

Facebook Campaigning in the 2019 and 2021 Canadian Federal Elections

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Abstract

Canada’s federal elections in 2019 and 2021 produced a similar outcome—a minority Liberal government. These back-to-back elections provide an ideal context to understand trends in digital campaigning strategies and assess how the pandemic influenced campaigns’ use of social media. We examine how the three leaders of the major parties used Facebook in 2019 ($n = 712$) compared to 2021 ($n = 979$). The Conservative leader O’Toole posted more frequently than other candidates in 2021, fitting with the equalization theory of digital campaigning. In 2019 and 2021, the incumbent prime minister, Trudeau, received the most user engagement on his Facebook posts despite calling a snap election during a pandemic and less than two years into his mandate. These findings support normalization theories of digital campaigning with evidence of an accumulating incumbent advantage. The Covid-19 pandemic sidelined attention to climate change. We argue that the Liberal government owned both issues; we expected Trudeau to have greater attention to and user engagement for these policy posts. In general, Facebook posts about the pandemic yielded greater user engagement than posts that did not mention the pandemic. Candidates tested new campaign strategies in 2021, particularly making calls to interact with them; these posts yielded higher user engagement than posts that did not include a call to interact. While candidates used new social media campaign strategies, voter turnout declined from 2019 to 2021. These findings have implications for other democratic systems and the future of digital campaigning.

Keywords

Canada; climate change; election; Facebook; mobilization; pandemic; social media; user engagement

1. Introduction

In August 2021, Prime Minister Trudeau called a snap election despite being less than two years into his mandate and the possibility of staying in power for up to five years before calling another election. The snap election produced a similar outcome—Trudeau's Liberal party was re-elected as a minority government, meaning the Liberal Party did not win a majority of seats. The 2019 and 2021 back-to-back elections provide an opportunity to assess how the pandemic influenced candidates' use of social media. Stromer-Galley et al. (2021) argue that there is a lack of research on how social media messaging changes longitudinally; we address this gap, as they do, by comparing two election cycles.

Furthermore, we study a country outside the US, whereas existing political communication research focuses on the US (Boulianne, 2019a). Studying Canada provides valuable insights into election campaigns in bilingual countries, such as Belgium, Finland, India, South Africa, and Switzerland, as well as multi-party systems, such as Brazil, Denmark, Finland, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Philippines, and South Korea. Like Australia and New Zealand, Canada has a parliamentary system modeled after the UK's Westminster system. More generally, Canada has a parliamentary system, as do most European countries. We analyze trends in digital campaigning strategies in a Western democracy, focusing on changes in attention to policy issues and mobilization posts.

In this article, we focus on Facebook as a platform. While we do not know the profile of those who are engaging (liking, commenting, and sharing) with Facebook posts, we follow a line of research suggesting that Facebook, unlike Twitter, is a platform for political leaders to connect with their supporters (Boulianne & Larsson, 2023; Kelm et al., 2019; Rossini et al., 2018; Stromer-Galley et al., 2021; Wurst et al., 2023). According to the *Digital News Report 2023*, 62% of Canadians use Facebook (Newman et al., 2023). Furthermore, 15% of Canadians follow political candidates or a political party on social media (Boulianne & Steen-Johnsen, 2023).

We focus on the frequency of Facebook posts and user engagement with these posts, examining differences by election cycle and party leader. We refer to user engagement as how users react to Facebook posts, including liking, sharing, and commenting. Facebook has several affordances, particularly related to different types of interaction, multi-media posts, advertising, and longer posts, which are combined with widespread adoption, making it a critical tool in campaigns in Western democracies. We document the increase in Facebook posts but note that this increase is attributable to the Conservatives (an established party challenging the Liberal government). We also document that the Covid-19 pandemic sidelined attention to climate change as a policy issue. Drawing upon scholarship about issue ownership, we argue that Trudeau's incumbent government owned this issue and thus, his posts about the pandemic should produce higher levels of user engagement.

In 2019, Conservative Scheer was the only leader to post calls to interact, whereas, in 2021, all candidates posted these types of calls. In 2021, these posts produced higher levels of user engagement. We explain this pattern in terms of the pandemic, which contributed to loneliness; in this context, leaders' calls to interact appealed to Facebook users. Leaders posted more calls to participate (vote, watch the debate, etc.) in 2021 compared to 2019. Despite the increased calls to participate in this election, voter turnout dropped from 67% to 62.6% (Elections Canada, 2021). Overall, the user engagement analysis shows that Trudeau still dominates social media, supporting the normalization theories about digital campaigning. Trudeau had many advantages,

including incumbency status, a more expansive follower network, and his government “owned” the issue that was top-of-mind for Canadians during the election—the pandemic.

2. Facebook Posts in Pandemic Elections: A New Look at Normalization or Equalization Debates

The pandemic increased the health and political costs of in-person events. Specifically, there are health risks associated with door-to-door canvassing and larger events. In addition, Trudeau’s events were targeted by anti-vaxxers and those opposed to any pandemic-related restrictions. Given these risks associated with in-person interaction during a pandemic, we expect an increase in the frequency of posting to Facebook from 2019 to 2021.

We also consider whether there are party differences in the frequency of posts from 2019 versus 2021. Established and incumbent parties are more likely to have the resources to adopt social media (Quinlan et al., 2018; Xenos et al., 2017); however, other studies suggest that challenger parties post more often on social media (Stetka et al., 2019). Political parties’ differential rates of social media use are core to understanding the normalization versus equalization debates about digital campaigning (Bene, 2023; Keller & Kleinen-Von Königslöw, 2018; Margolis & Resnick, 2000; Strandberg, 2008). When established parties make greater use of this platform, this favors a normalization explanation of digital campaigning; when challenger/opposition/outsider parties use this platform to a greater degree, this supports the equalization explanation of digital campaigning. The support for normalization versus equalization likely depends on the political context and specific election. As such, this theory requires constant attention within the field of digital campaigning.

In the Canadian context, these debates must examine the tendency to re-elect leaders for multiple terms, providing a new angle to consider the role of incumbency in digital campaigning. While Gibson (2020, p. 12) suggests that tendencies of normalization and equalization over time could be considered a “pendulum swing between these two poles,” we note that there are cumulative effects that amass as candidates gain experience and followers through elections. In particular, we propose the concept of accumulating incumbency advantage, which favors parties and candidates that create and sustain large follower networks during and post-election. These large networks benefit the incumbent in subsequent elections, as they can draw upon their follower bases to maximize engagement. In countries with snap elections, these larger follower networks are a critical resource for the candidates and parties.

RQ1: Are there differences in the frequency of posting by (a) party leader or (b) time period?

3. Trudeau’s Popularity: Incumbency, Network Size, and Snap Elections

Trudeau was first elected in 2015, then re-elected in 2019, and then re-elected in 2021. Before Trudeau’s election in 2015, the Conservative Party led the Canadian government with an election in 2006, a re-election in 2008, and another in 2011. This re-election cycle may make Canadian politics distinctive from other electoral systems.

Studies show that higher-status politicians tend to elicit more user engagement (Peeters et al., 2023); this pattern would favor Trudeau as a high-profile candidate (the prime minister) and having a family legacy in

the prime ministerial role as his father won elections during the 1970s and 1980s. Established and incumbent parties are more likely to have the resources to pay for post-promotion, increasing the possibilities for engagement (Bossetta, 2018; Keller & Kleinen-Von Königslöw, 2018).

Prior research demonstrates that candidates and parties with larger numbers of followers have advantages in terms of user engagement (Bene, 2023; Brands et al., 2021; Heiss et al., 2019; Keller & Kleinen-Von Königslöw, 2018; Klinger et al., 2023). User engagement is important because when users interact with the content, the content is propelled through online networks due to Facebook's algorithm, which favors content yielding higher levels of engagement (Bene, 2023; Jost, 2023; Keller & Kleinen-Von Königslöw, 2018; Tønnesen et al., 2023).

In 2019, Trudeau received the most user engagement in terms of likes, comments, and other user engagement metrics (Boulianne & Larsson, 2023). We wanted to see if that continued to be the case, even though Trudeau called a snap election during a pandemic and less than two years after the last election. The other political leaders did not want an election and criticized the snap election as opportunistic and irresponsible given the pandemic. Turnbull-Dugarte (2023) argues that when the governing party calls a snap election, it could increase trust as voters relish the chance to weigh in on the government's continuing mandate. His research focused on the UK. Furthermore, studies in Canada suggest that voters rarely punish the prime minister for calling a snap election (Blais et al., 2004). A citizen's reaction to the snap election may depend on whether they share the ideological position of the governing party calling the snap election (Blais et al., 2004; Turnbull-Dugarte, 2023). To the extent that Facebook user engagement is based on supporters, we expect user engagement patterns to continue to support Trudeau's popularity. In other words, his popularity would not suffer due to calling a snap election during an ongoing pandemic.

RQ2: How does user engagement (likes, etc.) differ by (a) party leader or (b) time period?

4. Competing Policies: Climate Change Versus the Pandemic

Posts about policies are relatively rare on social media, albeit studies show that candidates are more likely to post about policies on Facebook than on other platforms (Boulianne & Larsson, 2023; Stromer-Galley et al., 2021). Stromer-Galley et al. (2021) compared candidates' social media use during the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, finding that posts about policy issues were more common in 2020 than in 2016. They explain this change in terms of the pandemic.

During a campaign, political parties can: (a) stick to issues they "own" or (b) address issues based on public opinion or the "national public agenda" (Tønnesen et al., 2023). In terms of issue ownership, left-wing parties tend to own policies attached to social welfare and the environment (Cruz, 2017), whereas right-wing parties tend to own policies related to the economy, gun control, foreign policy, and crime (Smith, 2010; Tønnesen et al., 2023). The desire for attention on social media may trump issue ownership; parties may opt to post about policies that generate user engagement to maximize the visibility of their post.

In a study of elections in Poland and Czechia, Stetka et al. (2019) did not find a relationship between policy posts and user engagement. In the 2019 Canadian election, policy posts received less user engagement than

non-policy posts (Boulianne & Larsson, 2023). However, these studies fail to capture important nuances about issue ownership and Facebook as a platform to engage supporters.

If a party or its leader posts about a policy issue on Facebook, their followers may not engage with the post if it is not “their” issue. Climate change is an issue for left-wing parties, i.e., Liberals and the New Democratic Party (NDP), more so than right-wing parties, i.e., Conservatives (Boulianne et al., 2021). Those on the right are less concerned about or downgrade the importance of climate change versus the economy (Boulianne et al., 2021). As such, we expect more posts and higher user engagement on climate change for the left-wing leaders than those on the right. In 2019, we found support for these patterns: The right-wing Conservative leader rarely posted about climate change and yet, these types of Facebook posts produced higher user engagement for Liberal Trudeau (Boulianne et al., 2021).

Other studies have found that “environment” policy posts are relatively rare (Bene et al., 2023; Tschla et al., 2023) and produce lower levels of engagement (Bene et al., 2022; Brands et al., 2021) but, again, they do not consider party differences in patterns of user engagement on Facebook. As noted, other research suggests that Facebook is a platform for leaders to connect with supporters (see Boulianne & Larsson, 2023; Kelm et al., 2019; Rossini et al., 2018; Stromer-Galley et al., 2021; Wurst et al., 2023). Engagement with policy posts may depend on the topic and platform of the post.

The pandemic presents an interesting point of analysis. Since the policy area is new, it does not have a legacy or attachment to left or right-wing parties. Instead, pandemic policies offer a point of debate for the governing party versus the opposition parties. Indeed, Trudeau called a snap election to capitalize on the electorate’s goodwill generated from his pandemic policies and expand his support to a majority instead of a minority government (Medeiros & Gravelle, 2023). The pandemic was a critical election issue in 2021 (Medeiros & Gravelle, 2023). As such, the number of posts will be high for both the incumbent and the challenging parties; however, the question is whether followers engage differently with this policy topic. If the pandemic is framed regarding the economy, we might expect more engagement from followers of right-wing parties (Bene et al., 2023), whereas framing the pandemic in terms of health or social welfare might yield more engagement from followers of left-wing parties. Finally, we consider how this salient issue impacts attention to climate change in 2019 versus 2021. Did attention to the long-term threats related to climate change decrease due to the immediate threats related to the pandemic?

RQ3: Are there differences in attention to (a) climate change versus the pandemic, (b) policy issues by the party leader, or (c) policy issues by time period?

RQ4: Are there differences in user engagement for (a) climate change versus the pandemic posts, (b) policy issues by the party leader, or (c) climate change posts from 2019 to 2021?

5. Mobilization Posts: Calls to Participate and Interact

As mentioned, this was a snap election and there were concerns about people showing up to vote in an election less than two years after the prior election. People may be more likely to agree to a big request (show up at voting stations on election day) if they comply with a smaller request first (“like” my post). This strategy is called the foot-in-the-door (FITD) technique (Pascual & Guéguen, 2005). The effectiveness of FITD techniques

depends on several factors, especially the authority of the person making the requests and injunctive social norms supporting the activities (Guadagno, 2017). Having political leaders use the strategy and general social norms supporting voting helps the effectiveness of these FITD strategies. The idea is to ask voters to engage in low-risk online campaign activities in hopes of persuading them to participate in the higher-risk offline activity of voting. This theory of scaling up participation from low-effort online activities into high-effort offline activities has been well-established in existing scholarship on citizens' political participation (Boulianne, 2019b). However, the scholarship on "slacktivism" claims otherwise. For this article, we examine candidates' calls to participate in terms of (a) contacting them, such as texting them and (b) watching the leaders' debate, voting on election day, and other online or offline activities. We theorize that leaders implicitly use the FITD technique to increase voter turnout; unfortunately, we do not have data to test the effectiveness of this technique in real-world turnout. Instead, we document these mobilization posts and explore user engagement with this messaging.

Calls to interact are pretty rare as most studies document that politicians use social media to broadcast information rather than interact with citizens (Keller & Kleinen-Von Königslöw, 2018; Magin et al., 2017; Stromer-Galley et al., 2021; Wurst et al., 2023). However, the pandemic may have changed these dynamics. In particular, the pandemic limited opportunities for offline interaction through political rallies and door-to-door canvassing. As such, candidates may be more motivated to interact on social media to connect with voters and try to win their votes. However, Wurst et al. (2023) found that less than 1% of posts involved calls to interact (on Facebook or Instagram) in the 2021 German election. We expect that these calls to interact will be more frequent in 2021 compared to 2019 because of the limited opportunities for in-person interaction; furthermore, we expect that user engagement will be higher for these types of posts because the pandemic left many citizens feeling isolated and lonely. As such, calls to interact may appeal to voters in 2021.

Calls to participate are also quite rare, even when measured beyond merely casting a ballot (Magin et al., 2017; Wurst et al., 2023). In the 2021 German election, Wurst et al. (2023) found that 7% of party and candidate posts included a call to support online; the most popular calls were to donate, share the post, and add a party frame to one's profile picture. Heiss et al. (2019) also found that these types of posts were rare (4% for offline mobilization and 2% for online mobilization) in an Austria election; they also found these requests received lower levels of user engagement, regardless of whether the request was to participate online or offline. Tschla et al. (2023) also found that mobilization posts were rare (7%) in a national election in Greece in 2019. Looking at the EU election in 2019 and radical right party on Twitter, Heft et al. (2023) found that mobilization posts are rare (5%).

In contrast, Stetka et al. (2019) found that mobilization posts were popular in the Czechia (46%) and Polish (26%) elections; these types of posts produced higher levels of user engagement in Czechia and lower levels of engagement in Poland. As such, the frequency of mobilization posts and user engagement with these posts differ based on country context.

Stromer-Galley et al. (2021) compared candidates' social media use during the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections. They found that both Trump and Biden issued more calls to action (mobilization) in 2020 than in 2016; this pattern was evident for Facebook. These posts include calls to watch and share content. They explain the change in terms of the pandemic limiting in-person events. We expect a similar increase in

participation calls from 2019 to 2021; again, we explain this trend because of concerns about voter turnout and as part of a FITD strategy. While there is an abundance of studies documenting the (in)frequency of mobilization posts, we re-visit these findings given the pandemic and we seek to move scholarship forward by examining user engagement with these calls to participate posts (similar to Heiss et al., 2019; Stetka et al., 2019).

RQ5: Are there differences in the frequencies of (a) calls to interact versus participate, (b) type of call by the party leader, or (c) type of call by time period?

RQ6: Are there differences in user engagement with (a) calls to interact versus participate, (b) type of call by the party leader, or (c) type of call by time period?

6. Methods

6.1. Data Collection

We used CrowdTangle to gather Facebook posts and their meta-data. We considered a four-week election period. The four-week period was September 24, 2019, to October 22, 2019 ($n = 712$) and August 24, 2021, to September 20, 2021 ($n = 979$). We limited the posts to messages from the candidates, excluding retweets or shared material. We focus on three parties, covering 90% of the 338 seats in the House of Commons. The three parties cover the ideological range: Conservatives = right; Liberals = center (center-left); and NDP = left.

Using CrowdTangle data, we recorded the number of followers for each candidate's page on the first day of this data collection period. Liberal Leader and Prime Minister Trudeau had the most followers: 6.89 million in 2019 and 8.44 million in 2021. For NDP Singh, the numbers were 215,707 in 2019 and 369,962 in 2021. The Conservatives changed leaders from 2019 to 2021. For Conservative leader Scheer, the number was 304,342 in 2019; for Conservative leader O'Toole, the number was 122,031 in 2021.

6.2. Coding

Two students coded each post independently. They were instructed to read through posts once and assign codes to six different variables about the content. They were also instructed to use the "find" command to verify they had caught all mentions of keywords. The first author repeated this process to confirm the coding approach. There were a few disagreements about coding, given the short codebook and clear instructions. Coders focused on the text and did not code images, links, videos, etc. We assessed intercoder reliability by having the students code the same 51 random posts from the sample. Specifically, we tested for Holsti's coefficient of reliability, which varied between 0.90 and 0.98. With all the variables being dichotomous (0–1 for non-presence and presence) and with the majority of instances for all variables heavily skewed towards non-presence (i.e., coded as 0), this approach to reliability was deemed most suitable.

To identify pandemic policy content, coders read the post and searched for keywords including pandemic, Covid-19, coronavirus, vaccin*, vaxx, health crisis (if referring to pandemic), masks, and social distancing (including the French version of these keywords). Coders read the post to identify climate change policy and searched for climat*.

For calls to interact, we borrowed examples from the Digital Election Campaigning Worldwide (DigiWorld) codebook. These examples are as follows:

1. Call to comment on a post;
2. Call to take a vote by using Facebook reactions;
3. Call to address a political actor (via email or social networking sites);
4. Call for other interactions online;
5. Call to build new or strengthen already existing local political relationships;
6. Call to address a political actor personally, by letter, or over the phone;
7. Call for other interactions offline;
8. Call for other interaction.

We instructed coders to identify if any of these ideas (0,1) were included in the posts, in contrast to the DigiWorld codebook, which required identifying which type of call for interaction was used.

For calls to participate, we again borrowed examples from the DigiWorld codebook. These examples are as follows:

1. Call to share a post;
2. Share/forward/embed SNS post of politician/party;
3. Call to like/follow/subscribe to a Facebook page or to unlike/unfollow/unsubscribe it (likely the politician's page);
4. Call to sign an online petition or to participate in an online survey;
5. Call to participate in an online supporter campaign;
6. Call to go to vote or to vote for a party;
7. Call to participate in an offline survey (including TV);
8. Call to do door-to-door canvassing;
9. Call to participate in other offline campaign actions (e.g., voting booth and posting bills);
10. Call to join a party;
11. Call to watch a TV debate or other TV shows;
12. Call to donate to a party;
13. Mobilize/persuade/convince others (for party purposes);
14. Online mobilize/persuade/convince others (for party purposes);
15. Remind someone to vote offline (for example, in face-to-face conversations);
16. Join and participate in an SNS group started by the political actor (politician/party);
17. Equip your own SNS profile image with the party's logo.

Figure 1 contains examples of each of the four types of posts.

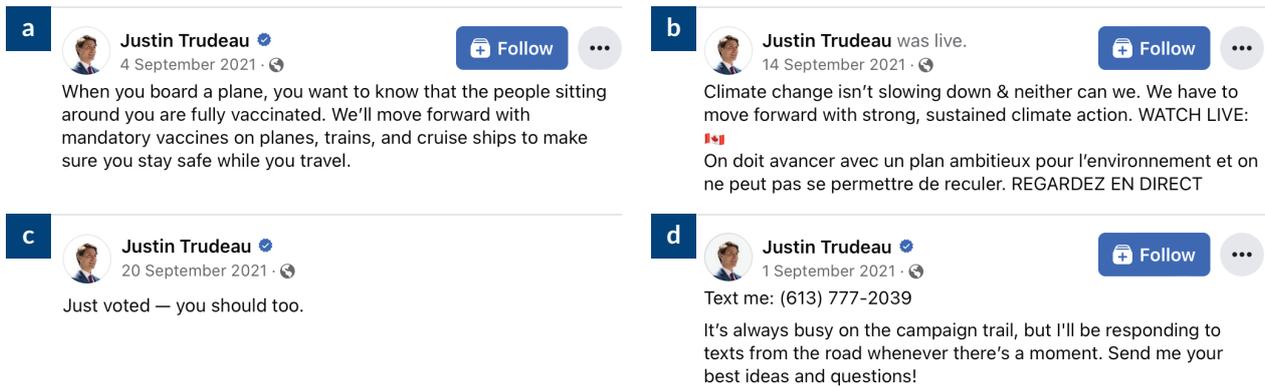


Figure 1. Coding scheme and exemplars: (a) pandemic post; (b) climate change post; (c) call to participate; and (d) call to interact.

6.3. Analysis

Our analysis focuses on two dependent variables: frequency of posts and user engagement. For user engagement on Facebook, we added the likes (and the nuanced reactions, such as “love” and “haha”), shares, and comments. We log-transformed our dependent variable to address the skewed distribution. We begin with an analysis of variance (ANOVA) and then conduct multivariate analysis using ordinary least squares regression. Both the ANOVA and the regression yield similar findings, offering robust results.

7. Findings

Concerning RQ1, the number of posts increased from 2019 to 2021 ($n = 712$ to $n = 979$). This change is largely attributed to Conservative leader O'Toole, who posted 514 messages on Facebook in 2021 (Table 1). Concerning RQ2, user engagement did not change for Liberal Trudeau (Table 1) or the Conservative leaders (Table 1) from 2019 to 2021 (RQ2). In contrast, NDP Singh's user engagement decreased slightly (Table 1). Overall, there were significant differences in user engagement based on the party leader (Table 1). These differences were larger in 2021 compared to 2019.

Concerning RQ3 about the topic of the posts, 8.9% of posts from 2021 mentioned the pandemic—Liberal Trudeau ($n = 56$ of $591 = 9.5\%$) was more likely to post about it than NDP Singh ($n = 14$ of $347 = 4\%$) or Conservative O'Toole ($n = 17$ of $753 = 2.3\%$). In 2021, these posts were more common than posts about climate change. Posts about climate change decreased from 9.4% in 2019 to 3.8% of posts in 2021. In 2021, Trudeau ($n = 23$ of $277 = 8.3\%$) posted more about climate change than Singh ($n = 14$ of $188 = 7.4\%$) or O'Toole ($n = 0$).

In terms of RQ4, we see slightly higher levels of user engagement with pandemic posts than posts that were not about the pandemic (Table 2). In this multivariate model, we did not see higher levels of user engagement for posts about climate change for the four weeks in 2019 or 2021 (whether or not pandemic policies were included in the regression model).

Regarding calls to interact (RQ5), the relative frequency of these posts stayed about the same: 2.8% of posts in 2019 and 4.4% in 2021. In 2019, Conservative Scheer was the only leader to post a call to interact

Table 1. User engagement by candidate (ANOVA).

	Trudeau (Liberal)		Singh (NDP)		O'Toole vs. Scheer (Conservative)	
	F-ratio = 1.11 $p = 0.294$ Welch test = 1.13 $p = 0.289$		F-ratio = 24.14 $p < 0.001$ Welch test = 26.60 $p < 0.001$		F-ratio = 2.30 $p = 0.130$ Welch test = 1.87 $p = 0.172$	
2019 election	Mean = 3.65 $n = 314$	SD = 0.51 $n = 159$	Mean = 3.27 $n = 239$	SD = 0.57	Mean = 3.02	SD = 0.74
	F-ratio = 73.84, $p < 0.001$ Welch test = 71.42 $p < 0.001$					
2021 election	Mean = 3.69 $n = 277$	SD = 0.43 $n = 188$	Mean = 2.99 $n = 514$	SD = 0.49	Mean = 2.94	SD = 0.55
	F-ratio = 202.11, $p < 0.001$ Welch test = 243.64 $p < 0.001$					
Both elections	Mean = 3.67 $n = 591$	SD = 0.47 $n = 347$	Mean = 3.12 $n = 753$	SD = 0.55	Mean = 2.97	SD = 0.62
	F-ratio = 268.30, $p < 0.001$ Welch test = 300.49 $p < 0.001$					

Table 2. User engagement by campaign year.

	2019 Campaign (without interact variable) $n = 712$		2019 Campaign (with interact variable) $n = 712$		2021 Campaign (without pandemic variable) $n = 979$		2021 Campaign (with pandemic variable) $n = 979$	
	b (SE)	p	b (SE)	p	b (SE)	p	b (SE)	p
NDP Singh	0.258 (0.063)	< 0.001	0.233 (0.063)	< 0.001	0.006 (0.047)	0.897	-0.002 (0.047)	0.971
Liberal Trudeau	0.612 (0.054)	< 0.001	0.579 (0.055)	< 0.001	0.737 (0.039)	< 0.001	0.751 (0.040)	< 0.001
Call to participate	0.139 (0.060)	0.020	0.125 (0.060)	0.036	-0.047 (0.040)	0.242	-0.044 (0.040)	0.272
Call to interact			-0.410 (0.141)	0.004	0.264 (0.084)	0.002	0.274 (0.084)	0.001
Climate change	0.024 (0.080)	0.759	0.023 (0.079)	0.773	-0.011 (0.088)	0.901	-0.008 (0.088)	0.924
Pandemic							0.129 (0.059)	0.029
	R-squared	0.179	R-squared	0.188	R-square	0.302	R-squared	0.305

Note: Comparison group is Conservatives, which in 2019 the leader was Scheer and in 2021 was O'Toole.

($n = 20$); neither Liberal Trudeau nor NDP Singh posted any calls to interact in 2019. As such, the observed negative relationship between calls to interact and user engagement in 2019 is attributed to Conservative Scheer (Table 2). In 2021, NDP Singh ($n = 34$ of 188 posts = 18.1%) was more likely to invite people to contact him compared to Liberal Trudeau ($n = 4$ of 277 posts = 1.4%) or Conservative O’Toole ($n = 5$ of 514 posts = 1.0%). These posts have an interesting pattern in terms of user engagement (Table 2). In 2019, these types of posts produced lower engagement (see note above about Scheer) but yielded higher engagement in 2021. In other words, in 2021, citizens “liked” the posts that asked them to contact the candidate.

As for calls to participate (go vote, watch this clip, sign up, and watch the leaders’ debate), these types of posts increased from 18.1% in 2019 to 23% in 2021 (RQ5). Across both years, the Conservative leaders posted 143 (of 753 posts = 19%) calls to participate compared to the Liberal Trudeau’s 120 posts (of 591 posts = 20.3%) and NDP Singh’s 91 posts (of 347 posts = 26.2%). Not all party leaders increased their participation calls from 2019 to 2021. For Trudeau, there were 75 (of 314 posts = 23.9%) calls to participate in 2019 but only 45 calls (of 277 posts = 16.2%) in 2021. Singh increased his participation calls from 12 (of 159 posts = 7.5%) in 2019 to 79 (of 188 posts = 42.0%) in 2021. For the Conservative leaders, there were 42 (of 239 posts = 17.6%) calls to participate in 2019 (Scheer) compared to 101 (of 514 posts = 19.6%) calls in 2021 (O’Toole). These posts did not yield greater user engagement in 2021 (RQ6). Instead, we see slightly higher levels of user engagement with calls to participate in 2019 (Table 2). Most notably, we see different patterns of user engagement for calls to participate versus calls to interact.

Our final set of regression analyses revisits RQ4 and RQ6, considering whether user engagement differs by candidate. User engagement with Liberal Trudeau’s posts did not change from 2019 to 2021, whereas user engagement decreased slightly for NDP Singh (Tables 1 and 3). When any of the three leaders posted calls to interact, these posts produced significant differences in user engagement (Table 3). However, these differences do not move in the same direction. When Liberal Trudeau and NDP Singh post calls to interact with them, user engagement increases; however, when Conservative leaders post calls to interact with them, user engagement decreases. As noted above, the pattern of reduced user engagement on calls to interact is specific to Scheer; in contrast, O’Toole’s posts about calls to interact increased user engagement (albeit the coefficient did not reach statistical significance).

Likewise, we examined the calls to participate and user engagement, which were positively correlated with the pooled analysis of Conservative posts. In this case, calls to participate increased user engagement in

Table 3. User engagement by candidate.

	Trudeau (Liberals) $n = 591$		Singh (NDP) $n = 347$		O’Toole vs. Scheer (Conservative) $n = 753$	
	b (SE)	p	b (SE)	p	b (SE)	p
2021 (vs. 2019)	0.001 (0.021)	0.950	-0.158 (0.034)	< 0.001	-0.048 (0.025)	0.051
Calls to participate	-0.058 (0.048)	0.231	-0.055 (0.071)	0.439	0.114 (0.058)	0.050
Calls to interact	0.513 (0.238)	0.031	0.261 (0.101)	0.011	-0.285 (0.128)	0.027
Climate change	-0.001 (0.059)	0.987	-0.018 (0.104)	0.862	0.582 (0.440)	0.186
Pandemic	0.131 (0.071)	0.064	0.117 (0.148)	0.427	0.140 (0.152)	0.358
	R-squared	0.017	R-squared	0.089	R-squared	0.020

2019 when Scheer posted these messages, whereas O’Toole’s calls to participate in 2021 did not significantly increase user engagement.

User engagement did not increase when Trudeau posted about climate change, despite expectations related to “owned” issues; instead, there was a slight increase in user engagement when Trudeau posted about the pandemic (albeit the coefficient was only significant at the 0.10 level, $n = 591$).

8. Conclusion

Trudeau’s continuing popularity supports the normalization theory of digital campaigning (Bene, 2023; Keller & Kleinen-Von Königslöw, 2018; Margolis & Resnick, 2000; Strandberg, 2008). We explain his continuing popularity in terms of his incumbency (Quinlan et al., 2018; Xenos et al., 2017) and his larger follower network (Brands et al., 2021; Heiss et al., 2019; Keller & Kleinen-Von Königslöw, 2018; Klinger et al., 2023). Indeed, the Canadian election is distinctive in its pattern of the re-election of leaders, which results in an accumulating advantage for Trudeau. Citizens did not punish Trudeau for the snap election (Blais et al., 2004; Turnball-Dugarte, 2023). In addition, his party owned the key election issue (pandemic policy). When any leader posted about the pandemic, user engagement increased, affirming Medeiros and Gravelle’s (2023) claim that this was a hot topic for 2021. When Trudeau posted about the pandemic, these posts produced slightly higher levels of user engagement.

The Conservative Party is an established party challenging Trudeau’s Liberals. They changed leaders from 2019 to 2021. In 2021, they posted more than the other party leaders, reflecting the equalization theory of digital campaigning (Stetka et al., 2019). O’Toole posted more in 2021 than Scheer did in 2019; user engagement depended on which Conservative leader posted. We believe the difference reflects the leaders’ personalities rather than the election cycle. In Canada, voters cast their ballots for local representatives of a party rather than directly for a leader, which suggests that party leaders are less relevant. Yet, the findings suggest that leaders do matter, particularly in relation to social media user engagement.

We studied Trudeau over two elections and changes in the content of these posts. Our research did not, however, consider what is sometimes referred to as the demand side of political communication—the expectations placed on these political actors by their supposed supporters. Relatedly, for the supply side, public demand may influence how the campaigns are branding their candidates, competencies, and personalities. Indeed, how “celebrity politicians” (van Zoonen, 2005) are portrayed and featured in contemporary campaigns leads to questions of whether it is possible for individuals without physical or charismatic advantages to truly thrive on social media platforms—platforms where widespread attention is indeed key for gaining engagement and possibly electoral success. Prime Minister Trudeau has more than 8 million followers on Facebook, whereas 27.5 million Canadians are on the voters’ list (Elections Canada, 2021). In a multi-party system, this is a disproportionate share of the electorate and an exponentially larger social network compared to the other leaders, which creates an enduring advantage. Future research could consider Trudeau alongside other highly popular political leaders across the globe to compare their use of Facebook and their ability to generate user engagement.

In 2021, all party leaders posted messages urging people to interact with them. However, the reception of these messages differed in 2021 compared to 2019. In 2021, users were more likely to engage with these

calls to interact by liking, commenting, and replying to these messages. We explain this finding in terms of the pandemic and people's general sense of loneliness; in this context, people "liked" the calls for interaction as an opportunity to connect online when offline contact was riskier. We explain the motivation for these posts in terms of the FITD technique (Pascual & Guéguen, 2005). While research on pandemic elections is forthcoming, we wonder whether these patterns are observed in other countries running elections during the pandemic.

Voter turnout is a challenge during a pandemic, snap elections, and elections only two years apart. Overall, the calls to participate increased from 2019 to 2021; the NDP and Conservative leaders increased calls to participate, whereas Trudeau's calls decreased. This pattern is notable as incumbent Trudeau did not try to mobilize the electorate more in 2021 compared to 2019. Voter turnout dropped. Calls to participate were more popular in the 2021 Canadian election than reports from elections in other countries (Heiss et al., 2019; Tschla et al., 2023; Wurst et al., 2023), albeit not as popular as in the Czechia and Polish elections (Stetka et al., 2019). While scholarship tends to aggregate calls to interact/participate as "mobilization posts" (Magin et al., 2017; Wurst et al., 2023), this may not be appropriate given our findings about user engagement patterns for calls to interact versus calls to participate. Further research could also explore nuances in the types of reactions to calls to interact versus participate. In particular, Gerbaudo et al. (2023) examine "haha" versus "angry" versus "like" reactions regarding their mobilization potential. This seems like a promising line of new research.

Finally, we considered Facebook to be a platform where supporters could react to party leaders' posts (Boulianne & Larsson, 2023; Kelm et al., 2019; Rossini et al., 2018; Stromer-Galley et al., 2021; Wurst et al., 2023). We outlined a theory about issue ownership (Cruz, 2017; Smith, 2010; Tønnesen et al., 2023), leading to expectations for a greater number of posts and higher user engagement when parties posted on Facebook about issues they owned. We find support that Trudeau posted more about climate change and pandemic policies than other party leaders; these are policy issues that his party owned. We find mixed support for issue ownership and user engagement. While Trudeau's posts about the pandemic produced slightly higher levels of engagement, his posts about climate change did not receive more user engagement. There are several explanations: (a) the assumption about Facebook as a platform for supporters may be over-stated in the literature and, thus, we should not expect a favorable environment for user engagement on posts about "owned policies" and (b) our analysis was limited to only two policy issues and these two issues are both competing with each other for Liberal supporters' attention. Further research could consider a wider variety of policy issues and attempt to code the ideological leanings of those who follow a specific politician and engage with their posts. Furthermore, our findings about user engagement and climate change did not replicate prior findings which considered the six weeks leading up to the 2019 election, capturing major climate strikes (Boulianne & Larsson, 2023).

In addition to the limited number of policy issues, this study is limited by the focus on text instead of images and videos. Other research assesses the importance of images in social media campaigning (e.g., Bossetta & Schmøkel, 2023; Farkas & Bene, 2021). We also focused on a single platform, which is a limitation (vs. Boulianne & Larsson, 2023). We chose Facebook because of its high adoption rates among Canadians (Newman et al., 2023) but also because the affordances (long posts) make it easier to accommodate bilingual posts. Indeed, Facebook and Instagram are better suited for this multi-lingual campaigning than Twitter's short entries which require separate posts for English and French content (Boulianne & Larsson, 2023).

In conclusion, our article offers new insights into the frequency of different types of Facebook posts and user engagement with these posts, examining differences by election cycle and party leader. We highlight the role of the pandemic in changing patterns of digital campaigning and discuss how these changes relate to findings from other Western democracies.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data and replication files are posted at <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.25555782.v1>

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