

DIGITAL DEMOCRACY PROJECT

Research Memo #6 Political Advertising

OCT. 2019

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DIGITAL DEMOCRACY PROJECT

The Digital Democracy Project is a joint initiative led by the Ottawa-based Public Policy Forum and the Max Bell School of Public Policy at McGill University.

The project will study the media ecosystem in the run-up to and during Canada's Oct. 2019 federal election by monitoring digital and social media and by conducting both regular national surveys and a study of a metered sample of online consumption. The project will communicate its preliminary research findings publicly on a regular basis from August to Oct. 2019, and will work with journalists to analyze the spread and impact of misinformation. The study will culminate in a final report to be published by March 2020. Both the project's preliminary findings and final report will be publicly available.

The project director is Taylor Owen, Associate Professor and Beaverbrook Chair in Media, Ethics and Communications in the Max Bell School of Public Policy at McGill University. The online data analysis team is led by Derek Ruths, Associate Professor in the School of Computer Science at McGill University, and the survey analysis team is led by Peter Loewen, Professor of Political Science at the University of Toronto.

The project is funded by The Rossy Foundation, the McConnell Foundation, and the Luminate Group and with support from the Mozilla. The project is also participating in the Digital Elections Research Challenge, a collaborative research project led by Taylor Owen and Elizabeth Dubois, Assistant Professor at the University of Ottawa, and funded by a grant from Heritage Canada. The Digital Democracy Project will be sharing survey and online data with the 18 research projects funded through this collaboration and will highlight select findings from these projects in our regular briefings.

For enquiries, please contact [Stephanie MacLellan](#).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

KEY FINDINGS: FACEBOOK ELECTION ADS

- 1 The Liberal Party outspent the Conservatives on Facebook. They also chose more narrowly targeted ads compared to the Conservatives’ “broadcasting”-style strategy.
- 2 The highest-spending partisan third-party group, by far, was Canada Proud.
- 3 Troublingly, we found at least two advertisers purporting to show “fact checks” that were actually partisan advertisements.

KEY FINDINGS: SURVEY

- 1 Canadians do not seem to prefer positive ads to negative ads. Negative ads do drive up negative perceptions of the party that is targeted, but also of the party that pays for the ads.
- 2 Positive political ads appear to reduce affective polarization—dislike of parties or their supporters on the other end of the political spectrum simply because they belong to an opposing group.

KEY FINDINGS: ADVERTISEMENTS

The Cambridge Analytica scandal shed light on the ways social media advertising could potentially be used to influence electoral outcomes. With traditional advertising, political campaigns can only reach broad audiences—such as newspaper subscribers, or viewers of a certain television show—and their spending is strictly regulated. But with social media advertisements, political parties and their supporters can fine-tune their messages to highly specific audiences, without the rest of the country knowing what information their friends and neighbours are receiving.

In the year and a half since the Cambridge Analytica revelations, social media companies have taken steps to make their political advertising processes more transparent. Facebook, for instance, has made all Canadian political, electoral and issue ads that run on its platforms available to journalists and researchers. This is the basis for research by the Online Political Transparency Project at New York University’s Center for Cybersecurity, which collaborated with the Digital Democracy Project on this report.

Adding up the total ad spending for Canadian political parties during the election campaign so far—including the national and provincial party organizations and individual candidates—shows that the Liberal Party has far

outspent its rivals. From Sept. 11 to Oct. 4, the Liberals and their candidates spent an estimated \$1 million (all figures CAD) on Facebook ads, compared to \$640,000 for the Conservatives and \$230,000 for the NDP.

But looking more closely at these figures also tells us something about the parties' advertising strategies. The Liberals appear to be running far more targeted ads, with an average estimated spend of \$150. The Conservatives are running fewer ads but spending more on them, with an average estimated ad spend of \$695. The Conservatives appear to be pursuing a "broadcast" strategy, similar to traditional advertising, with ads promoting the party as a whole and only minor tweaks to the messaging. The Liberals, by contrast, are focusing on promoting individual candidates. (Much smaller spending totals by the NDP and other parties makes it difficult to make direct comparisons.)

The 2018 Ontario election was notable for the way that a third-party group, Ontario Proud, disrupted the political information landscape with social media ads and posts taking aim at the incumbent Liberal government, which ended up losing to the Conservatives. With Ontario Proud's founder launching a national organization, Canada Proud, ahead of the federal election, analysts have been closely watching partisan third-party groups. Canada Proud has turned out to be the biggest third-party spender on political Facebook ads by far. It spent more than \$123,000 in the election period up to Oct. 4. Its closest competitor was the left-leaning third-party North99, which spent a fraction of that amount at \$29,000. Right-leaning third-parties that are [affiliated with each other](#) made up five of the top 10 spenders.

Troublingly, we found at least two advertisers on Facebook purporting to show "fact checks" that were actually partisan advertisements. One page, "Election Fact Check," clearly discloses that it is paid for by the Conservative Party of Canada. The other, which attacks the Conservatives, states that it is paid for by "Canada Fact Check," providing a link to an associated web page and political consultant responsible for the campaign. North99 also ran ads that solicited donations for a "fact check" website, but that site also appears to be a partisan site designed to spread negative political messages.

The idea of partisan advertisements masquerading as "fact checks" should be of serious concern to journalists. In recent years, news organizations have invested more resources into fact-checking as a way to counter political misinformation and position themselves as a trusted source for news. But as [Research Memo 5](#) showed, Canadians are not more likely to trust fact-checks from the media than from politicians or random Twitter users. Partisan groups presenting political spin as "fact checks" could create even more confusion in this space.

KEY FINDINGS: SURVEY

For years, parties and political scientists have debated whether negative ads win elections. We are no closer to answering that question but our survey this week shows that Canadians do not seem to have any preference between positive and negative ads. They saw negative ads as slightly less appropriate and less fair than positive ads, but more believable and more accurate.

Negative ads do lead to more negative impressions of the party that is being targeted. However, they also lead to more negative impressions of the party that is placing the ad. This means that any party looking to go negative with its advertising would be taking a calculated risk.

Beyond the competitive considerations of elections, negative ads may also have an effect on society as a whole. We found that two measures of affective polarization—*affect gap* and *warmth gap*—were reduced by positive ads. We randomly divided our respondents into three groups and showed them Facebook advertisements from the New York University collection. Some saw only positive ads, some saw only negative ads, and some saw a mix of the two. Because the overwhelming majority of our ads were from the Liberal and Conservative Parties, we restrict our analysis here to Liberal and Conservative partisans.

To calculate the *affect gap*, we asked respondents to rate how well a series of positive and negative words (e.g. honest, intelligent, hypocritical, selfish) describe a given party. Respondents who were only exposed to positive ads felt less negatively about the opposing party than those who received only negative ads or a mix of the two, and the gap between their perceptions toward their own party and their opponents was smaller as well.

We calculate the *warmth gap* by asking respondents to rate their feelings toward each of the major parties well before exposure to any ads at the beginning of our survey and again after respondents saw the ads. We find that Liberal and Conservative partisans saw each other's parties more positively after exposure to positive ads, while there was no difference in feelings for those who only saw negative ads or a mix. In addition, the *warmth gap* was 10% smaller for respondents who were exposed to only positive ads than those who saw no ads.

Parties of all stripes have been fiercely debating whether digital media contributes to polarization and what can be done to stop it. If they are serious about tackling the issue, one step might be taking a closer look at political advertising.

METHODOLOGY

Our survey data team conducted an online panel survey of 1,549 Canadian citizens 18 years and older using the online sample provider Qualtrics. The sample was gathered from Sept. 27 to Oct. 3. Data was weighted within each region of Canada by gender and age to ensure it adequately represented the Canadian public. Survey respondents were asked questions related to basic demographics, as well as their partisan, ideological and issue preferences. They were also asked to evaluate six randomly assigned Facebook ads from the three major parties. We present 90% confidence intervals for each of our figures below. Partisan sub-groups are restricted to the Conservatives, Liberals, NDP and non-partisans for sample size considerations.

For our online data research, we used Facebook's Ad Library API and Ad Library Report. Facebook publishes weekly reports of pages which have run ads on social issues, elections or politics in Canada. We use those reports to find Facebook pages which have run ads of this type, and then we request all ads via the API for those pages on a daily basis. For each ad, we receive the ad text, the page associated with the ad, the link description shown to user telling them where the ad would take them, and information about how much was spent on the ad and how many impressions it had. The ads in this report ran between Sept. 11 and Oct. 4.

More details about our methodology can be found in Appendix A.

GENERAL FINDINGS: CANADIAN POLITICAL ADVERTISING ON FACEBOOK

Digital advertising targeted at voters via online platforms such as Facebook has emerged as a major feature of modern campaigning in the past decade.¹ Following controversy over the role that divisive, opaque digital advertising may have played in the 2016 U.S. election,² Facebook, Google and other firms have created advertising archives that can be accessed by journalists and researchers.³

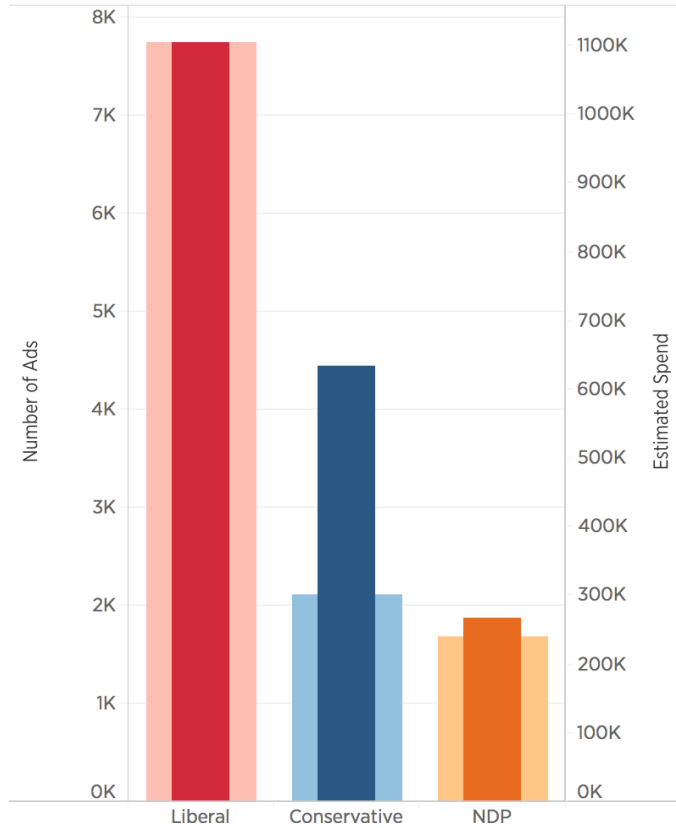
The Online Political Transparency Project at New York University’s Center for Cybersecurity has been collecting all advertisements made available in Canada by Facebook since the election period began on Sept. 11. We estimated the major political parties’ total ad spending on Facebook from Sept. 11 to Oct. 4, by combining the spend of the pages of the national parties, the provincial and local parties, and individual candidates. During this period, we estimate that the Liberal Party and its candidates spent just over \$1 million (all figures CAD), the Conservative Party and its candidates spent \$640,000, and the NDP and its candidates spent \$230,000. Beyond the simple spending differences, though, we can see the parties taking very different strategies when engaging in Facebook advertising.

¹ Jessica Baldwin-Philippi, 2015. *Using Technology, Building Democracy: Digital Campaigning and the Construction of Citizenship*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Daniel Kreiss, 2016. *Prototype Politics: Technology-Intensive Campaigning and the Data of Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

² Young Mie Kim et al, 2018. “The Stealth Media? Groups and Targets behind Divisive Issue Campaigns on Facebook.” *Political Communication* 35(4): 515–41; Daniel Kreiss and Shannon C. McGregor, 2019. “The ‘Arbiters of What Our Voters See’: Facebook and Google’s Struggle with Policy, Process, and Enforcement around Political Advertising.” *Political Communication* 0(0): 1–24

³ Paddy Leerssen et al, 2019. “Platform Ad Archives: Promises and Pitfalls.” <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=3380409>

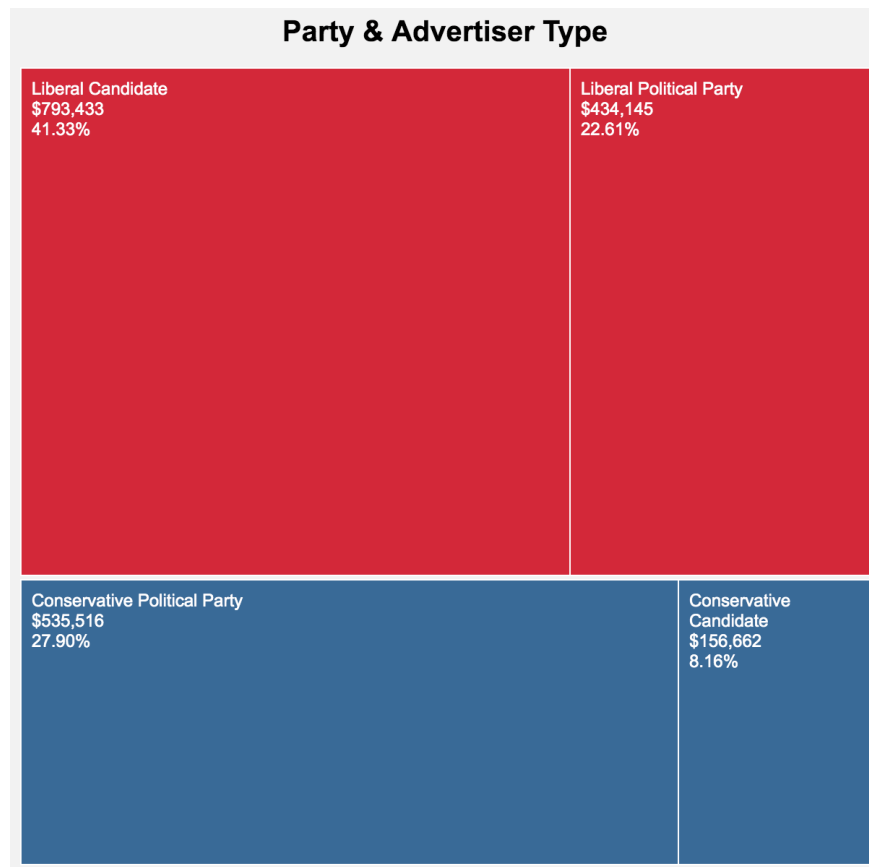
FIGURE 1. Parties' Total Ad Spending (dark bars) and Number of Ads Purchased (pale bars)



First, the Liberal Party and its candidates appear to be running far more targeted ads, with an average estimated spend of \$150 per ad. The Conservative Party and its candidates, while running fewer ads, have been spending more per ad, with an average estimated ad spend of \$695 per ad. The Liberals are running ads that are far more narrowly targeted than those of their opponents. This can be seen in Figure 1, where the pale background bars represent the number of ads, and the dark foreground bars represent estimated spend.

Another significant difference is in how the parties are distributing their spending across various party actors. The Conservative Party page channelled 77% of its Facebook ad spending through the national party page. Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer’s page was a very distant second, with only 6.5% of the overall Conservative spend. Conversely, the Liberal Party spent more of its Facebook advertising through leader Justin Trudeau’s page (33%) than it did through the national party page (30%). Excluding the party leaders, only 129 Conservative candidates ran ads on Facebook, and their total average spend was just \$830, while 180 Liberal candidates ran ads with a total average spend of \$2,135. Details can be seen in Figure 2.

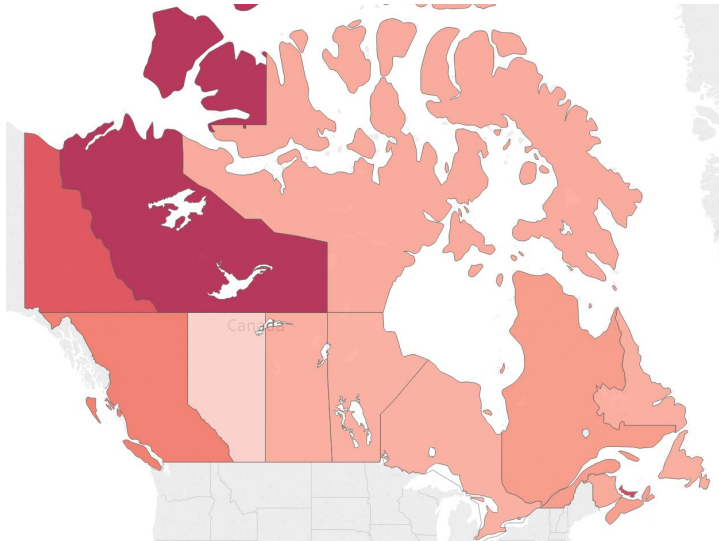
FIGURE 2. Liberals' and Conservatives' Ad Spending for Party vs. Candidates



From this data, we can see larger differences in campaign strategy. The Conservative Party's Facebook advertising strategy is based on large ad campaigns, which span across Canada with minimal changes from the national party's page. Relatively fewer individual candidates run Facebook ads compared to their Liberal counterparts, and those who do spend less on those ads. This "broadcast" strategy promotes the party as a whole, rather than individual candidates. The Liberal strategy, by contrast, is focused around promoting individual candidates. This at least partially explains the difference in size between the Liberal and Conservative Facebook ad operations: when an advertiser is promoting a particular candidate rather than an entire party, they are naturally trying to reach smaller groups of people at the riding level.

The NDP spent far less on Facebook advertising, for both the party and its candidates, than the Liberals or the Conservatives, making it difficult to make direct comparisons. Notably, NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh has not run any ads from his personal Facebook page during the election campaign; however, a third-party group, the United Steelworkers, has funded a campaign via a page called "Jagmeet Singh: On Your Side" with 33 ads that promote the NDP party leader and spread negative messages about Trudeau.

FIGURE 3. Liberal Party Spend Per Voter by Province



We also reviewed the demographic and geographic distributions of Facebook ad spending by the major political parties. The Conservatives and Liberals followed broadly similar spending per user in the provinces, but strikingly different patterns in the territories, demonstrated in Figures 3 and 4, where the darker shades represent more spending per user. A more detailed breakdown can be found in in Table 1.⁴

FIGURE 4. Conservative Party Spend Per Voter by Province



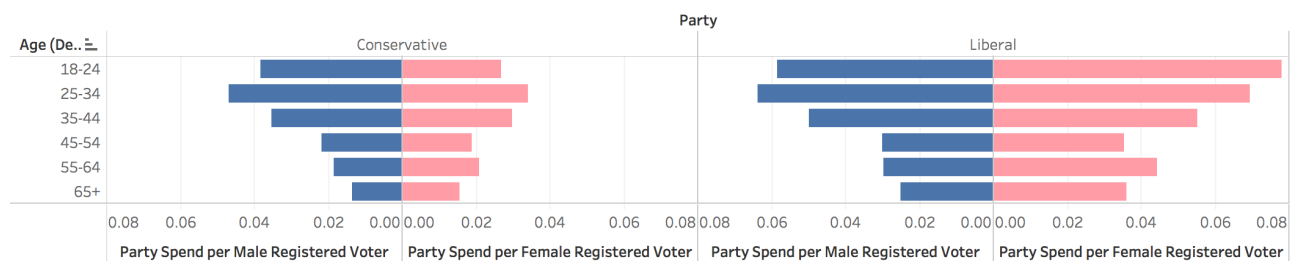
⁴ There was a local election in the Northwest Territories on Oct. 1 so our dataset includes spend on ads for that election, but because local elections in that Territory are non-partisan, it does not impact our analysis of party spend.

TABLE 1: Liberals' and Conservatives' Ad Spend Per Voter Per Province/Territory

Province/Territory	Liberal Spend per voter	Conservative Spend Per Voter
Alberta	0.091420015	0.050136526
British Columbia	0.17025317	0.089932389
Manitoba	0.15203046	0.253602535
New Brunswick	0.171695998	0.132179862
Newfoundland and Labrador	0.114675375	0.016944675
Northwest Territories	0.228170993	0.014142962
Nova Scotia	0.151812251	0.070014834
Nunavut	0.067892785	0.644572993
Ontario	0.118842139	0.05732068
Prince Edward Island	0.193802435	0.193784236
Quebec	0.143289837	0.060151326
Saskatchewan	0.101892292	0.112595182
Yukon	0.159156263	1.092818404

Figure 5 shows Facebook ad spending by demographic group per the electoral population of that group. While the Liberals outspend the Conservatives in every demographic group, this difference was most stark for female voters, with women between 18-34 receiving the largest share of Liberal ads.

FIGURE 5. Facebook Advertising Spend by Demographic

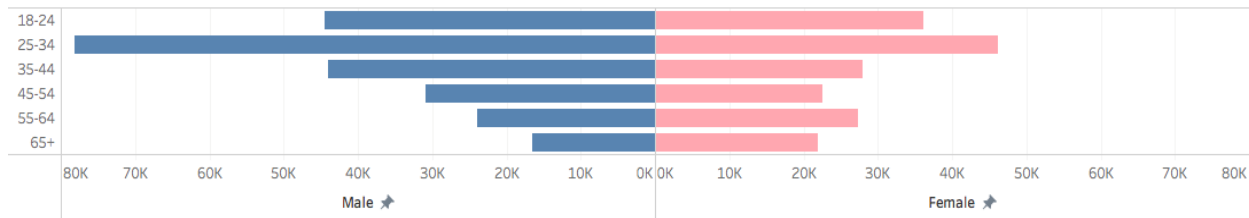


FINDINGS: THIRD-PARTY FACEBOOK ADVERTISERS

We reviewed third-party political advertisers and their ads in Canada as reported by Facebook and classified them into the following categories: non-partisan institutions, such as Elections Canada; partisan campaign groups focussed on promoting or attacking specific parties or candidates; and issue-based advertisers focussing on single issues such as healthcare or the environment. We mostly focus our analysis on the national picture, with ad spending by province detailed in Appendix B.

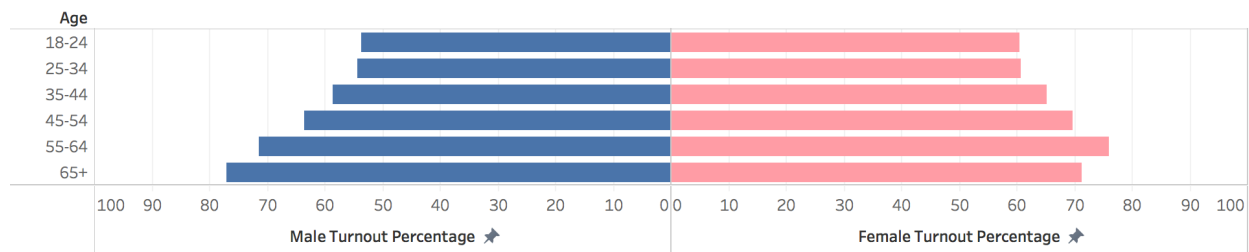
Elections Canada

FIGURE 6: Election Canada Facebook Advertisements, Broken Down by Demographic



Elections Canada and its provincial counterparts were the biggest non-partisan spenders in all provinces except Ontario, where it was second. Figure 6 above displays a demographic breakdown of Election Canada’s ad spend: its ads targeted voters 18-34 more than older voters and men more than women in that age range, and more women than men in the older age brackets.

FIGURE 7. Turnout Figures for 2015 Federal Election



Source: Elections Canada

This ad spend is inversely correlated with the voter turnout in the 2015 election (seen in Figure 7) which appears to suggest an effort by Elections Canada to increase turnout among age groups that voted less in 2015.

Partisan advertisers

Third-party partisan advertisers are also prevalent on Facebook, although they spend significantly less than the parties. We collected these advertisements and performed a qualitative analysis of their content.

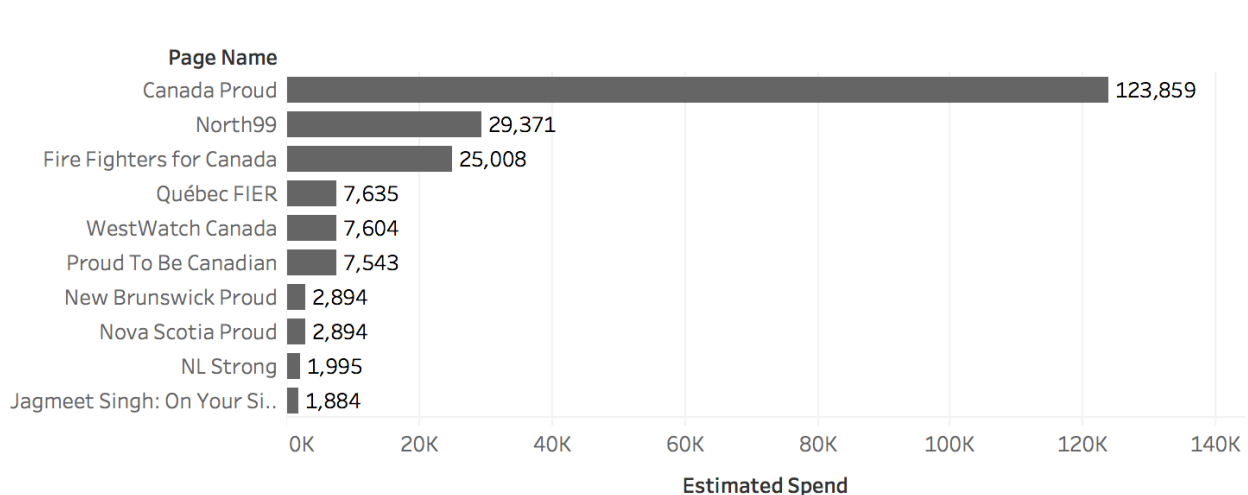
The largest third-party partisan advertiser by far was Canada Proud. It spent more than \$123,000 in the election period up to Oct. 4, while no other partisan page spent more than \$30,000 in the same period. Canada Proud and the page with the fourth largest spend, Proud to be Canadian (registered third-party name “Canada Strong and Proud”), bought ads that campaign for the Conservative party and tend to attack Trudeau nationwide.

The second-largest spender at just over \$29,000 was North99, whose attack ads target the Conservative platform and leaders, especially Scheer and Ontario Premier Doug Ford — although often without directly campaigning for an alternative. It focused more than 50% of its national spend in Ontario.

The third-largest spender was the pro-Liberal group “Fire Fighters for Canada,” whose ads target Conservative leaders across the country (especially Scheer, Ford and Alberta Premier Jason Kenney) and support the Liberal party. Their total spend was \$25,000.

The largest partisan spender in Quebec was Québec FIER, which ran anti-Trudeau and anti-Bloc Québécois ads. It spent a much smaller amount, \$7,600, but focusing on one province made it the biggest partisan spender in the region.

FIGURE 8. Top 10 Partisan Third-party Advertisers



Other regional partisan advertisers who were amongst the most active partisan advertisers in the areas they targeted were WestWatch Canada, Nova Scotia Proud, NL Strong and New Brunswick Proud. According to [The Canadian Press](#), the latter three advertisers are affiliated with Canada Strong and Proud and Québec FIER, but not with Canada Proud.

The last of the top 10 pages, Jagmeet Singh: On Your Side, is paid for by the United Steelworkers union and features pro-NDP messages and attacks against Trudeau. It has only spent \$1,900 in the election period.

“Faux Fact Check” advertisements

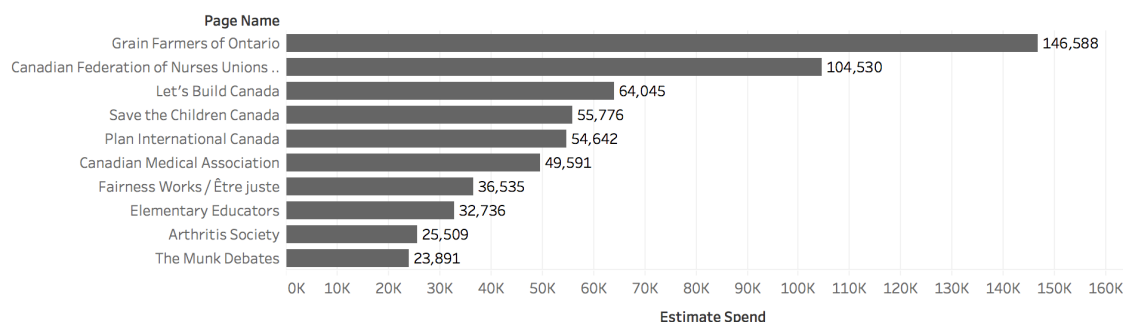
A notable type of ad which has been deployed during the election is what we might call the “Faux Fact Check” advertisement. In total, we found 60 ads that ran between Sept. 11 and Oct. 4 from two different Facebook pages with the phrase “fact check” in the page title. However, these appear to be from partisan sources, and promote negative messages about their political opponents. One of the two Facebook pages, “Election Fact Check,” clearly and accurately discloses that it is paid for by the Conservative Party of Canada. The other, which attacks the Conservatives, states that it is paid for by “Canada Fact Check,” providing a link to an associated web page and political consultant responsible for the campaign. We also found 30 ads from North99 that solicited donations for a “fact check” website. That site, conservativeplan.ca, also appears to be a partisan site designed to propagate negative political messages.

Special interest groups

Special interest advertisers are different from partisan advertisers in that they advocate on political issues but outside of a purely partisan context. These issue-based advertisers can spend considerable amounts at different points of a campaign.

Across Canada, advertising on Facebook by special interest groups largely focuses on healthcare (Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions, Canadian Medical Association, Arthritis Society), workers’ rights (Fairness Works), agriculture (Grain Farmers of Ontario), construction (Let’s Build Canada), education (Elementary Educators) and international development (Save The Children Canada, Plan International Canada). The final entry on the list, The Munk Debates, was the sponsor of a much-publicized leaders debate on foreign policy that the organizers cancelled after Trudeau declined to participate.

FIGURE 9. Top 10 Special Interest Third-party Advertisers



GENERAL FINDINGS: ASSESSING THE EFFECTS OF ONLINE CAMPAIGN ADVERTISING

We collected all available Facebook advertisements that ran on the official pages of the national parties and the official pages of the party leaders in the first week of the campaign, Sept. 11-18, before fielding our latest survey. We excluded ads that only asked respondents to donate or volunteer, invitations to campaign events, and a handful of ads that could not be formatted for our survey, which left us with a sample of 72 ads. We showed our respondents six randomly assigned advertisements from this sample. They were asked to evaluate how accurate, fair, believable, appropriate and informative each ad was, with each dimension rescaled from 0 to 1. From this, we constructed an average rating for the ad across all criteria, which we call its *global evaluation*, running from 0 to 1. We rank the top five and bottom five ads by our respondents' global rating in Table 2.

TABLE 2. Top five and bottom five Facebook ads as evaluated by survey respondents

Rank	Global Rating	Party	Ad Text
Top 5			
1	0.63	CPC	Conservatives know that public transit can be a significant out-of-pocket expense for Canadians everywhere. That's why Andrew Scheer will introduce the Green Public Transit Tax Credit, which will reduce the cost of public transit and put more money back in your pockets.
2	0.63	CPC	Les conservateurs d'Andrew Scheer savent que les Canadiens paient trop d'impôts. C'est pourquoi la réduction d'impôt universelle d'Andrew réduira l'impôt à payer pour tous les Canadiens. ⁵
3	0.62	LPC	La campagne électorale est officiellement lancée et votre aide peut propulser les libéraux vers la victoire. Faites un don si vous choisissez d'avancer. ⁶
4	0.61	CPC	As Prime Minister, Andrew Scheer will help parents give their children every opportunity to get ahead. His Children's Arts and Learning Tax Credit and the Children's Fitness Tax Credit will put more money in parents' pockets while helping their kids do well in school, learn a new skill, and reach their greatest potential.
5	0.61	NDP	Justin Trudeau's Liberals met 550 times with the Telecom giants. While he keeps cozying up with big Telecom, we keep getting ripped off. Today, Jagmeet Singh announced that he will protect Canadians from cell phone gouging.
Bottom 5			
68	0.46	LPC	This Oct., the choice is clear: keep moving forward with our progress, or let the Conservatives take us backward with cuts to vital services. Your help is important. \$5 is all it takes to power us to victory. Can we count on you?
69	0.45	CPC	Andrew Scheer veut aider les Canadiens à améliorer leur quotidien, pas seulement s'en sortir. Il va : 1) Annuler la taxe sur le carbone; 2) Supprimer la TPS sur les factures d'énergie domestique; 3) Rendre les prestations de maternité libres d'impôt. ⁷
70	0.45	CPC	The Liberals want you to be afraid, yet they can't explain why. The Trudeau Liberals are not as advertised. Watch and spread this message.
71	0.45	LPC	Let's keep building on the progress we've made since 2015. With your help, let's Choose Forward.
72	0.41	LPC	This Oct., the choice is clear: keep moving forward with our progress, or go back to the Harper years. Your help is important. \$5 is all it takes to power us to victory. Can we count on you?

⁵ Andrew Scheer's Conservatives know that Canadians pay too much tax. That's why Andrew's universal tax cut will reduce the tax burden for all Canadians.

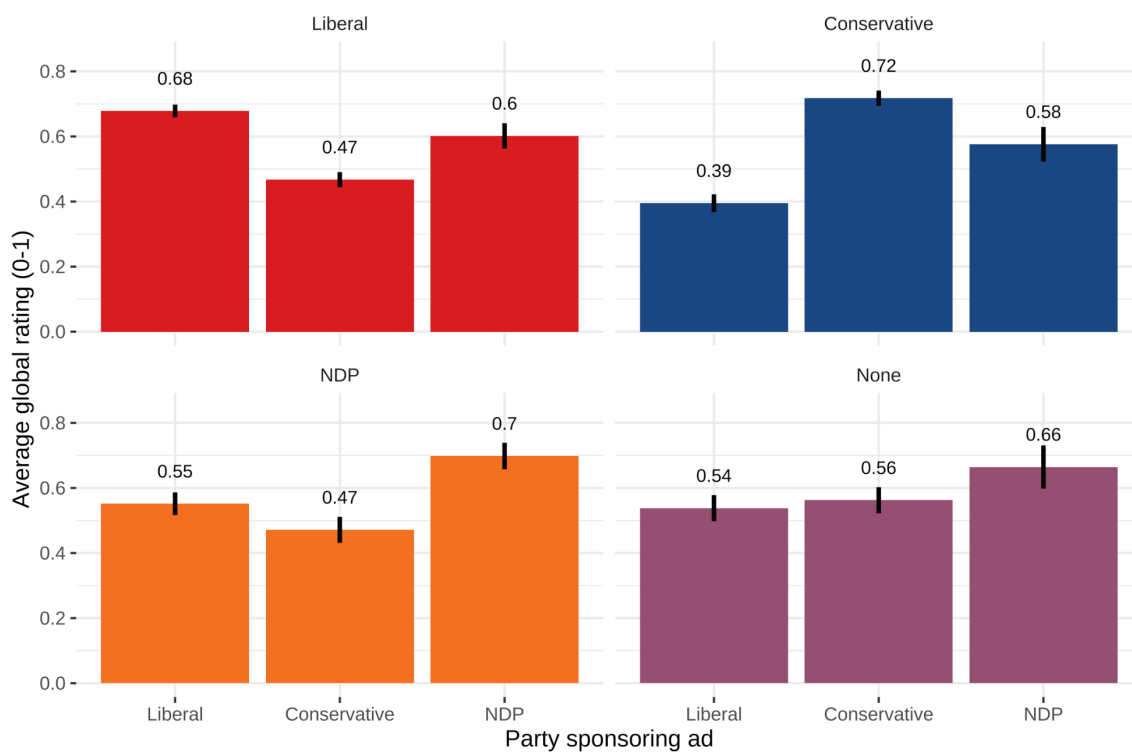
⁶ The election campaign has officially launched, and your help can propel the Liberals to victory. Donate if you choose to move forward.

⁷ Andrew Scheer wants to help Canadians improve their lives, not just get by. He will: 1) Cancel the carbon tax; 2) Remove the GST on household energy bills; 3) Make maternity benefits tax-free.

At the top of the list is Andrew Scheer’s public transit tax credit pledge, followed by his universal tax cut pledge in French. The Conservatives have one additional ad in the top five related to their proposed children’s fitness tax credit. The Liberals and the NDP each have an ad in the top five, including a standard Liberal ad in French that references their campaign slogan (“Choisir D’avancer”, or “Choose Forward” in English), and an NDP ad targeting the Liberal Party for its relationships with big telecom companies.

In the bottom five we find a trio of Liberal ads, two of which attempt to draw a contrast between “choosing forward” and a return to the policies of previous Conservative governments, with the third being a generic positive Liberal message. Two Conservative ads are in the bottom five: one attack ad targeting the Liberals, and one policy-based ad in French related to the carbon tax, removing the GST from heating bills, and maternity benefits.

FIGURE 10. Average Global Ad Rating by Respondent Partisanship and Party Sponsorship

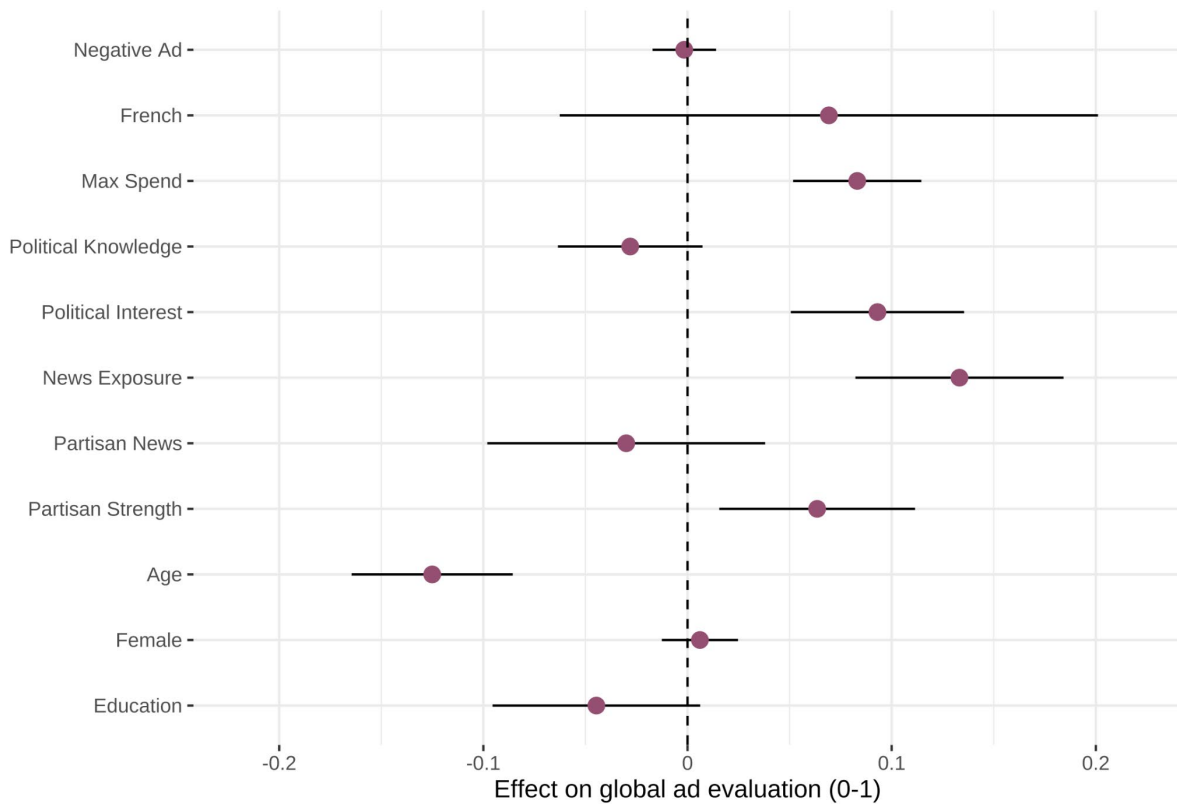


So what exactly is driving our respondents’ perceptions of these ads? Unsurprisingly, the most important determinant of an ad’s favourability is the partisanship of the respondent, but the degree to which partisans preferred their own party’s ads or disliked others varies between the parties. Liberal partisans are much more favourable to their own ads (0.68) than the NDP’s (0.60) and the Conservatives’ (0.47). Conservative partisans were more partial to their own party’s ads (0.71), compared to the NDP’s (0.57) and the Liberals’ (0.39). Non-

partisans, for their part, preferred NDP ads (0.67) to the other two parties (0.54 for Liberals, 0.56 for Conservatives). These results are shown in Figure 10.

We can analyze which characteristics of ads, and respondents, are more likely to result in a higher global rating for an ad. The plot below in Figure 11 presents the results of our analysis. The position of each dot represents the degree to which a positive rating can be associated with each factor. A dot closer to 0 means the association is weaker, while being closer to either end of the spectrum represents a stronger positive or negative correlation.

FIGURE 11. Ad-level and Individual-level Determinants of Ad Evaluations⁸



There appears to be a positive correlation between the maximum spend on a given ad and its rating. This does not necessarily mean that spending more money on an ad will cause it to be more favourably received, but it does suggest that political parties are spending comparatively more money on their more effective ads. Interestingly, respondents do not seem to prefer positive ads to negative ones. At the individual level, it appears that respondents who are more partisan, more politically interested and more exposed to more

⁸ Additional controls for region, party sponsor, partisanship, and the interaction between sponsorship and partisanship.

political news are more likely to rate an ad highly, while older and more politically knowledgeable respondents are more likely to give a lower rating.

In short, how respondents rate an ad is heavily shaped by their partisanship. However, ads were generally rated higher by those with high levels of political interest and news exposure, and lower by older respondents and those with higher levels of political knowledge. The tone of the ad does not seem to make a significant difference.

FINDINGS: POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE ADVERTISEMENTS

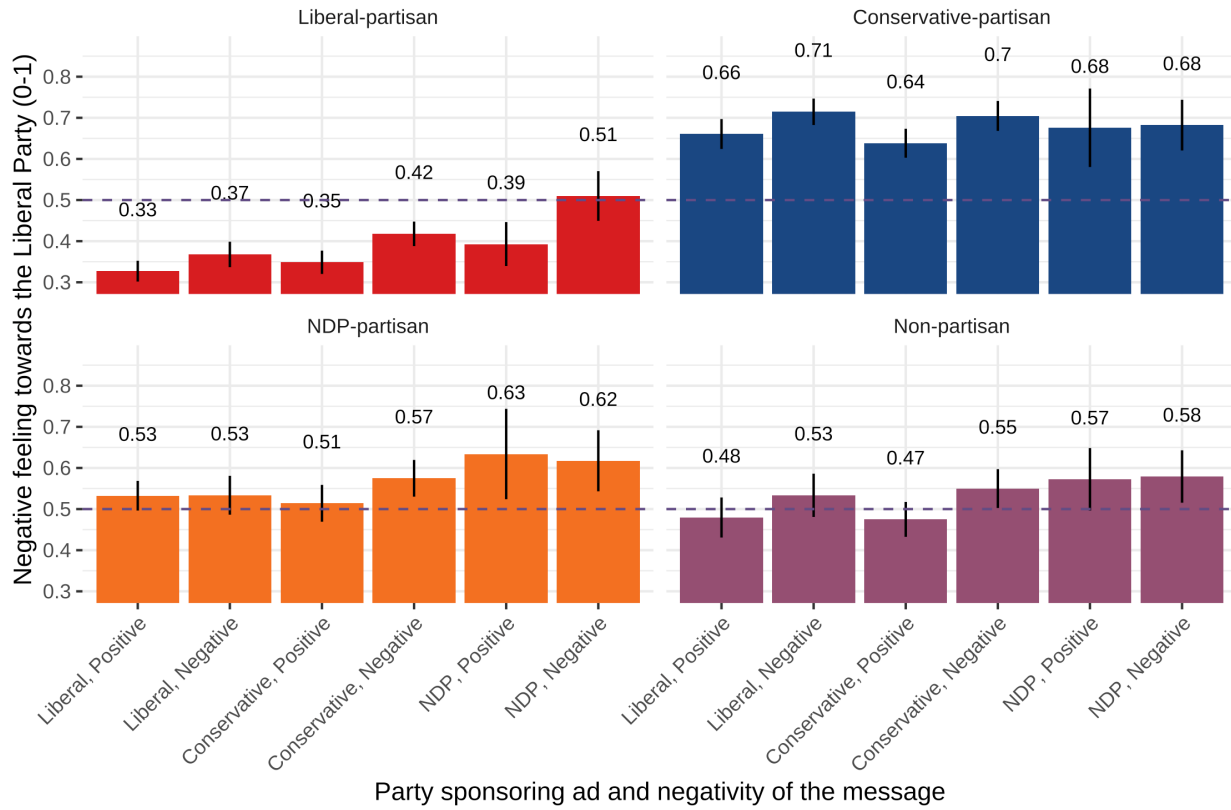
We found that negative ads did not receive lower ratings from our respondents, which might strike some readers as surprising. As noted, our global ad evaluation is an index based on five factors: whether respondents think an ad is accurate, believable, fair, appropriate and informative. We can unpack this further. It appears that respondents saw negative ads as slightly less appropriate than positive ads (0.56 vs. 0.58) and less fair (0.55 vs 0.57), but more believable (0.55 vs. 0.52) and more accurate (0.55 vs. 0.53). These differences are statistically significant, but substantively small. At least when asked to evaluate advertising, respondents are not particularly responsive to the tone of the ad.

However, negative ads do drive up negative evaluations of parties — both the parties that are targeted and the parties that pay for the ads. We asked our respondents to evaluate how much more positively or negatively an ad made them feel about the three major parties and their leaders (scaled from 0-1, where 1 is much more negative and 0.5 is neutral). We focus on the Liberal and Conservative parties because they were far more often the sponsors and targets of the ads our respondents received. Overall, negative feelings toward the Conservatives (0.53 vs. 0.49) and Liberals (0.56 vs. 0.50) were higher in response to negative ads from either party compared to positive ads.

We can see how this breaks down by the partisanship our respondents. Figure 12 shows how much more negatively partisans felt about the Liberal Party in response to an ad. Two points stand out. First, it appears that negative Conservative ads successfully elicited more negative feelings toward the Liberal Party among respondents from all partisan groups. Negative NDP ads, which in our sample all target the Liberal Party, also appear to drive up negatives of the Liberal Party among Liberal partisans.

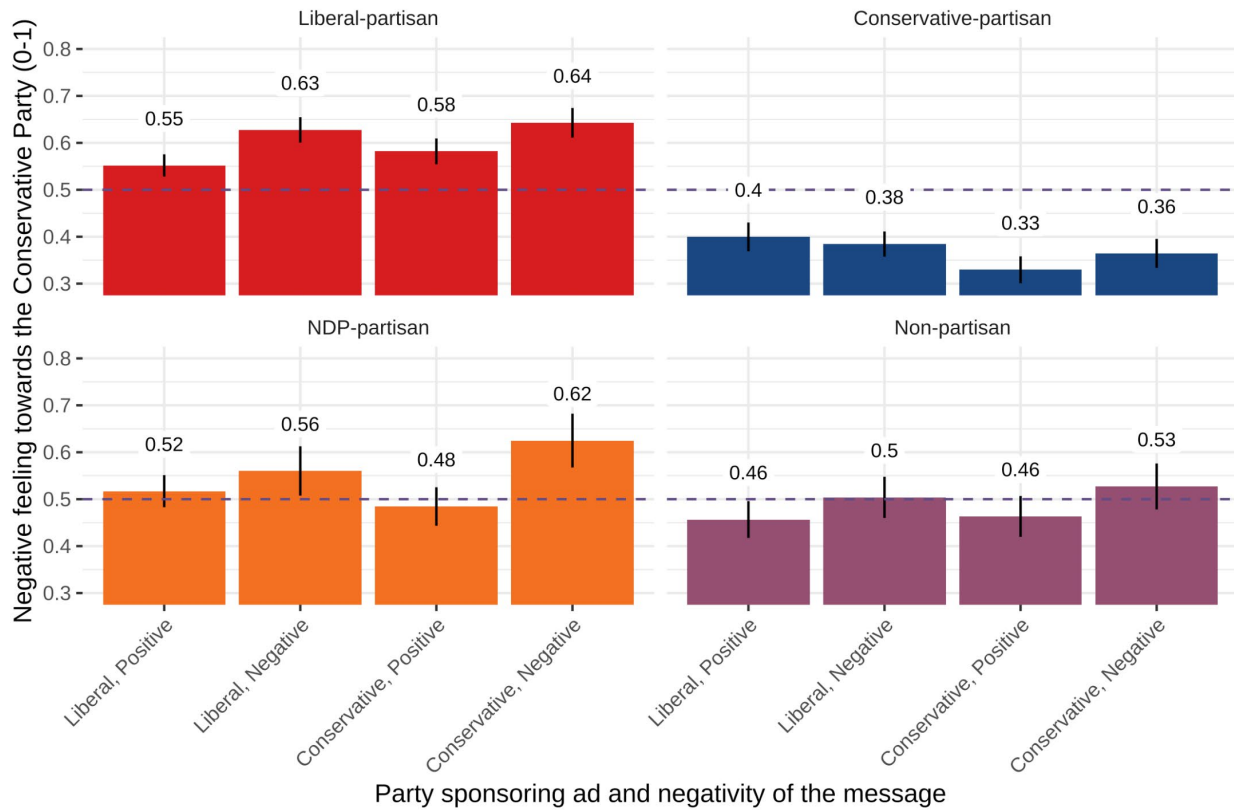
Second, negative ads drive up the negatives of the sponsoring party to some degree as well. Negative Liberal ads increase negative evaluations of the Liberal Party among Conservatives and non-partisans, though not among the NDP.

FIGURE 12. Partisans’ feelings toward Liberal Party, by ad sponsorship and tone



The same pattern holds when looking at feelings toward the Conservative Party. Negative Liberal ads (which only target the Conservatives) drive up negative feelings toward the Conservative Party, except among Conservative partisans. At the same time negative Conservative ads also increase negative evaluations of the Conservative Party among all partisan groups, except Conservative partisans. These results are shown in Figure 13.

FIGURE 13. Partisans’ feelings toward Conservative Party, by ad sponsorship and tone



In short, negative ads do what they are supposed to: they elicit more negative feelings toward their targets. However, they also generate similar levels of negative sentiment toward the ad sponsor as well. Interestingly, our survey respondents were not more notably hostile to negative ads. They see them as more accurate and believable, if less appropriate and fair.

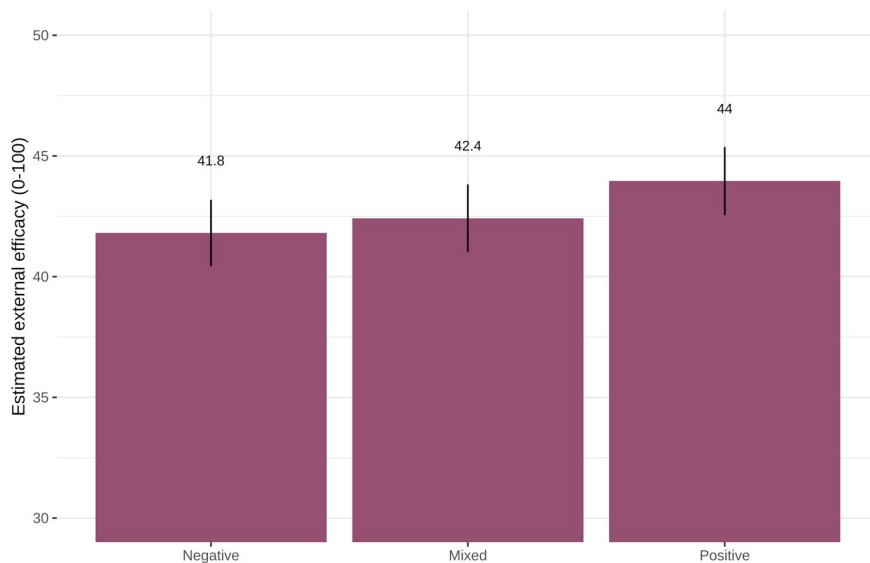
FINDINGS: EXTERNAL EFFICACY AND AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

Our respondents were asked to evaluate six randomly assigned Facebook campaign ads. Respondents were randomly assigned into three groups: one group only saw positive ads, one group received only negative ads, and another group saw a mix of positive and negative ads. This allows us to examine the influence of advertising tone on political attitudes.

We have two general expectations. First, it seems likely that the tone of advertising has implications for citizens' *external political efficacy* – or their trust and confidence that public officials are responsive to their concerns and interests. Negative ads may breed cynicism, while positive ads—which typically have more policy content—may lead to the feeling that politicians are addressing important concerns.

We find some evidence of this process among our respondents, although the effect is modest. We measure external efficacy with an index of four questions scaled from 0-100, with 100 being the most efficacious.⁹ Respondents who received negative ads had an efficacy score of 42, compared to 44 for those who received positive ads – a difference that is marginally significant ($p \sim 0.07$). These results are plotted in Figure 14.

FIGURE 14. Estimated External Efficacy by Ad Group



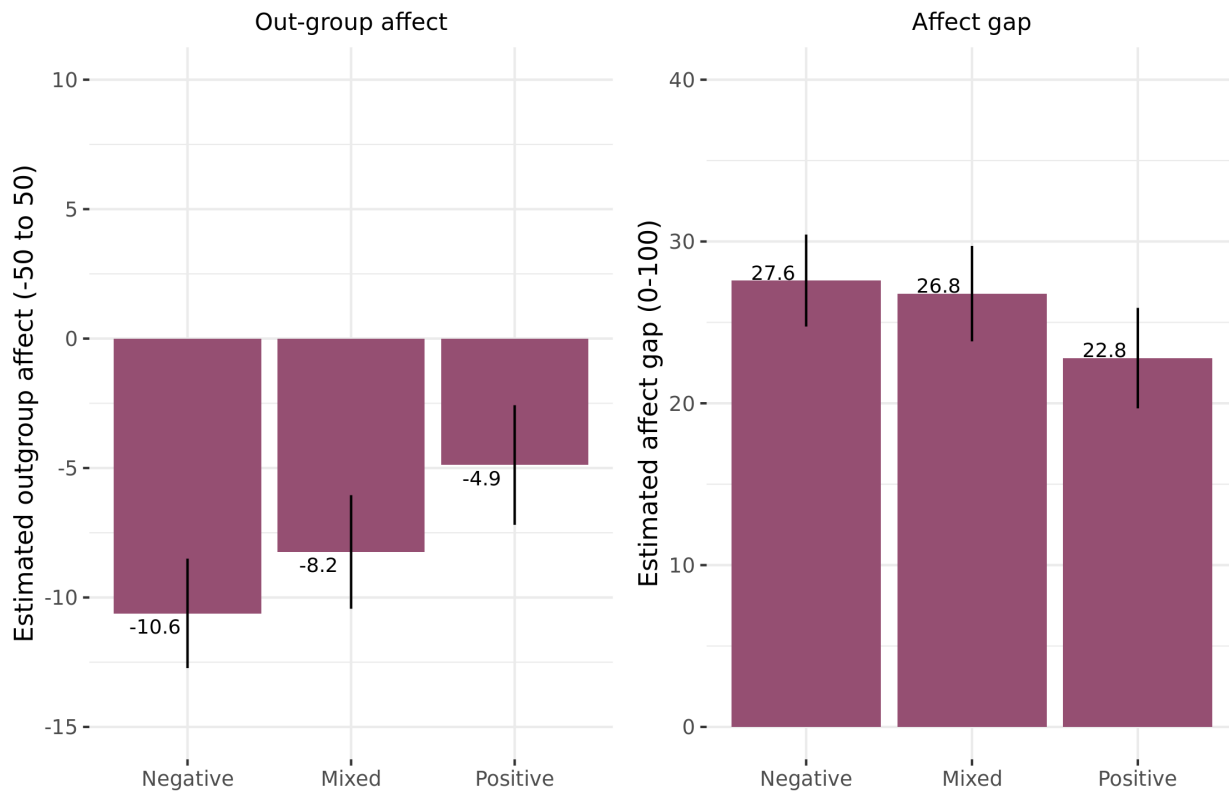
⁹ 1) Ordinary people can influence the government; 2) Public officials care what ordinary people think; 3) People like me don't have any say about what the government does; 4) I don't think public officials care much what people like me think (Strongly agree to strongly disagree, 5-point)

Second, it is possible that the tone of advertising influences *affect* – the positive or negative feelings people have toward parties, their leaders and their supporters. In [Report #3](#) we showed that there is *affective polarization* between left- and right-wing partisans in Canada much like there is in the United States. Not only do partisans dislike elected officials and candidates for ideologically opposing parties, they dislike their voters as well. We found that the strongest determinants of animus toward opposing parties are the strength of one’s partisan attachments and the perceived ideological distance of the opposing party to oneself.

Party advertising may play a role in driving or inhibiting affective polarization. On the one hand, negative ads contain messages that are hostile to the interests of opposing partisans, which may breed feelings of animosity. On the other hand, positive ads tend to focus on policy rather than identity-threatening messages, so they may lower the perceived ideological distance between parties.

We test for this in two ways. First, we calculate the *affect gap* by asking respondents to rate how well a series of positive and negative words (e.g. honest, intelligent, hypocritical, selfish) describe a given party. We tally up the score for the positive words (*positive affect*) and negative words (*negative affect*) and take the difference to find their “net affect” toward parties they identify with (*in-group*) and those they oppose (*out-group*). Because the overwhelming majority of our ads were from the Liberal and Conservative Parties, we restrict our analysis here to Conservative and Liberal partisans. That means the Conservative Party is the out-group party for Liberal partisans, and vice versa.

FIGURE 15. Estimated out-group affect (left) and affect gap (right) across experimental conditions

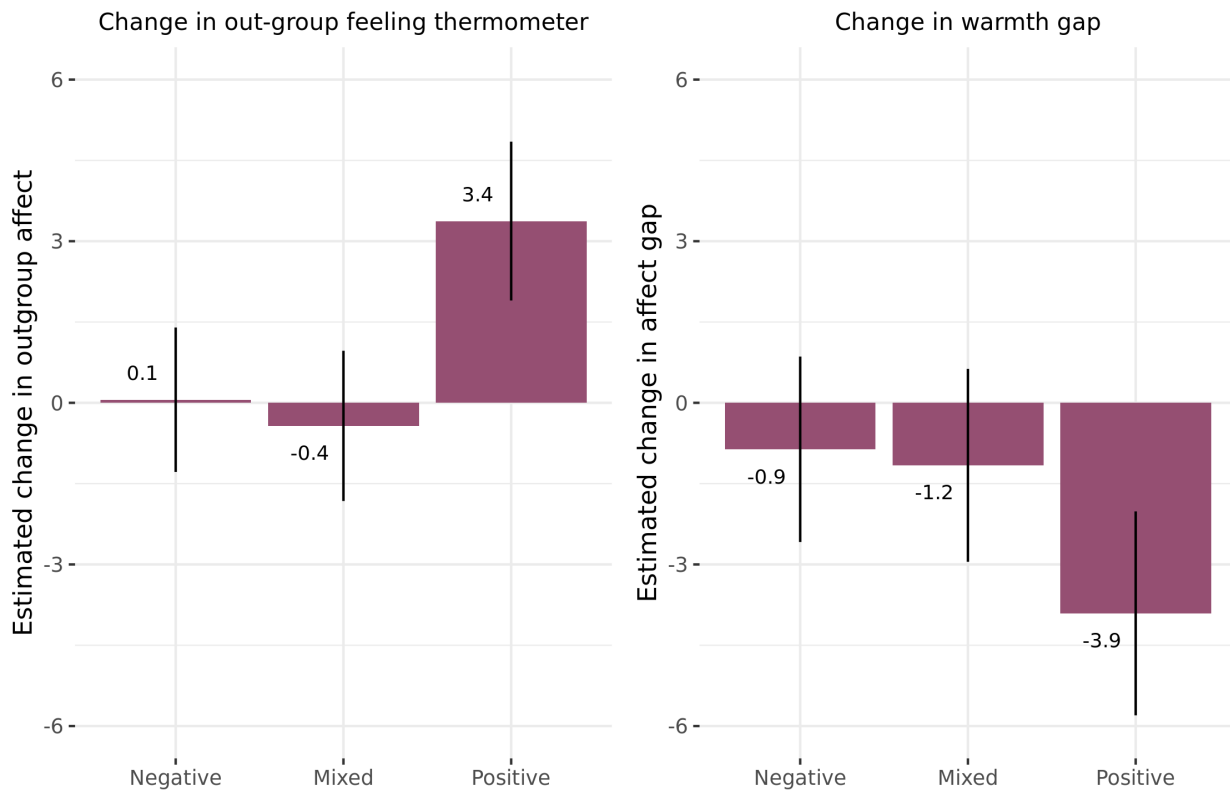


We find that positive ad exposure reduces *negative out-group affect*. That is, respondents who were only exposed to positive ads felt less negatively about the opposing party than those who received only negative ads or a mix of the two. Net affect was -11 for negative-ad recipients, compared to -8 for mixed ads, and -5 for positive ads. The difference in affect between the positive- and negative-ad groups is statistically significant ($p < 0.01$), while the difference in between the positive- and mixed-ad groups is marginally significant ($p = 0.07$). These results are plotted in the left panel of Figure 15.

Positive ad exposure, therefore, appears to reduce the *affect gap* – or the gap between an individual’s feelings toward partisan in-groups and out-groups. This gap was 28 points for the negative-ad group and 27 points for the mixed-ad group, compared to only 23 points for the positive-ad group, all of which are statistically significant. The affect gap decreases by 15% from those who saw a mix of ads to those who saw only positive ads. These results are shown in the right panel of Figure 15.

Second, we want to see if being exposed to only positive ads reduces affective polarization compared to being exposed to no ads at all. We calculate the *warmth gap* by asking respondents to rate their feelings toward each of the major parties on 0-100 feeling thermometers, where 100 is the warmest possible feeling. We then calculate the difference between partisan respondents' feelings toward in-group and out-group parties. We asked these questions well before exposure to any ads at the beginning of our survey *and* after respondents saw the ads.

FIGURE 16. Estimated change in out-group feeling thermometer (left) and warmth gap (right) across experimental conditions



We find that Liberal and Conservative partisans saw each other's parties more positively after exposure to positive ads. Respondents who saw only positive ads showed a 3.5-degree increase in their feeling thermometer towards the out-group party, which is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). In contrast, there was no change in out-group feeling thermometers for those who only saw negative ads or a mix of positive and negative ads. These results are shown in the left panel of Figure 16.

Positive ad exposure also appears to reduce affective polarization as measured by the *warmth gap*. The gap between in-group and out-group feeling thermometer evaluations was four points smaller for respondents who

were exposed to only positive ads than those who saw no ads, which is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). This amounts to a nearly 10% decrease in the warmth gap. These results are shown below in the right panel of Figure 16.

The takeaway here is that positive ads appear to have the potential to increase citizens' confidence in elected officials and reduce the animus between partisans and ideologically opposing parties and their supporters.

APPENDIX A: DETAILED METHODOLOGY

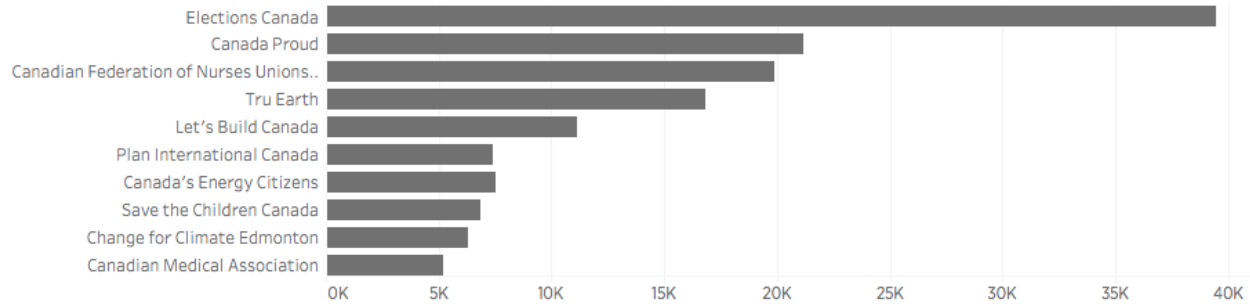
Our survey data team conducted an online panel survey of 1,549 Canadian citizens 18 years and older using the sample provider Qualtrics. The sample was gathered from Sept. 27 to Oct. 4. Data was weighted within each region of Canada by gender and age based on data from the 2016 Canadian census. We used an iterative proportional fitting algorithm for our weighting procedure with a minimum weight of 0.71 (N=41) and a maximum weight of 2.98 (N=1).

Survey respondents were asked questions related to basic demographics, as well as their partisan, ideological and issue preferences. They were also asked to identify their recent exposure to the news media. The median time it took respondents to complete the survey was 23 minutes. The survey instrument is available upon request. We present 90% confidence intervals for each of our figures. Our analyses on the global ratings of the top five and bottom five ads can generalize to the full population +/- 0.03-0.05 with 90% confidence.

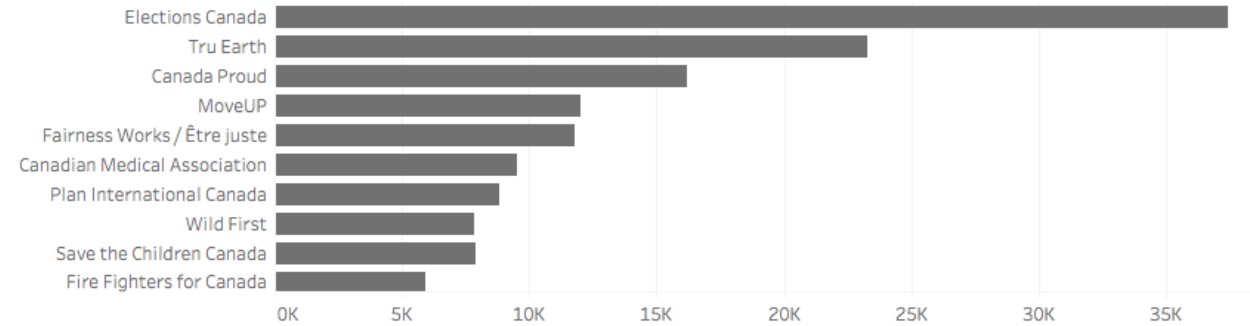
APPENDIX B: THIRD PARTY SPEND BY PROVINCE

Across Canada, the largest third-party advertisers were largely similar; however, most provinces also had pages that only advertise within that province. Here, we break down the top 10 third-parties that spent the most money advertising in each province. Note that this list includes all third-parties running ads that have been classified as political and election-related by Facebook. Some of these actors include commercial advertisers that seem to have been mistakenly flagged (such as Tru Earth detergent and cleaning products) and charities such as Plan International and Save the Children. (Also note the differing labels on the X axis for each province.)

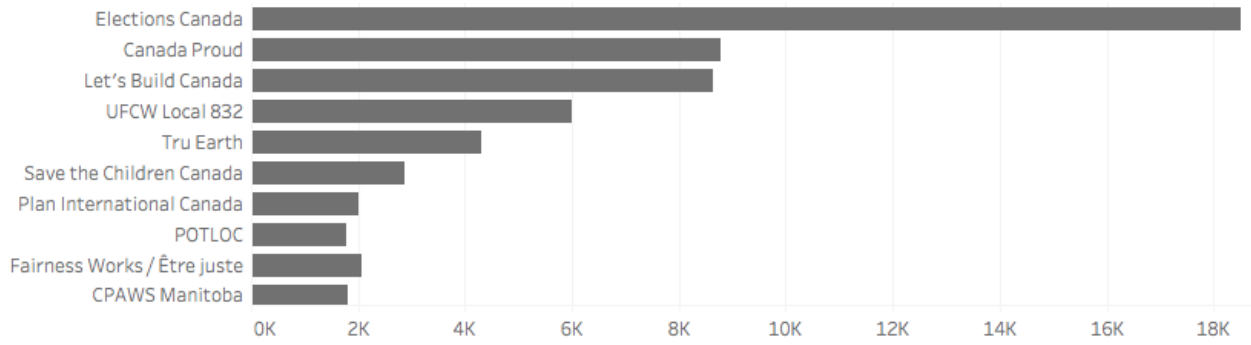
Alberta



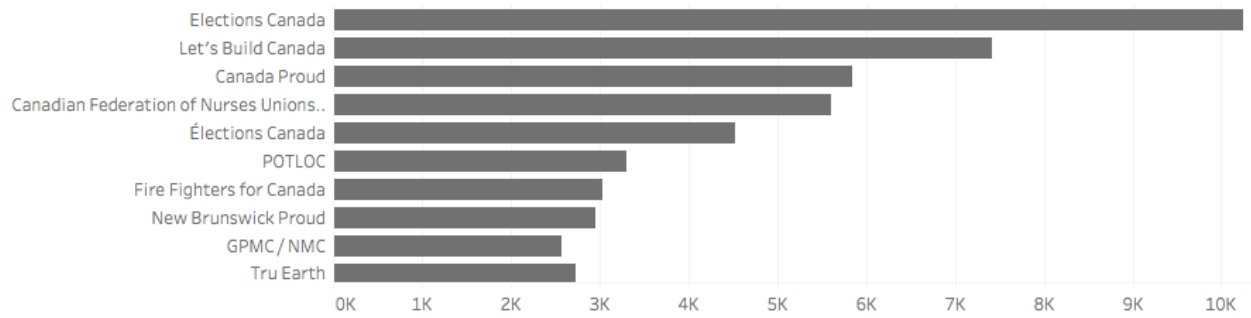
British Columbia



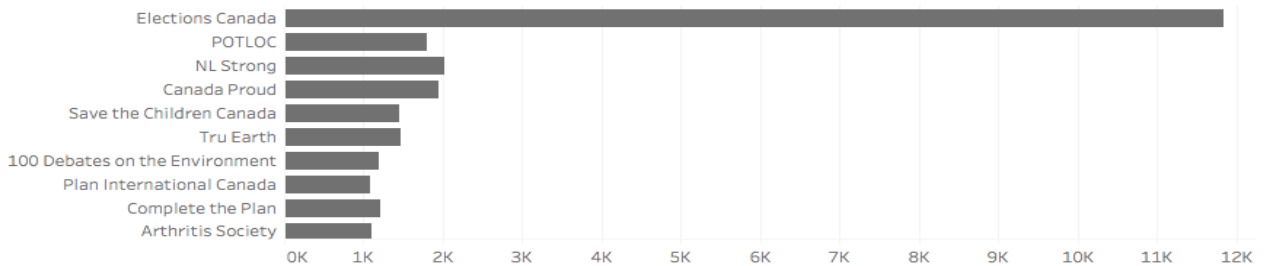
Manitoba



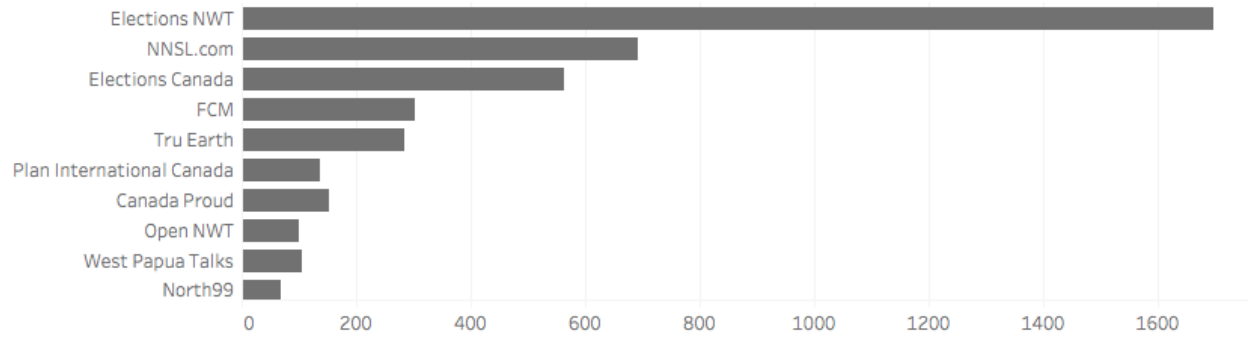
New Brunswick



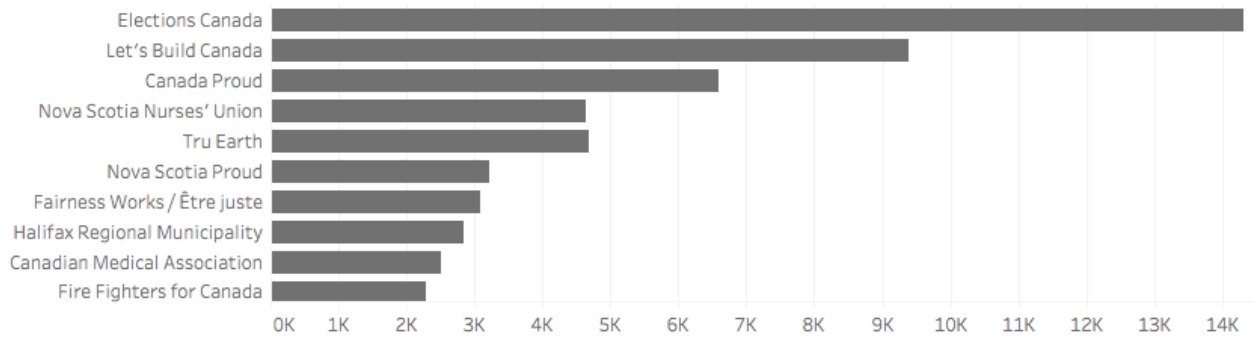
Newfoundland and Labrador



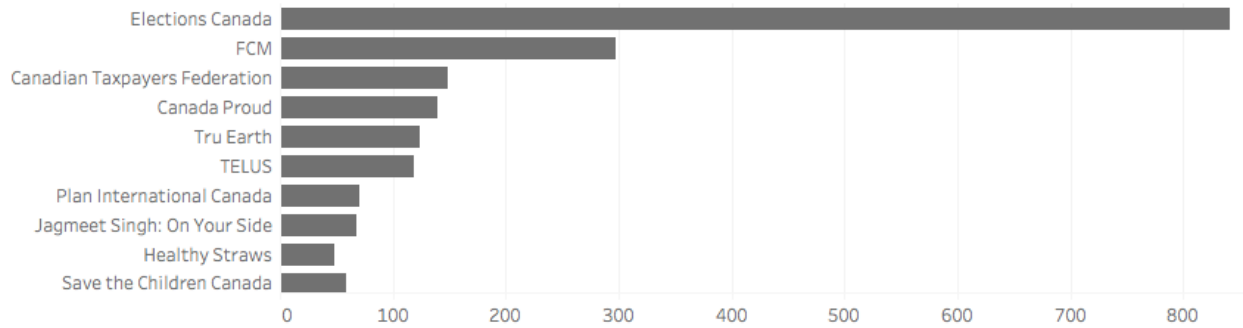
Northwest Territories



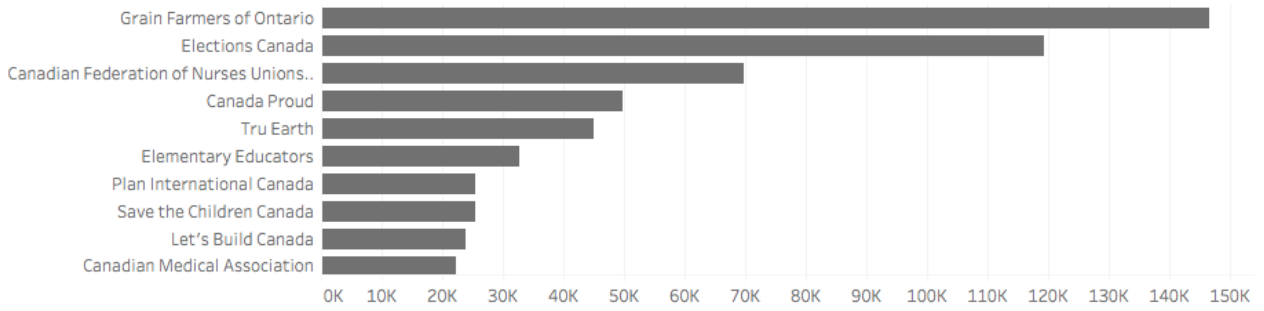
Nova Scotia



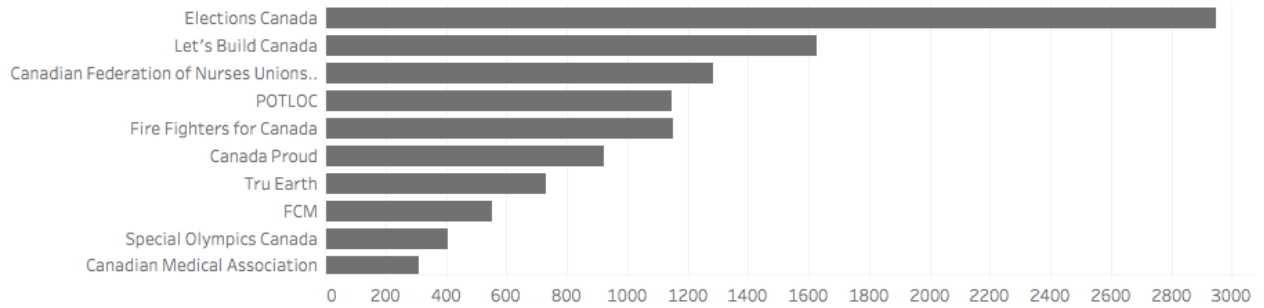
Nunavut



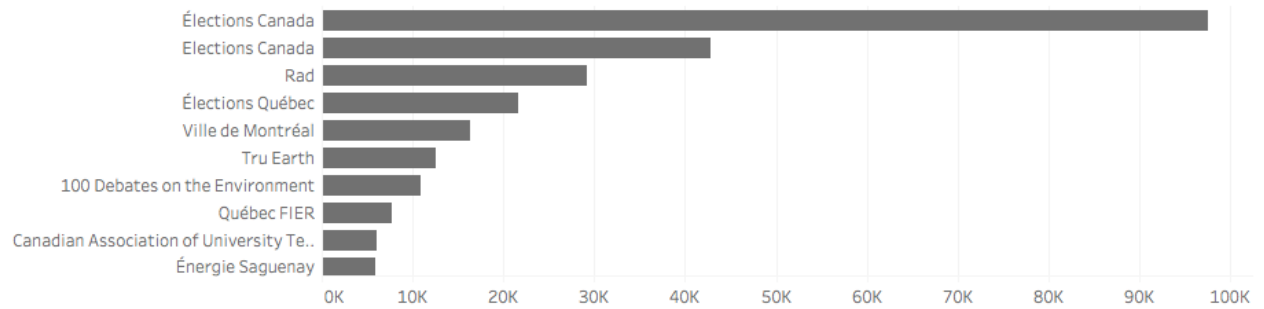
Ontario



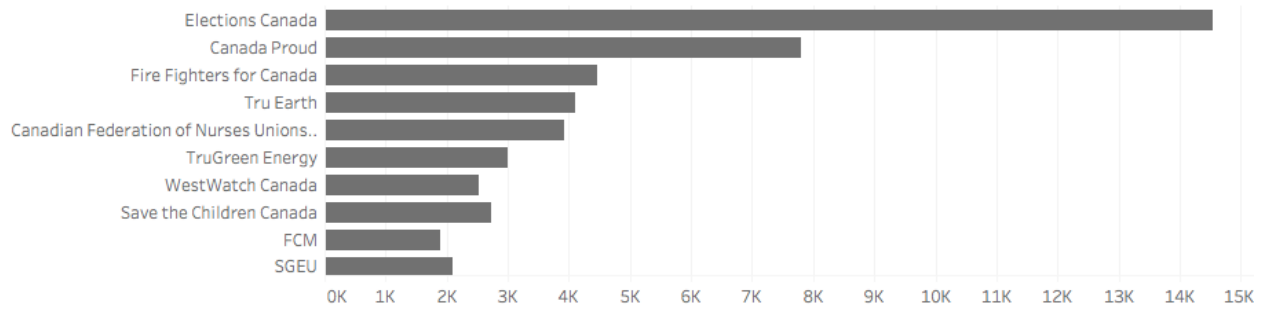
Prince Edward Island



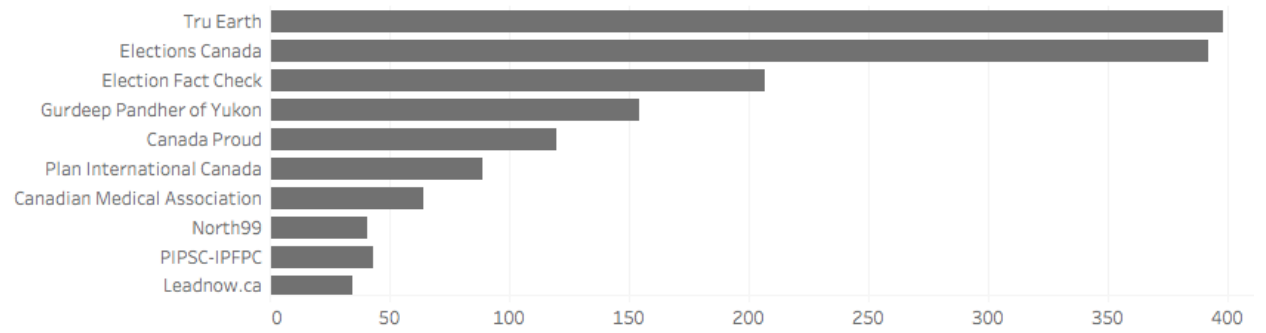
Quebec



Saskatchewan



Yukon



**DIGITAL
DEMOCRACY
PROJECT**

