publicly available social media data being used for political polling, followed by 17% and 16% who are comfortable with this data being used by political parties or journalists, respectively.

Comfort with third party use of publicly available social media data



⁸ For more details see: Dubois, Gruz, & Jacobson. (2018). Journalists' Use of Social Media to Infer Public Opinion: The Citizens' Perspective. *Social Science Computer Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439318791527>

Methods

Data was collected using a market research data company, Research Now, for panel recruitment. The survey was open from June 1 to July 15, 2017 and was hosted by Qualtrics. We received a total of 1,500 completed responses after data cleaning. The survey was made available to online Canadian adults in French and English. The term “online Canadian adults” refers to Internet users aged 18 and older.

To increase the representativeness of the data, we used quota sampling by age, gender, and geographical region to match the distributions in the 2016 Statistics Canada Census⁹. We recognize gender is not binary; however, the sampling question was phrased to be in line with Statistics Canada for recruiting a representative sample of adult Canadians. Later in the survey, participants were invited to self-identify as “trans*, non-binary, two-spirit, genderqueer, or other” and 0.8% (12 people) did. Considering the small and non-representative sample of this group, the gender-based distributions are only reported based on the counts of participants who self-identified as female or male. Four respondents were excluded from the demographic-based counts due to their incomplete demographic data.

Census-Balanced Sampling by Gender, Age, and Region

CANADA	2016 %
GENDER	
Female	51
Male	49
AGE	
18–24	11
25–34	16
35–44	16
45–54	18
55+	39
REGION	
Western (Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan)	32
Atlantic (New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island)	7
Ontario	38
Quebec	23

Ethics

The data is anonymized and presented in aggregate in this report. Prior to data collection, Research Ethics Board approval was obtained from two Canadian universities. Participants were shown a comprehensive consent form. Participants were offered eRewards for completing the survey, which can be transferred to various loyalty rewards programs.

Reporting

All percentages are rounded to the nearest 1%

⁹ Unfortunately, Research Now does not have panel survey participants from Northwest Territories, Nunavut, and Yukon.

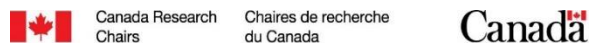
Survey Questions

For this report, we analyzed the following questions from our survey:

Sharing Political Opinions Thinking about all of the social media sites you use, how often do you <i>share your political opinions</i> ? [Several times a day; Daily; Weekly; Monthly; Less than monthly; Never]	Social Media Data Use by Third Parties How comfortable would you be if one of the following entities accessed information about you or posted by you publicly on social media? • Journalist • Political party [Extremely comfortable; Moderately comfortable; Slightly comfortable; Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable; Slight uncomfortable; Moderately uncomfortable; Extremely uncomfortable]
Political Engagement On social media, how likely would you do one of the following: • Friend or follow someone because they SHARE YOUR POLITICAL VIEWS • Friend or follow someone because they offer interesting views DIFFERENT from your own POLITICAL VIEWS • Click the “like” button in response to POLITICAL comments or material posted by someone else (even though you might disagree with it) • Post a comment in response to a POLITICAL post or status update from someone else [Extremely likely; Moderately likely; Slightly likely; Neither likely nor unlikely; Slightly unlikely; Moderately unlikely; Extremely unlikely]	Social Media Data Use for Polling How comfortable would you be if information about you or posted by you publicly on social media is used for <i>political polling</i> ? [Extremely comfortable; Moderately comfortable; Slightly comfortable; Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable; Slight uncomfortable; Moderately uncomfortable; Extremely uncomfortable]
Self-Censorship You sometimes choose NOT to post a comment or link on social media because: • A political comment or link might upset or offend another person • The government might collect and/or use your content for surveillance [Strongly agree; Agree; Somewhat agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Somewhat disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree]	Age What is your age group? [18–24; 25–34; 35–44; 45–54; 55+]
Agreement with Online Friends When your friends post on social media, how often do you AGREE with the political opinions or political content they post? [Nearly always; Most of the time; Sometimes; Rarely; Almost never]	Self-Identification For the purposes of this study, how would you like to be identified? • Female • Male • Trans*, non-binary, two-spirit, genderqueer, other
Disagreement with Online Friends How often do you find that you DISAGREE with the political opinions or political content your friends post on social media? [Nearly always; Most of the time; Sometimes; Rarely; Almost never]	Political Party Affiliation Generally speaking, which Canadian federal political party do you identify with? • Bloc Québécois • Conservative • Green • Liberal • NDP • None of the above • Other

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The Canada Research Chairs Program (CRCP) is a tri-agency (SSHRC, NSERC, CIHR) program launched in 2000. The CRCP is designed to enable Canadian universities and affiliated research institutes and hospitals to foster research excellence and to enhance their role as centres of research excellence in the global, knowledge-based economy. Chair holders are entrusted with improving our depth of knowledge and quality of life, strengthen Canada's international competitiveness, and help train the next generation of highly skilled people through student supervision, teaching, and the coordination of other researchers' work.



The Ted Rogers School of Management (TRSM) at Ryerson University is Canada's preeminent entrepreneurial-focused business school that is shaping

the country's next generation of global innovators and leaders. TRSM is home to six schools of management, three innovative graduate degrees (two MBA degrees and one research-focused Master of Science in Management), and 14 cutting-edge research centres, institutes, and labs. The Ted Rogers School of Management is accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), and is home to nearly 10,000 students and 250 industry-connected faculty members.



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