

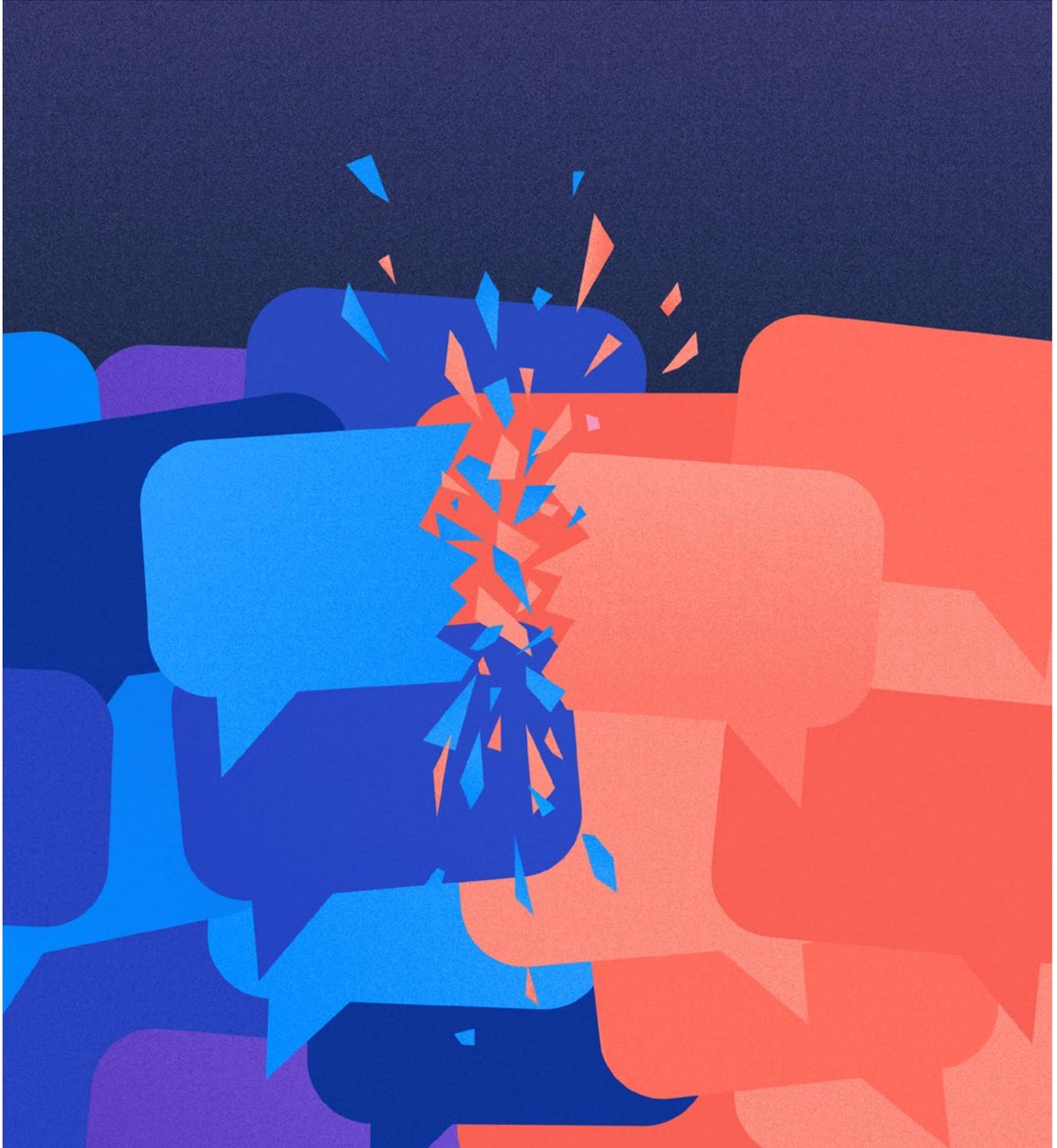


AUGUST 2023

Far and Widening

The Rise of Polarization in Canada

BY JUSTIN LING





The Public Policy Forum works with all levels of government and the public service, the private sector, labour, post-secondary institutions, NGOs and Indigenous groups to improve policy outcomes for Canadians. As a non-partisan, member-based organization, we work from “inclusion to conclusion” by convening discussions on fundamental policy issues and identifying new options and paths forward. For more than 30 years, PPF has broken down barriers among sectors, contributing to meaningful change that builds a better Canada.

1400 - 130 rue Albert
Ottawa, ON, Canada, K1P 5G4
Tel : 613.238.7858
www.ppforum.ca @ppforumca

© 2023, Public Policy Forum

ISBN: 978-1-77452-134-2





Preface 5

Introduction 11

What is Polarization? 15

Part 1:

Partisan Sorting 18

Streaming Parliament 19

Money Makes the World Go Round 21

Affective Polarization 22

If Canada Is Broken, Why Isn't Someone Fixing It? 23

Part 2:

Online Polarization 27

A New Media Ecosystem 28

Birds of a Feather 29

Cancel Culture 31

Part 3:

The Pandemic 34

The Science of Trust 35

The Trouble with Elites 36

Conclusion 39

Appendix 43

Acknowledgments 45

This report is the culmination of a seven-segment project in which the Public Policy Forum engaged communities across the nation. It is a dynamic and comprehensive study involving more than **1,600 young adults, 10 researchers and writers, six community organizations, two think tanks and one investigative journalist**—all studying, documenting and reporting on the issue of Canadian polarization and its ongoing threat to a healthy and vibrant democracy. PPF collectively seeks to understand how this issue is manifesting in Canada and break down silos needed to tackle these challenges, with a particular focus on young adults.

Learn about [How Polarization Manifests in Canada](#) ↗



Author

Justin Ling is a freelance investigative journalist. His work has appeared in the *Globe & Mail*, *The Guardian*, *Foreign Policy*, *WIRED* magazine and on CBC's *The National*. He is the author of *Missing From the Village*, and host of two podcasts for the CBC: *The Village*, and *The Flamethrowers*. He writes the *Bug-eyed and Shameless* newsletter, all about our current age of conspiracy theories and misinformation.

Preface

By **Victoria Kuketz**,

PPF Fellow in Digital Democracy

I began my career working in non-partisan democratic engagement with grassroots community organizations and marginalized groups, aiming to address barriers to access, information and inclusion that they face. Bringing those perspectives into my national policy work was a foundational value and the driving force behind accepting an invitation from the Public Policy Forum, where I had previously worked, to design, build and scale this project. I was excited by the ambition to gain a better understanding of different communities, both geographic and cultural, and how they are experiencing polarization in their daily lives.

The project would have to be multi-faceted, engage Canadians at all levels, speak to them directly, use different methods of investigating their opinions, and reflect the voices of people who are often left out of the conversation: in short, encompass the diversity of the Canadian experience.

PPF had an established partnership with McGill's Centre for Media, Technology and Democracy and its consortium of researchers. I complemented that relationship by providing a platform for more than 100 grassroots

voices through virtual and in-person community roundtables held across the country. In addition, we commissioned a survey of 1,500 young adults, a group generally hard to reach and too often excluded from policy discussions held in elite circles. If we are to better understand how polarization manifests in Canada, we must *listen* to the very people trying to navigate this polarized climate and those who must deal with its harmful effects. We made the effort, including the use of innovative online technologies, to get our survey in front of them. *Listening* is at the heart of democracy.

Our focus on 18- to 35-year-olds became the vector through which we created and convened the community roundtables—a novel intervention and space for discovery in the Canadian policy landscape. These young adults were honest, vulnerable and frustrated by polarization's hindrance to progress on issues that matter to them.

We recruited journalist Justin Ling to tell this story. He had covered the convoy in Ottawa and joined us for every step of the journey, sitting with young people across the country and listening to their testimonies. As a young

“If we are to better understand how polarization manifests in Canada, we must listen to the very people trying to navigate this polarized climate and those who must deal with its harmful effects.”

adult himself, he had the vision to expand this narrative by interviewing sitting politicians, political staffers, activists, journalists and a host of others across the political spectrum, ultimately offering what Ontario Poet Laureate Randell Adjei calls “a penmanship that bridges gaps of intergenerational dialogue.”

With that in mind, sharing the methods and values behind these community roundtables became both my intervention and an invitation to understand how we conscientiously and purposefully build spaces for dialogue across differences, establishing a respectful foundation for diverse voices to share their experiences. And that was what we got: a window into “wokeness,” nuanced views on cancel culture, concerns about what lies beneath the veneer of political correctness, and how polarization in our political arenas is distracting from real progress on critical issues such as affordable housing, uneven development, the pandemic and climate change.

It was electric; it was challenging; it was educational; it was significant. We learned that creating space for meaningful dialogue and empowering young people in our policy conversations must stand as our collective call to action. As inheritors and stewards of

our collective futures, their worries and anxieties must be a central focus of how we move forward.

Dynamics that lead to discussions like that do not happen by accident. Drawing on my near decade of working in and building communities, we constructed these roundtables based on a values-led approach so we could offer some level of psychological safety, trust and belonging to the young adults who were willing to speak with us.

The Values

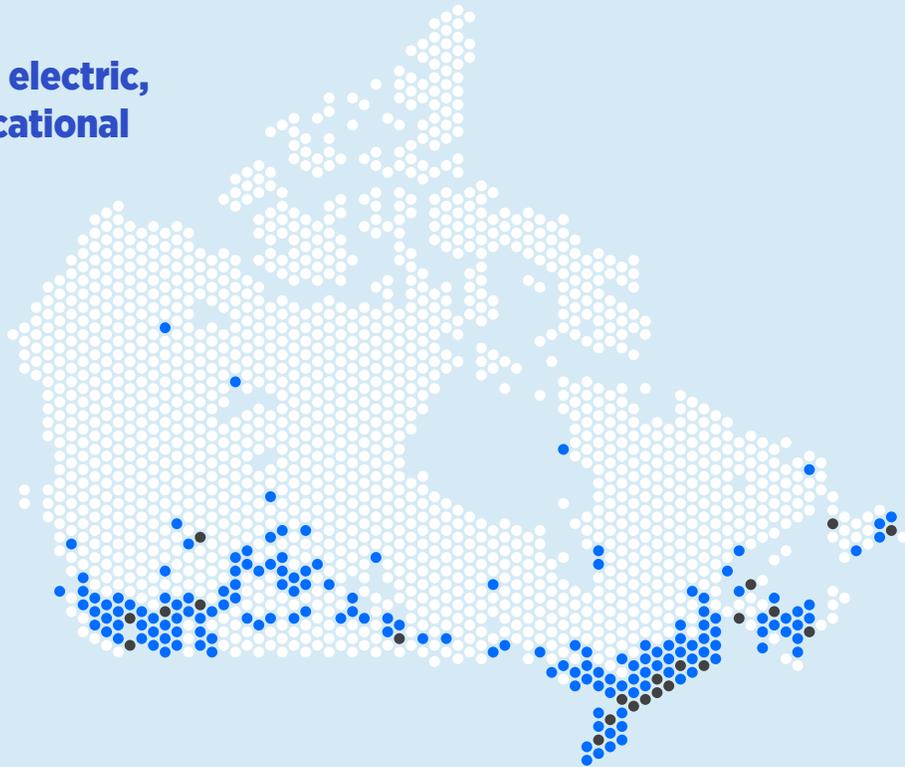
1. Seek connection through community:

We partnered with community organizations employing and serving young adults, knowing that the least burdensome, most meaningful way to have these discussions was to integrate them into existing programs. We tried to meet these young people where they were.

The responses we received were based on trust built through the demonstration of shared values, relationship-building and genuine care for the communities we visited and the people they serve. Community leaders worked closely with us to assemble the roundtables; their willingness to develop a relationship with us and vouch for us with their community was humbling. This created an environment where people felt safe expressing their concern, isolation, agitation, and fear.

2. No names: Inviting people to speak on background helped elicit honest—even brutally honest—perspectives without fear of professional or personal backlash. We encouraged courageous conversations and honoured these contributions by providing them safety.

“What we got was electric, challenging, educational and significant.”



- 31 roundtables
- 319 cities surveyed

3. Build with regional and national representation:

We invited diverse voices from different parts of the nation, engaging with a total of 1,617 young adults across Canada: 117 in community roundtables and an additional 1,500 via our survey partnership with RIWI (Real-Time Interactive World-Wide Intelligence). We reached urban and rural settings, towns as small as Nakusp, B.C., and Black Point, N.B., as well as large city centres. We welcomed newcomers, front-line youth workers, students, young people not in employment, education or training (NEET), and others representing Canada’s diversity during the roundtables. Prioritizing a dedicated session in French for young Quebec adults was essential. We reached out to community-serving organizations nationwide and gratefully accepted the partnership of those who shared our concern, had the capacity to work with us, and joined in our quest.

4. Create an accessible, evidence-based discussion guide:

I designed a workshop and toolkit that served as a foundation for discussions, helping participants consider the nature of polarization and how it was affecting their lives. The non-partisan, factual information provided a common understanding and was presented in plain language.

5. Co-develop principles of engagement:

We co-developed the principles of engagement with roundtable participants in real time, first sharing the project’s values, then asking what participants needed from us to feel psychologically safe. We forged a path together, striving to create a rare and inclusive space where vulnerability thrived, and honesty flowed.

6. Compensate young adults for their time:

In recognition that their time and perspectives

are valuable, each young adult participant received an honorarium from PPF, unless their organization compensated them directly for their participation during working hours instead. We aimed to demonstrate reciprocity in action.

7. Commit to ongoing engagement with community: Our commitment to the community goes beyond the roundtables. We have designed an accountability loop, inviting young adults and the organizations that serve them to a post-report conversation to learn about project findings and witness the incorporation of their voices on a national platform. We did the same for project partners and contributors, convening a group of 50 multidisciplinary democracy champions for a symposium. Our aim is to break the cycle of black box consultations, striving instead for ongoing engagement.

The response we received was overwhelming, showcasing the genuine concern and care young Canadian adults hold for these issues. Though they are said to feel increasingly alienated by the democratic process, registrations for one roundtable co-hosted by Apathy is Boring reached nearly 150, despite our limited capacity of just 25 attendees. We managed to host a second convening as these registrants told us they were desperate for a space where they could connect and share their experiences in an unfiltered manner.

The effect was similar in Saint John, NB, where we partnered with the Saint John Human Development Council. After I sent executive director Randy Hatfield an introductory email, he asked to connect right away, stressing the necessity of engaging young adults from the Atlantic in our study:

44%

of young adults believe the political stability of Canada is threatened moderately by the political division of its people



38%

of young adults believe political division in Canada will increase



“In our community, we often focus on basic needs like food security, homelessness, safe housing and harm reduction,” he said. “With just about two percent of the national population, New Brunswick faces big city problems in a small city. There is a group here excited to be part of a meaningful national dialogue, but they lack the opportunity, means and invitation to have such discussions.”

Some telling data from our survey: 44 percent of young adults believe the political stability of Canada is threatened moderately by the political division of its people; and 38 percent surveyed believe political division in Canada will increase.

These times are tumultuous and visceral, demanding that we go beyond statistics. Understanding people’s deepest fears and anxieties requires close examination of

real communities. Our carefully considered methods enabled us to delve not only into the thoughts and actions of young adults, but to bring the data to life, capturing the prismatic nature of their real lives and how they navigate this world that awaits them.

The issues we face are not purely intellectual; they are also deeply emotional. Political scientist Benedict Anderson argued that national communities are imagined constructs, which implies our sense of community is forged in the crucible of our emotions — who we connect with, who we don't, and why. As I write this, flying over the vast expanse of North America, I cannot help but reflect on how the emotional and informational bonds holding our imagined national community together are fraying, with the risk of collapse. Our national community seems to be in a state of flux, trying to define and redefine itself. This report seeks to understand the how and why of these fractures, aiming to rebuild the sense of community we all envision. Indeed, as Adjei so wisely writes, “Our words can build dynasties and mend broken bonds.”

On behalf of PPF, I express profound gratitude and appreciation for our community partners, including:

- **Lifelong Leadership Institute;**
- **First Work Ontario;**
- **Saint John Human Development Council;**
- **Apathy is Boring;**
- **LOVE Nova Scotia;** and
- **YMCA Canada.**

Special thanks to McGill's Centre for Media, Technology and Democracy for its partnership in the Digital Democracy Project and the

esteemed academics and journalists involved in this phase:

- **Dr. Wendy Chun**, Canada 150 Research Chair, Simon Fraser University;
- **Erica Ifill**, Freelance Journalist, Not in my colour;
- **Dr. Stephanie Carvin**, Associate Professor of International Affairs, Carleton University;
- **Dr. Elizabeth Dubois**, Assistant Professor, University of Ottawa;
- **Guillermo Renna**, Legislative Clerk, Senate of Canada;
- **Riley Yesno**, Anishinaabe scholar and writer;
- **Dr. Eric Merkley**, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Toronto;
- **Aengus Bridgman**, Assistant Professor (Research), McGill University;
- **Sonja Solomun**, Deputy Director, Centre for Media, Technology and Democracy and;
- **Dr. Heidi Tworek**, Associate Professor, University of British Columbia.

You can access their collective contributions by visiting the Canadian Commission on Democratic Expression website.

We also extend our recognition to the advisory council that guided and supported this project, including:

- **Cadmus Delorme**, Prior Chief of Cowessess First Nation;
- **Dr. Cristine de Clercy**, Jarislowsky Chair, Trent University;
- **Dr. Eric Merkley**, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Toronto;
- **John Beebe**, Founder, Democratic Engagement Exchange, Toronto Metropolitan University;

- **Nathalie Des Rosiers**, Principal, Massey College;
- **Samantha Reusch**, Executive Director, Apathy is Boring and;
- **Trevor Massey**, Chair, Lifelong Leadership Institute.

Shweta Menon, PPF Policy Lead, deserves recognition for her unwavering dedication, remarkable intellect and tireless efforts in working alongside me to deliver on this ambitious and far-reaching project. I would like to recognize her as a key contributor in this work. And to Gareth Chappell, PPF Director of Planning and Operations, thank you for your wisdom and counsel throughout.

To Zofia Switkowski, the restorative justice facilitator we worked with, thank you for co-creating a safe space for young adults through your roundtable facilitation.

I extend my thanks to Justin Ling for his commitment to reporting on this project. Through his work, he breathed life into the

stories of these young adults and connected them to the collective consciousness of our nation. Also, Justin and I are grateful to Andrew Potter, for his deep investment and work as handling editor on this report.

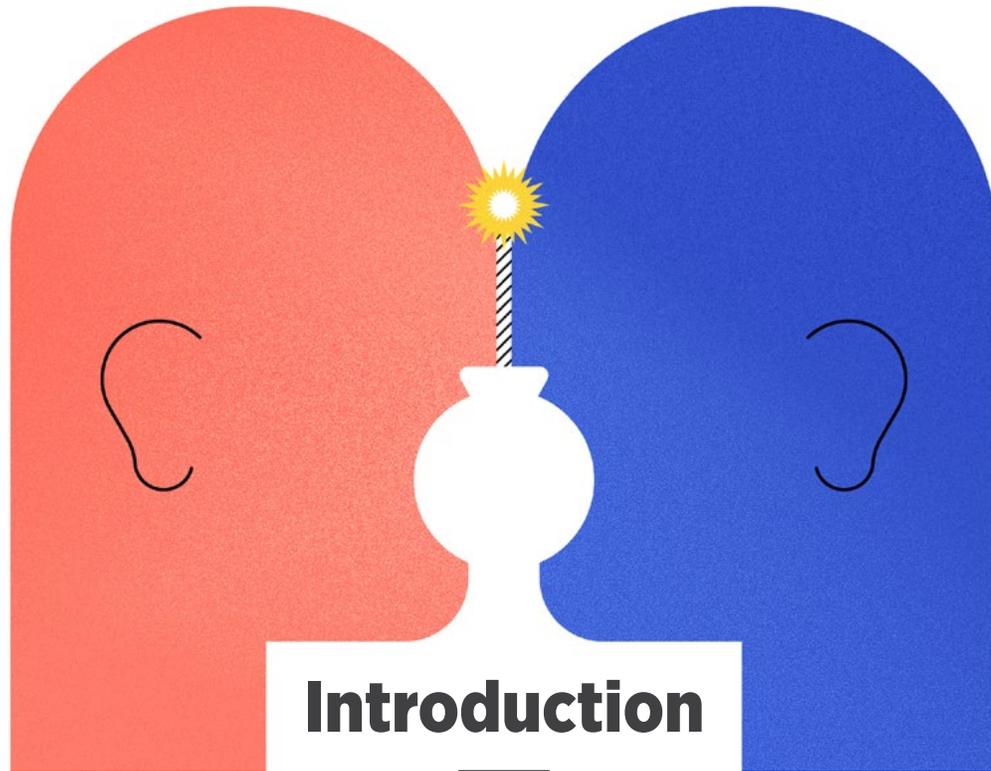
Lastly, my deep appreciation to Edward Greenspon and Alison Uncles, my mentors and now my friends, for placing their trust in me and allowing me to undertake this endeavour on behalf of PPF. I'm honoured to share all we strove for in the PPF spirit and quest for good policy towards a better Canada.

Where do we go from here? My invitation to all of you is best articulated by Sufi mystic and poet Rumi: "Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I'll meet you there."



Victoria Kuketz





It's hard to imagine a more Canadian scene.

There's a sea of Canadian flags of all sizes, almost rigid from the cold. Hundreds of Canadians stand below, clad in tuques, hoodies, parkas and fuzzy mitts, condensation from their breath rising in the air. In the distance sits the Gothic Revival architecture of West Block, the temporary home of the House of Commons.

In collaboration with the online pollster RIWI, PPF presented a photo of that tableau to 1,500 young Canadian adults and asked a simple question: "What do you see in this picture?"

About three-quarters of the respondents correctly answered that this wasn't just a regular patriotic assembly: They may have noticed one of the Canadian flags is flying upside down. White placards rise out of the

sea of people, a makeshift stage nestled in the middle of the crowd is set up on a flatbed truck. On one sign, Quebec Premier François Legault's face is barely visible behind painted iron bars. Deep in the crowd, another hand-painted sign shows hands grabbing similar bars with the caption: "Trudeau's new home." A few feet above the crowd, attached to a truck cab, another reads: "Thank you freedom truckers!"

We asked the survey participants, made up of 18- to 35-year-olds from across the country, to describe what they saw. But many opted to tell us how this photo of the three-week occupation of Ottawa, led by the Freedom Convoy, made them feel. And they were brutally honest.

"They are peacefully protesting their rights and freedoms that our government took

50%

of respondents said voting was the best way to enact change



1 in 5

respondents opted for protest and civil disobedience



away from us on account of a virus outbreak,” a 25-year-old man from Bobcaygeon, Ont., wrote. “Our government forced every middle-class family to struggle to pay rent, food, fuel and our economy to nosedive.”

A 30-year-old woman from Saskatoon felt otherwise. “It is the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever seen happen in this country,” she wrote. “It makes no sense that people are protesting the f***** health and safety of other people.”

The responses are a cross-section of the wildly different, incompatible views on what happened last winter. Was it a “peaceful protest against a tyrannical ruler,” as a 32-year-old from Winkler, Man., said? Or were the protesters driven by “lies and misinformation, disrupting the peace of everyone, and being bigoted,” as a fellow Manitoban concluded? There were plenty of invectives: they called the protesters “adult babies” and “losers.” One Quebec man wrote they were protesting “measures THAT HAD TO BE TAKEN TO RESTRICT THE DEATH OF HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS.”

We also asked them about solutions: When something needs to be fixed in this country, what is the best way to enact that change? We gave them four options:

- Nothing can enact real change;
- Take power away from the global elites;
- Protest and civil disobedience; and
- Voting.

The pro-convoy man from Bobcaygeon was nihilistic, taking that first option. The 30-year-old Saskatonian, the one exasperated by the convoy, said we need to pursue the global elites. The Quebecer with his caps lock on said the best way to enact change is through protest. A 25-year-old woman from Guelph, Ont., who believed the convoy was composed of Canadians “protesting to get our rights and freedoms back,” still had faith that the best way to enact real change is through the electoral system.

Only half of respondents said voting was the best strategy. More than one in five opted for protest and civil disobedience, 17 percent said supplanting the global elites was key. Another 12 percent said nothing can truly fix our problems.

Those responses suggest that faith in our democratic system is weaker than we may think, and hint at a deeper frustration with the state of the country. At the centre of that problem is polarization.

Across the board, more than 70 percent of respondents said Canada is moderately to severely polarized. More than 45 percent expected it to get worse over the next five years. Some 25 percent are very or extremely

worried that Canada itself is threatened by these political divisions.

It's a sharp departure for Canada. Until recently, there was a saccharine consensus that we had dodged the rising tide of polarization afflicting other rich nations. If that feeling clearly missed some canaries in the coal mine, the Freedom Convoy finally jolted us awake.

A grassroots movement, fuelled by frustration, anger and, in some cases, misinformation, descended on the nation's capital in a cacophony of air horns and conflicting agendas. The occupation of Ottawa, along with ancillary blockades in Windsor and at the Coutts border crossing in Alberta, revealed a deeper schism that has been opening in Canadian society, one that belies the hopeful analysis that Canada has some built-in immunity to the politics of division, one that hadn't been picked up in polling.

More than a year on, the country seems unable to agree on what, exactly, the Freedom Convoy was really about, as our survey responses show. Many who oppose the movement think of it as inherently violent, racist, sexist and illiberal, perhaps even funded by hostile foreign powers. Politicians of various stripes are keen to promote, or denigrate, the convoy and its supporters for their own political gain. Convoy participants are convinced their cause and tactics were just and their fundamental rights remain under threat. Amidst this noise, it is hard to decipher why it began, let alone how it reflects our society.

This report is an attempt to take stock of polarization in Canada and understand its main drivers. It is an extension of a multi-year PPF examination of democracy in digital-age

Canada. The Digital Democracy Project sought to better understand the challenges posed by the hate and misinformation proliferating online. The Canadian Commission on Democratic Expression and a companion Citizen's Assembly, meanwhile, were tasked with putting forward answers to how online platforms could mitigate online harms while encouraging a more free and frank exchange of views.

This particular leg of the project honed in on the phenomenon of polarization, with a special focus on 18- to 35-year-olds in the democratic process. Through a national survey conducted by RIWI, PPF attempted to reach those who do not normally participate in opinion polls, measuring young Canadian adults' attitudes on this growing divide.

We also organized community roundtables, both in person and online, with help from grassroots partners established through a values-based approach:

17%

of respondents said supplanting the global elites was key



12%

of respondents said nothing can truly fix our problems



- Apathy is Boring;
- First Work Ontario;
- Lifelong Leadership Institute;
- Saint John Human Development Council;
- YMCA Canada; and
- LOVE Nova Scotia.

Participants joined from remote towns as small as 1,600 people to large city centres. Those in-depth conversations probed how polarization manifests in the day-to-day lives of young Canadian adults and how they cope with it. Across the spectrum, we found neither indifference nor grudging participation, but rather a clamouring enthusiasm to testify and listen to one another, as well as gratitude for having access to a rare and trusted space to share experiences, vulnerabilities and frustrations.

As with other aspects of the Digital Democracy Project, we partnered with the McGill Centre for Media, Technology and Democracy. The centre commissioned papers from eight academics across the country on subjects ranging from partisan stratification to the experiences of Indigenous Peoples in this fraught political landscape.

And we interviewed dozens of Canadians with a unique vantage point on the problem: politicians of all stripes and from all levels, political staffers and strategists, journalists and commentators, academics and experts, activists, Indigenous leaders and regular citizens. All these sources were given anonymity and encouraged to offer their unvarnished opinions.

This report draws on all that work as well as my experience as a journalist, which includes reporting on the streets of Ottawa

during the Freedom Convoy; working inside Parliament as an occasional member of the Parliamentary Press Gallery; researching new trends in misinformation and disinformation; and covering those who advance false narratives for profit.

Relying on all those sources, this report breaks the issue down into three parts.

First, we tackle the partisan sorting that has driven divides between parties and partisans, and alienated those frustrated with the Ottawa bloodsport. From the role of social media to the constant need to fill the party coffers with cash, parties have worsened this polarization, and have in turn been worsened by it.

Second, we investigate how the internet has disrupted our conversations. Misinformation and conspiracy theories, driven by influencers and forged in insular online communities, have not just polarized us along socio-political lines but put us into different realities. This comes at a time when one traditional moderating force, the so-called mainstream media, has collapsed in on itself, instead becoming variations on a theme that no longer speaks to all Canadians.

Third, we look at the pandemic; how solidarity amidst crisis eventually gave way to deep animosity between those convinced that we did too little to battle the virus, and those who worried we had gone too far.

The aim of this report is to expose the ways in which this polarization manifests itself, and to identify just some of the pressures driving it. Because, if we are to have any hope of reversing these trends, we first need to understand them.

What is Polarization?

In 1964, the U.S. Supreme Court had a tricky case before it: A risqué French film had scandalized American audiences, and the top court was assigned to mediate the conflict between American sensibilities and freedom of expression. The ruling came down to whether the film, *The Lovers*, was technically “obscene.”

The film, Associate Justice Potter Stewart found, was not obscene, and therefore constitutionally protected. In his ruling, he confessed he was unable to come up with an actual definition of obscenity: “But I know it when I see it.”¹

Those eight frustratingly vague words would spark plenty of legal debate in the decades to come. They also succinctly sum up how many Canadians feel about the state of polarization in this country. We know it’s there, but we simply do not have a great test for what makes a country polarized.

Canada is a country riven by numerous long-standing divides: English versus French; east against west; urban and rural; rich and poor; settler and Indigenous; Protestant and Catholic; and so on. These divides existed before COVID-19 and the internet even entered our lexicon; indeed, they are the timber out of which the Canadian federation was constructed.

Given that history, it’s no surprise that Canadians know polarization when they

see it. Earlier this year, pollster Ekos asked Canadians for their biggest fear about the future: polarization topped the charts.² Public relations firm Edelman recently found that Canadians’ anxieties about our political climate are feeding economic uncertainty. Canada is, in fact, one of the most economically anxious rich countries: Just 28 percent believe they will be better off in five years, the lowest level ever recorded. Edelman also found just 51 percent of the country said they had trust in government.

Canadians reported that if rising division is not addressed, they feared we would see rising prejudice, a growing inability to address societal problems, slower economic development and even violence in the streets.³

Yet we also know polarization—in the form of competing views—is not necessarily a bad thing. If diverse voices don’t argue and compete, then the majority consensus will simply impose its will on an entire nation. Westminster systems of democracy are founded on the principle of loyal opposition. When voices are left out of our democratic debate, polarization can also serve as an indicator of a broader problem in the country: western alienation, racial injustice, the cultural genocide of Indigenous Peoples. Real societal injustices or deep differences of opinion can push us to the fringes of hitherto acceptable thought. Ideas like desegregation in the United States or building a nation-to-nation relationship with Indigenous Peoples here were once deemed too polarizing to even discuss.

But the polarization Canada is facing hasn’t taken on that constructive hue. Our state of polarization is not defined by vigorous

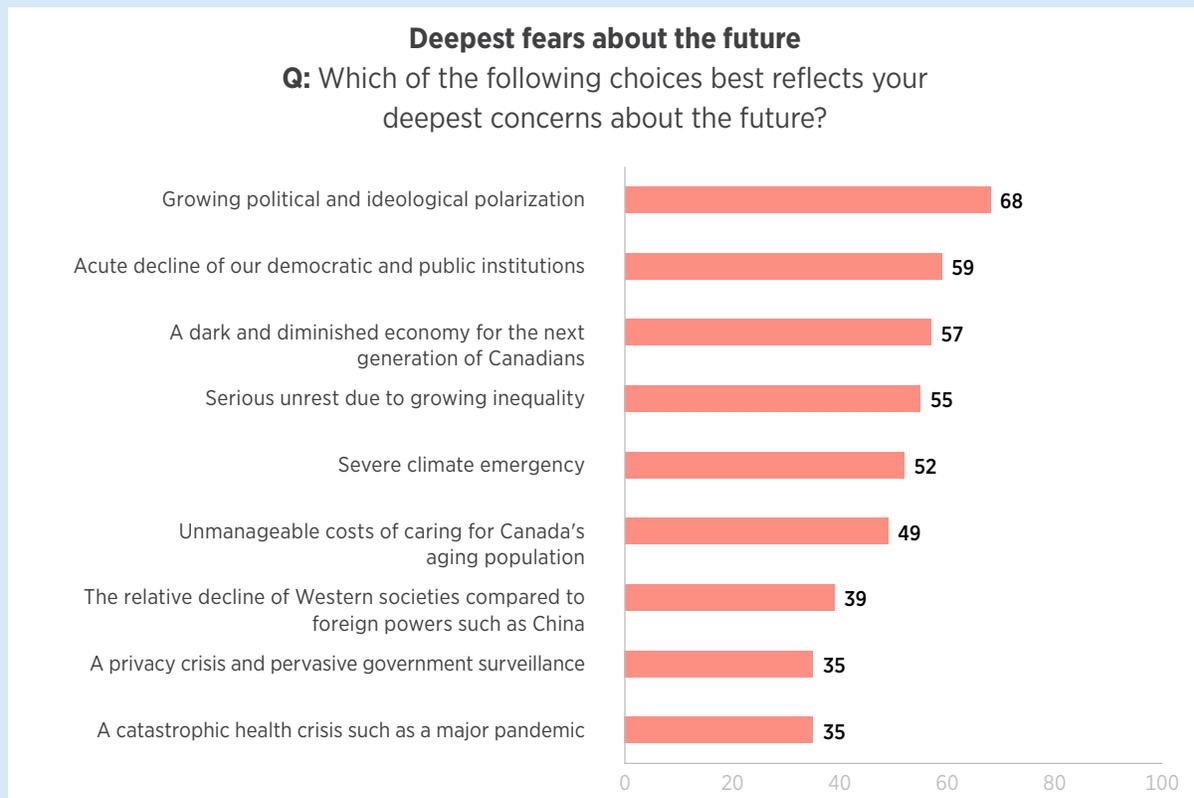
engagement, but of disengagement, unproductive bitterness and impure motives.

Over the past decade in the United States and Europe, illiberal leaders have fomented and exploited this exact type of polarization: Donald Trump in the U.S., Giorgia Meloni in Italy, Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico, amongst others. Opinion polls easily measure some expressions of this polarization: widening rifts on abortion access, immigration, LGBTQ rights, even the credibility of their own elections.

Yet in Canada, there has been no notable divergence on most social issues. A 2022 poll

conducted by U.K.-based pollster Lord Ashcroft looking at issues of policy in Canada found “few signs of the polarization that shapes politics in the U.S. and parts of Europe.” Subjects that provoked vitriol elsewhere led to “calm consensus among most Canadians.”⁴

There has been no populist surge at the ballot box, either. Maxime Bernier’s People’s Party, styled after right-wing populist parties elsewhere, has grown, but not by much. Bernier’s party earned 550,000 more votes in the 2021 federal election than it did in the one held two years prior, still leaving it below five percent of the popular vote, a far cry from the popular upswell lifting polarizing parties abroad.



Note: Presented in a series of paired choices. Figures represent how often each option was selected over the other items tested.

Base: Canadians; October 7-14, 2022, n=1,079, MOE +/- 3.0%, 19 times out of 20

“On many issues, and in complex ways, we have grown more dogmatic and intense in our beliefs, and less trusting of people who disagree with us.”



But that doesn't mean Canada is free of polarization. It may just mean that traditional tests aren't quite suited for the situation.

The Global Initiative on Polarization, a recently launched effort by the Institute for Integrated Transitions, has attempted to identify the hallmarks that define polarization.

The initiative calls the first indicator of polarization the “centrifugal hallmark.” That is, polarization “involves a move away from the centre and toward identifiable poles or extremities.” If we think about this hallmark exclusively in terms of public attitudes on certain social issues or the popularity of individual politicians, we may say Canada fails on that metric. Yet we have migrated to the edges in other ways, including our opinions of political leaders, strategies to address the pandemic, new city housing projects and imagined dangers of drag queens reading to children. More worryingly, police-reported hate crimes have risen by a dizzying 70 percent from 2019 to 2021.⁵ On many issues, and in complex ways, we have grown more dogmatic and intense in our beliefs, and less trusting of people who disagree with us. *Centrifugal: Check.*

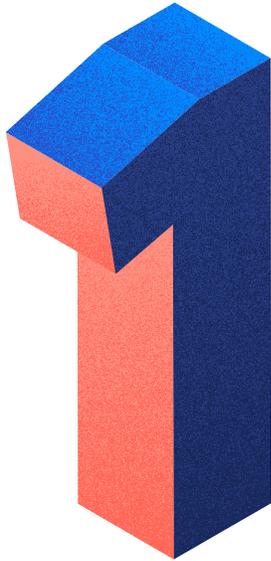
Canada checks some other boxes as well. The Global Initiative on Polarization's committee of experts identified “scale,” or a “mass form of conflict or dispute,” as being a necessary component of polarization. Certainly, more than 10,000 people travelling great distances to occupy and blockade our capital and border crossings seems to satisfy that criterion. *Scale: Check.*

Polarized states also tend to be defined by “feedback loops and self-reinforcing action-reaction dynamics,” the initiative says; that is, entrenched positions that define themselves in opposition to another camp. Think “patriots” who define themselves in opposition to “globalists,” or “free thinkers” who oppose the controlling political correctness of the “woke.” *Feedback loops: Check.*

Countries experiencing internal polarization also tend to have public discourse that devolves into “the terrain of identity in which the ‘who’ matters more than the ‘what,’ and emotion more than reason.” Practitioners of identity politics of all stripes have become dismissive, even hostile, to the views of those they deem oppressors. *Identity: Check.*

And, perhaps most importantly, the initiative identifies “a loss of viewpoint diversity and a default to simplification, binaries, in-group romanticization and out-group demonization.” Consider the protesters on university campuses who have shut down events involving speakers with whom they viscerally disagree. *Simplification: Check.*

If we are in search of validation that our instincts are correct, this test confirms it: Canada is polarized.



Part One: Partisan Sorting



The first place to search for clues about the state of polarization is, of course, Ottawa.

Evidence that Canadians are disgruntled with our political status quo is not difficult to find: At the end of 2022, pollster Ipsos found that 14 percent of the country strongly approved of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, while a third strongly disapproved.⁶ The numbers were nearly identical for Pierre Poilievre, his main rival. Even when it comes to Jagmeet Singh, who consistently ranks as the most popular federal leader, intense negative reactions outweighed strongly positive ones by about seven points.

Politics has always involved a mix of hope and fear, loyalty and loathing. But current polarization trends are pointing toward anger taking the lead, and a self-reinforcing loop is rewarding negativity over positivity.

In our community roundtables focused on young adults, we heard a tone more of disappointment and frustration with our political system and those who drive it: “Many people have lost faith in their political leaders because it’s not a system that reflects the needs and experiences of many,” one participant said. Another lamented that it’s difficult to support candidates who “spend their whole campaign

smearing others.” Another was frustrated by politicians who spend more time campaigning “than actually doing things for the community.”

This politics-as-sport has real-world impacts. Whether it is because they are internalizing the high rhetoric, or because they are simply disgusted by it, young adults are losing faith in our very system of government. Our RIWI survey asked: “How much confidence do you have that the election process of your country is fair and transparent?” It found that 18- to 35-year-olds were split almost straight down the middle.

With pervasive feelings like these, it’s no wonder that just six of 10 in this country vote. For those alienated from the system, politics is simply not a forum where things get done, and a lack of faith in the process is leading some Canadians to take matters into their own hands.

In 2020, mobs in Nova Scotia attacked Mi’kmaq fishers over a perception that an Indigenous fishery, which had been promised but never respected in treaties, was a threat to their own livelihood. Throughout 2022, attacks on infrastructure in British Columbia, apparently in opposition to new oil and gas projects by militant environmentalists, caused extensive damage and left workers afraid for their safety. Since the beginning of the pandemic, there have been repeated attempts to enact citizens’ arrests of members of Parliament under a plan to try them for crimes against humanity for their role in advocating vaccines.

These are extreme examples of a more general feeling that government is too slow, too indifferent, too self-obsessed, too divided

and too biased to address the challenges facing the country—and that vigilantism is necessary to make up the difference.

Streaming Parliament

Next to each member of Parliament’s desk in the temporary House of Commons in West Block is a new feature: a tiny monitor broadcasting the House’s live video feed. When an MP stands in Question Period, they can watch the camera cut to their seat and see their own performance from the corner of their eye.

When the debates of the House of Commons were televised for the first time in 1977, there was a real fear that it would add an element of drama and theatrics that the House of Commons didn’t need. As a CBC report put it at the time, there was a fear of “making performers out of members, and TV drama out of serious debate.” That fear, for a long time, proved to be unfounded. Aside from a weekly recap show, *This Week in Parliament*, relatively few Canadians tuned in to those debates. Mugging for the camera was rarely worth it.⁷

Today, the incentives have shifted. Many MPs control their own broadcast channels. Thanks to new streaming technology, MP’s offices are easily clipping their interventions in the House and posting them to social channels. This kind of direct-to-consumer content showcasing the work of Parliament *could* be

“Performance politics is fuelling polarization, virtue signalling is replacing discussion, and far too often we are just using this chamber to generate clips, not to start national debates.”

a tonic for distrust, proof to the skeptical masses that our elected officials are, in fact, hard at work promoting and serving the national interest.

In practice, however, these videos offer some perverse incentives.

Last February, as protesters occupied the capital outside the doors of Parliament, MPs in the House of Commons debated the invocation of the Emergencies Act. During a particularly heated debate, Conservative MP Scott Aitchison delivered a speech that struck a conciliatory tone. “Every Canadian has a right to peaceful protest, but we do not have the right to park a truck in the middle of a city street for three weeks,” he said. “In the same way, we have a right to disagree with those who have chosen not to get vaccinated, but we do not have a right to call them racists or misogynists.” Aitchison clipped the speech and posted it to Facebook. To date, it has been viewed about 30,000 times—just a fraction of the views earned by his caucus colleagues for similar, but more acrimonious, videos.⁸

For example, a speech by fellow Conservative MP, one of his caucus colleagues, Chris Warkentin accused the government of an “illegal attack on our freedoms,” which would give the prime minister unlimited power “to attack his political adversaries.” The video racked up 10 times as many views.⁹

Liberals have gotten into this game, too. But the Conservatives use this kind of high-emotion digital tactic more effectively, churning out intense social media videos, leveraging bombastic rhetoric and emotional topics to whip supporters into a frenzy. Since Pierre Poilievre’s leadership win, he has

frequently posted videos with titles such as “What a Liberal snob thinks of Canadians.”

We know that algorithms on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube tend to prioritize content that provokes emotions¹⁰—be they positive or negative. So, these MPs are only leaning into what works. One Conservative politician admitted MPs now think about Question Period exclusively in terms of what can be clipped and shared on social media.

Erin O’Toole, the former Conservative leader, let this secret slip in his goodbye speech to Parliament as he resigned his seat. “Performance politics is fuelling polarization, virtue signalling is replacing discussion, and far too often we are just using this chamber to generate clips, not to start national debates,” he told his colleagues—and, of course, his followers on social media.

We can see this play out in how parties talk to their own members and supporters. The Liberals have, in recent years, sent out fundraising missives accusing their opponents of “taking orders from Canada’s NRA.” The Conservatives have accused the media of being in league with the Liberal Party and “swearing, shouting and heckling” during press conferences. The NDP, for its part, has emailed supporters with allegations that their opponents are “gathering in lavish rooms of exclusive members’ only clubs where regular working people aren’t allowed. They’re enjoying free food, drinks and gifts paid for by the corporate lobbyists.”

These claims are, at best, misleading, and are frequently outlandish. Yet they can appear in supporters’ email inboxes as often as five times a day, marked “URGENT.” Much like

those social media videos, they are tailored for the parties' existing supporters.

These tactics make a moral imperative out of both party loyalty and rejection of their opponents. As a recruitment tool for new voters, this is a lousy strategy, although it does tend to keep party faithful in the fold. And there is one area where it has become incredibly effective: fundraising.

Money Makes the World Go Round

In the 2006 federal election, parties were allowed to spend up to just over \$18 million. Hitting that number wasn't difficult: supporters could contribute \$5,000 per year, while corporations and unions could kick in \$1,000 to candidates and riding associations. A subsidy proportional to the number of votes each party received directed \$8.5 million to the Liberals¹¹ and nearly \$15 million to the Conservatives.¹²

In the years that followed, financing rules were tightened and parties lost that per-vote subsidy. While new rules may have rooted out the problem of big money in politics, they also left the parties cash-starved—just as elections were getting more and more expensive.

Today, individual Canadians can donate no more than \$1,700 per year. The next election will have a per-party spending cap of over \$40 million; figuring out how to hit that target is a constant source of anxiety for the parties.

Conservatives, in particular, are feeling the squeeze of three successive election losses. Their impressive fundraising ability is the result of an obsessive, sophisticated, intense fundraising machine. Individual MPs are

“One Conservative MP said, bluntly, they have grown afraid of their own members.”



expected to put fundraising high on their day-to-day priorities.

Two Conservative MPs confidentially described a toxic feedback loop: as elected representatives, they are whipping up anger and distrust amongst their core supporters for money. Those supporters, in turn, are becoming increasingly fervent in their beliefs, distrustful of rival parties and demanding of ideological purity. To meet those members where they are means the party must in turn become more confrontational and dogmatic.

MPs deemed insufficiently loyal to the cause may face nomination challenges. Caucus members who don't raise enough money or who fail to go sufficiently viral online are unlikely to be tapped for senior roles in the party. Worse yet, Conservatives labelled ideologically impure are likely to face social media backlash, a deluge of nasty emails, even death threats.

One Conservative MP said, bluntly, they have grown afraid of their own members.

Multiple MPs have sketched both the problem and their solution: Centrist voters have consistently rejected the Conservative Party. So, instead, Pierre Poilievre's party will look for votes elsewhere, in particular in the ranks of

the People's Party and among right-leaning Canadians who have unplugged from the political system altogether, such as those who joined the Freedom Convoy. This strategy could radicalize the conservative movement in Canada, as it has done in other rich countries. It is a risk, they admit. But they say it will be worth it to win.

A Conservative MP nervously surmised that, should their party fail to improve their performance in the upcoming vote, the Conservative Party is likely to mimic right-wing parties abroad and become avowedly anti-immigration. This could be a reality within five years, the MP warned.

The Liberals have a particular hand in the Conservatives' poor showing over the past few elections. Justin Trudeau has broadcast the message, with remarkable efficacy, that a Conservative government could mean a criminalization of abortion, a proliferation of firearms and a dismantling of our public health-care system. The Conservatives' counter-messaging—that the Liberals are elitist, out of touch, corrupt, perhaps even beholden to hostile foreign powers—has been less effective electorally, but has certainly hardened their supporters' beliefs.

We will discuss how this partisan jousting is driving divisions far outside the capital, but it is worth noting how much of this outrage is performative. Partisans of all stripes in Ottawa—including those who have been around for more than a decade—agree that the capital, in human terms, is no more polarized than in eras before. The combat may seem more real, but once the cameras switch off, the acrimony dissipates and conviviality returns. MPs and staffers

alike are no less likely to engage in small talk or grab a pint on Sparks Street as they ever were.

As author Kurt Vonnegut once wrote: “We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be.”

Affective Polarization

University of Toronto political scientist Dr. Eric Merkley has analyzed decades of data on Canadians' attitude towards politics.

His work confirms that Canadians have not polarized significantly on major policy matters, but he has also found something interesting: we are becoming *more* consistent on political issues, but it is strictly along partisan lines. “Policy beliefs are becoming modestly more correlated with one another and much more correlated with partisanship,” he found.¹³

In other words, we have stopped remaking our political parties in our images and they have begun remaking us. Political scientists call this “partisan sorting.”

Ideally, political parties should attract a diversity of voices and opinions. Historically, Canadian parties have been big tents, welcoming of a variety of factions and movements; they are supposed to be microcosms for the country at large, not special interest groups. Today though, party members look at each other as kinfolk, and members of other parties as aliens.

In fact, Merkley found they quite literally do not recognize their political adversaries. When he surveyed partisans about the makeup of other parties, “respondents overestimated the prevalence of LGBTQ representatives in the

“We have stopped remaking our political parties in our images and they have begun remaking us. Political scientists call this ‘partisan sorting.’”



Liberal Party and the NDP by 15 percentage points...They also underestimated the share of the COVID-19 fully vaccinated among Conservatives by 15 percentage points more than for the Liberal Party and NDP.”

A significant majority of partisans across parties say they believe supporters of the rival political camp are “selfish” and “hypocritical.”

“Supporters of the Liberal Party and the New Democratic Party increasingly dislike the Conservative Party, and supporters of the latter party increasingly dislike the Liberal Party, in particular,” Merkley found. By this metric, polarization between the parties has doubled since the 1990s. “This resembles the growing mutual hostility Democrats and Republicans hold towards one another in the United States.”

Perhaps most interestingly, Merkley found Canadians may overestimate how polarized the country truly is—in part because they believed their political opponents to be

polarizing. In that way, polarization becomes self-perpetuating.

As partisans see each other in increasingly negative terms, parties see a benefit in stepping up the demonization of each other. This becomes particularly acute when partisans attribute problems not just to the policies of their rivals, but to a deep moral defect in the opposing party itself.

Political parties know this. The proliferation of telephone and online surveys, digital microtargeting, focus groups and modelling has given the parties an unprecedented understanding of how the public engages with these issues. They know this polarization exists and they see a benefit in exploiting it.

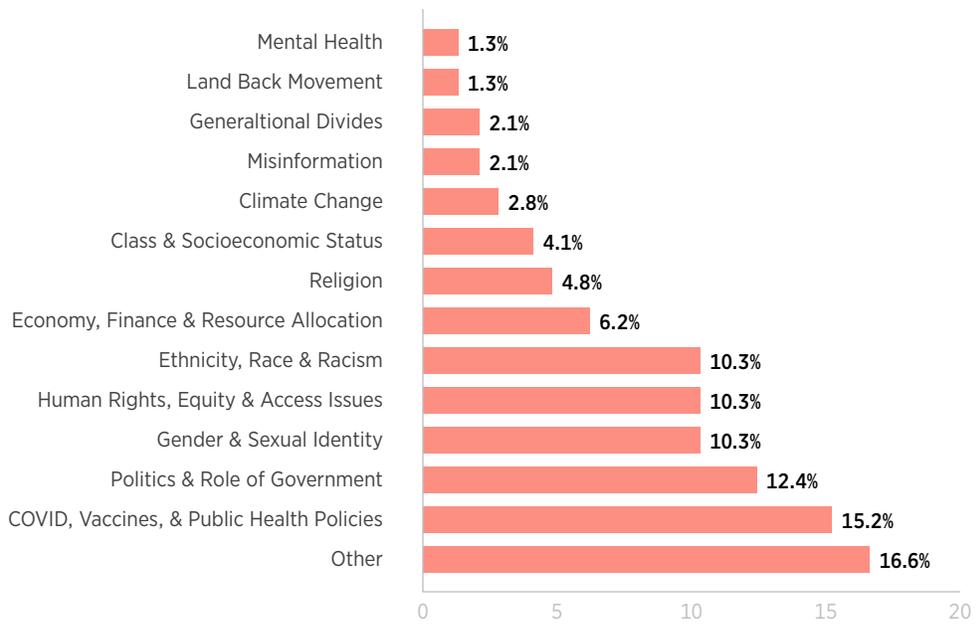
🍁 If Canada Is Broken, Why Isn't Someone Fixing It?

“It feels like there’s so much work to be done and we’re all disconnected.”

That frustrated admission from a participant at one of our Montreal community roundtables was a common theme among the young adults we interviewed. “I can relate to the confusion, anxiety and anger others are feeling surrounding observing the political environment,” they explained. But, they continued, a fractured political environment is making it frustratingly difficult to address the very real problems facing the country. And there are plenty. Nearly half of the respondents to our RIWI survey believe political stability is threatened by the political divisions in this country.

We heard that young adults, who will have to shoulder the burden of inflation, climate change, racial injustice, homelessness and an affordability crisis in the decades to come,

Divisive themes among young adults
Q: What issues do you find most polarizing?



Overall, the top five themes that participants named as polarizing included (with percentage of responses reflecting said theme):

- COVID-19, Vaccines & Public Health Policies (15.2%)
- Politics & Role of Government (12.4%)
- Gender & Sexual Identity (10.3%)
- Ethnicity, Race & Racism (10.3%)
- Human Rights, Equity & Access Issues (10.3%)

(Themes and percentages were extracted from community roundtables)

feel their concerns are not being addressed. Worse, they feel polarization is being driven by the political class, even as it becomes a hindrance to confronting these issues.

In this context, Pierre Poilievre’s “Canada is broken” slogan has a dual meaning. It’s not just that our infrastructure and government services, from roads and railways to passport offices and police, feel worn down, it’s that we are increasingly uncertain that our democratic process can fix these problems. When asked by polling firm Leger, more than two-thirds of

the country agreed that things feel broken, and half said they were angry about the state of our governance.¹⁴ Abacus Data found equal levels of frustration, with Canadians assessing that nearly every facet of the state had declined in quality over just a few years prior.¹⁵

They’re right that the mechanics of our state are under strain. “Canadians don’t realize the impact that COVID had on their cities,” a former mayor of a major Canadian city told me. The closest and most present level of government for most Canadians is municipal.

“Cities were absolutely hammered. Our revenue sources dried up,” the mayor continued. “At the beginning of COVID, I had to lay off almost 20 percent of my workforce.” It was a trend that repeated across the country. The services that keep our cities functioning, unseen to most people, seized up. A mental health crisis exploded. At the same time, an affordability crisis worsened and an opioid crisis deepened.

We heard a consistent frustration about the federal government’s inability to meet its own lofty rhetoric on fixing dire problems. For example, the Liberal Party made a pointed election promise in 2015 to finally provide one of the most basic services for Indigenous communities: clean drinking water. Although 142 long-term boil water advisories have been lifted since November 2015, 28 communities still face long-term boil water advisories, and many others face frequent, short-term ones. This is a complex problem more than a century in the making, but Canadians are rightly indignant that a rich nation such as ours cannot guarantee such a basic human right to a population that has been so systematically disadvantaged for so long.

This is an aspect of what has been called a crisis of state capacity. As researcher Samuel Hammond puts it, at the most basic level, “state capacity simply refers to a government’s ability to adopt a policy and have it faithfully enacted through some combination of competence, credibility and political will.”¹⁶ In the wake of the pandemic, as many Western countries struggled to cope with basic public health logistics, their citizens became increasingly disillusioned with their governments’ inability to do what they set out to do.

“We heard a consistent frustration about the federal government’s inability to meet its own lofty rhetoric on fixing dire problems.”

This lack of state capacity, real and perceived, extends to other areas. The country is in a housing crisis, touching nearly every community, even outside the big urban centres. For young adults, the idea of homeownership—which, in generations past, was a critical indicator, real and symbolic, of breaking into the middle class—is drifting further away. Skyrocketing housing prices are contributing to other negative externalities, from homelessness to crime. This problem is as clear as day for millennials and Gen Z. They have noticed, of course, that this crisis has become a major theme of every major political campaign of the last five years, yet things have continued to worsen.

At our Saint John community roundtable, we heard from a young adult experiencing homelessness. “I’ve already fallen through the cracks,” they said. Others spoke up about the hostility against homeless people present in the community. “I feel so much more hostility towards people experiencing homelessness,” one participant told us. That “anger, frustration” is not an innate feeling: It is an emotional response to systemic failure. In Montreal, we heard a similar testimony: “I can’t think of these issues right now because I need to figure out where I’m going to sleep tonight.”

With a political climate that seems incapable of not just resolving these issues, but of even

effectively mediating debates about them, interpersonal conflict follows. One participant from Nova Scotia highlighted the tensions between settler and Indigenous fishers: There has been a rolling conflict for years.¹⁷ “I’m constantly arguing with my family about this,” they said. An Albertan noted that the regional conflict inside the country has gotten so dire “I feel like I get mistreated in other provinces if I say where I’m from.”

Certainly, addressing these issues—increasing the housing supply, advancing reconciliation, achieving carbon neutrality, and so on—is not easy. But, as one former Liberal cabinet minister explained, governments have become more obsessed with managing these problems than fixing them.

“We want to tell people what they should care about, and why what we’re doing is amazing,” they said. All the while, people feel “talked down to,” and “we can’t deliver services properly.”

Faith in our institutions is governed by feedback loops. Governments build trust by regulating those problems and mediating these conflicts. They lose trust when the problems persist and debate in the legislature seems unproductive at getting things back on track. Governments at every level are facing a legitimacy problem. We need only look online for the rage that results.





Part Two: Online Polarization

When the Freedom Convoy descended on Ottawa, participants were listening to a constellation of startup news outlets with names like Rebel, True North and Bright Light News. And they were following online broadcasters that included Viva Frei, Jeremy MacKenzie, and Laura-Lynn Tyler Thompson.

As traditional media has declined and retreated, web-first entrepreneurs have rushed to fill the gap. These new startups are run by writers and broadcasters, often with no formal journalistic training, who don't adhere to a formal code of ethics. Yet they are frequently addressing topics that seem ignored or verboten on mainstream channels. Many of these more ideologically based outlets employ the same fundraising tactics described in the first section: emotional appeals designed to drive a large number of small donations. Most concerning, they have become critical vectors for misinformation.

As the Freedom Convoy made clear, social media is an integral part of this dynamic. While convoy participants congregated on Facebook and Twitter, they also used the unmoderated messaging app Telegram and



radio platform Zello. The movement itself could not have existed without an array of these platforms. Also in the mix are right-wing networks Gab, Parler and Truth Social, and video platforms Rumble, Bitchute, and Odysee. These platforms are hotbeds of misinformation, extremism and conspiracy theories. And they are popular. Rumble, a video streaming site akin to YouTube and founded in Toronto, boasts some 63 million monthly active users across the U.S. and Canada.¹⁸

The establishment has lost control of the narrative. It won't be getting it back anytime soon.

A New Media Ecosystem

In early 2021, Danielle Smith joined Locals, a website where content creators could publish their work directly and charge a fee to give their fans access. It was founded as a rejection of Patreon, one of the most popular platforms for content creators to interact directly with fans. Patreon, however, maintains fairly strict standards for its platform: in 2018, it banned a far-right political commentator for the repeated use of “racial and homophobic slurs to degrade another individual,” according to the company. Big-name users, such as Jordan B. Peterson, quit in protest. Locals began as a home for those who objected to Patreon’s content policing, people like Danielle Smith. Then, she was just a private citizen; today, she is premier of Alberta.

Over the next year, Smith forged her own community on Locals. It was a walled garden where, for a few dollars a month, fans could read Smith’s writing, watch her livestreams and engage directly with her. They sent her recommended reading, pointed to new

research and debated the efficacy of measures adopted to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

This online clubhouse operated on a series of shared beliefs: COVID-19 restrictions were unwarranted, masks and vaccines were bad medicine, and the state was in cahoots with the media and the pharmaceutical industry to suppress more effective treatments like Hydroxychloroquine and Ivermectin. “Our governments are becoming increasingly untrustworthy and it’s getting dangerous for all of us,” Smith wrote in early 2022, sharing a post accusing the U.S. government of developing bioweapons in Ukraine. She shared links to an antisemitic blog and to outlets known to spread Russian propaganda, often at the recommendation of her readers and subscribers.¹⁹ Almost uniformly, her readers liked her posts. Rarely did they point out that her warnings about the safety and efficacy of mRNA vaccines, for example, were contradicted by peer-reviewed science.

Smith’s Locals community shared an incredible amount of information with each other. They, and many others who have fallen down conspiratorial and anti-vaccine rabbit holes, often claim the science is on their side. They can point to a number of doctors and researchers, including several Canadians, who have become internationally renowned by claiming the vaccines are not safe, and mainstream media has been duped or, worse, bought off by the powers that be.

When Jordan B. Peterson launched the tour for his book *Beyond Order: 12 More Rules for Life* earlier this year, he nearly sold out the Canadian Tire Centre in Ottawa. The audience—a diverse array of men and women, young

“The Edelman Trust Barometer shows that faith in the media is steadily declining year-over-year, with just 50 percent of Canadians saying they have trust in the media—lower than government, business and NGOs.”

and old, white and racialized—were enraptured by his lecture, a mix of Bible study, self-help seminar and political polemic. He has become a testament to the growing appetite for a right-wing, Christian-inflected counterculture.

While his core philosophy is conspiratorial and has driven a wave of hatred against transgender people, the first “rule” in Peterson’s new book is a good one: “Do not carelessly denigrate social institutions, or creative achievement.” Unfortunately, figures like Peterson and outlets like Rebel have grown their brands by carelessly denigrating the social institution of journalism. And it’s been ruthlessly effective.

For these ideological startups, this careless denigration of the Fourth Estate is ideological, but it is also necessary for their continued growth. Trashing the ailing mainstream press amps up their fundraising and wins over new subscribers. In this new media paradigm, fans of this kind of media believe that truth can only be found on the margins.

Politicians like Danielle Smith have adopted this ethos to great effect. Through Locals, she became a new media entrepreneur in her own right. And she did it by warning her fans

of the confluence between, as she phrased it in a 2022 newsletter, “Big Money, Big Tech, Big Pharma, Big Media.”²⁰

It comes at a time when traditional journalism is suffering and quality is declining. A hollowing out of traditional media has left communities across the country without any local news—449 local news operations shut down between 2008 and 2021, according to the Local News Research Project.²¹ It has also deprived the halls of power in Ottawa and the regional capitals of a full complement of journalists holding power to account. Fewer resources mean declining quality. Politicians and political operatives lament that the Parliamentary Press Gallery has become even more obsessed with process over policy.

The Edelman Trust Barometer shows that faith in the media is steadily declining year-over-year, with just 50 percent of Canadians saying they have trust in the media—lower than government, business and NGOs.²²

Figures like Peterson have denigrated the media and offered themselves as alternatives. It has made our media sphere more fractured than ever before.

Birds of a Feather

In September 2020, Facebook launched a little experiment.

Normally, every reaction to a post has an impact on how well that post does; every time a user hits the thumbs up button on a news article or photo, Facebook is a little more likely to show that post to other people. Each time someone reacts with a laughing emoji or a surprised face, the algorithm rewards that content.

But, as the U.S. presidential election neared, engineers decided that negative, angry reactions would no longer help a status update reach a wider audience. The hope was that if they stopped rewarding content that made people mad, perhaps the overall climate would be less aggressive.

It worked. The number of times Facebook users viewed violent content and misinformation dropped measurably in just a day. What's more, users became less likely to click the little angry face emoji. The number of angry reactions dropped by eight percent—not a massive amount, but it was proof of concept.²³

We know this thanks to Frances Haugen, a former Facebook engineer who left the company, concerned that it had become a corrosive force within democracy. Facebook leadership, Haugen testified before a U.S. Senate subcommittee, shut down this experiment, reintroducing anger as a positive factor in the algorithm. They wanted the advertising revenue it generated.

Algorithms are not magic. They cannot provoke emotions we are not already inclined to feel. They reflect back to us a distorted version of who we already are, like standing before a funhouse mirror. Indeed, some of the platforms most prone to hate speech and extremism—such as Gab or Truth Social—are largely free of algorithms.²⁴

Dr. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, a professor at Simon Fraser University, has studied how online communities perpetuate in-group/out-group dynamics. Researchers call this “homophily.” Most people understand homophily through the adage “birds of a feather flock together”—it's the idea that

we gravitate to those who are like us and avoid those who are dissimilar. Very often, those similarities are based on our political views. Indeed, some of the earliest research on homophily looked at the residents of all-white communities and found that residents who reported having close friends who were pro-segregation correlated strongly with being, themselves, pro-segregation.

This idea has become incredibly useful in understanding social dynamics online. While we spend a lot of time talking about big, open platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, a massive amount of information online flows through smaller, private, insular communities of like-minded people. These communities are sometimes conceived by algorithms, or affected by them, but it is the interpersonal dynamics that really drives their impact.

These online communities can become “agitated clusters of comforting rage,” Chun explains; spaces where users celebrate their shared interests and beliefs but where they also coalesce around their dislike of the out-group.

“Since most platforms don't have enough data points about you, this ‘personalization’ is not based on your actions but on actions of people determined to be ‘like you,’ that is, part of your network neighbourhood,” Chun explains. “What's key about these neighbourhoods is that they're filled with people who are like you—it makes segregation the default.”

Homophily, Chun explains, is “allegedly” about comfort. Being surrounded by people who look, think and act like you makes you feel secure but, practically, it saves you from having to confront a point of view that you may not

agree with. That, in turn, makes other groups feel more foreign, or alien.

We know, thanks to Haugen’s whistleblowing, that Facebook uses rage to tailor its product to users. From the internal documents she released, we also know Facebook experimented with making homophily core to its service. In 2018, the platform made changes to its algorithm to try to replicate our real-world relationships: it prioritized content from users’ friends and family, instead of strangers.²⁵

It was a disaster. It reflected our closest relationships back to us in a distorted, grotesque way. The platform was still rewarding content that garnered angry, highly emotional reactions, but now it was coming from people users ostensibly knew.

There was an unintended consequence of this change. By promoting friends to the exclusion of strangers, Facebook deprioritized news and politics, forcing news outlets and politicians to work harder to break through. They accidentally started a rage arms race.

“Engagement on positive and policy posts has been severely reduced,” the documents reveal, “leaving [political] parties increasingly reliant on inflammatory posts and direct attacks on their competitors. Many parties, including those that have shifted strongly to the negative, worry about the long-term effects on democracy.”²⁶

Social media companies, however, cannot solve this problem for us. A 2023 University of Maryland study followed what happened after Twitter, alarmed by its role in instigating an insurrection, suspended and banned thousands of accounts linked to the assault

on the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6—a so-called “great deplatforming.”²⁷ The study found that Twitter’s mass moderation effort backfired. It caused a large migration to Gab, a far-right clone of the microblogging platform, where the prevalence of hate speech “significantly increased—and remained high.” Worse yet, the mass banning appeared to have nearly no effect on the prevalence of hate speech on Twitter.

Deplatforming, the study found, “can incentivize users to seek alternative platforms where these discussions are less regulated and often more extreme.”

Cancel Culture

This rage-amplifying power of the internet has generated corrosive movements across the political spectrum, and across age groups. In our cross-country community roundtables, young adults consistently volunteered a particular tension of their digital era—cancel culture.

This loose concept, more tactic than an ideology unto itself, was born of a belief that our existing systems could not address endemic sexual misconduct. It grew to address inequities around race, gender, sexual orientation and disability. It was an attempt to mediate conflict where our traditional forums—the government, the media, the courts—could not or would not. But the exercise soon found there was no limit to the injustice to be addressed, and plenty of people who would use this new technique for their own ends.

What we heard was a consistent commitment to those laudable social goals, and a belief that the system that had evolved to address them had become a monster.

“In a sense, cancel culture is polarization distilled. It is a demand to make firm judgments on people, groups and ideas based on a set of inherited values.”

“Cancel culture is like how our prison system works,” one young adult explained. “It’s not about reform but just about punishment. There is no opportunity or grace. What I want to see is pathways for learning, evolution and accountability rather than punitive ways of dealing with harm.”

In a sense, cancel culture is polarization distilled. It is a demand to make firm judgments on people, groups and ideas based on a set of inherited values.

“Polarization divides, so it pulls away social cohesion,” one of our community roundtable participants said.

We heard that this constant demand to stay up on the discourse, to denounce, is exhausting. “If you don’t take a stand, and you don’t know every detail that makes someone problematic, if you don’t know every detail of what happened two years ago, five years ago, you are just this pressure cooker of anxiety,” one participant told us. Another participant said: “I feel like you are always on the spot, and I think it has evolved to where we, as consumers, are almost held as accountable as the people in positions of power.”

Another roundtable participant discussed the social burden she felt to engage in online discussion during the height of the Black

Lives Matter movement when she needed space to grieve what was happening in her own community: “Excuse me, I live this every day. Do not pressure me to post. I don’t want to post,” she said. “I feel everybody just wants to show that they know about this thing as opposed to, like, actually engaging with the material, engaging with the ideas.”

Said another: “Even if you actively want to get out of it, you can’t.” For all the wonderful ways the internet can connect disparate populations, they explained, “the flip side of it is that cancel culture and the toxicity that comes with these cycles is just so fast that sometimes it gives people anxiety to go online and look at all the hate that’s been spreading.” This climate is encouraging self-censorship, which is anathema to a functioning democracy. “When things are so polarized, people are afraid to actually share their authentic perspectives to things,” one young adult explained. “So, I feel like, as a society, sometimes no one is having authentic discussions.” We also heard that cancel culture “doesn’t leave a lot of room for people to make mistakes, especially not in a public forum.”

We heard from one participant who had moved to a remote, small town in the B.C. interior, living relatively off the grid, in part because of the stifling nature of performative politics and highly politicized public spaces. “Young people need space to test out ideas and opinions—to be tentative and exploratory both on and offline,” they said. “Our current society doesn’t allow for that.”

Cancel culture frequently breaks free from the confines of the internet and encourages real-world vigilantism. Take the Stella Luna Gelato Café in Ottawa. Last year, it emerged

that the café’s owner had contributed \$250 to the Freedom Convoy. She faced a deluge of phone calls targeting her business, with callers threatening to attack staff and throw bricks through the window. There are plenty of examples of similar cases: people who are mobbed and harassed for having the wrong opinions, or for making a joke for a small online audience that becomes a national news story.

Nowhere was this more obvious in recent years than in the clutch of debates that consumed the online world during the COVID-19 pandemic. The fights over masks, vaccines, lockdowns and even the very idea of public health expertise brought the simmering tensions to a head, exposing the raw polarization at the very heart of the Canadian body politic.



A visual representation of the issues young adults find polarizing around social media (themes and quotes were extracted from community roundtables)



Part Three: The Pandemic



By early 2020, Canada's political system was already careening towards greater polarization. The political trends mentioned in the first section and the digital changes discussed in the second ensured it. But the COVID-19 pandemic supercharged these factors, helping drive the separation of Canadians into two distinct tribes, at odds over the most basic facts about the pandemic and our collective response to it.

On one side were those who were generally inclined to trust government and the public health officials who managed our pandemic response. As bad as the pandemic went for Canada, with over 50,000 deaths, things could have been much worse. Thanks to that basic trust in our leaders and in our resilient institutions, Canada had one of the lowest COVID-19 death rates in the world,²⁸ and one of the strongest rates of vaccine uptake.²⁹

On the other side were those more predisposed to distrust government and experts, and who found vindication for this skepticism in Canada's pandemic response. Our governments' measures were often slow, chaotic, haphazard, arbitrary and, some may argue, even manipulative. Some of these skeptics were never on board, rejecting Canada's approach from the very beginning of the pandemic and insisting COVID-19 was no worse than a cold. Others grew skeptical as they sat with the anxiety, stress, isolation, loneliness and depression that the virus and its lockdowns had wrought, becoming increasingly disillusioned with many of the more controlling aspects of the state's response. In reaction, and with a vast digital library of scientific literature, speculation, polemic, misinformation and conspiracy theories at their fingertips, they found community.³⁰ Young Canadian adults

“These two groups, the trusting and the skeptical, came to a boil over the most visible and intrusive of Canada’s pandemic measures—lockdowns, mask wearing and vaccine mandates.”

were not immune. As an example, the advent of Students Against Mandates, a Manitoba student group founded to oppose vaccine mandates in post-secondary institutions, participated in convoy protests in Winnipeg and Ottawa.³¹

These two groups, the trusting and the skeptical, came to a boil over the most visible and intrusive of Canada’s pandemic measures—lockdowns, mask wearing and vaccine mandates. Each considered the other side to be selfish, misinformed and misguided. But one side had the support of political leaders, the health establishment and the media. The other, lacking a viable democratic outlet for their grievances, decided to head to the capital to make their voices heard.

“This is truly a reuniting of our country,” one user posted to a Freedom Convoy channel on Telegram in January 2022. “What the Plandemic has destroyed is being undone.”

 **The Science of Trust**

On Jan. 9, 2021, Quebec Premier François Legault imposed a province-wide curfew of 8 p.m.

Initially, the curfew was largely accepted by Quebecers, the media and even most of the opposition parties. “We have indications that it’s useful,” Legault told the nation,

assuring them curfews reduced the number of COVID-19 cases. Early on, the only evidence that this solidarity wasn’t absolute was the growing pile of infractions issued for violating the curfew, particularly to youth in racialized parts of Montreal. But when the curfew was reimposed a year later, angry protests broke out. Not long after, when the convoy arrived in Ottawa, a contingent of Quebecers opted to occupy the Gatineau side; another offshoot marched on Quebec City. The serene consensus of the elites was facing backlash from the governed.

The curfew was in effect for 157 days over those two years. It was not until the second curfew ended that it became clear the state lacked the evidence to justify it,³² which was arguably the country’s most stringent and—in terms of its impact on Quebecers’ mental health—the riskiest public health intervention.

This is perhaps only the most extreme example of what was a very general pan-Canadian phenomenon: Governments and their pandemic advisers across the country “were communicating with a level of certainty that they didn’t have,” one former public health official said. Governments needed the public to abide by public health measures that, they believed, would save lives, even as scientific advice was morphing and evolving. The state was telling people, the former official said, “what they should do, not what the science is.”

In 2021, a team of French-Austrian researchers examined their countries’ response to the pandemic. They wanted to understand how COVID-19 had affected the public’s trust in government. In Austria, they found a cross-partisan, rally-around-the-flag sentiment during the pandemic that saw trust in the

government response initially increase among most of the population. That sentiment, however, waned with time as the public perceived that their government had gone too far in some measures. In France, however, trust seemed to follow partisan lines from the very beginning.³³ “It seems that initially low levels of trust in government and high levels of partisan polarization have reduced the chances that citizens rally behind its government,” the study found.

In Canada, support for public health measures remained high for most of the pandemic. But the public certainly noticed sudden, sometimes contradictory, policy reversals on masks, travel restrictions, lockdown measures and social distancing. Some of these issues, rightly or wrongly, became partisan concerns. Trust waned, hitting historic lows in 2022, according to an annual survey from Proof Strategies.³⁴

The Trouble with Elites

Last year, academics at Laval University embarked on a study that drew on interviews with Quebec legislators to better understand how Quebec’s pandemic response managed to be both so strict and initially so popular—yet also how it eventually managed to foster such anger.

Politicians reported that the overwhelming initial support for public health measures pushed them to self-censor. Interestingly, one parliamentarian told researchers that the polarization present in Quebec dissuaded them from asking tough questions. “We do not want [our criticisms] to be a deterrent to compliance with sanitary measures. We also do not want our criticisms to be assimilated to conspiratorial criticism,” they told the researchers.

It’s a perfectly sensible tactic. But it backfired.

They found that “the ability of opposition parties to scrutinize government action and contribute to the political process—the quality of democratic governance—was clearly undermined by a sudden intolerance of criticism during the first part of the pandemic and the increased centralization of decision-making.”

This was a problem that was in no way isolated to Quebec. We know there is a sizable number of Canadians who are convinced that our country is governed by elites, either foreign or domestic, who have lost their connection to the people they serve. When our policy-makers came to virtual unanimity on these tough measures, backed by scientists and health officials, there were plenty of skeptics who saw conspiracy in the consensus. They retreated further into online communities, forming a new kind of opposition.

For some, these rabbit holes led to dark places, including conspiracy theories and misinformation that alleged a global depopulation plot, in which vaccines were a tool of mass murder. They linked up into other conspiratorial movements at home and abroad: for instance, a team of Canadian nurses, fired for their refusal to be vaccinated, spoke at a “stop the steal” rally in Washington, D.C, on Jan. 6, 2021.³⁵

Many of these skeptics are still deeply obsessed: A National Citizens Inquiry,³⁶ with support from Preston Manning, Jordan B. Peterson and prominent backers of the Freedom Convoy, is currently studying whether Canadian public health officials and governments should be held criminally liable for

their pandemic response. It is hard to imagine a more extreme sense of distrust.

Anti-vaxxers and skeptics are a minority—the vaccination rate in Canada is over 80 percent—but they are mighty. Aengus Bridgman, assistant professor at McGill University, has studied the impact of a politically motivated minority in the internet age, finding that 10 percent of users generated 80 percent of online posts during the 2019 federal election. He found that 10 percent to be “far more likely to engage in embodied and directed political participation acts, including protests and blockades, producing hate and harassing speech, and voting in crucial low-turnout contests.”³⁷ That observation rang true through the pandemic, particularly through the 2021 federal election.

Some leaders took this stubborn pocket of anti-vaccine sentiment as a challenge, and an invitation to engage, to reason and to persuade. “I respect that I represent people who are against vaccinations,” one Indigenous leader told me. Good leaders shared more data, published more research and spoke more directly to those who were skeptical. “The more you drive transparency, the more you drive debate—you might build trust,” the former public health official said.

Other leaders took a different tack. One senior member of the Trudeau government told me it was their moral imperative to push back against this anti-vaccine minority. In practice, it meant turning vaccine status into a moral electoral wedge issue during a snap election in the midst of the pandemic. While campaigning, Trudeau wondered aloud to a Quebecois TV host whether we should “tolerate” the “small group...who are often anti-science, who



“When our policy-makers came to virtual unanimity on these tough measures, backed by scientists and health officials, there were plenty of skeptics who saw conspiracy in the consensus. They retreated further into online communities, forming a new kind of opposition.”

are often misogynistic, who are often racist.”³⁸ Trudeau also accused Conservative Party leader Erin O’Toole of being “softer” and Bloc Québécois leader Yves-François Blanchet of being “less firm” on vaccines.

“It really divided,” the Indigenous leader said, “and made people add up the score.” Policies meant to protect the most vulnerable, such as vaccine mandates and passports, could have been deployed without denigrating those who objected, the leader said.

“This trucker vax policy is obviously just dumb political theatre,” Alberta Premier Jason Kenney texted a Trudeau cabinet minister during the occupation and blockades. “Calling them all Nazis hasn’t exactly helped. And now the provinces are holding the bag on enforcement.”³⁹

Two years later, at the Public Order Emergency Commission, Trudeau said he “did not call people who were unvaccinated names.” He told the commission he “highlighted there is a difference between people who are hesitant to get vaccinated for any range of reasons and people who deliberately spread misinformation that puts at risk the life and health of their fellow Canadians.”⁴⁰

While we do not yet have a proven toolkit to combat this type of health misinformation, we know what does not work. A 2018 study, analyzing the anti-vaccine sentiment of more than 5,000 people across 24 countries, concluded that any strategy designed to win over those holdouts should “align with people’s underlying fears, ideologies and identities, thus reducing people’s motivation to reject the science.” Conversely, they found, “official pronouncements that imply a lack of dissent

or that the ‘science is in’—can be inverted to be proof of a conspiracy.”⁴¹

Perhaps there was no communications strategy that would have convinced ardent holdouts to get vaccinated, but it is likely that a less bellicose approach may have averted some of the acrimony and anger that defined the last half of the pandemic.

As well, constant attempts to leverage the convoy for political ends by the Conservative Party—an attempt to siphon the movement’s online enthusiasm and impressive fundraising chops, even Conservative MPs admit—served to legitimize anti-scientific beliefs. The fact that Kenney himself was ousted by the more radical elements in his party is a testament to how motivated and destructive this contingent can be.

No country found itself immune to the global anti-vaccine movement or the anger that misinformation produced. But not every jurisdiction saw animosity as intense as in Canada, or protests this substantial. In fact, although the Freedom Convoy became a cause célèbre for the American right, as evidenced by millions of dollars in online donations from the U.S. and elsewhere, it also became an exporter of anti-elite sentiment, inspiring similar actions as far afield as the Netherlands and New Zealand. Canadian influencers and media startups, particularly those that found success in the anti-vaccine movement, command an impressive international audience.

Conclusion

Canada has a polarization problem that strikes at the heart of our system of government. It's a problem that has been years, even decades, in the making, and it sits at the confluence of a number of long-term trends in the evolution of our political institutions and media environment. These trends came to a head during the pandemic, where they turned into a roiling cauldron of anger and recrimination.

If these trends continue, our politics will become more gladiatorial and performative. More voters will tune out and drop out, leaving less territory in the middle and on the margins to be contested. Politics will devolve further into trench warfare. Increasingly, policy could become politics by other means—a way of signalling to the faithful and wedging the opposition.

Our political arena is becoming less cooperative and more rigid. Politicians and partisans are locked in a downward spiral, with each demanding greater purity and militancy from the other.

This is driven by plenty of real-world factors, but the trend is supercharged by caricatures we have made of each other online. Emails in our inboxes and posts on our timelines tell us partisans of the other stripe represent a threat to our society, our way of life, our finances, our children.

Many Canadians have recoiled from this nastiness, particularly young adults. An attempt to use the internet to serve as a great equalizer, to prosecute social injustice through collective action, has netted plenty of good, but also pain. Rather than consistently fostering accountability, education and redemption, cancel culture has allowed small, marginalized groups, or even lone actors, to set loose a mob to destroy lives and careers. Worse yet, some marginalized young adults we interviewed—intended beneficiaries of this online justice—feel stifled and anxiety-ridden because of it.

The mainstream media, which one would hope could help untangle this social tumult, is more fragmented than ever. Things are likely to get worse. We will have an institutional press, for those who believe in institutions, that is increasingly impoverished and incapable of fulfilling its mandate; and an alternative press that prioritizes confirming fans' identities and boosting its own fundraising over true accountability for the systems it covers. This divide is worsening polarization, not improving it.

In good times, reasonably steady economic growth has a way of making everyone more open-minded and tolerant of diversity and difference. But Canada is facing serious challenges, including a cost-of-living crisis, a challenged economy and flatlining productivity,

“An attempt to use the internet to serve as a great equalizer, to prosecute social injustice through collective action, has netted plenty of good, but also pain.”

“Young adults have become frustrated but, as best we can tell, are not entirely hopeless about the state of our country; they haven’t checked out.”

all factors contributing to a noticeable decline in state services. Those problems are providing traction for this growing anxiety. Young adults have become frustrated but, as best we can tell, are not entirely hopeless about the state of our country; they haven’t checked out. We need, at the very least, to understand them better and, more ambitiously, to ensure they understand one another and see themselves—their anxieties and priorities—addressed in our political discourse.

The ship of state is not rudderless in these waters. We still have time and ability to address these problems, but we require leaders who want to reduce this polarization and are willing to abandon the tactics that drive it. That does not require that individuals in our political system and media water down their beliefs or mute their criticism of each other, but it does demand that they do so thoughtfully, and with awareness of their own potentially corrosive impact.

The Freedom Convoy should be a wake-up call. Canadians are angry. And they are picking sides, increasingly segmenting into agitated clusters of comforting rage. ■



Endnotes

- 1 Jacobellis v. Ohio, 378 U.S. 184 (1964)
- 2 Graves, F. (Jan. 17, 2023). [Polarization, Populism, and Evolving Public Outlook on Canada and the World](#). EKOS.
- 3 Edelman. (March 2023). [2023 Edelman Trust Barometer](#).
- 4 Lord Ashcroft Polls. (June 2022). [Canadian Politics after COVID](#).
- 5 Statistics Canada. (Mar. 22, 2023). [Police-reported hate crime, 2021](#).
- 6 Bricker, D. (Dec. 26, 2022). [One Half \(49%\) of Canadians Want a Federal Election in 2023](#). Ipsos.
- 7 CBC Archives. (2018). [From 1977: The House of Commons enters the TV era](#).
- 8 Aitchison, S. (Feb. 21, 2022). [Speaking to the Emergencies Act](#). Facebook.
- 9 Warkentin, C. (Feb. 19, 2022). [Untitled video](#). Facebook.
- 10 Allyn, B. (Oct. 5, 2021). [Here are 4 key points from the Facebook whistleblower's testimony on Capitol Hill](#). NPR.
- 11 PricewaterhouseCoopers. (2007). [The Liberal Party of Canada Combined Financial Statements](#).
- 12 Deloitte. (2007). [Financial Statements of Conservative Fund Canada](#).
- 13 Merkley, E. (January 2023). [Polarization Eh? Ideological Divergence and Partisan Sorting in the Canadian Mass Public](#). Oxford University Press.
- 14 Leger. (Feb. 4, 2023). [Is Canada Broken?](#)
- 15 Coletto, D. (Feb. 23, 2023). [Some Perspective and Deeper Polling Analysis on the "Canada Feels Broken" Framing](#). Abacus Data.
- 16 Hammond, S. (Jan. 24, 2020). [Three Motivations for "State Capacity Libertarianism"](#). Niskanen Center.
- 17 MacDonald, M. (Dec. 19, 2022). [Conflict over new Indigenous lobster fishery continues to smoulder amid some progress](#). Canadian Press.
- 18 PRNewswire. (Sept. 7, 2022). [Rumble Sets New Monthly Active User Record in August Citing Growth Among 'Gen Z' Users](#). Benzinga.
- 19 Dryden, J. (Oct. 19, 2022). [Danielle Smith shared link to antisemitic blog while writing about potential of global currency](#). CBC News.
- 20 Ling, J. (Oct. 18, 2022). [Danielle Smith's Magical Mystery Media](#). Bug-eyed and Shameless.
- 21 Cussen, K. (Aug. 20, 2021). [New campus-industry startup will generate local stories, build students' data journalism skills](#). Local News Data Hub.
- 22 Edelman, 2023
- 23 Document Cloud. (2020). [Using p\(anger\) to reduce the impact angry reactions have on engagement ranking levers](#).
- 24 Fixler, M. (Aug. 19, 2022). [On Gab, Truth Social and beyond, antisemitic threats continue in the wake of the FBI's Mar-a-Lago search](#). Jewish Journal.
- 25 Hagey, K., and Horwitz, J. (Sept. 15, 2021). [Facebook Tried to Make Its Platform a Healthier Place. It Got Angrier Instead](#). Wall Street Journal.
- 26 Document Cloud. (2019). [Political Party Response to '18 Algorithm Change](#).
- 27 Buntain, C., et al. (Mar. 12, 2023). [CrossPlatform Reactions to the PostJanuary 6 Deplatforming](#). Journal of Quantitative Description.

- 28 Coronavirus Research Center. (Mar. 10, 2023). [Mortality Analyses](#). Johns Hopkins University.
- 29 Holder, J. (March 13, 2023). [Tracking Coronavirus Vaccinations Around the World](#). New York Times.
- 30 Pennycook, G., McPhetres, J., Bago, B., and Rand, D.G. [Beliefs About COVID-19 in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States: A Novel Test of Political Polarization and Motivated Reasoning](#). *Pers Soc Psychol Bull*.
- 31 Leedham, E. (Aug. 10, 2022). [Family of CEO at One of Manitoba's Biggest Corporations is Behind a Pro-Convoy Youth Group](#). PressProgress.
- 32 CBC News (Mar. 04, 2022). [Unredacted document shows Montreal Public Health urged Quebec not to impose 2nd curfew](#).
- 33 Kritzinger, S., et al. (June 14, 2021). ['Rally round the flag': the COVID-19 crisis and trust in the national government](#). *West European Politics*, 44:5-6. Taylor & Francis Online.
- 34 Proof Strategies. (n.d.). [The Proof Strategies CanTrust Index](#).
- 35 Ling, J. (Jan. 8, 2021). [COVID Conspiracy Nurses Among Those Who Spoke At Trump's Violent D.C. Rally](#). VICE News.
- 36 [National Citizens Inquiry](#). Accessed Jun. 5, 2023.
- 37 Bridgman, A. (n.d.). [The role of social media in polarizing Canadians](#). McGill University.
- 38 La semaine des 4 Julie. (Sep. 16, 2021). [Season 3, episode 4](#). Noovo.
- 39 Public Order Emergency Commission. (2022). [Texts MM \(Ministers group chat Alghabra and LeBlanc.\)](#)
- 40 Trudeau, J. (Nov. 25, 2022.) [Public Order Emergency Commission](#).
- 41 Hornsey, M.J., Harris, E.A., and Fielding, K.S. (2018). [The psychological roots of anti-vaccination attitudes: A 24-nation investigation](#). *Health Psychology*, 37(4), 307–315.

Reach across the nation

Appendix

Young adults from 31 cities across Canada participated in virtual and in-person community roundtables.

1. London, Ontario
2. Whitby, Ontario
3. Mississauga, Ontario
4. Hamilton, Ontario
5. Prince Edward County, Ontario
6. Blenheim, Ontario
7. Toronto, Ontario
8. Ottawa, Ontario
9. Etobicoke, Ontario
10. North York, Ontario
11. Scarborough, Ontario
12. Oakville, Ontario
13. St. Catharines, Ontario
14. Oshawa, Ontario
15. Peterborough, Ontario
16. Dartmouth, Nova Scotia
17. Halifax, Nova Scotia
18. Saint John, New Brunswick
19. Moncton, New Brunswick
20. Blackpoint, New Brunswick
21. Vancouver, BC
22. Victoria, BC
23. Nakusp, B.C.
24. Winnipeg, Manitoba
25. Edmonton, Alberta
26. Calgary, Alberta
27. Montreal, Quebec
28. Saint-Lazare, Quebec
29. Laval, Quebec
30. St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador
31. Corner Brook, Newfoundland and Labrador

Young adults from 319 cities participated in the national survey.

Alberta

Calgary
Edmonton
Fort McMurray
Red Deer
Bonnyville
DeBolt
Chestermere
Cochrane
Lethbridge
Spruce Grove
Drayton Valley
Leduc
Medicine Hat
Valleyview
Taber
Grande Prairie
St. Albert
Fairview
Wainwright
Cold Lake
Canmore
Airdrie
Lloydminster
Sherwood Park
Sundre
Sylvan Lake
Forestburg
Westerose
1 anonymous city within province

British Columbia

Victoria
Vancouver
Surrey
Duncan
Burnaby
Qualicum
Beach
Penticton
Abbotsford
Richmond
Coquitlam
Kelowna
Port Hardy
Kamloops
Ashcroft

Saanich
Chilliwack
Salmon Arm
Port Coquitlam
North
Vancouver
Port Alberni
Dawson Creek
Pitt Meadows
Terrace
Nanaimo
Keremeos
Merritt
Prince George
Langley
New
Westminster
Vernon
Oliver
Williams Lake
Princeton
Comox
1 anonymous city within province

Manitoba

Steinbach
Winnipeg
Sperling
Ste. Rose du Lac
Neepawa
Winkler
Petersfield
Niverville
Selkirk
Brandon
Russell
Portage la Prairie

New Brunswick

Fredericton
Dieppe
Saint John
Miramichi
Oromocto
Moncton
Tracadie-Sheila
Newcastle

Quispamsis
Sackville
Edmundston
St. Stephen
Durham Bridge

Newfoundland and Labrador

St. John's
Portugal Cove
Corner Brook
Mount Pearl
Clareville
Little Bay East
Spaniard's Bay
Victoria

Northwest Territories

Yellowknife
1 anonymous city within province

Nova Scotia

Bridgewater
Kentville
Bedford
Dartmouth
Yarmouth
Halifax
Sydney
Truro
Antigonish
Fall River
Springville
Oxford
Amherst
Lower Sackville

Ontario

Kingston
Toronto
Milton
Ottawa
Brantford
Belleville
Stittsville
Brampton
Orleans

Orillia
 North York
 Scarborough
 Thornhill
 Windsor
 Bradford
 Innisfil
 Etobicoke
 Bowmanville
 Pickering
 London
 Hamilton
 Aurora
 Kitchener
 Mississauga
 St. Catharines
 Huntsville
 Thunder Bay
 North Bay
 Port Elgin
 Nepean
 Maple
 Beeton
 Smiths Falls
 Manotick Station
 Aylmer
 Orangeville
 Waterloo
 Leamington
 Cambridge
 Niagara Falls
 Haliburton
 Oakville
 Oshawa
 Dundas
 Markham
 Burlington
 Peterborough
 Frankford
 Grimsby
 Kenora
 Simcoe
 Barrie
 Ajax
 Oshweken
 Bobcaygeon
 Stoney Creek
 Guelph
 Thorold
 Richmond Hill
 Greater Sudbury
 Petawawa
 Ingersoll
 Wellington
 Sarnia
 Dryden
 Sydenham
 Collingwood
 Sault Ste. Marie
 Stouffville
 Enterprise
 Concord
 Woodbridge

Whitby
 Chelmsford
 Keswick
 Woodville
 Kemptville
 Stayner
 Corunna
 Cornwall
 Tillsonburg
 Uxbridge
 Port Hope
 Unionville
 Drumbo
 Woodstock
 Burgessville
 Stratford
 Vaughan
 Cobourg
 Millbrook
 Amhertsburg
 Welland
 Kingsville
 Dundalk
 Picton
 Plattsville
 Huron East
 Bolton
 Fergus
 Owen Sound
 Kincardine
 Perth
 Tottenham
 New Hamburg
 Kanata
 Newmarket
 Binbrook
 Ancaster
 Carleton Place
 Caledon East
 Waterdown
 Caledon
 Goderich
 Mitchell/Ontario
 St-Albert
 Trenton
 Avonmore
 Alliston
 King City
 Forest

Prince Edward Island

Summerside
 Charlottetown
 Cornwall

Quebec

Montreal
 Saint-Eustache
 Gatineau
 Québec
 Chicoutimi
 Saint-Jerome
 Trois-Rivières

Terrebonne
 Matane
 Sherbrooke
 Repentigny
 Saint-Calixte
 Roberval
 Verdun
 Laval
 Longueuil
 Saint-Laurent
 Sainte-Anne-des-Plaines
 Shawinigan
 Blainville
 Inukjuak
 Granby
 Saint-Georges
 Dorval
 Pierrefonds
 Mont-Saint-Hilaire
 Sept-Iles
 La Prairie
 St-Jean-Port-Joli
 Mirabel
 Pointe-Claire
 Dollard-des-Ormeaux
 Val-des-Monts
 Sorel-Tracy
 Salaberry-de-Valleyfield
 Vaudreuil-Dorion
 Bristol Mines
 Prevost
 Drummondville
 Saint-Augustin-de-Desmaures
 Sainte-Anne-des-Monts
 Lachine
 Saint-Lambert
 Lorraine
 Pincourt
 Joliette
 Wemindji
 Baie-Comeau
 Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu
 Saint-Sauveur
 Roxboro
 Mont-Laurier
 Lac-Beauport
 Jonquiere
 Boisbriand
 Levis
 Saint Thomas de Montmagny
 Saint-Constant
 Brossard
 Saint-Jacques
 Chambly
 Mont-Tremblant
 Kirkland

Eastmain
 Beauharnois
 Victoriaville
 Varennes
 Saint-Bruno-de-Montarville
 LaSalle
 Greenfield Park
 Sainte-Catherine
 1 anonymous city within province

Saskatchewan

Regina
 Saskatoon
 Neuanlage
 La Ronge
 Prince Albert
 Moose Jaw
 Yorkton
 North Battleford
 Humboldt

Acknowledgments

Project Funders

Government of Canada:
Department of
Canadian Heritage



The McConnell Foundation



Community Partners

Lifelong Leadership Institute
First Work Ontario

Saint John Human
Development Council

Apathy is Boring

LOVE Nova Scotia

YMCA Canada

Advisory Council

Cadmus Delorme
Prior Chief of Cowessess
First Nation

Dr. Cristine de Clercy
Jarislowsky Chair,
Trent University

Dr. Eric Merkley
Assistant Professor,
Department of
Political Science,
University of Toronto

John Beebe
Founder, Democratic
Engagement Exchange,
Toronto Metropolitan
University

Nathalie Des Rosiers
Principal, Massey College

Samantha Reusch
Executive Director,
Apathy is Boring

Trevor Massey
Chair, Lifelong Leadership
Institute

McGill Team

Dr. Taylor Owen
Founding Director and
Associate Professor in the
Max Bell School of Public
Policy at McGill University

Dr. Sonja Solomun
Research Director

Phaedra de Saint Rome
Director of Operations

Helen Hayes
Research Manager

Nadia Solomun
Director of Communications

RIWI Team

Danielle Goldfarb
VP Global Affairs,
Economics and Public Policy

Catherine Barker
Product Manager

Ayesha Naseem
Project Coordinator

Roundtable Facilitators

Zofia Switkowski
Restorative Justice Facilitator,
Trainer and Consultant

Jaqueline Sultan
Apathy is Boring

PPF Team

Edward Greenspon
President & CEO

Alison Uncles
Vice-President, PPF Media
& Communications

Gareth Chappell
Director of Planning
and Operations

Victoria Kuketz
PPF Fellow in Digital
Democracy

Shweta Menon
Policy Lead

Colin Campbell
Editorial Director

Lacy Atalick
Digital Editor

Naushin Ahmed
Manager, Production
& Brand

Mark Perry
Event Specialist

Chelsea Berry
Membership Lead

Contributors

Andrew Potter
Handling Editor

Anita Murray
Copyediting

Emmanuelle Demange
Translation

Illustration + Design

Emily Tu
emilytu.com

