



# THE SAMARA CENTRE'S **FIELD GUIDE**

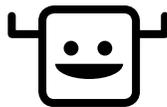
 **TO** 

 **ONLINE**

**POLITICAL**

 **CONVERSATIONS** 

**The Samara Centre is grateful for the support and collaboration of the Walrus Foundation. Throughout the election period, the Walrus will host an in-depth, non-partisan examination of the state of Canada's democracy, in print and on its website at [thewalrus.ca/democracy](http://thewalrus.ca/democracy).**



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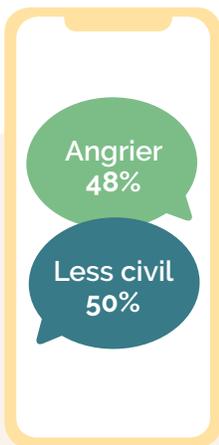
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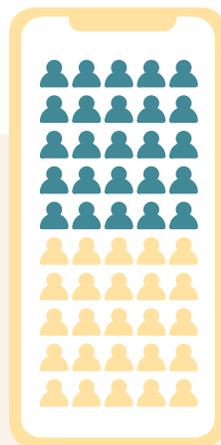
# Executive summary

Social media is one of our most important public spaces, a place where Canadians come to talk politics. It offers the potential to have bigger, freer, more open conversations. With its ability to allow people to engage and connect, to express ideas and inform each other, social media can be a powerful tool to improve our democracy.

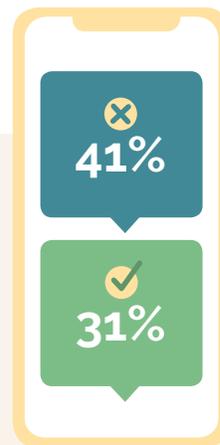
**But something has gone wrong.**



Canadians say political conversations online are angrier (48%) and less civil (50%) than offline political discussion



Nearly half (47%) of Canadian social media users say they stay out of political discussions out of fear of being criticized



More Canadian social media users say they do not feel safe sharing political views online (41%) than do (31%)

We need space to disagree with passion. But online incivility has negative consequences for our democracy. It causes people to disengage. It hurts equity in politics. It exacerbates polarization. It makes us more vulnerable to malicious actors trying to sow division and confusion.

Canadians can help make these online conversations more constructive and more civil. Drawing from research on social psychology and social media behaviour, this report outlines seven techniques for better political conversations online:

**1 Lead by example:** Being civil can cause others in a conversation to follow your lead.

**2 Police your own side:** Calling out incivility is most effective when you're addressing someone on the same political team.

**3 Practice slow politics:** Small changes in the way you use technology can reduce the likelihood of using social media on the go, cutting down on thoughtless and aggressive exchanges.

**4 Get in to the weeds:** Inviting people to provide detailed explanations of what political choices they support, and

doing so yourself, can reduce polarization.

**5 Reframe your language:** Thinking about the moral foundations of an argument, and reflecting those foundations in your own language, can reduce the psychological distance between you and the person you're having a discussion with.

**6 Remind us what we share:** Priming someone to consider the identities that unite us (like civic identity) rather than the identities that divide us (like party affiliations) can reduce polarization.

**7 Spot a bot:** Recognize fake accounts, and don't give them what they want—attention.

## What's civility?

Civility in political discourse is a contested idea. While many see the importance of civility in a democracy, some argue that complaints about incivility can be used to censor or drown out critical voices. It's also easy to see civility as a quaint and secondary concern, given the high stakes of the political issues being discussed.

Getting to an absolute definition of civility is impossible. It's always situation-specific, and it will always be contested. And there are limits to civility in a democracy. In this report, civility refers simply to demonstrating to fellow citizens the level of respect and courtesy that make substantive and constructive democratic conversations possible. Civility does not exclude passion, anger, or deep disagreement.

# Introduction

Social media is used by approximately nine out of 10 online Canadians and may be the most influential public space in our society. It's a place where politicians come to speak to citizens, from the furious early morning dispatches of an American president, to the more mundane photo ops of Canadian politicians. It's where citizens speak directly to their leaders, in a free, direct, and unmediated way. Critically, it's also where we as citizens talk to each other about the major issues we face. In a country as geographically vast as Canada, social media facilitates direct personal exchanges that otherwise would not be possible.

Theoretically, that is an amazing thing for our democracy. While we're told to keep religion and politics away from the dinner table, the reality is that political conversations are democracy's lifeblood. But in practice, something has gone wrong. We behave differently on social media. Political conversations on social media are often angrier than what we witness offline. Harassment and extremism thrive on social media. Earlier this year, the prime minister described it as "the wild west."<sup>1</sup>

Social media is "real life," in the sense that its problems are not contained to its platforms. The aggressive nature of online political conversations can turn people off politics and worse, even cause mental anguish.<sup>2</sup> Social media can skew our perception of what Canadians really think and feel, particularly when it's used by journalists or politicians as a representation of public opinion—which it isn't.<sup>3</sup> And there's a risk of falling into a vicious cycle: people uncomfortable with the incivility of social media opt out, leaving behind a space that is increasingly governed by trolls and attention-seekers, creating an ever-more skewed image of society. As a result, social media can become both a polarizing and demobilizing force, and a resource for opportunistic politicians to foment anger.

At the Samara Centre for Democracy, we conduct biennial surveys on how Canadians participate in politics. In 2019 we noticed something strange. Compared to past years, Canadians were discussing politics more than ever face-to-face and over the phone. More Canadians were reaching out to politicians, and more said they were interested in politics. Yet the number of Canadians discussing politics on social media dropped slightly. This shows there's a real chance of us losing out on the potential of using social media for free and open political conversations that strengthen democracy.

There's been a lot of talk about what governments and social media platforms should do. But with a national election here, we at the Samara Centre turned our attention to citizens themselves. This report brings together insights from the study of difficult conversations and the study of social media to examine what's going wrong, why it matters, what government action we should expect, and how citizens can change the nature of online political conversations.

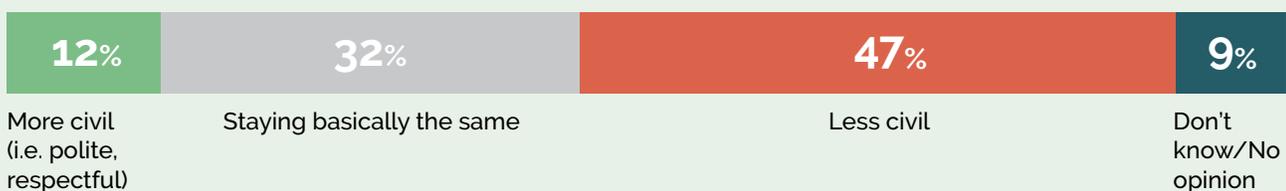
## Spotting a problem

According to Canadian social media users, online political conversations tend to be angrier, less civil, and (for some) less informative than offline conversations. Canadians also perceive a growing incivility problem in Canadian politics: nearly half (47%) of Canadians think politics is becoming less civil, compared to just 12% who think it's becoming more civil.

### Compared with offline, are the political conversations you see on social media more or less...



### In your opinion, is Canadian politics becoming...



# Nice for what

## For the sake of our democracy, we need to start having better online political conversations

Many agree that political conversations on social media are ruder, angrier, and less civil online than in person. But is that necessarily a problem? The openness and freedom of social media is what made it so appealing and suggested its democratic potential in the first place. Is incivility simply the price we pay for free, open communication? Social media is characterized by raw emotion, but political conversations should reflect passion. And if people don't like it, can't they just log off or ignore the people and perspectives they don't like? As one Canadian Member of Parliament put it recently: "the block button exists for a reason."<sup>4</sup>

But incivility in online politics has real costs for our democracy:

 **It causes some people to give up on politics**—chasing them out of the digital public square, and potentially out of political participation altogether. Incivility itself can actually produce engagement, because the fired-up people keep engaging,<sup>5</sup> but people with lower tolerance for rudeness and anger will simply log off.<sup>6</sup> Worse, some people become less likely to participate in offline political conversations because of what they see on social media.<sup>7</sup>

 **It hurts equity in politics**, as not everyone is equally targeted with incivility. In fact, some groups who are already underrepresented in politics experience worse incivility. A study of over two million tweets at politicians found that high-profile female politicians attract more incivility than high-profile male politicians, for example.<sup>8</sup>

 **It's making polarization worse.** Polarization refers to when people cluster around extreme positions on opposite ends of the spectrum, or when people develop increasingly more negative attitudes toward people supporting other parties. It's essential that political differences are explored and represented in a democracy, but polarization erodes the basis for collective decision-making, and can be a major force in the breakdown of democracy.<sup>9</sup> Polarization comes from many places, including the



In a 2019 survey of people in 54 countries, Canadians were tied for **most likely to say social media has a negative impact on democracy** in their country: **43%** of Canadians think it has a negative impact, while **38%** think it has a positive impact.<sup>10</sup>

behaviour of politicians, and traditional media, but there's evidence that we can become more polarized simply by being exposed to uncivil political comments on social media.<sup>11</sup> Incivility also erodes trust—in each other, our leaders, our 5 institutions, and media.<sup>12</sup> It makes us less likely to believe in the value of public debate and deliberation.<sup>13</sup>

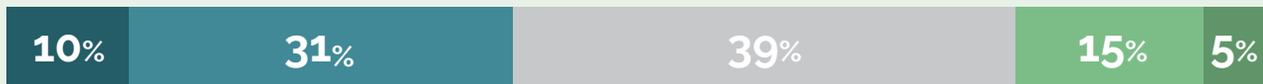


**It makes us more vulnerable to malicious actors online**, including foreign actors who are trying to undermine our democracy. Online incivility is closely related to the growing problem of foreign interference by authoritarian states. They employ bot armies to manufacture anger and hatred, and take advantage of polarization to generate more outrage and further poison the information environment. For example, foreign actors have used thousands of troll accounts to try to inflame already emotional social media debates around pipelines and immigration policies in Canada.<sup>14</sup>

## Missing voices

Twice as many Canadians agree (41%) than disagree (20%) that online political conversations make them feel “angry and discouraged.” Fully 47% of Canadian social media users say they stay out of political discussions for fear of criticism. And more Canadians say they do not feel safe sharing political views online (41%) than do (31%). (There is a gender divide as well—36% of men feel safe sharing their views, compared with 24% of women.) Political discussion online therefore misses out on the voices of many—even among those who are social media users.

### The political conversations I see online make me feel angry and discouraged



### I usually stay out of online political conversations because I'm worried I will get criticized



### I feel safe sharing my political views on social media



Strongly Agree
  Agree
  Neither agree nor disagree
  Disagree
  Strongly Disagree

# Diagnosing the problem

## We're not built for political arguments in the first place

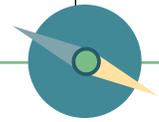
First things first: the difficult nature of political conversations is not all the fault of social media. Decades of research in political science, psychology, and economics finds that even in the best of circumstances, we're bad at disagreeing about politics.<sup>15</sup> It's not our fault. We're hardwired this way.

It may be that we've actually evolved to behave like this.<sup>16</sup> Groups are essential to our identity and wellbeing. If the group is based around ideas, like an ideological group or political party (in theory) is, then information which challenges those ideas is actually a threat to our group, and therefore to ourselves. Brain imaging suggests that the parts of our brain associated with our personal identities and perceptions of threat start firing when we're confronted with arguments that go against our political beliefs.<sup>17</sup> In fact, we start to feel threatened as soon as a divisive topic comes up. Just the mention of a contentious issue causes us to perceive a threat in other peoples' faces.<sup>18</sup>

We like to imagine ourselves as rational truth-seekers, exchanging facts and arguments, evaluating new information as it comes to make the best possible decisions. But this is not how humans operate. We suffer from a tendency towards "confirmation bias": we uncritically grab at information that confirms what we already believe, and we find reasons to reject information that doesn't.<sup>19</sup> We refuse to even acknowledge a problem exists, if we think that acknowledging it will lead us to a political solution we won't like (this is called "solution aversion").<sup>20</sup> We hate hearing from the other side, plain and simple. In fact, experiments have found that people will actually give up the chance of earning money in order to avoid reading political arguments they disagree with.<sup>21</sup>

We also often just speak past each other. People from different ideological camps use different language, which come from different moral values.<sup>22</sup> So when you think you're sounding really persuasive, your political opponent just hears hateful noise.

The result is that online or offline, there's some stuff that we just can't argue about well.



### Spotting Human Obstacles to Good Political Conversations

**Identity:** We treat political ideas and allegiances as who we are, rather than what we think.

**Confirmation Bias:** We only like information that matches or supports what we already believe.

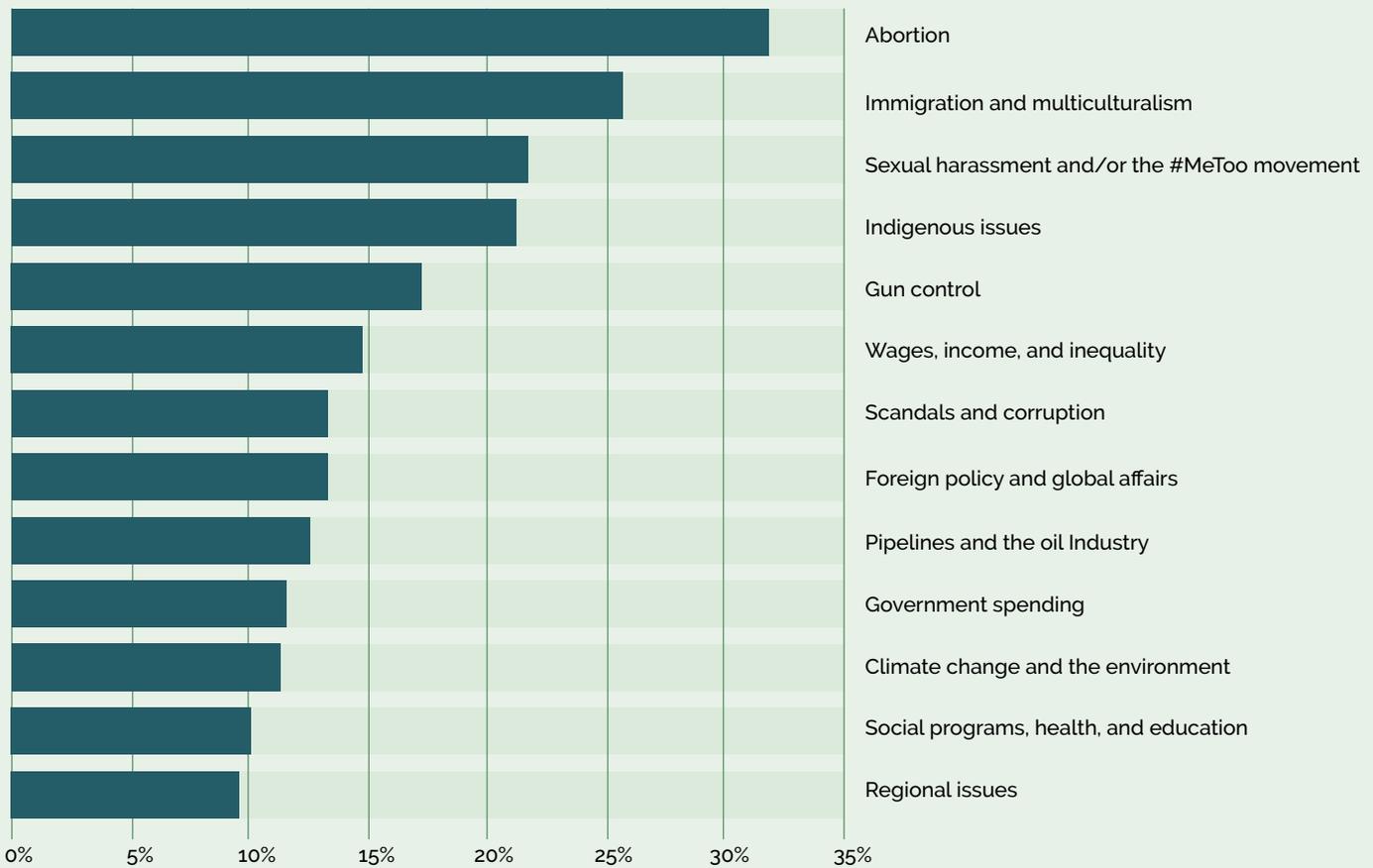
**Solution Aversion:** We reject information if we don't like its implications.

**Anxiety and Fear:** Just the mention of a divisive topic makes us feel threatened.

## What can't we talk about as a country?

We asked Canadian social media users which topics they're most uncomfortable discussing with someone who disagrees. In general, Canadians are pretty game for political disagreement. But a few issues stood out as being particular conversation-stoppers. More than one in five Canadians are uncomfortable disagreeing about abortion, immigration and multiculturalism, sexual harassment and/or the #MeToo movement, Indigenous issues, gun control, wages, income, and inequality, scandals and corruption, foreign policy and global affairs, pipelines and the oil industry, government spending, climate change and the environment, social programs, health, and education, and regional issues.

### Percentage of Canadians who are uncomfortable discussing topic with someone who disagrees



# Worst behaviour: What social media does to us

It's hard to disagree civilly and constructively in person, and social media exchanges make it that much harder. There's no single reason for that, but there are a number of things that help explain why political conversations online are so vulnerable to going off the rails.

## **The platforms are designed to make us feel big emotions**

Understanding emotional amplification is important to understanding the nature of social media, and the “attention economy” that it operates in. The idea of an attention economy can be summarized this way: while information is almost limitless in the internet age, attention is a scarce resource. We can only pay attention to so much, so platforms are built to fiercely compete for our attention—not just by providing interesting or useful information, but by using tools to manipulate our attention. Provoking strong emotional responses is a great way to keep our attention.

Online content that produces strong emotions—either negative or positive—is more likely to “go viral.”<sup>23</sup> Awe, anger, and anxiety are some of the most potent emotions for spreading content across the internet quickly.<sup>24</sup> Emotion is also contagious. Facebook conducted a highly controversial study in which nearly 700,000 users unwittingly had their feeds manipulated. The study found that users shown more negative or positive emotional content expressed more negative or positive emotions themselves.<sup>25</sup>

So emotional content gets more attention. Attention of any kind is good for the bottom line of a platform like Facebook, which sells advertising, so content that attracts attention and “engagement” (like comments and likes) is amplified—ending up in front of more of us. And we're vulnerable to feeling some of the emotion we see displayed. This is an environment in which anger can spread quickly and infect broadly.

Heavy social media days also tend to be less happy days, research suggests. It may not be true, as is sometimes feared, that social media use replaces more positive activities,

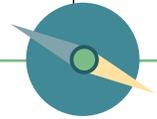
like spending time with friends and family. Research has found that it tends to replace other activities we don't like, like cleaning and working—but whether cleaning or tweeting we tend not to be our happiest selves.<sup>26</sup>

### Talking to a screen is just different

Having our conversations mediated by a computer changes the way we talk to each other. Early in the social media era, anonymity was a big concern. The worry was that if we didn't have to identify ourselves and be accountable for our comments, we would be nastier. There is some experimental evidence that, for example, anonymous comment boards do produce more incivility than comment boards that do not permit anonymity.<sup>27</sup> Believing yourself to be anonymous has also been associated with more cyberbullying.<sup>28</sup> Some platforms, like Twitter and Reddit, still permit anonymous users, while others, like Facebook, do not (and there's ongoing debate about whether anonymity online can be valuable).<sup>29</sup>

There are other ways that social media conversations are different. We can't read the social cues of the people we're talking to (which is why it's appealing to deliver bad news over email).<sup>30</sup> Our exchanges are brief, and that seems to have an effect on civility. For example, a study found that tweets directed at politicians immediately became slightly more civil after Twitter increased the word limit on tweets.<sup>31</sup> Also, people are "meaner on mobile"—we're more uncivil when we use social media on our phones rather than at a computer.<sup>32</sup>

These may be contributing factors to a bigger phenomenon—sometimes called the "online disinhibition effect"<sup>33</sup>—where we compartmentalize our online and offline selves. And even when we make our identities public, we aren't accountable to the people we talk with on social media, who we might never meet in person, or have to coexist with in the neighbourhood or workplace or playground. The result is that we say things on the internet that we would never say in person.



### Spotting Social Media Obstacles to Good Political Conversations

**Emotional amplification:** Platforms amplify and spread strong emotions like anger.

**Anonymity:** Hiding who we are can make us more likely to act in ways we wouldn't if we felt personally accountable.

**Absent cues:** We don't have to face the human responses of the people we're talking to.

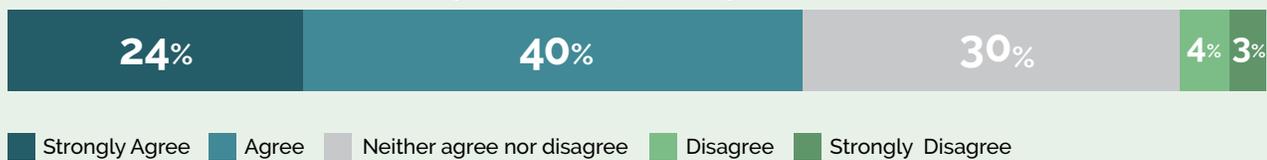
**Haste:** We send messages that are poorly thought out.

**Online Disinhibition:** We treat our online and offline selves as different people.

## Hell is other people?

Canadian social media users agree that online political conversations tend to be less civil and angrier. And we don't like it. But we're quick to absolve ourselves of blame: just 7% of Canadians disagree with the statement "if I discuss politics online, I always do so respectfully." This odd pairing of the perception of widespread incivility with a near-universal belief that we aren't participating in it could reflect the poisonous effect that a small number of bots and trolls can have on the online public square. Or it could suggest a lack of self-awareness of the ways that the social media environment draws out behaviour from us that we don't identify with.

### If I discuss politics online, I always do so respectfully



### "Trench warfare"

The social structure of social media also makes it ripe for angry exchanges. Much of the public conversation has focused on "filter bubbles" and "echo chambers." The idea is that we are becoming more polarized because, first, the internet makes it easier to seek out only the news and opinions that conform to our existing political opinions. And then algorithms—the secret, automatic rules that affect (among other things) what content we see—do the rest, filtering content to us that the platforms knows we'll like, so that we become increasingly cut off from the world beyond our political bubble.

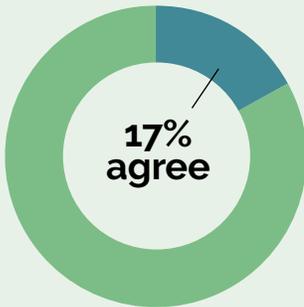
But the social media echo chamber may be more myth than reality. Evidence is starting to accumulate that social media exposes us to a wider variety of news sources and views than is often thought.<sup>34</sup> We do live in partial echo chambers, and some of us are highly motivated to cultivate our bubbles on social media. But that has as much to do with our offline lives and preferences—including forces like ideological,<sup>35</sup> geographic, and socio-economic sorting in society, and niche cable TV news—as it does with social media platforms. In fact, being on social media may actually expose us to different views more often than would otherwise be the case.

“Trench warfare” has been proposed as a different way of conceptualizing the world of online debates.<sup>36</sup> Basically, social media allows us to exist partially in echo chambers with people who share our views, which strengthens our views. But unlike offline life, we’re also coming in contact in brief, superficial ways with strongly contradicting views—which also makes more entrenched in our own views.<sup>37</sup> This results in polarization.

## Social bubbles > Social media bubbles

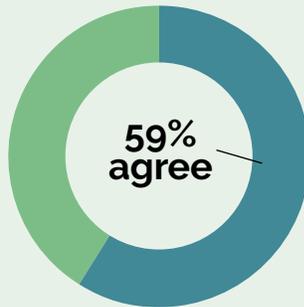
Most Canadian social media users reject the notion that they’re stuck in an online echo chamber. Just 17% say that most of the political opinions they see online reflect their own views. But when we asked Canadians about their *offline* networks earlier this year, significantly more saw themselves as in a bubble. This finding reflects recent research, which suggests that we’ve overblown the online bubble issue.

**Most of the opinions I see on [social media] reflect my views on government and politics**

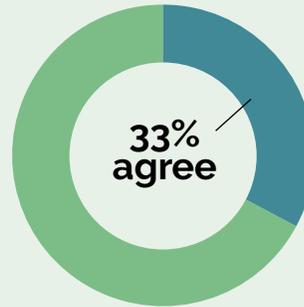


Source: Samara Social Media and Politics Survey 2019

**Some of the opinions I see on [social media] reflect my views, but many don't**

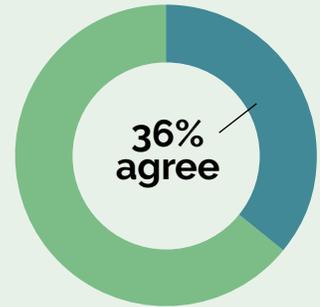


**Most of my close friends share my views on government and politics**



Source: Samara Citizens' Survey 2019

**Some of my close friends share my views, but many don't**



## From trolls to bots

Political conflict on social media also exists simply because some people—or the organizations they work for—want it that way. There’s a spectrum of kinds of people who deliberately contribute to polarization and incivility online. At the more moderate end are people who are simply less bothered than most people by incivility,<sup>38</sup> and happy to inject some rudeness into their exchanges on social media which wouldn’t be tolerated anywhere else. Further along the spectrum are true “trolls”: people whose primary goal online is simply to make others angry or upset. According to psychological researchers, online trolls tend to hold certain personality traits, like a tendency toward sadism—quite simply taking pleasure in making other people suffer.<sup>39</sup>

So some people are uncivil because it doesn’t bother them, and some are uncivil for the sake of being uncivil.

There are also some bad actors who contribute to online incivility with other goals in mind. Sometimes those goals are commercial, such as for people who are trying to draw clicks to fabricated news sites. Sometimes the goals are political. A key strategy of foreign enemies of our liberal democracy is to take advantage of, and exacerbate, online incivility. Russian information campaigns in the United States and Europe have used “bots”—fake social media accounts that are either fully automated or partially controlled by a person—to generate or boost emotional messages on both sides of a controversial issue.<sup>40</sup>

It’s not clear how effective it’s been, but it’s happening in Canada too. An analysis by CBC News of now-deleted bot accounts controlled by the Russian Internet Research Agency found that these bots focused on Canadian issues like Syrian refugees and the pipeline debate.<sup>41</sup> While the problem of “fake news” commands enormous attention right now, recent examinations of foreign interference campaigns have found that actual fake news makes up just a small amount of online activity. More common are attempts at the subtler, insidious poisoning of the digital public sphere by making use of existing polarization, and making it worse.

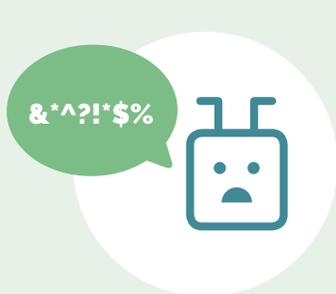
To be clear, bots can be directed toward positive, negative, and neutral ends. But part of the problem with bots is the way they can use questionable social media analytics to create a

false impression about how popular, widespread, or influential an argument is. When we as social media users uncritically rely on things like likes and retweets, or over-rely on social media platforms that put us in the hands of algorithms which affect the content we find but rely on questionable inputs,<sup>42</sup> we become more vulnerable to manipulation by bots.

## Anatomy of bots

In most basic terms, bots are fake social media accounts. Some bots are entirely automated. Others are partially controlled by real people, but still use automation to generate more activity than the human user could (technically a “cyborg”).

In a political context, bots are used for a variety of purposes, both good and bad. According to Canadian communications researchers Elizabeth Dubois and Fenwick McKelvey,<sup>43</sup> these purposes include:



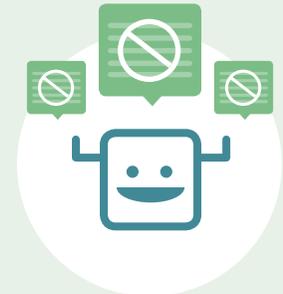
**Dampeners:** Bots used to suppress certain voices or messages (for example, by aggressively commenting negatively on a post).



**Amplifiers:** Bots used to broadcast more widely certain voices or messages (for example by retweeting constantly).



**Transparency bots:** Used to generate useful information and hold governments accountable (for example, by automatically tweeting out the results of Access to Information requests).



**Servant bots:** Used to automate certain simple tasks for political actors like politicians or journalists (for example, automatically deleting posts on a politician’s Facebook page that include abusive language).

# Changing the conversation

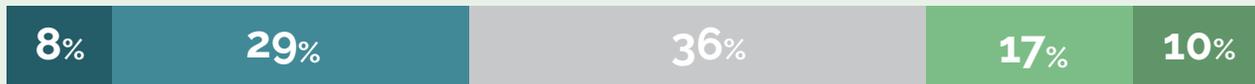
There are real risks to a culture of uncivil and counterproductive online political conversations. The causes of this culture are many, and complicated to address. But while these problems are well-known, too little attention has been paid to solutions—particularly public solutions to what are now public problems.

This report will now provide a brief overview of how governments are increasingly becoming involved in overseeing the digital public sphere, before turning to some approaches that citizens can themselves adopt in order to have better political conversations online.

## Spotting the potential

Much of the optimism about social media has disappeared—but it can make democratic opportunities available that wouldn't otherwise exist. Canadians are still somewhat more likely to agree than disagree that social media can be used to hold politicians accountable, and to explore new perspectives.

**Social media helps me to hold politicians accountable for their views and actions.**



**Social media has exposed me to new ideas and perspectives, and led me to change my mind about some things.**



Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

## Where we're headed: Platform governance

For the first decade of the social media era, little attention was paid to the role of public authorities to oversee, regulate, and manage the digital public sphere. Important decisions—like what content crossed a line, and when users should be excluded—were left to the social media platforms themselves. Those days may be coming to an end. Mega political events, like the Cambridge Analytica scandal, generated enormous public anger and brought attention to unaddressed problems. Most governments are now somewhere along the road to social media regulation, though these initiatives vary in their strength and effectiveness. Even Facebook's founder Mark Zuckerberg has publicly conceded that there should be new rules imposed in law.<sup>44</sup>

There's lots of heat, and not enough light. What does it all mean for online political conversations?

### **What's a platform?**

A platform, in this sense, is an online app or service which is powered by data.<sup>45</sup> Facebook, Google Search, YouTube, and Twitter are all examples. Platforms are the places where users can have online political conversations.

### **What's platform governance?**

Platforms themselves govern what goes on in their sites. For example, platforms do content moderation—deciding if material is offensive or violates terms of service and must be removed, and occasionally banning users for their behaviour. Platforms are also governed by law. For example, social media platforms see some oversight from privacy authorities, who examine whether the platforms are sufficiently protecting users' data; anti-trust authorities, who look at whether the platforms are acting like monopolies; and other corporate regulators. Peoples' and organizations' behaviour on social media platforms is also governed through law. For example, digital political advertising falls under the spending limits and transparency requirements of the Canada Elections Act.

But there is an increasingly widespread view that governments have left social media platforms alone to govern themselves to too great of a degree. Trends around the democratic world suggest that a new era of public platform governance is coming, or is already here.

But while lots of ink has been spilled arguing for more regulation of social media, there are a series of tricky remaining questions. For example:

- Most importantly, how do governments reduce harmful behaviour without interfering with free political expression?
- How should we treat social media platforms in the law? For example, should they be treated like publishers or media companies, responsible for their content in the same way?
- Do we need new laws to deal with problems on social media, or new ways to enforce existing laws (such as laws concerning harassment and hate speech)?
- How can algorithms be brought to public control or scrutiny?

Perhaps because of the unanswered questions, despite seeing danger in the platforms, Canadians are somewhat hesitant about social media regulation. The 54-country study that found Canadians are most likely to see social media as damaging to democracy also found that only 40% of Canadians want more regulation of content shared on social media—placing us, at 29th out of 54, in the middle of the pack.<sup>46</sup>

## How should platform governance come to Canada?

The federal government is likely to act on platform governance in the near future. But regulating social media must be done carefully, with effort put towards building consensus. The Government should consider following the lead of the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics—an Opposition-chaired Parliamentary committee which has begun to study issues of data, privacy, social media regulation, and democracy, and delivered a unanimous report on these topics in December 2018. In taking up these issues again, the committee could consider sponsoring a citizens' assembly—a group of randomly selected Canadians given the opportunity to meet regularly, learn about the topics, discuss them, and finally make recommendations. Committees in other Westminster Parliaments have begun to use citizens' assemblies to help them tackle wicked problems that need shared, democratically legitimate, cross-partisan solutions.<sup>47</sup>

With more questions than answers, and high stakes, Canadians should focus on getting the process right. The Samara Centre believes that a functional multi-party committee, with support from a citizens' assembly, could be a more credible vehicle for making decisions about the critical trade-offs than a government would be.

# Doing it ourselves

With all the attention on what social media platforms and governments should do about the state of online political conversations, little attention has been paid to what citizens can do. Are there steps that citizens themselves can take to have better political conversations, despite the obstacles?

Our answer is a tentative yes. We offer seven rules for more constructive online conversations, based on the existing research. This is a brand-new area, and all of these techniques should be tested against new research.

1

## Lead by example

Being civil can cause others in a conversation to follow your lead

The first rule is as simple as it gets. Research shows that rudeness is contagious.<sup>48</sup> So is civility. For example, an experiment asked people to read a news article on a controversial issue (gun control), followed by a comment thread.<sup>49</sup> The participants were randomly assigned to a thread containing civil or uncivil debate. Sure enough, people reading the civil comments were more likely to make civil comments of their own. Happily, they were also more likely to stay on topic, and offer new perspectives—showing how civility makes for more useful and constructive political conversations, not just nicer ones.

In the real world, you don't have control over how civil a conversation is overall. You're working against the challenge of trolls, and the incivility they can bring out in others. But there is hope that targeted acts of unilateral civility will attract more civility from others (along with more relevant, interesting comments).

## 2 Police your own side

Calling out incivility is most effective when you're addressing someone on the same political team

Does it help to call out bad behaviour? The answer is complicated. The experiment described above found that talking about the ugly state of the comment thread did not necessarily produce more civility. But elsewhere it has been found effective. The key is who is doing the calling out. Kevin Munger at New York University discovered this by building civility bots—fake Twitter accounts disguised as real people—to tweet at social media trolls and encourage them to change their behaviour. He then watched their public social media behaviour afterward to see if the criticism had any effect.

He started by directing bots at people who had used serious anti-Black slurs on Twitter, varying the identity of the bot—what they looked like, how many followers they had.<sup>50</sup> He found that bots that were most effective at changing peoples' behaviour were from the “in-group” (in this case, they were white men tweeting at other white men), and seen as having high status (in this case, having more followers on Twitter). He then tried something similar with Twitter trolls who were being uncivil to people with different political views during the 2016 US presidential election.<sup>51</sup> Again, he found that receiving criticism about your conduct from someone who belongs to the same political team can change that conduct.

The lesson: if you want to foster a healthier online conversation, you might have to do the psychologically harder work of scrutinizing the behaviour of the people you agree with (or share identities with in other ways). They're more likely to listen to you if you tell them they're out of bounds.

## 3 Practice slow politics

Small changes in the way you use technology can reduce the likelihood of using social media on the go, cutting down on thoughtless and aggressive exchanges

Think about all the deleted tweets by public figures, the apologies, the social media posts that do lasting harm to peoples' reputations. Social media lets us disgrace ourselves fast.

There's evidence that the speed and brevity of social media makes us harsher.<sup>52</sup> And remember: people are "meaner on mobile."<sup>53</sup> Research also finds that even boredom makes us more politically extreme.<sup>54</sup> And we tend to use social media in the place of unpleasant tasks, like housework.<sup>55</sup> All of this suggests that we are not at our best when we're picking away idly on social media at a bus stop—jumping into a discussion without having actively chosen to participate. Maybe it's time to add some friction into our social media use—to slow us down and make us more thoughtful.

The Center for Humane Technology makes a series of recommendations for how to limit our social media use on mobile devices.<sup>56</sup> These include:

- Turning off all app notifications apart from actual messages from real people (because social media apps use notifications to draw us in).
- Changing the settings of your phone to grayscale (because colourful icons are used to grab our attention).
- Simply removing social media apps from your phone altogether (you can still use them at your computer).

Those recommendations break the hold of the attention economy on our time and focus. But they can also improve the health of our political conversations, requiring us to make a deliberate choice to log on and participate.

## 4

### Get into the weeds

Inviting people to provide detailed explanations of what political choices they support, and doing so yourself, can reduce polarization

Whether we're debating on- or offline, we have the habit of having the same arguments in the same way over and over again. We quickly stop hearing one another, or thinking seriously about the opposing argument—or even thinking seriously about our own. That's hard to break out of, but one promising strategy involves getting into the fine detail.

Some research suggests that strong ideological views thrive on "the illusion of understanding"—we think we know more about complex issues than we actually do. (The "Dunning-Kruger Effect" just makes things worse; the same lack of knowledge that leads us to questionable conclusions makes us unable to see our own shortcomings).<sup>57</sup> If we

were more aware of complexity and nuance and the limits of our own understanding, we may be more interested to hear from others and revise our own views. An experiment found that simply asking people to provide a detailed, step-by-step explanation for how a policy they support would work causes them to admit to themselves they understand less about it, and adopt moderated, less polarized attitudes.<sup>58</sup>

So consider the following as an intervention to produce more constructive and useful online political conversations. Rather than rehearsing the old arguments (e.g. “we should build the TMX pipeline/we shouldn’t build the TMX pipeline”), ask questions that drill deeper (e.g. “How should the TMX pipeline be built, given the obstacles?” or, “How do you think stopping the pipeline works to reduce our impact on climate change?”). Encourage people to get into the mechanics of their positions, and do the same for your own.

## 5

### Reframe your language

Thinking about the moral foundations of an argument, and reflecting those foundations in your own language, can reduce the psychological distance between you and the person you’re debating

Along with taking a new angle on an issue, consider adopting a new vocabulary. That’s in response to an important school in political psychology that looks at our “moral foundations”— the basic, fundamental moral instincts we hold that inform how we look at the world. According to social scientists like George Lakoff and Jonathan Haidt, political ideologies map onto different conceptions of morality.<sup>59</sup> Haidt and other researchers have suggested that liberals are more responsive to arguments based on fairness or care, for example, while conservatives respond more to appeals to loyalty and authority.<sup>60</sup> This makes it hard for us to talk to one another, because we base our own arguments in language and values that aren’t wholly shared. But understanding the differences between us can actually help us to bridge those differences in political conversations.

The University of Toronto’s Matthew Feinberg and his colleagues have experimented with making the same argument using different moral language.<sup>61</sup> They find that echoing the moral language from the other side of the spectrum can make an argument more persuasive. For example, conservatives are more supportive of same-sex marriage when a loyalty-based argument is made (“same-sex couples are proud and patriotic ...”) rather than

a fairness-based argument (“all citizens should be treated equally”). Liberals are more supportive of funding for the military when a fairness-based case is made (through the military, disadvantaged people can achieve upward mobility) versus a loyalty-based argument (the military unifies us and makes us great in the world). They’ve found that this works in the context of a political campaign too, and it can affect support for candidates.<sup>62</sup>

If moral reframing is enough to persuade some small number more of those from the other side, it probably helps close the psychological distance between camps. That could produce more civil exchanges, even when people aren’t persuaded.

In the real world, it’s probably impossible to expertly reframe your argument based on what social psychologists have learned about our different moral foundations. Perhaps the lesson is simply: listen carefully to arguments against your position. Think about the substance of the arguments, but also where they come from—the values they’re built on. Try to reflect that back.

## 6

### Remind us what we share

Priming someone to feel the identity that unite us (like civic identity) rather than the identity that divide us (like party affiliations) can reduce polarization

Our political views have a lot to do with our identities—who we see ourselves as, what political tribe we feel we belong to. That’s a problem for democratic deliberation. But it may be that we can use that reality—the power of identity—to reduce polarization, at least long enough to have a constructive exchange.

We are more polarized when our partisan or ideological identities are activated—when, in the moment, we see ourselves as Liberals or Conservatives, Right or Left. But we have other identities—identities that are shared across the political spectrum. For example, most (but not all) participants in a Canadian election will identify as Canadians. And experiments have found that when we are prompted to think about shared civic identity, we hold warmer views toward people from other political teams.<sup>63</sup> An American study found that in the 2008 presidential election, people surveyed shortly before and after the July 4th national holiday, or before and after the Olympics (when the US team competed against the world), held systematically better opinions of the candidate they opposed.<sup>64</sup>

If an online conversation is going off the rails, use language that encourages people to remember the things they share despite politics—a country, a desire to make that country stronger. Maybe that feels hokey, but there’s real evidence for thinking that priming people’s patriotism can help them speak across political divisions. It probably also helps that civility is seen (rightly or wrongly) as a national characteristic and shared norm of Canadians. That’s a powerful prime.

## 7 Spot a bot

Finally, let’s not forget that some proportion of the political incivility comes from bots, fake accounts often operated by foreign interests that exist to poison the information environment. It’s hard for individual users to combat the presence of bots. Much of their work is in simply amplifying a message through massive coordinated sharing. But knowing how to recognize them is necessary if we want to resist falling into the behaviour they’re there to get out of us. Really: don’t yell at bots.

The first step is to simply exercise critical thinking about whether a message is worth engaging with. Recall that bots take advantage of our reliance on analytics—things like the number of retweets and likes—which don’t actually tell us that much about the popularity or reach of an argument.

For considering a particular account, the Atlantic Councils Digital Forensic Research Lab points out the clues that suggest you may be talking to a bot.<sup>65</sup> For instance:

- Do they have tons of activity on their account—like, 50+ posts a day?
- Do they spend most of their activity copying, sharing, and retweeting, rather than posting original content? Bots spend most of their time amplifying, so that can be a tell.
- Do they have a very small amount of activity or a short-lived account, but their posts have been shared and retweeted a lot? That’s a strong suggestion that they are bots, getting amplified by all their little botnet friends.
- Are they anonymous, using a pseudonym (or a name that looks randomly generated, with numbers and letters) or a profile picture that isn’t a photo of a person? Less identifying information makes it more likely to be a bot—but some bots use images and names, too.

- If you're looking at a photo of a real-looking person but still suspect a bot, you can take the next step of searching for that same image on Google. (In Google Chrome, just right-click on an image and select "Search Google for image.") Google will show other places where that photo has been used, allowing you to see if you are dealing with a bot that has taken someone's face, or is using the same photo as many other accounts.

If you really want to get serious, there are lots of tools available that can detect bots for you, including websites and browser extensions. Just asking yourself the question—am I arguing with a bot, which exists to harass me and fire me up in the service of foreign authoritarians?—should have a disciplining effect.

## Conclusion: Leaders need to lead, too

In just over a decade, our society has gone from optimistic to deeply anxious about what social media means for democracy. That anxiety is felt as strongly in here in Canada as anywhere in the world.<sup>66</sup> The time has come for the first major renovation of the digital public square. Better that than a moral panic which would cause us to turn away from the potential social media still offers to have bigger, freer, more open democratic conversations.

This report has tried to sketch out ways for users of social media to navigate political conversations online—and hopefully, to make those conversations more comfortable, inclusive, and constructive. In this way, the Samara Centre hopes to stimulate a renovation from the ground up. But in doing so, we don't ever want to lose sight of the critical importance of fierce, even emotional, disagreement. It's an indispensable resource in democracy.

There are limits to what good citizens can do on their own. Our behaviour is powerfully shaped by platforms, which is why our political leaders need to work to build a consensus around better platform governance.

Our behaviour is also shaped by those leaders themselves. People with big profiles and lots of followers on social media are called “influencers,” and there's a good reason for this. The research is clear: if leaders can't resist the big dark emotion, red-meat, sure-retweet-getter messaging, they infect us with their own incivility and misinformation. Or they can redirect their powerful emotions, persuasive language, and unparalleled reach to signal the kind of respect and political tolerance that democracy demands.

### US President Donald Trump on responses to his tweets:

“I used to watch it. It would be like a rocket ship when I put out a beauty. Like when I said—remember when I said someone was spying on me? That thing was like a rocket!”<sup>67</sup>

### A Note on the Data

Unless otherwise noted, data in the Field Guide come from the Samara Centre Politics and Social Media Survey, conducted by Doctors Daniel Rubenson and Peter Loewen of 1,010 Canadian frequent social media users between July 17 and 19, 2019. The online survey sample provided by Dynata was drawn with regional, gender, and language quotas, and weighted against census values for age, gender, language, region, and immigration status.

# Acknowledgements

We would like to thank David Moscrop and Fenwick McKelvey, who provided extremely helpful comments on earlier drafts of this report. We are also grateful to Matthew Feinberg and Kevin Munger for responding to questions about their important research contributions.

The Samara Centre is grateful for the support and collaboration of the Walrus Foundation. Throughout the election period, the Walrus will host an in-depth, non-partisan examination of the state of Canada's democracy, in print and on its website at [thewalrus.ca/democracy](http://thewalrus.ca/democracy).

We wish to thank all of our individual donors from across the country. Without their generous support this research would not be possible.

This project has been made possible in part by the Government of Canada.

Funded by the Government of Canada



*Version française disponible.*

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PUBLICATION DATE: 19 September 2019

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CITATION: Michael Morden 2019. "The Samara Centre's Field Guide to Online Political Conversations". Toronto: The Samara Centre for Democracy.

EDITOR: Allison Jane Smith

SURVEY DATA COLLECTION: Dr. Peter Loewen, Dr. Daniel Rubenson, and Benjamin Allen Stevens

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