Going on the Offensive: Attack Ads and Canadian Youth Perceptions of and Engagement with the Democratic Process

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Abstract

Many western democracies are facing declining voter turnout rates, but that decline is most significant amongst the youth demographic. In 2011, only 38.8% of Canadian youth cast their ballots in the federal election. Meanwhile campaign communications continue to favour negativity in the form of attack ads, while youth continue to report adverse perceptions of negative political advertising and a general distrust and disconnect towards politicians. There are indications that this distrust comes from a feeling, as a cohort, that they are largely ignored and marginalized from meaningful political discussion. By looking at youth engagement through the theoretical perspective of the public sphere, this semi-structured focus group study asked Canadian youth how they perceive attack ads, and how this style of campaigning impacts their perceptions of and engagement with the democratic process more generally. Youth largely denounced attack ads and their design as misleading, and claimed they failed to discuss issues that were relevant to them. Youth feel marginalized from political discourse and do not feel that politicians are doing enough to make the process more accessible. This research provides important findings for political communication researchers and campaign staffers, but also presents challenges and implications for the long-term health and representativeness of both the public sphere and our democratic process more broadly.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In Canada, and other western democracies, voter turnout has been gradually declining for years. Many scholars have suggested this is mainly attributed to decreased political engagement/participation amongst youth (Binder, Heiss, Matthes, & Sander, 2020; Blais & Loewen, 2011; Dahlgren, 2009; Howe, 2010; O'Neill, 2010; Putnam, 2000). In the 2011 federal election, the voter turnout rate was 61.1%. However, for the county's youngest eligible voting cohort (18-24 years old), the turnout rate was a dismal 38.8%. Voting remains just one form of political engagement, along with protests/social movements, petitions, and volunteering (to name a few). However, voting remains the most fundamental democratic principle of equality (Putnam, 2000), and to not vote is to withdraw from the political community. Why youth choose to neglect their right to vote and largely disengage from the traditional democratic process, requires an understanding of the Canadian youth population, how politicians communicate with the cohort, and the modern political campaign environment. Attack ads for example, dominate political campaigns and in the U.S. are a multi-billion-dollar campaign finance expense during election cycles. While not as pervasive, their encroachment into Canadian politics has become more widespread (Diagnault, 2014). There are findings to suggest attack ads contribute to feelings of indifference, which is also cited as the main reason for not voting in Canada (Elections Canada, 2011).

Attack ads featured on television are intended for an audience that transcends the traditional television medium in modern campaigns. Repackaging TV ads for wider audiences across our "hybrid media system" (Chadwick, 2013) allows parties and candidates to reach people directly and more cost efficiently in an increasingly fragmented yet pervasive world of online social networks. As a pervasive form of political communication in Canada, attack ads are

criticized for being too short to contextualize, and presenting inaccurate or misleading information to voters. Youth are often referred to as disengaged, so it is important to understand youth perceptions of attack ads, and whether these perceptions affect the cohort's broader engagement with the democratic process. The political system is hardly representative when the majority of the youth population fails to vote. It raises questions about why young people choose not to vote, how politicians and the media communicate with them, and has broader implications for the future of our democratic institutions and potential marginalization from the public sphere.

Through the theoretical lens of the public sphere this study attempts to answer the central research question:

How do Canadian undergraduate students perceive national political attack ads and what do they see as the implications for the electoral process?

This qualitative study employed the use of four semi-structured focus group interviews with Canadian youth. For the purpose of this study, Canadian youth refers to 18-24-year-old undergraduate students from various faculties at the University of Ottawa, also Canada's youngest voting cohort as defined by Elections Canada. Participants screened three attack ads from the 2015 federal election and were asked to participate in a discussion, about their perceptions of the ads and their broader implications for youth political engagement and marginalization from political discourse.

To answer the central research question, focus groups were determined to be the most appropriate method of study. Focus groups have been used in the social sciences for decades as a method of study and (besides consumer goods and brands) have also been used by marketers to gauge people's political beliefs or responses to media messages (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Focus groups are a "useful social laboratory for studying the diversity of opinion on a topic, the

collaborative process of meaning construction, and the cultural performance of communication" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 183). Another benefit to focus groups is they can gather many people's viewpoints in a relatively quick amount of time. They also draw upon shared experiences which can cause a "chaining" or "cascading" effect, where participants link to previous statements; something rarely possible in a one-on-one interview.

Structure

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter starts by broadly defining Canadian youth, and paints a picture of the diverse demographic in Canada. After narrowing the concept of "engagement" for this study, precursors for and obstacles to youth engagement are outlined, drawing on studies from academics, non-profits, and reports from Elections Canada. Next the chapter explores past research on attack ads and their place in our current media environment for the purpose of looking at their contribution to the youth disengagement problem and to help guide the study design. The chapter concludes by outlining the history of the theoretical perspective of the study (the public sphere), critiques of the theory, and how it is defined in the context of this study.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

This chapter outlines the research design of the study, followed by a rationale for the chosen methodology, explanation for the sample size, recruitment strategies, how data was collected and analyzed, ethical considerations, and finally limitations of the study.

Chapter 4: Results and Analysis

This chapter begins by highlighting the results and three main themes that emerged from the data analysis process, and a few notable outliers. The discussion section follows which highlights the three themes and uses direct quotes from focus group transcripts to highlight key

findings. The discussion section also explains how the key findings of this study compliment previous research outlined in the literature review. The chapter ends with a brief summary highlighting the most relevant findings and contributions, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The final chapter summarizes the main findings of the study and why the findings contain important contributions to communication and media studies research. The chapter concludes following a discussion of the "real world" implications of the study's key findings, and reflections on limitations and possibilities for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Canadian Youth

The terms "youth" or "young people" can be ambiguous, referring to a wide or narrow age range. When discussing young Canadians for example, Howe (2010) explains researchers often lump young Canadians into a variety of groupings with ages ranging from 15-35 and he considers youth not to exceed the age of 21. However, the precise numbers are not important, as research suggest that the pattern is generally one of "diminishing political engagement at younger ages" (Howe, 2010, p. xv). For the purpose of this study, the major research paper will refer to youth by Elections Canada's definition, those between the ages of 18-24, and the youngest eligible voting cohort.

It is important to note that youth, like any age demographic, are not a homogenous group and those 18-24 years old come from vastly different life situations and backgrounds. However, there are also a number of similarities among this demographic. There are urban and rural differences; however, according to Inspire Democracy (2015), an initiative of Elections Canada, youth are the most mobile group in the Canadian population and are more likely to live in one of the country's largest cities, where education and employment opportunities are higher. Youth are a diverse group with 17% being born abroad, 22% identifying as a visible minority and 6% identifying as aboriginal. There are also linguistic differences in regards to English and French speaking Canadians.

As of 2012, Canadian youth (aged 15-24) reported volunteering more than most other age groups at a rate of 58% (Statistics Canada, 2012). Youth aged 18-24 can encompass high school, college, undergraduate and even graduate students, or those who dropped out of the educational

system all together. Around 45% of those aged 18-24 have a post-secondary education (Statistics Canada, 2020).

Unfortunately, the cost of obtaining a post-secondary education across the country has increased significantly and has hit record levels depending on the province. Ontario undergraduate students pay the highest tuition in the country, followed by students in Saskatchewan, while undergraduate students in Newfoundland and Labrador and Quebec pay the lowest, in that order. (Statistics Canada, 2014). According to the Canadian Federation of Students - Ontario (CFS-ON), over the last 20 years, "undergraduate tuition fees outpaced inflation by 601 per cent [in the province]." (CFS-ON, 2015). This dramatic increase in tuition fees has created a financial obstacle to obtaining a post-secondary education for many. As a result, while Canada ranks among the most educated countries in the OECD, (Statistics Canada, 2017), according to the most recent National Graduate Survey (NGS), 49% of Canadians graduate with debt (Statistics Canada, 2020).

Of those who take on debt, Canadians graduating with a bachelor's degree report have an average of $26,000 in both public and private loans (Statistics Canada, 2014) while students in Ontario report graduating with closer to $37,000 in loans from both public and private sources (CFS-ON, 2015). Dramatic discrepancies in tuition costs amongst the provinces, and that fact that Canada does not offer publicly funded access to post-secondary education are likely the root causes for this large difference in reported debt loads amongst students across the country.

The youngest cohort of voters is the least likely to vote in federal elections and that statistic has been trending downward not just in Canada, but in many western democracies. While, voter turnout in the 2011 federal election was 61.1%, just 2.8% above the all-time low set in 2008 (Elections Canada, 2012), only 38.8% of 18-24 year-olds voted, compared to 75.1% for

64-74 year-olds (Elections Canada, 2012). According to Elections Canada there were 2.9 million eligible voters between the ages of 18-24 in the last federal election, which means only around 1.1 million turned out to cast a ballot (Inspire Democracy, 2015). Why over 60% of youth chose not to cast ballots in the 2011 election remains the central question to the youth voter turnout predicament, and the answer is complex and conflicting.

Despite a majority of youth being highly educated, this demographic is often referred to as being politically disengaged, leading scholars to suggest that declining voter turnout generally is largely attributable to a decrease in political participation amongst the young (Binder, et al 2020; Blais & Loewen, 2011; Dahlgren, 2009; Howe, 2010; Milner, 2010; O'Neill, 2010; Putnam, 2000). Debates surrounding the cause of youth voter turnout point to life cycle and cohort effects but often refer to a lack of political engagement or political participation as the main contributing factor. At this point, it is important to define these terms, as they can complicate the discussion.

Defining Political Engagement

The term "engagement" can be vague and the definition varies depending on the context in which it is used. For example, the terms civic and political engagement must be differentiated. According to Dahlgren (2009) civic engagement is defined as "forms of voluntary activity aimed toward solving problems in the community and helping others, while 'political engagement' is reserved for activity oriented toward influencing governmental action in some way" (p. 58). However, the terms political engagement and political participation are often used synonymously, for example, Dahlgren (2009) also claims that political engagement refers to "subjective states, that is, mobilized, focused attention on some object" which he claims, even at a minimal level, is a "prerequisite for participation" (p.80). Political participation according to

Dahlgren (2009) "involves some 'activity', which can take many forms but often involves acts of communication" (p. 81). Milner (2010) expands on this definition of political participation as follows:

> Political participation is here understood to encompass a range of activities that, in one way or another, seek to affect the policies of individuals who are—or wish to be—democratically elected, and of the organizations behind them. These include conventional activities like voting and the various activities related to it (party membership, activities in support of candidates and outcomes in election campaigns and referendums, etc.), as well as unconventional activities, such as demonstrations and boycotts, that seek to affect policies (p. 6).

For the purpose of this study, political engagement will refer to Dahlgren's definition as being a subjective state of mobilized and focused attention on some object (politics broadly); a precursor to political participation. Political participation will refer to Milner's (2010) definition of activities, both conventional and unconventional, which seek to affect politics in some way. However, throughout various literature, political engagement is often used synonymously to describe acts of political participation.

Some people are politically engaged and others are not, and if engagement is a precursor to participation, it's important to understand what makes people politically engaged and why some remain disengaged from politics all together.

Life Cycle vs. Cohort Effect on Voter Turnout

Life cycle and cohort effects are each cited as reasons for declining youth voter turnout. Howe (2010) explains that life cycle effect "sees people's behaviours and attitudes as a function of changes people experience as they age and move through different stages of life" while cohort

effect is interpreted as "reflections of the distinctive and abiding qualities of the birth cohort to which people belong" (p. 9). Life cycle effect suggests that youth are less apt to vote because of a number of factors such as: high residential mobility, a focus on personal goals that take priority over politics (higher education, establishing a career or seeking a life partner), or simply a lack of life experience (as cited in Howe, 2010, p. 10), but that as they age their likelihood to vote will increase. It is true that as youth age they are more likely to vote by approximately 15 percentage points between the ages of 20-50 (Howe, 2010, p.10).

Cohort effect, which looks at the unique characteristics of an age cohort at different periods of time, suggests that today's youth vote at lower levels than their parents or grandparents did at the same age, and that non-conventional forms of political activity are not filling the gaps left by a decline in conventional forms of engagement amongst youth (Milner, 2010, p. 77). Additionally, even though youth are slightly more likely to vote as they age, they are beginning at such a low level that overall turnout can only be expected to decline (Blais and Loewen, 2011). The consensus is that declining youth voter turnout in many western nations is largely a generational phenomenon (Blais and Loewen, 2011; Dahlgren, 2009; Howe, 2010; Milner, 2010) largely due to declining levels of political engagement and participation amongst the youth cohort.

Political Attentiveness as Engagement Precursor

Declining voter turnout is argued to be "merely the most visible symptom of broader disengagement from community life" (Putnam, 2000, p. 35). It has been argued that the continuing decline and lack of social capital has a direct effect on political engagement and therefore participation, especially amongst youth (Howe, 2010; Putnam, 2000).

Though not the first to develop the term, Putnam (2000) developed a definition of "social capital" that is much more applicable to democratic engagement. He suggested that social capital is created by social connections within networks of generalized reciprocity (pp. 20-21). Dahlgren (2009) effectively summarizes Putnam's version of social capital, claiming "these social ties involve shared values, trust, and reciprocity; they are both an individual and a social good. Putnam's notion of social capital encompasses *bonding* (exclusive, tight, intragroup ties) and *bridging* (inclusive, open links, with other groups)." Putnam (2000) points out that social capital can be used for malevolent and antisocial purposes as well, like terrorist organizations or racist groups for example (p. 22). Putnam (2000) argues that a decline in social capital has been taking its toll on the performance of our democratic institutions (p. 349) and places much emphasis on volunteering. Putnam (2000) argues:

> Volunteering is part of the syndrome of good citizenship and political involvement not an alternative to it. Volunteers are more interested in politics and less cynical about political leaders than nonvolunteers are. Volunteering is a sign of positive engagement with politics, not a sign of rejection of politics … Conversely, political cynics, even young cynics, are less likely than other people to volunteer." (p. 132)

Theiss-Morse & Hibling (2005) critique some of Putnam's claims, arguing that voluntary association members tend to be better educated and wealthier than non-members and that people tend to join homogenous groups, as people enjoy being around others like them. They also claim that the evidence linking voluntary association membership to increased civic values is decidedly weak (pp. 233-235). Dahlgren (2009) also questions Putnam's assertion that membership in formal civil society organizations offers solid foundation for political engagement. Indeed, Canadian youth volunteer in large numbers but that number doesn't translate to the polls on

Election Day. While crediting Putnam's idea that social connectivity is important for civic participation, Dahlgren (2009) explains it may be that in the network society, membership in formal organizations becomes superfluous and that social connectedness can be tied more to the network society generally, rather than formal organizations (p.107). This will be expanded upon later.

Putnam's argument that youth lack social capital is not fully reflective of Canadian youth, given they volunteer and participate in unconventional forms of political engagement at higher rates than most other cohorts (Inspire Democracy, 2015; Samara Canada, 2015). However, many scholars (including Putnam) argue that while social capital and social cohesion are important, not enough emphasis is put on the influence of knowledge and interest in politics and its contribution to increasing political engagement and therefore increasing youths' likelihood to vote (Blais and Loewen, 2011; Howe, 2010; Milner, 2010; Putnam, 2000). Howe (2010) combines interest in politics, knowledge about public affairs, and keeping up with political news/current affairs into an all-encompassing definition of what he calls "political attentiveness". The argument is that without an interest in politics a base of knowledge or at least basic awareness of current political affairs, youth cannot make an informed choice at the ballot box with any degree of certainty or commitment (Putnam, 2000; Howe, 2010; Milner, 2010). Putnam (2000) explains that "political knowledge and interest in public affairs are critical preconditions for more active forms of involvement. If you don't know the rules of the game and the players and don't care about the outcome, you're unlikely to try playing yourself" (p. 35)

Additionally, those who are politically attentive to some degree are also more likely to be politically engaged, and are therefore more likely to participate in both conventional and unconventional forms of political action (Blais and Loewen, 2011; Howe, 2010; Milner, 2010).

When the majority of youth (61.2%) fail to participate in elections, the interests of the entire cohort become disproportionately overshadowed as politicians reach out to groups they can rely on to vote consistently. Some have argued that Canada is stuck in perpetual vicious cycle where youth do not vote because they are ignored by politicians, while politicians largely ignore youth because they don't vote (Samara Canada, 2015).

Political Dropouts

As mentioned, youth are not a homogenous group, and some segments are more likely than others to vote. Howe (2010) claims that around one third of youth, and perhaps slightly more, have tuned out of electoral politics altogether and that these voters are unlikely to change their patterns as they age as they have become what he calls "habitual non-voters" who abstain from voting consistently rather than intermittently. According to Howe (2010) youth with lower levels of education and income levels are less likely to vote and have been the main cause for the decline in turnout amongst this cohort. Unsurprisingly, postsecondary educated youth and those from middle-upper classes are more likely to vote. However, given the majority of youth have some level of postsecondary education or are currently postsecondary students the increase in habitual non-voting could not have occurred without a significant contribution from those with higher levels of education as well (Howe, 2010).

Milner (2010) refers to habitual non-voters as "political dropouts" which he defines as "young citizens so inattentive to the political world around them that they lack the minimal knowledge needed to distinguish and thus choose among parties or candidates" (Milner, 2010, p. 24). Not surprisingly, "people who normally do not vote are highly unlikely to take part in more active forms of politics. Moreover, these more active forms of participation are, as a rule, limited to a minority of the population" (Milner, 2010, p. 77).

As youth voter turnout stagnates, it's clear that having a higher level of education while important, does not guarantee political engagement. While some political dropouts are systemically disenfranchised, others actively choose to disengage either through distrust, ambivalence, or indifference (Dahlgren, 2009). Dahlgren (2009) argues that while distrust and ambivalence are certainly present, indifference captures much of the sentiment held by the politically disengaged. Indifference, Dahlgren (2009) explains, implies a disinterest in politics or an alienation that can treat politics as irrelevant, at least in terms of its representations in the media, reducing citizenship to a lifestyle choice like sports or music (p. 82). Indifference makes politics personally insignificant, but Dahlgren (2009) insists that this not a permanent state of mind, and with experience, indifference can be transformed into engagement (p.83). Indifference (or disinterest) is an obstacle to engagement, as interest is one of the three pillars of political attentiveness. Polls conducted following the 2011 federal election help to shine a light on why voters in the Canadian youth cohort failed to vote.

Reasons for not Voting

Statistics Canada's 2011 Labour Force Survey reported voter turnout rates of 50% for 18-24-year-olds (Uppal and LaRochelle-Côté, 2012) while the 2011 National Youth Survey estimated it was as high as 74% (Elections Canada, 2011) opposed to the official turnout rate of 38.8% reported by Elections Canada a year after the election (Elections Canada, 2012). Some reasons for over-reporting turnout are: non-voters are less likely to answer survey questions about voting, many youth don't have landline phones, as a cohort youth are highly mobile, and some may provide the incorrect answer either due to faulty recall, confusion between municipal, provincial and federal elections or simply a conscious lie (Blais and Loewen, 2011; Howe, 2010; Milner, 2010; Uppal and LaRochelle-Côté, 2012). Although the abovementioned surveys are

unreliable in terms of turnout rates, they can provide helpful insight as to why 18-24-year-old non-voters did not cast a ballot in the last federal election. Statistics Canada's Labour Force Survey (with questions provided by Elections Canada) asked non-voters of all ages why they did not vote in the 2011 federal election, found the top three responses for 18-24-year-olds were as follows:

1. 30% indicated that they were "not interested" which includes feelings that their vote would not make a difference
2. 23% reported they were too busy citing personal obligations/work (although Canadians are legally entitled time off work to vote)
3. 11% said they were out of town or away (Statistics Canada, 2014)

While the 2011 National Youth Survey commissioned by Elections Canada found that 33% of 18-34-year-olds cited "motivation factors" for not voting, which was further broken down to include:

- 12% citing disinterest in politics
- 11% citing a lack of political knowledge about the parties/candidates/issues
- 9% citing attitudes toward voting: e.g. vote meaningless, did not like the parties/candidates, distrust in government/politicians (Elections Canada, 2011).

A lack of knowledge, interest and negative feelings towards parties/candidates/government and the belief that their vote won't make a difference were the most cited reasons for not voting amongst the cohort. Even those citing personal obligations such as being outside their home riding at the time of the election, didn't make the effort to cast a special ballot or vote in an advanced poll. Additionally, work conflicts are a non-issue as employers are legally required to provide at least three hours off work to vote on the day of a

general election (Elections Canada, 2020). The responses in both the 2011 Canada Labour Force Survey and the 2011 National Youth Survey help validate the claim that political inattentiveness remains a significant barrier to youth engagement and voter turnout. Negative perceptions of and a distrust towards political candidates, parties and government in general suggests that indifference, which is the most cited reason for not voting remains another significant obstacle. There are indications that this distrust amongst youth comes from a feeling, as a cohort, that they are largely ignored and marginalized from meaningful political discussion.

Youth Perceptions of Political Leaders

Youth cannot be held entirely responsible for their disengagement and although some subgroups are more likely to vote and be politically engaged in other ways, there are commonalities and shared attitudes that transcend across the cohort. A recent study points to the role political leaders and institutions play in this complex issue. Bastedo (2014) found that both university-educated and activist youth and those less likely to engage in politics "shared a consistent understanding of power relations and of their own marginal place within politics" (p. 8). Bastedo (2014) found that across all subgroups, including the university educated who do vote, youth felt that they do not matter to politicians and that politicians do not care about issues that matter to them. They also had little confidence that as individuals, or as a cohort, that they would be heard or included in political discussions and that young people had "absorbed the message that 'we are unimportant to them'. They likely gleaned this message in part from modern political campaign practices, which are not aimed at young people, as well as from their very limited interactions with government" (p. 9). Bastedo (2014) argues that political campaigns tend to exemplify that youth concerns are not of interest to political leaders and that political leaders do not need youth to participate in order to win elections. Additionally, she claims that

ignoring this vital section of the population both during campaigns and in broader political discourse is taking a toll, making representation for some but not all (Bastedo, 2014).

Youth issues, unsurprisingly, differ from those of older cohorts, of course each subgroup differs as to what issues they consider to matter the most. Bastedo (2014) found university educated and politically active youth tended to ascribe importance to issues that are more national in scope (e.g. international trade, democratic reform, commodity pricing, stopping online piracy legislation) and personal issues like jobs and unemployment. While those less engaged tended to focus on issues that are personal, local or provincial in scope. This challenges life cycle theory that suggests youth care more about politics as they get older, as politics doesn't touch their lives (Bastedo, 2014). On the contrary, youth and every voting demographic have many issues that directly impact their lives. Engaged and disengaged alike, youth tend to participate beyond the ballot box in other ways that they feel have a more direct effect or they disengage entirely from the political process.

The Vicious Circle of Disengagement: Communication Issues

Amongst engaged and disengaged youth alike, Bastedo (2014) found that youth felt a lack of efficacy (a feeling their vote would make a difference), and cited non-traditional forms of political engagement as more effective ways of being heard or effecting change than voting or joining a political party (Bastedo, 2014). According to an online survey conducted by Samara Canada, across 18 different political acts, many being more laborious than voting, Canadians under 30 years old participated on average 11 percentage points higher than those over 30 years old (Samara Canada, 2015). However, as mentioned, it is typically those who are more engaged traditionally that participate beyond voting, and the disengaged are typically underrepresented in surveys related to political engagement. As youth are increasingly disengaged not just from

elections but from traditional politics in general, parties and candidates rarely try to speak to the most marginalized voters. Some argue that this might exacerbate a vicious circle of non-participation which could threaten Canadian democratic legitimacy (Bastedo, 2014; Samara Canada, 2015).

Samara Canada echoes findings by the 2011 National Youth Survey that turnout for youth contacted by a politician or political party were 15 percentage points higher than those who are not contacted (Elections Canada, 2011). However, almost half (45%) of youth surveyed reported having no contact at all while for those with a high school diploma or less that number increases to 53% (Samara Canada, 2015). It's important to note that those who are contacted are often reached by phone, mail, in person or through email, with social media lagging behind (Samara Canada, 2015). However, youth generally lack residential stability and few have landline phones (Blais and Loewen, 2011; Howe, 2010; Milner, 2010; Uppal and LaRochelle-Côté, 2012) which makes them, especially those who are less engaged, difficult to reach.

In regards to politicians or parties' use of social media, there are at least three distinguishable reasons that this strategy is not an ideal solution for engaging youth: access, inclusivity, and message control. According to the 2012 Canadian Internet Use Survey (CIUS), 83% of Canadian households have internet access, while household income levels cause numbers to drop below and rise above this average (Statistics Canada, 2014). While youth, predominately university educated, are the most likely demographic to use social media and engage with politics through Facebook and Twitter for example (Albaugh & Waddell, 2014), only a small minority actually do, and surveys also tend to overestimate those figures (Kruse, Norris, & Flinchum, 2018; Small, Jansen, Bastien, Giasson, & Koop, 2014,). Internet access alone does not guarantee that youth will become more informed or participatory in regards to politics

(Papacharissi, 2002). Ultimately, from disengaged youth there has to be some desire or interest in engaging with politics online for social media to facilitate more political engagement, and currently political engagement through social media remains predominately a tool of those already engaged (Albaugh & Waddell, 2014; Kruze et al., 2018). Additionally, the social media accounts of parties and politicians will often regurgitate official party information, press releases, events, and other announcements. Albaugh & Waddell (2014) claim politicians often avoid interactive venues that encourage off the cuff statements, mirrored in the online context; this could simply be a desire to keep control of the message in an increasingly uncontrollable communication environment. During campaigns, parties and candidates are often stretched for resources, time and money and make a conscious decision to focus their efforts where they can have the greatest impact (Samara Canada, 2015). Therefore, reaching out to youth who are less likely to vote and harder to reach is predictably not a priority. Given youth are the most active cohort on social media, it has been suggested that politicians and governments should provide more youth specific content as a way to engage (Small et al., 2014).

Reading the news on the internet has the strongest correlation with increased political knowledge of any other media related activity and can lead to increased political interest and discussion amongst youth (Milner 2010, p. 65). As mentioned, increased political attentiveness is a strong precursor to political engagement and participation and youth in Canada are the most active cohort online. So while challenges still remain and the internet remains far from the dominant source of political information, it cannot be ignored as a more effective way to engage youth with political affairs (Albaugh & Waddell, 2014; Kruze et al., 2018; Lalancette & Cormack, 2020; Milner, 2010; Papacharissi, 2002; Small et al., 2014).

To make things more complex, at the same time youth voter turnout has been in decline, differences between the parties have become less pronounced, making it harder, especially for those with low levels of political attentiveness, to understand party stances and make an informed choice at the ballot box.

Political Party Ideologies Shifting

Bittner (2013) explains that over the last 20 years, Canadian federal politics has been in a period of substantial flux, citing the emergence of new parties, new leaders, the disappearance of traditional parties, and prior to 2011, the dominance of minority governments (p. 278). In addition to changes within Canadian federal politics, the traditional political parties themselves have also shifted their ideological leanings, further complicating things for voters, especially for those with low levels of political attentiveness. Dahlgren (2009) argues that parties in many Western democracies have become more voter-oriented as opposed to member-oriented, drifting towards "consensus politics", as people have become less attached to specific parties. Koop & Bittner (2013) found that "since the 1988 election, the ideological space between right and left has been substantially reduced" (p. 321). The 2004 merger of the Canadian Alliance and the Progressive Conservatives, which created the current Conservative Party of Canada formerly led by Stephen Harper has, according to Koop & Bittner (2013), brought that party more sharply to the right ideologically (p. 320). However, Koop & Bittner (2013) cite the NDP platform transformation as the main reason for the closing of the right-left gap, claiming that over the last twenty years the party has moved itself 30 more percentage points to the right, positioning itself nearly ten points left of centre. The NDP's dramatic shift towards the centre meant that the Liberal platform in the 2011 federal election was more left-leaning than the NDP's (p.321). The

NDP also removed socialism from its constitution and some have argued it took a more centrist approach to the 2015 campaign than the Liberals on many issues (Globe and Mail, 2015).

These shifts in federal politics and party ideological leanings have also taken part during a period of gradual decline in voter turnout. Lower turnout tends to favour the Conservatives, creating an obstacle to both the Liberals and the NDP, as "left leaning parties' natural constituents are less likely to turn out to vote in the first place" (as cited in Koop & Bittner, 2013, p. 328). Another benefit to the Conservatives is vote splitting between the two major left-of-centre parties, the Liberals and the NDP.

Disengaged and Disenfranchised

Aside from the reasons behind their disengagement, non-voters' absence at the ballot box does matter significantly. According to Howe (2010) habitual non-voters (or political dropouts) are the most effected by their disengagement, citing cuts to various social and welfare programs across the provinces in the 1990's as an example, which disproportionately affected the disadvantaged/lower classes without any obvious electoral response. Youth voter turnout in the 2011 federal election was just 38.8% (Elections Canada, 2012). While it can be presumed that not all 61.2% of non-voting youth are political dropouts or disadvantaged, Milner (2010) argues that "the needs and interests of those unable to participate effectively in political life fall to the bottom of the political agenda" and, understandably, "the needs and interests of young people are not identical to those of their elders" (p. 25). Not only are the needs and interests of youth different from their older counterparts, but youth are often cited as significantly more progressive than their older counterparts.

A recent study funded in part by the Social Sciences Research and Humanities Council and published by the Broadbent Institute found that Canadians under thirty-five years old from

nearly all socio-demographic groups and provinces were more likely than older Canadians to support a progressive political agenda which desires an activist government that is socially liberal, cares about the environment, and spends more on social programs related to health care and education (McGrane, 2015). The problem with low turnout is that when the majority of youth do not vote, the needs and interests of the entire cohort, even those politically engaged, become overshadowed. As of the last provincial election in Ontario, millennials (which the youth participants in this study are a subgroup of) were the largest voting cohort in the province (Toronto Star, 2018). However, with turnout for the cohort remaining notoriously low, the interests of youth voters were not at the forefront of that campaign, and overall voter turnout in that election was just 57% (Elections Ontario, 2020).

Initiatives to Increase Youth Engagement

There are a number of NGO's dedicated to increasing political engagement amongst the Canadian electorate and more specifically Canadian youth, both in conventional (e.g. increasing voter turnout, connecting with elected officials) and non-conventional ways (e.g. single-issue advocacy, electoral reform). Samara Canada is a non-partisan charity, specializing in research and engagement programming (Samara Canada, 2020), while Apathy is Boring also focuses on increasing engagement but also increasing voter turnout specifically amongst the youth population (Apathy is Boring, 2020). There are also a number of single-issue advocacy organizations dedicated to promoting engagement in a "non-conventional" sense, while organizations like Fair Vote Canada advocates for electoral reform, more specifically scrapping Canada's current first-past-the-post electoral system.

The Conservative's won a majority government in the 2011 federal election with only 39.6% of the popular vote (Parliament of Canada, 2015), with only 61.1% of eligible voters who

casted a ballot. While preliminary results for the 2015 federal election show the Liberals won their majority with only 39.5% of the popular vote with turnout estimated (excluding those that registered on election day) to be around 68.3% (Elections Canada, 2015). This is one of the criticisms of Canada's first-past-the-post (SMP) system. It is argued that a change in Canada's electoral system could have a positive effect on turnout, though the makeup of a new electoral system would have to respect and consider the nature of Canadian Federalism and the makeup of a Westminster system of government.

Milner (2010) claims that a system of Proportional Representation (PR) would increase political knowledge, to a small but positive degree, as the idea is that parties with weak but real support still receive a proportionate level of representation (reducing the need for strategic voting), and party differences are more pronounced as they must appeal to every voter and not just ridings they perceive as winnable. As political party differences have become less pronounced and parties have become more voter-oriented and focus more on "consensus politics" (Dahlgren, 2009) it is argued that under SMP the electorate becomes more subdivided while at the same time party polices become vague enough to shift with voter opinion compared to a more gradual shift under PR where cooperation between parties is necessary and commonplace (Milner, 2010, pp. 142-147). Bastedo (2014) calls this recent shift towards consensus "retail politics", and argues that segmenting the electorate into niche groups is likely contributing to the turnout decline among youth (as they are frequently absent from substantive political discussion) which highlights a problem for the long-term health of Canadian democracy.

During the 2015 federal election, the Liberal, NDP and Green parties all expressed in their platforms that Canada needs to look seriously at democratic reform, finding a suitable

replacement for our current SMP system. Justin Trudeau during his campaign even announced that 2015 would be the last election run under First-Past-The-Post. Following his election, he abandoned/broke that promise, to the ire of many academics, democratic reform activists and others.

People, especially the disengaged are more likely to vote if barriers are removed and the process is easy, clear and efficient (Elections Canada, 2011; Samara Canada, 2015). Knowing when and where to vote, being informed about what identification requirements, and having a polling station that is easily accessible can all contribute to increased turnout and are part of Elections Canada's mandate as the public agency responsible for administering federal elections. Elections Canada has also played an influential role in informing youth about the importance of voting as well as conducting a number of initiatives and partnerships to boost youth electoral participation. Until recently, Elections Canada was able to perform these tasks "without political backlash […] because it is manifestly nonpartisan" (Milner, 2010, p. 124), additionally voting is a right of citizenship, so reaching out to marginalized groups should not be controversial. However, recent changes to the *Canada Elections Act* have made executing many of these initiatives impossible.

Changes to the Canada Elections Act

The *Canada Elections Act* underwent an extensive list of major amendments under the former Conservative government's Bill C-23 (dubbed the Fair Elections Act) which received Royal Assent on June 19, 2014. Some of the amendments deal directly with public education and information and youth engagement initiatives, but the bill also brought in new ID requirements for voting, and modifies election expense and investigative rules, directly effecting voter

eligibility and how parties and candidates communicate with the electorate. An excerpt regarding communications with voters from the legislative summary of the *Canada Elections Act* states:

> Clause 18 allows the Chief Electoral Officer to implement public education and information programs to make the electoral process better known to the public, particularly those persons and groups most likely to experience difficulties in exercising their democratic rights. It also allows the use of the media and other means of communication to provide the public, both inside and outside Canada, with information relating to Canada's electoral process, the democratic right to vote, and how to be a candidate. Such programs are particularly important in light of the development of the permanent voters' list, and in order to reach marginalized groups. The clause allows flexibility in accessing modern communications and media such as the Internet. (Parliament of Canada, 2015)

Amendments made under the *Fair Elections Act* have limited public education and information campaigns to primary and secondary students, so initiatives like Student Vote, a parallel election that introduces over 500,000 under voting age students to the democratic process (Student Vote, 2015), will remain. However, the bill removed any mention of making the electoral process better known to "marginalized groups" and informing people "likely to experience difficulties in exercising their democratic rights" and about their democratic right to vote. This means that Elections Canada's "get out the vote" initiatives at post-secondary institutions (and elsewhere) for example are no longer permitted, even though youth, the cohort least likely to vote, are highly concentrated at these institutions. An excerpt from the *Fair Elections Act* explains that advertising messages and communications with electors are to be limited to five topics:

(a) how to become a candidate;

(b) how an elector may have their name added to a list of electors and may have corrections made to information respecting the elector on the list;

(c) how an elector may vote under section 127 and the times, dates and locations for voting;

(d) how an elector may establish their identity and residence in order to vote, including the pieces of identification that they may use to that end; and

(e) the measures for assisting electors with a disability to access a polling station or advance polling station or to mark a ballot. (Parliament of Canada, 2015)

During a persistent period of declining youth voter turnout, these amendments and many others in the act received much criticism. In response to the clause above, over 160 Canadian and International scholars signed an open letter to the Conservative government expressing that the clause will severely limit the Chief Electoral Officer's (CEO) communications with the public, "thereby preventing the CEO from encouraging voting and civic participation, and publishing research reports" (Globe and Mail, 2014). Marc Mayrand, the CEO of Elections Canada, told the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) that the clause would limit his ability to speak about democracy and that he is "not aware of any electoral bodies around the world who can not talk about democracy" (CBC News, 2014). One day after introducing the bill to the House of Commons, Pierre Poilievre the Minister for Democratic Reform, told the House of Commons that "Political candidates who are aspiring for office are far better at inspiring voters to get out and cast their ballot than are government bureaucracies," (CBC News, 2014). Mayrand took issue with that statement arguing that:

> "Nobody owns [voter] turnout. I think it requires a collective, collaborative approach of the whole society… If [voter] turnout continues to decline at the pace it has been declining over the last 40 years… we'll have questions about the legitimacy of our government and how representative they are" (CBC News, 2014)

In their open letter to the government, the academics argued that the bill was being rushed into law and that the government was using its majority to cut off debate and discussion, which when regarding electoral law, always involves consultation with Elections Canada, opposition parties, citizens, and the international community (Globe and Mail, 2014). Indeed, it was within the span of just over four months that the bill went from its introduction in the House of Commons to receiving Royal Assent on June 19, 2014.

The government denied opposition requests for consultations across the country and limited the bill to committee hearings in Ottawa. Following Senate readings, amendments were recommended but many didn't go far enough for opposition parties and other critics. Aside from Student Vote, Elections Canada was not allowed (outside the primary and secondary levels) to engage in public outreach to encourage voting during the 2015 election. In response to the amendments another open letter was sent to the government, this time by 465 academics, in which they refer to Conservative Senator Linda Frum who suggested to Mayrand that Elections Canada is in a "conflict of interest" when it comes to seeing turnout number increase (CBC News, 2014). The academics claim that Frum's position is "…unjustified in both fact and logic" and that "Public outreach that encourages all citizens to vote – not just those who support one party or another – is central to the mandate of electoral commissions worldwide, such as those in Australia, India, and New Zealand." (Globe and Mail, 2014). Regardless of opposition, the clause does not allow Elections Canada to reach out to youth or other marginalized groups to

encourage voter turnout, so that responsibility is now left to NGO's like Samara Canada, Apathy is Boring and others, and as Minister Poilievre suggested "political candidates", although, as outlined, those under 30 years old are the least likely to be contacted (only 45%) by politicians (Samara Canada, 2015).

Changes to ID requirements and rules on vouching at polling stations were another major point of contention with Bill-C23. Before voter identification rules were brought in by the Conservatives in 2007, voters who were on the registered voters list did not need to show identification when they voted (CBC News, 2014). As part of a pilot program, Elections Canada allowed voters to use the Voter Information Card (VIC) they receive in the mail as a proof of identity and address, as the VIC is only distributed to registered voters (CBC News, 2014). Proving your address can be difficult for people without a driver's license and a driver's license does not always reflect your current address, so in 2011over 400,000 voters living on native reserves, in long term care facilities and post-secondary students living away from home took advantage of this pilot program and used the VIC as a proof of address. This prompted Elections Canada to recommend the VIC being used for all voters starting in 2015 (CBC News, 2014). Additionally, if a voter did not have a VIC card or the proper identification to vote (around 120,000 voters in 2011), they could be "vouched" for by another voter in the same polling area so they could still receive a ballot (Globe and Mail, 2014).

Bill-C23 eliminated the VIC as proof of address and vouching for another elector as proof of identity (Parliament of Canada, 2014). Critics like Canada's former auditor general Sheila Fraser, former and current CEOs Jean-Pierre Kingsley and Marc Mayrand, former BC CEO Harry Neufeld, and hundreds of academics had claimed this would disenfranchise hundreds of thousands of voters if both the VIC and vouching were eliminated (CBC, 2014; Globe and

Mail, 2014). Rather than vouching the bill was amended to allow a form of "attestation". Voters without ID indicating their address will be allowed to vote if they bring two pieces of ID to the polling station and have another voter who knows them personally attest to their address, provided that the attesting voter proves their address, has not been attested to by someone else, and only attests to the residence of one person (Parliament of Canada, 2014).

Harry Neufeld, whose report was cited as one of the justifications for the new ID requirements, claims that attestation, while not perfect, does make it easier for some of the people who would have difficulty voting in the 2015 federal election. However, Neufeld told CBC News that "This certainly doesn't make it easier to vote. This makes it more difficult to vote and, I think, it will effectively drive down the voting turnout numbers… I think legally they're not disenfranchised, but administratively they effectively are." (CBC News, 2014)

Academics warned in their open letter to the government that the voter ID provisions of the Fair Elections Act could be open to Charter of Rights challenges in the courts. In fact, the bill was challenged in the in the Ontario Superior Court by the Canadian Federation of Students and the Council of Canadians, who argued that it is a form of voter suppression. Justice David Stinson claimed that "There is a risk that some voters who would otherwise rely on the Voter Information Card to enable them to vote will be unable to do so … which would result in irreparable harm due to their inability to exercise their right to vote in that fashion." (CBC News, 2014). However, in his ruling, he claimed that an injunction shouldn't be granted without a full hearing on the merits of the voter ID requirements, which all parties agreed, could not be accomplished before the election (CBC News, 2014).

Finally, Bill-C23 made sweeping changes to election financing laws allowing for a dramatic increase in the amount political parties can spend during an election. Campaign

expenses were formerly capped at $25 million for each political party, regardless of the length of a campaign (Toronto Star, 2015). In Canada, an election period must be a minimum of 37 days; however, there are no limits on the maximum length of an election period. The new provisions allow for spending to increase by 1/37th or $675,000 for every day exceeding the 37-day minimum, which for the 11-week campaign in 2015 (the longest in modern Canadian history) allowed parties to spend more than $50 million each (Toronto Star, 2015). For a national campaign, parties are reimbursed by taxpayers for up to 50% of what they spend, and local candidates are reimbursed up to 60%, which in 2011 combined totaled more than $60 million (Toronto Star, 2015). Local candidates must submit spending receipts to be eligible to receive reimbursement. However, although it was requested by CEO Marc Mayrand, Federal parties are not required to submit spending receipts to receive reimbursement for national campaign expenses (CBC News, 2014), which creates accountability issues. These increases to electoral spending limits combined with the rebates parties receive benefit the Conservative party the most, as they tend to raise more money than the other parties. While financial statements for the 2015 election are not yet known, the Conservatives reported $20.1 million in contributions by the end of 2014 compared to the Liberals at $15 million and the NDP at $9.5 million (Elections Canada, 2015). However, according to The Canadian Press, the Conservative riding associations had a total of $19 million more than the Liberals ($8 million), NDP ($4.4 million), Greens (1.2 $million), and Bloc ($410,000) combined (CBC News, 2014).

Following his election, Justin Trudeau scraped some parts of Bill C-23 and introduced the "Elections Modernization Act" (Bill-76). Most notably, restoring Elections Canada's communication mandate and removing limits on target audiences, setting limits for elections periods of no more than 51 days, and introducing a Register of Future Electors in which

Canadians aged 14-17 may consent to be included (Elections Canada, 2019), so come the age of majority, they are already added to the list of electors. The Canada Elections Act was amended to reflect some of the changes on January 19, 2019, coming into full force on June 13, 2019. It's important to mention these changes to legislation, because while the Canada Elections Act has been modified, all of the youth who took part in this study voted under the previous amendments of the Fair Elections Act (Bill C-23).

Political Advertising

Political advertising is not a new phenomenon, and it is used overwhelmingly both during and outside of election campaigns to inform and persuade voters. Government advertising can be sponsored by the government in power to inform the electorate about programs and services available to them, and political or election advertising is used by aspiring political parties to create a narrative of the party and its leader, or their opponent's, in order to persuade voters.

Government advertising has received criticism, many accused Stephen Harper's Conservative government of using taxpayer funded advertising to promote partisan propaganda, such as Canadian forces recruitment, Canada's economic action plan and the War of 1812 campaign (Small, Giasson, & Marland, 2014). While the Liberal Party was plagued for over a decade by its famous sponsorship scandal, which saw ad agencies affiliated with the Liberal Party obtaining public funds by submitting inflated or fake invoices that were paid for by the Liberal government of the time (Small et al., 2014). While transparency and advertising rules have been improving, there is still no federal advertising review board to ensure the suitability of federal government advertising. Previously, in Ontario for example, the Auditor General had the power to determine whether or not government ads were suitable to be aired (Auditor General of Ontario, 2020). However, the previous Liberal provincial government of Kathleen Wynne

stripped the Auditor General of that power, and since the election of Doug Ford's PCs in June 2018, we have seen a return to partisan-government funded ads in Ontario, specifically ads targeted at the federal government's "price on carbon/carbon tax" (even how you say it gets political). Additionally, the *Canadian Code of Advertising Standards* excludes political and election advertising, as the Code is not intended to "govern or restrict the free expression of public opinion or ideas" emanating from these type of ads, (Advertising Standards Canada, 2020).

Political and election advertising sponsored by political parties can be positive or negative. Negative ads, commonly referred to as attack ads, can be subdivided into two subcategories: issue-based, which focus on a candidate's stances on important issues or policies, and image or character-based, which focus on the trustworthiness, integrity and other personal qualities of a candidate (Dardis, Shen & Edwards, 2008, p. 27). Some researchers highlight comparative ads (also known as contrast or mixed) as a third type, which combine both positive and negative information to criticize and contrast an opponent (Daignault, 2014). This study will focus specifically on attack ads. Which, according to Daignault (2014), have exposed citizens to powerful and occasionally misleading campaign strategies in a largely unregulated environment.

Political Attack Ads

Attack ads are a prominent staple in American political campaigns. Their encroachment into Canadian politics, though not a new phenomenon, has some scholars suggesting that this negative style of campaigning has become more widespread (Daignault, 2014); especially given the vastly different media and communication landscape that we face from even a decade ago. Nesbitt-Larking (2009) argue that although English Canadian political culture shares a language with its American counterparts, attack ads do not hold a central role like in the U.S. and that

Canadians are more resistant to the "glibness and superficial slickness" of this "American-style" campaigning (p. 11). Additionally, Nesbitt-Larking (2009) claims that Canadian political ads are more party-centered and are normally contrastive and substantive as opposed to personally vindictive and mean-spirited, although some exceptions are highlighted, such as the 1993 Conservative attack ad targeting Jean Chrétien's facial paralysis (Small, Giasson & Marland, 2014; Nesbitt-Larking, 2009). However, in the most recent decade there are many examples of personality/character-based attack ads, and the strategy is still utilized in campaigns at both the federal and provincial levels.

Before and during the federal elections of 2008, 2011 and 2015, the Conservatives continued their attempts to define Liberal leaders both during and outside of campaigns, before they had a chance or ability to do so themselves. Their considerable fundraising, combined with unrestricted spending limits on advertising during the pre-writ period, had made doing so quite easy for the Conservatives, and some would argue, quite effective.

Former Liberal leaders Stephane Dion and Michael Ignatieff were targets of a series of attack ads both before and after the writ had dropped. Dion was relentlessly painted most noticeably as "not a leader" and Ignatieff was portrayed as "just visiting/not in it for you", among other jabs (Taras, 2015). Nesbitt-Larking (2009) defined this as "a new American-style campaign strategy on the part of the Harper Conservatives" (p. 12), which was also evident in 2015, where the Conservatives attempted to paint Liberal leader Justin Trudeau as inexperienced, immature and, as the attack ads put it, "just not ready" to be Prime Minister (Appendix 5). Like those targeting Dion and Ignatieff, the Trudeau ad, titled "the interview" was primarily character based, referring to Justin Trudeau exclusively by his first name, highlighting that he was not

ready to be Prime Minister and closing with one actor uttering the line "nice hair though", which became a soundbite during the campaign.

Attack ads that feature on television in the modern day are intended for an audience that transcends the traditional television medium. As the audience becomes more fragmented, the media is evolving into more of a "hybrid media system" (Chadwick, 2013), blending traditional and new media, especially during political campaigns. It is important to evaluate attack ads in the current media environment.

Old Tactics in a New Media Environment

Attack ads, and political ads more generally are now packaged for multiple formats of communication media. Due to the fast-paced nature of political campaigns "Television ads are… now just as much a part of the rapid-reaction, real-time campaign as e-mail, blogs, and social network updates" (Chadwick, 2013, p. 8). As cable subscriptions have been on the decline, ads packaged for TV are still used traditionally, but in alternative and adaptive ways for a new media environment. For example, "Television and radio advertising are still perceived by campaign insiders as more effective than any other medium for persuading voters" [and] have become more, not less, valuable for campaigns as the broadcasting system has evolved (Chadwick, 2013, p. 8).

Campaigns will now make specific, targeted ads called "press ads". These are ads not intended for TV but for YouTube, campaign websites and supporting/temporary microsites (Chadwick, 2013). This is partly done to avoid paying for large ad buys, in the goal of attracting free coverage. According to Anita Dun, senior press officer to Barrack Obama's 2008 campaign "… made-for-television ads were less likely to be covered by reporters than the sensational ones uploaded to the web and sent to news studios" (Chadwick, 2013, p.10). We can see this play out

in Canada as well, where some political ads are edited or re-packaged to be broadcasted over radio, TV, online or more partisan politician's social media accounts.

Television remains a powerful campaign medium because of its importance for reaching audiences in an increasingly fragmented media market, but also because technologies, genres, norms/behaviours and organizational characteristics are becoming hybridized with those on the internet. In the hybrid media system, campaign commercials are increasingly part of a circulation, repurposing, and mobilization circuit: made-for-television ads feature on YouTube, and other sites and vice versa. This allows political parties to save money, as opposed to spending on ad buys that may or may not generate traction. Campaigns cost a lot of money, so free media coverage is always highly sought after.

There is debate surrounding the use and significance of attack ads and whether or not they contribute positively, negatively or at all, to campaign outcomes and more importantly, if they have any influence on political engagement amongst the electorate.

Influence of Attack Ads

Campaigns use traditional media and supplement it with an online presence, giving them direct connection to the public (Taras, 2015), without the news media scrutinizing their message. However, this can also backfire as the perceptions of the audience cannot always be accurately assumed. In the U.S. Republican political strategists have been known to use attack ads to discourage middle-of-the-road or undecided voters from going to the polls, as more ideologically committed voters, like their supporters, will vote anyway (Taras, 2015/2020). There is little work from a communication perspective exploring impact of TV ads outside the U.S. (Daignault, 2014, Taras, 2020). Given, youth are largely unaffiliated with political parties it's important to understand Canadian youth perceptions of attack ads to determine if this style of campaigning

could discourage youth from casting their ballots. This is considered a form of voter-suppression, and goes against any efforts at increasing voter engagement and turnout. A more direct example of voter suppression in the Canadian context would be the Conservative robocall scandal of the 2011 federal election.

Negative Affects

For adolescents (not voting age), Wang, Gabay and Shah claim attack ads were found to provide more "human-interest" info rather than substantive, policy-relevant knowledge about candidates (2012). While advertisements can be a source of information, attack ads are seen as lacking substantive knowledge gains (Daignault, 2014; Remillard, Bertrand & Fisher, 2020; Wang et al. 2012). Attack ads are often too short to contextualize information, and often present inaccurate or misleading information to voters (Daignault, 2014; Rose, 2012), which risks presenting voters with information that lacks the quality to make an informed decision.

Negativity however elicits intense reactions, more so than positivity, which is why attack ads rely so heavily on emotional cues and superficial tactics to convey their intended message. As Bittner (2013) suggests, "generally speaking, even when they have more information, voters will continue to use stereotypes and shortcuts in order to formulate impressions and opinions" (pp. 258-259). Overall, the general consensus is that attack ads do not particularly serve to benefit an engaged democracy. An analysis of previous research would also suggest that attack ads do not serve to benefit youth participation in the public sphere (Remillard et al, 2020; Taras, 2020).

Theoretical Perspective

Public Sphere

Canadian youth political engagement can be adequately viewed through the theoretical lens of the public sphere, as the public sphere (abstractly) requires participation to be considered legitimate, and is supposed to be a sphere to express opinions about matters of the general interest. The theoretical concept of the public sphere requires a conceptualization for the context of this study. Youth are a marginalized cohort of the voting population in Canada. Therefore, it's important to understand some of the critiques of the traditional public sphere, to better understand how the theory can be useful when applied to youth engagement and politics.

Habermas, Lennox & Lennox (1964) referred to the public sphere as "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed" (p. 49). Habermas et al. (1964) explain that all citizens are guaranteed access to the public sphere and that a portion of the public sphere exists in any conversation in which private individuals assemble unrestrictedly (with a guarantee of freedom of assembly and association) to form a "public body" for the purpose of expressing their opinions about matters of "general interest" (p. 49). However, the public sphere is not to be confused with "the public" (i.e. individuals that assemble) or a crowd, but instead as an institution which "only assumes concrete form through the participation of people" (Habermas et al., 1964, p. 49). Habermas et al. (1964) argue that the public sphere operates separately from the state as a sphere of non-governmental opinion making. The original conceptualization of the public sphere was critiqued for being too exclusive, to the expense of woman, minorities and marginalized populations.

Rethinking the Public Sphere

Fraser (1990) suggests that Habermas's original conceptualization of the public sphere fails to consider social inequalities and subordinated groups arguing that the public sphere needs to be looked at more as a "plurality or competing publics" (p.66). Fraser argues that one all-encompassing public sphere is not realistic and leads to the "bracketing" of differences and diversity in society. Dahlgren (2009) also claims that "the goal of ushering all citizens into one unitary public sphere, with mostly one set of communicative and cultural traditions is mostly rejected on the grounds of pluralism and difference" (p.163). This is true in a society like Canada's, where multi-culturalism and diversity are celebrated as a fundamental aspect of society. We also have to consider the rapid development of the internet, which has changed the way our society communicates and how citizens interact with one-another.

Papacharissi (2009) refers to the internet as more of a collection of "commercially public spaces" than a public sphere, wherein citizens engage in healthy democratic practices that differ from the public sphere of the past but "may present a more accurate reflection of contemporary post-modern public needs and wants" (p.243). One problem with assuming the internet can act as a sole public sphere is accessibility issues. Dahlgren (2009) refers to this as "the digital divide" (p. 174), which refers to the social inequality with regards to internet access. Not everyone has access to, or the skills to use the internet. In terms of social media, MacNamara (2012) claims "discussion of politics rarely meets the criteria of the deliberative public sphere and does not conform to the tone and form of traditional institutionalized political participation" (p. 75).

Most youth have internet access and social media accounts, but that does not mean that they will utilize them for political reasons. As mentioned, youth are not a homogeneous group and social media can encourage people to join forums and sites that share their interests.

Therefore Dahlgren (2009) claims "a myriad of counter-pubic spheres can easily lose sight of the larger issues of power in society and the world, fostering an inwardly oriented fixation on the individual groups' interests" (Dahlgren, 2009, p.164). This is also referred to as "cyberbalkanization – confined communication with people who share precisely our interests (p. 177). With the election of Donald Trump, and the rise of populism and fake news across the western world, there are many other obstacles to fostering a unitary public sphere on the internet/social media. It's through this theoretical lens of a "cyberbalkanized" public sphere that the study seeks to answer the following central research question.

Research Questions

Central RQ**:**

How do Canadian undergraduate students perceive national political attack ads and what do they see as the implications for the electoral process?

- SQ1: What themes stand out to youth when viewing political attack ads?
- SQ2: How do youth perceive the claims made by and the style of attack ads?
- SQ3: Where do youth view and discuss attack ads and politics in general?
- SQ4: How are attack ads perceived in regards to encouraging youth engagement with the democratic process?

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

This chapter will outline the research methodology used to develop this study as well as the justification for choosing this particular method in regards to answering the central research question.

This qualitative study employed the use of four semi-structured focus group interviews with Canadian Youth. For the purpose of this study, Canadian youth refers to 18-24-year-old undergraduate students at the University of Ottawa, also Canada's youngest voting cohort as defined by Elections Canada. Participants screened three attack ads from the 2015 federal election and were asked to contribute to a discussion about their perceptions of this style of political communication, but also what they perceive to be the implications of this style of campaigning on youth engagement and the broader electoral process.

Participants viewed three attack ads from the 2015 Canadian federal election. The ads were produced by the Conservative Party of Canada and were all released at different times before and during the campaign period. The main target is Justin Trudeau and the strategy used is similar to past Elections where the Conservatives tried early to frame their opponents (Stephan Dion & Michael Ignatieff) before they got a chance to do so themselves. These ads were chosen because participants taking part in the study would likely have seen or heard of them before as they were eligible to vote in the 2015 federal election, and even if they had not, they would be familiar with the context of the most recent election. Additionally, this has been a well-known strategy employed by the Conservative Party over the last three election cycles, the Conservatives traditionally spend the most during an election cycle on advertising, and the other parties did not produce a coherent set of attack ads that evolved throughout the campaign, framing an opponent consistently in similar fashion. The ads screened were as follows:

- "Marijuana"- a short ad released after Justin Trudeau became leader of the Liberal Party along with two others that were packaged for radio, online and TV formats.
- "The Interview"- a full length ad released during the 2015 campaign, the most well-known and widely aired of the three.
- "Economically clueless"- a full length ad released just under two weeks before election day. (Appendix 5)

Participants were asked to contribute to a discussion about the content of the ads, but also, what they perceived to be the implications of this style of political communication on the electoral process and whether or not they believe attack ads can contribute to engaging youth politically.

Previous work on attack ads has looked mostly at the American political context, and also their level of effectiveness in persuading the electorate. In terms of the latter, results have been mixed/ambiguous, and largely dependent on the knowledge, partisan affiliation, and candidate sponsoring the ad.

This study does not attempt to evaluate the ability of attack ads to persuade Canadian youth. Rather, this study is focused on understanding youth perceptions of this style of campaigning and its implications for their cohort within a broader Canadian political context. While the findings of this study cannot be applied to youth as a whole, given the diverse nature of the age group; this thesis seeks to contribute to past research, with the goal of contributing new insights into one sub-group of the youth population with varying levels of political engagement.

Rationale

Of the various group interview methods, the focus group is unquestionably the most popular, has been used in the social sciences for decades, and has established itself as a standalone method (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Focus groups bring people together who have "social status or attributes in common" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 111) and are a "useful social laboratory for studying the diversity of opinion on a topic, the collaborative process of meaning construction, and the cultural performance of communication" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 183). Besides brands and retail products, pollsters and marketers often rely on focus groups to gauge people's political beliefs or their responses to media messages (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 182-183). Some benefits of using focus groups are that they can gather many people's viewpoints in a relatively quick amount of time, and they take advantage of the "group effect", where people draw upon shared experiences which can lead to a "chaining" or "cascading" effect in which each participant's conversation links to or comes from a previous statement. This is something that rarely comes from a one-on-one interview (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 183).

Challenges to focus groups include group think, where everyone tends to just agree with one another, which stifles conversation. Interruptions and talking over one another are significant challenges when it's time to transcribe the data. Lindloff & Taylor (2011) claim it's the role of the moderator to manage interruptions, to encourage people to speak one at a time, and to keep people on topic by developing diversity of questions. Given how much content is in an attack ad, participants were asked a range of questions (Appendix 3) to keep them engaged and a focus group guide was used to direct the conversation if things went off topic and to keep the conversation flowing.

As the object of study, attack ads are a pervasive form of media used during but also outside of election campaign periods, whether featured in expensive targeted television spots, or more permanently in the online world via political party YouTube channels, sponsored websites (e.g. justinoverhishead.ca), and elsewhere. In order to capture as much data on youth perceptions as possible, a collection of diverse focus groups with youth of varying levels of self-reported political engagement was considered the most effective method of gathering data.

Sampling and Recruitment:

As the youngest voting cohort, Elections Canada identifies youth as being 18-24 years old. As expressed in the section on Canadian youth, this is a very diverse cohort and some sub-groups are harder to reach than others. However, the majority of this age group either were or are currently enrolled in some form of post-secondary education. Therefore, due to time and financial constraints, as well as the depth of a master's thesis, the participants selected for this study were Canadian citizens who are also undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 24 and enrolled at the University of Ottawa.

Convenience sampling was used as a method of recruitment. This study took place during the month of June, or the spring/summer semester, when the student population was not at full capacity. To overcome this potential barrier, the researcher conducted brief lecture hall presentations to students in a number of faculties and programs. Professors were contacted and allowed the researcher to present his project for potential participants. Students would then pass around sign-up sheets which contained their name, phone number and university email address so they could be contacted to participate.

This was an appropriate recruitment method as this setting provided large numbers of potential recruits from the cohort being studied in a readily available environment. However, as

mentioned in the section on Canadian youth, non-voters, or those generally more disengaged from politics, are often underrepresented in surveys and studies on engagement.

Therefore, snowball sampling was utilized only when a participant was identified as less "politically attentive" based on the answers provided on their pre-screening survey, or when they indicated that they knew of someone who was politically inattentive that would be willing to participate in the study. Snowballing is appropriate in this context as "it is sometimes the best way to reach an elusive, hard-to-recruit population" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 114).

In the case that convenience and snowball sampling were not yielding satisfactory numbers of participants; the University of Ottawa's Integrated System of Participation Research (ISPR), which rewards students credits based on research participation, was also utilized. Unfortunately, only two participants recruited through ISPR agreed to participate, and both did not attend the focus group they were scheduled for. However, these participants were scheduled for the fourth focus group, by which point, the researcher was comfortable data saturation had been attained.

Data Collection:

To better understand youth perceptions of attack ads and previous levels of engagement, participants were required to complete a brief pre-screening survey (Appendix 2). This pre-screening survey contained basic questions of age, gender, and program/year of study as well as more detailed questions regarding political affiliation (if any), political attentiveness, and whether or not the person voted in the 2015 federal election held on October 19, 2015. The purpose of the pre-screening survey was to ensure the focus groups were as heterogeneous as possible, to encourage different opinions to emerge, and to refer back to when analyzing the data

to understand the background and context of each participant's statements, though these are not highlighted in the results/discussion.

Prior to the study, participants signed in as they arrived and completed consent and confidentiality forms. In total four 60-90-minute-long focus groups were conducted, with an average of five participants per group. The final group, as mentioned had two no-shows, so it contained three participants. After a final reading of the consent form and a brief overview about how the study would unfold the attack ads were screened. A full focus group guide can be found in Appendix 3. Attack ads are brief and loaded with information, emotional cues, sound bites and images; therefore, to ensure full comprehension of the material, each ad was screened three times. Following the ad screenings, a semi-structured 60-90-minute focus group discussion took place. The focus groups were video-recorded to ensure that participants' comments were transcribed accurately, and to accurately tell who was speaking.

Data Analysis

Following the focus groups, video recordings were transcribed manually by the researcher and pre-coded as the transcription process unfolded. The transcripts were then read over a second time and analyzed collectively where common themes began to emerge. Coding required organizing key words or statements made by participants and separating them into common themes to note emerging findings (Creswell, 2014). Three main themes emerged from the research and one notable outlier. The findings were then analyzed with previous research from the literature review with the goal of answering the central research question.

Ethical Considerations

This study obtained clearance from the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board prior to recruitment of participants and commencement of the focus groups (Appendix 4).

Participants signed a consent form (Appendix 1) prior to participation which indicated protections for their confidentiality/anonymity. Therefore, throughout the results section, direct quotes taken from focus group transcripts have been given a unique identifier, which simply indicates which focus group the participant took part in, and which page of the transcript the quote was mentioned. For example, direct quotes from the focus groups will be followed with a citation in the following format: (FG#, p. #). Outside of the small focus group setting, this ensures complete confidentiality/anonymity for the participants who took part in the study.

Limitations

Limitations of the study included the size and scope, which couldn't allow for a broader representation of Canadian youth from outside the university sample size. The researcher was solely responsible for every aspect of this study, including manual transcription of recorded focus group discussions. In its original conception, the study would have run 6 focus groups with varying subgroups of the youth cohort. However, without research assistants, the study had to be limited to 4 focus groups. This meant that data saturation was reached mainly by the end of the third focus group.

Chapter 4: Results & Analysis

This section will begin by presenting general results and findings from the four focus groups. The three main themes that emerged from the study will be presented with direct quotes from participants to highlight these themes, and an analysis of how these findings help answer the central research question of the study, and relate to previous research on the subjects discussed. Finally, explanations for some surprising findings will be discussed, followed by a brief reflection on the research design and methodology chosen.

Results/Findings

Every participant that took part in this study was required to complete a pre-screening survey (Appendix 2) developed by the researcher before taking part in a focus group. This allowed the researcher to ensure that the groups were as diverse a reflection of the undergraduate student population as possible, and to determine a level of prior political engagement (if any) so the groups were not full of "political dropouts" (Milner, 2010) or highly engaged political activists. There were no exclusion criteria to participate, but given the size and scope of the study, there had to be as broad a representation of viewpoints as possible, to prevent both "group-think" as well as the risk that not enough usable data could be produced. After each focus group, hours of video were carefully transcribed into what amounted to be over 130 pages of raw textual data. The discussions provided anticipated, surprising and unique findings that contribute to a small but growing body of media studies research with a focus on political communication and youth engagement.

Most of the participants who took part in a focus group had seen, heard of, or watched a parody of at least one of the ads prior to taking part in the study. The ad that was most the most recognizable to the participants was Ad #2: "The Interview". This wasn't particularly surprising

given the level of exposure the ad got in both paid ad spots, media reports and parodies during the 2015 campaign. Of the participants who had reported seeing the ad prior to the study, most reported seeing it online (as an ad) either while watching videos on YouTube, or that they had been sent it by friends as a joke, or watched it in the form of satire/parody on shows such as "This Hour Has 22 Minutes". Television remained the second most reported source of viewership by only one participant, and radio listeners third. This underscores previous research that finds that "Television ads are... now just as much a part of the rapid-reaction, real-time campaign as e-mail, blogs, and social network updates" (Chadwick, 2013, p. 8). They also repackage well for a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013), that transcends beyond the reach of cable subscribers and incites strong emotional responses from viewers (Bitner, 2012; Chadwick, 2013; Cho, 2013; Daignault, 2014; Taras, 2015).

During the groups, the moderator had to occasionally remind participants not to talk over one another, and at other times was required to use a Focus Group Discussion Guide (Appendix 3), to get the conversation moving in another direction, to bring it back into focus, or to prompt discussion. Overall, participants were engaged during the discussions and offered far more data than could be presented in this section due to the size and scope of this study. However, except for some counter points that will be discussed, three main themes began to emerge during the groups and as the coding and data analysis process ended.

Themes

- Theme One: Attack Ads an Offensive/Misleading Communication Tactic

  Participants cited misleading or inaccurate statements in all three of the ads screened. Many also considered attacks on Trudeau's appearance/looks to be offensive and

mentioned that those attacks also failed to provide any information that would help them decide at election time.

- Theme Two: Political Discussion Lacks Relevance/Inclusion of Youth

  As previous research has shown, youth mentioned that the ads lacked relevance to issues at the forefront of their minds. Many participants commented that never hearing issues relevant to them makes them feel excluded from the conversation, as if their opinions have no value to politicians.

- Theme Three: Concerns for Youth Engagement

  Participants mentioned that outside of the focus groups, they would not watch attack ads some went as far to say that if an attack ad came on TV they would change the channel or mute the volume, signalling more of an annoyance than an engagement. Participants also noted it was easy to see how this style of campaigning could turn youth away from engaging all together.

To highlight the three main themes that emerged from the data, the discussion section will be organized by theme. Each section will highlight the theme that emerged from the focus groups, by using direct quotes from transcripts, addressing connections to the literature review, and contributing to answering the central research question (and sub research questions) of the study:

How do Canadian undergraduate students perceive national political attack ads and what do they see as the implications for the electoral process?

SQ1: What themes stand out to youth when viewing political attack ads?

SQ2: How do youth perceive the claims made by, and the style of attack ads?

SQ3: Where do youth view and discuss attack ads, and politics in general?

SQ4: How are attack ads perceived in regards to encouraging youth engagement with the democratic process?

Discussion

Theme One: Attack Ads an Offensive/Misleading Commination Tactic

Throughout the focus groups, participants noted that while the ads differed in style, they all shared common themes and claims. Participants in all groups repeatedly described the ads with words like: unsettling, ridiculous, condescending and fear (to name a few).

Below are some direct quotes from participants describing the overall themes, style and claims being made in the ads:

- "... the first one was very much like an attack ad, I guess on the person, that is Justin Trudeau, rather than policy" (FG3, p.3)
- "I think that probably, the pictures of Trudeau that they used, like he looks like some kind of greasy slimy guy... like his shirt was unbuttoned, you see his undershirt, his hair was longer and he had that stupid mustache, like he looked like a slime ball" (FG2, p. 6)
- "But right now, it's just the constant thing being mentioned [appearance], like his hair, that just belittles their argument, takes away, and makes it seem like they really don't have much to go on..." (FG3, p 17)
- "I noticed for the second one it was really based... they were really trying to take away his credibility by focusing on his image, especially just like getting back to the picture of him and talking about his appearance… which made it seem like they didn't really care about his policies, which is what they were talking about, so it was a really weird contrast." (FG1, p. 14)

- "They played on the emotions um I think that it may help people make a decision but it wouldn't be an informed decision" (FG4, p. 11)
- "In the first one it seemed like they were making fun of him but in the third one it seemed like this is a potentially dangerous situation, it was kind of dramatic" (FG2, p. 13)
- "I feel like their personality traits should not actually matter." (FG1, p. 24)

Each of the quotes above show the participants noticing the direct attacks on Justin Trudeau's appearance. As mentioned in the previous literature, this is because attack ads are designed to elicit intense reactions from the negative information and images imbedded within them (Bitner, 2012 Chadwick, 2013; Cho, 2013; Daignault, 2014; Taras, 2015). In fact, some scholars have even found that even when they have more information, voters will continue to use stereotypes and shortcuts in order to formulate impressions and opinions (Bitner 2013; Small, 2014; Taras; 2015). Even the participant in the second quote above (FG2, p. 6), describes how the first ad tries to make Justin Trudeau look like a "slimy guy" and that they succeed in making him look like a slime ball. Attack ads carry powerful messages, and combined with slick editing, a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013), and a largely unregulated environment, they can be a pervasive form of political communication.

Many participants, in addition to noting the focus on the target's (Trudeau) appearance, took notice of the absence of any real policy discussion or proposals:

- "...really why aren't they just highlighting the good things that their party is going to do?" [Participant responds]

  "Like I thought we were better than this?" (FG1, p. 22)
- "The second one [ad] felt very condescending, umm very much as... like... I don't want to sound like a stereotype but as very much the baby-boomer generation talking down to the

generations coming after them like 'these people have it too easy, they don't know how to run things, they don't know how to work for a living' that sort of whole tone being put onto him [Trudeau] And the third one felt very desperate, very much FEAR, you have to FEAR everything." (FG1, p.13)

- "To me it just sounded really condescending, like he was like a child, like I don't know, the woman talking who is like "does he even have a policy?..." you know what I mean?... I would rather, when I'm watching an ad, see why I should vote for you, not why I shouldn't vote for someone else, personally" (FG3, p. 5)

The participants appeared to perceive this as condescending, but they also seemed to back up research that shows youth want to hear about the issues that matter to them but just do not hear them from politicians reaching out to them, or about issues that seem to reflect their interests (Bastedo, 2014; Howe, 2010; Kruze et al., 2018; Lalancette & Cormack, 2020; Milner, 2010; Samara, 2014/2015). The intended message of these ads appears to have backfired with most of the participants in the study feeling more offended and turned off by the messages they received.

There was one notable counterpoint during the first focus group where a participant mentioned the value of talking about someone's character traits, but they too admitted that appearance and character play into multiple factors to weigh when evaluating a political leader:

- "I'd say, like, talking about someone's character traits umm really brings out kind of what you think they would decide morally or like their values, people lean - people are more likely, I think - to vote for politicians who have the same values and morals as them, because they think that their country will be led towards working towards those

values. So, I think highlighting character traits is important but it's not the only thing that's important. But it does add some weight." (FG1, p.23)

Attack ads are brief and packed with negative emotional cues, and because they are memorable, are broadcast over paid media, talked about by the mainstream media, and are repackaged and made into memes and satire/parody for a fragmented and diverse online audience across multiple social media platforms. However, they often present inaccurate or misleading information to voters, which risks presenting voters with information that lacks the quality to make an informed decision. As mentioned, many of the participants had seen at least one of these ads prior to the study, but aside from perceiving attack ads as offensive and misleading, they also speak to past research that suggests ads, but politicians more generally fail to speak to issues that matter to youth.

Theme Two: Political Discussion Lacks Relevance/Inclusion of Youth

A second major theme that emerged from the research was that youth do not feel included in political discussions, often feel talked down to as a cohort, and do not feel their opinions matter to politicians in general. This was highlighted effectively during a brief discussion in the third focus group, below are a few excepts from that conversation:

- "I don't know if I would say that was the strategy, I just kind of think, I do think they weren't aware of our age group, because like everyone said, our age group is the only one that wasn't addressed; we had old people, kids, 'working class people'…" (FG3, p.15)
- "I feel like we weren't mentioned in them, and they just didn't even care about our vote, is kind of the impression that I got. Having never seen these ads, I'm like 'well they obviously didn't care to find me anywhere so' (FG3, pp.17-18)

- "I feel like we aren't consulted on anything because they just don't care until we become older, and then our opinion matters." (FG3, p. 21)

As discussed in the literature review, this feeling of exclusion from the broader political discourse has been well documented in past focus groups (Bastedo, 2014), surveys (National Youth Survey, 2011; Elections Canada, 2019), reports by non-profits focused on youth engagement (Samara, 2014/2015), and even in Ontario during the most recent provincial election, which saw millennials become the largest voting cohort in that province for the first time (Toronto Star, 2018). It's not from a lack of interest that youth are excluded from the conversation, as it's well documented that they care about a number of progressive policies (McGrane, 2015), and are in many ways quite politically active, though maybe not in a traditional sense (Samara, 2014/2015).

On the issues, the youth participating in these focus groups seemed very aware of and willing to explain the difference between typical campaign issues, and their issues:

- "Yeah but it's not really not affecting that many Canadians [if Liberals cancelled income splitting], and it does suck for those [wealthy] Canadians but, they are making enough that like...they can get over it" (FG2, p. 9)
- "I understood what they were talking about, but I don't necessarily understand how the pension plan works right now, or child tax credits, and just by throwing out stuff like that, I would probably change the channel" (FG3, p.14-15)
- "I feel like a lot of them are not targeted towards young people? And so, all the seniors are going to go out and vote because they're talking about all these things, their pensions, healthcare, things that address them. But there's nothing specifically addressing youth. So, I think if the politicians came up with more policy ideas that interested youth, or even

mention them, then people might feel more engaged. I think that that's one thing that Trudeau tried to do um is he tried to address youth and I think that young people went out and voted for him." (FG4, p. 17)

- "… you see the Conservatives were doing a lot of mudslinging, [participant to left nods] and Trudeau kept it a little more clean, and I think people really appreciated that, because it showed that, because it made it seem like the conservatives were so focused on attacking their opponent, that they weren't really getting their platform out there. But Trudeau, really focused on like delivering his platform and like making sure that his message was heard. Rather than just focusing on the other. Which I think really, well clearly it worked for him" (FG1, p. 34)

It's was clear from the discussions that youth were tired of hearing the same old same during the election and that it was refreshing to hear some of the fairly progressive ideas coming from the Liberals at the time (e.g. democratic reform, legalization of marijuana, student jobs initiatives).

In the context of the Canadian political environment of the time it is also important to note that the governing party at the time (The Conservatives, led by Harper) had been in power for almost a decade by the 2015 election (the majority of these young voter's lives) following two minority governments and a majority. The 2015 election would be the fourth for the modern Conservative party and its leader since just 2006. Many youths reported hearing nothing new and exciting by the governing party, and felt lured by Trudeau's more positive messaging. Indeed, Trudeau and the Liberals were catapulted to a stunning majority on election night 2015, but after the initial optimism and promises came the realities of governing, and the Trudeau Liberals were reduced to a minority in 2019. The Liberal Party, which had relied on Trudeau's positive "Real Change" image, and a huge surge in the youth vote (and general turnout growth) to deliver its

historic third-place-to-first place victory in 2015, had four years of governing to answer for. Breaking promises, such as scrapping democratic reform and the purchase of a multi-billion-dollar oil pipeline that would run through sensitive environmental and indigenous territory, coupled with personal scandals of his own, including a vacation to the private island of a billionaire family friend and government lobbyist, and admitting to wearing blackface multiple times in his own youth, would become an issue for Trudeau and the Liberals in 2019. A reminder that the youth vote is hard to earn, but even harder to keep.

Theme Three: Concerns for Youth Engagement

As mentioned in the introduction, youth are not a homogenous group, which makes studying their levels of political engagement difficult. Even this study in its original conception wanted to contain focus groups of varying sub-groups of the youth population. The focus had to be narrowed to include the most accessible group of youth available, which happened to be undergraduate students at the University of Ottawa between the ages of 18-24 years old.

It's been found that of the youth population, university educated are the most likely to use social media and to keep up with and share political content online (Albaugh & Waddell, 2014; Small et al, 2014). However, unless they already self-reported being politically engaged they had little interest in engaging in politics online:

- "who follows like umm... I personally don't follow any political party on any social media..." (FG1, p. 22)
- "I follow Justin Trudeau, only because like, now he's Prime Minister, and I only followed him recently, you know just because he is our Prime Minister so I feel like more news about what's going to be going on is going to come out on his accounts, rather than the others. But before then I had absolutely no interest in following him." (FG1, p. 24)

Some, including those who reported having some degree of political engagement actively ensured that were only sharing political content privately online (via DM, private link, within a select group). Many participants claimed they talked to their friends about politics or share political content privately online, so as not to start an argument or get in a "comment war":

- "Yeah, I don't talk politics online or on social media or anything like that, but in person is fine" (FG3, p. 4)
    - "Yeah, I think it's the same for me, I don't...I'm not going to post anything online especially because you get in weird, angry fights online over a Facebook post, which I think is really dumb..." (FG3, p. 4)
- "I like to maintain a neutral online presence just in case I wanted to get a job in a non-partisan position and then also [gestures to participant to right] like you said I don't want to open up myself to all this online attacking. Like it's nice to have this debate with people you're comfortable with and you know but I don't really want to get yelled at by some random person online." (FG4, p. 4)

Some went beyond the opinions of strangers online as why not to engage politically, stating they maintained a politically neutral online for employment reasons:

- "I guess for the impression you're giving potential employers but also just peers that you don't necessarily know well; that definitely affects how people interact with you, we're students and whatnot. And you open up yourself to a lot of backlash as well and I don't find enjoyment in partaking in any of these online debates or anything so..." (FG4, p. 4)

Participants who mentioned not sharing their views online for fear of backlash from strangers or employers was surprising in some ways. During the groups participants were all very candid with each-other, many of whom were strangers to one-another, but replicate that

setting in an online environment and many would not have participated at all. This supports research that suggest the internet is not and has never been an ideal place for a functioning public sphere to foster (Dahlgren, 2009; Macnamara, 2012; Papacharissi, 2009; Taras, 2015). As a result of youth being such a diverse group, spending money online also does not guarantee that you will connect with your intended audience. Especially if that audience, at least in the Canadian youth political context, is increasingly, as Dahlgren puts it "cyberbalkanized" online, joining their own sub-groups and online communities and putting up "ad-blockers".

One participant highlighted one of the technical obstacles to reaching youth online:

- "we mentioned there's ad blocker and... we have made it very difficult for them to reach us, so I just don't know how. Are they going to put a blimp out in the sky? Cause that actually might be the most efficient because everyone will see it, you know? [joke- group laughs]" (FG3, p. 22)

While the participant is joking with others, the statement about political parties getting their message across with a "blimp in the sky" resonates. As mentioned, we live in a hybrid media system, where ads are often repackaged for multiple communication channels. This strategy works well at getting one message across to a wide audience (especially though the traditional TV spot), however, it loses its intended message when it goes online and becomes repurposed into memes, satire and parody. As political parties spend large amounts on campaigning online, they will have to abandon the one ad for everyone approach, or move towards a more engaging format to attract young voters.

Finally, it's important to discuss how attack ads could actually contribute to an already negative campaign environment, further marginalizing the youth population from an already fragile participation in democratic process:

- "They're just very off-putting [attack ads] and it's not something you want to engage in I think. So, if somebody isn't thinking a lot about politics and this is all they see, I think that they're just gunna tune out." (FG4, p. 14)
- "I think they just deter youth from like, seeing an attack ad like, yea it deters you from voting for the party that's being attacked but also to the party that's doing the attacking. So, yea if there's just (inaudible)... is it even worth it? Like it seems almost dishonourable… it's something I can't really see engaging youths very much, just more keeping them away. (FG2, p. 25)
- "I love attack ads because they're just great to watch but like it's a little bit scary because like… I feel like Trump got to where he is because of attack ads and how he manipulated the media. So, it's kind of scary that they're becoming a bigger thing in Canada. Like we don't know a Trump here, but there might be one, one day" (FG2, p. 20)

The first two quotes above highlight the view of attack ads as a deterrent to engaging youth or getting them to vote. The last quote mentions Trump, and his use of negativity to control the media in the U.S. leading up to, during, and following the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election. It's an important insight. During the 2016 presidential campaign, Trump ran a very negative campaign, perhaps the most negative in American history. While Hilary Clinton received the majority of the popular vote, Trump won the electoral college, and managed to win with 3 million less votes casted for him. While our political system is different than the U.S. there are similarities to the Canadian context. Had many of the voters that turned out to support Obama during his two election wins came out to support Clinton in similar numbers, she would have won the presidency. In Canada, had Trudeau managed to keep the voters he attracted (many of whom

were first time voters) in 2015, the Liberals might have fared better during the most recent federal election.

In the U.S. Republican political strategists have been known to use attack ads to discourage middle-of-the-road or undecided voters from going to the polls, as more ideologically committed voters, like their supporters, will vote anyway (Taras, 2015). Further research should look at the perceptions of youth voters who are in a less privileged position than their university educated counterparts, potentially looking at multiple sub-groups of the youth population to determine if attack ads can have a suppressive effect on voter turnout, or if this style of campaigning motivates voters to go to the polls.

This study has implications for the future of Canadian media studies and the long-term health of our democracy. In the beginning of the study I asked the central research:

How do Canadian undergraduate students perceive national political attack ads and what do they see as the implications for the electoral process?

It is clear, at least from this study, that youth do not give much value to attack ads as a form of political campaign messaging, and actually see their proliferation in Canadian campaigns as an obstacle to engaging youth. The vicious circle of youth not voting because politicians do not speak to them, and politicians not speaking to youth, because they do not vote, doesn't have to continue. It appears that youth are educated on the issues that matter to them and want to hear them addressed more by politicians. However, talk isn't enough. While voter turnout numbers saw a jump in 2015, they fell again in 2019, and youth have a big role to play for this drop. However, youth are leading some of the largest political movements in recent memory (e.g. environmental, indigenous, criminal justice), and if politicians can find a way to harness that passion into concrete policies involving consultation with youth, it could benefit youth

engagement in the short term and contribute to a more healthy and representative democracy in the long term. A democracy where the views of a chronically marginalized cohort do not fall out of relevance, and where a small minority of powerful voices cannot dominate the public sphere.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

During the focus group discussions and the data analysis procedure, it became clear that the majority of the participants viewed attack ads as a misleading form of political communication. As a result, this style of advertising doesn't appear to benefit youth engagement with the democratic process. Participants explained that political ads, and campaigns more generally, lack discussion around issues that matter to them and that this can lead to feelings of exclusion from political discourse. Participants also suggested that this style of campaigning could actually contribute to further disengagement amongst the youth population, especially those not interested in politics or those who have dropped out of the process all together.

These findings are important as they contribute to a small but growing body of research on the subject of youth engagement from a communication and media studies perspective (Bastedo, 2014; Milner 2010; Remillard et al, 2020). Participants overwhelmingly considered the ads screened to contain no informative value and they didn't agree with the negative attacks directed at superficial aspects of the target (Justin Trudeau). It's important to note that every participant was an undergraduate student, studying just blocks from Parliament Hill; and while a majority of Canadian youth attend a post-secondary institution and are more likely to be politically engaged, not all are. There does come a level of privilege that affords this sub-group access to politics that wouldn't be available to other groups of the youth population. That's perhaps why it was surprising to hear these participants mention feelings of exclusion and frustration, not just from attack ad messaging, but from the larger political conversation, from those who were and were not politically engaged. These findings highlight a level of youth marginalization from the public sphere that has important implications for the future representativeness and long-term sustainability of our democratic institutions.

The findings in this study have real world implications for politicians trying to connect with a group that is traditionally hard to reach. For example, youth that took part in this study, even those more politically engaged, do not like sharing political content online unless it's within close social circles. This ties back to Dahlgren's term "cyberbalkanization" when referring to fragmented online social networks. For strategists looking to create communications that interest, instead of turn away youth, the findings of this study echo and highlight that youth would prefer to hear solutions to issues from politicians, as opposed to mudslinging and attacks. The findings would also be useful to any non-profits dedicated to increasing youth engagement in politics, as there are anecdotes from participants regarding how to engage their demographic.

Due to the size and scope of the study, focus groups comprised of only undergraduate students at the University of Ottawa. Future research into campaign messaging and youth engagement should look at different subgroups of the youth population (e.g. high school, college, unemployed, working), and different regions of the country, outside the nation's capital. This would allow for a broader range of views from what is a diverse population of Canadian youth.

Attack ads would not be used if they didn't grab the attention of voters, and negativity caters to emotions to persuade. However, in the case of this study, it appears that attack ads not only provide misleading information, but may amplify negative ideas that youth already have of politics, acting as a form of suppression as opposed to motivation/persuasion. Millennials made up the largest voting cohort during the 2019 federal election, but they vote at far lower rates than their older counterparts. The trend of disengagement amongst the young is a threat to the very foundation of an informed, healthy, and functioning democracy. When the majority of youth do not turn out to vote, the interests of the entire cohort fall from relevance, as a minority of more powerful voices dominates the public sphere.

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Appendix 1 – Consent Form

Title of the study: Going on the Offensive: Attack Ads & Canadian Youth Engagement with & Perceptions of the Democratic Process

Primary Researcher:

Cody Reed
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Department of Communication
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Research Supervisor:

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613-562-5800, ext. 2728

Invitation to Participate: I am invited to participate in the abovementioned research study conducted by Cody Reed and supervised by Professor Patrick McCurdy.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to better understand how political attack ads affect Canadian youth (aged 18-24) perceptions of and engagement with the democratic process. The proposed thesis will research a largely unexplored area of media and communication research within Canada, which could have implications for the long-term health, legitimacy and representativeness of Canadian democracy.

Participation: My participation will consist of attending one focus group during which a series of attack ads will be screened multiple times to ensure full comprehension of the material. A semi-structured and video recorded focus group discussion will follow which should take no more than 60-90 minutes. The focus groups will take place in a conference/seminar room at the University of Ottawa between May 20 to June 15, 2016.

Risks: My participation in this study will entail that I volunteer my personal opinions about the subject of discussion. I have been informed by the researcher that my anonymity and confidentiality cannot be guaranteed during the study. However, to minimize these risks I, along with all other participants, have been invited to keep confidential what is shared during the focus group. Following the study, my anonymity and personal opinions will remain protected as only the researcher and the research supervisor will have access to any data gathered during the focus group, including the video recording. Identifiers will be used in the final report to protect my anonymity and confidentiality.

Benefits: My participation in this study will provide valuable insight into how Canadian undergraduate students (aged 18-24) perceive attack ads and whether or not this form of political communication is one contributing factor to youth disengagement with the Canadian electoral process and marginalization from political discourse.

Confidentiality and anonymity: I have been informed by the researcher that my anonymity and confidentiality cannot be assured during the study due to the nature of focus group discussions and the possibility of knowing others in my focus group. I understand that any quotes from the discussion will be used only for the purposes of the research and that my anonymity/confidentiality will be protected in the final report through the use of an abbreviation of the focus group I am participating in, followed by a number which will be assigned to me (e.g. FG1P1, FG2P2, FG2P1). Video and other digital data will be stored on a password protected portable hard drive and both digital and hard copy data will be kept in the Department of Communication's Graduate Students Office (room 11149) in a locked cabinet, only accessible (by key) to the primary researcher and research supervisor.

Anonymity: As indicated above, by taking part in a focus group discussion there is no way to ensure complete confidentiality/anonymity, as groups contain anywhere from 5-7 people and I could potentially be put into the same focus group as someone that I know. Additionally, during the focus groups a research assistant will be present for the purposes of note taking. This research assistant will have signed a confidentiality form prior to the commencement of the focus group and will not have access to any of the data collected following the focus group discussion (data collection). I, along with all other participants, have been invited to keep confidential what is shared during the focus group.

Conservation of data: The data collected, both digital and hard copy, including consent forms, videos, pre-screening surveys etc… will be stored on a password protected portable hard drive (digital) and both digital and hard copy data will be kept in a locked cabinet (DMS room 11149). Outside of data collected during the focus group (which will be observed by a research assistant), any other data will only be accessible to the primary researcher and research supervisor. After completion of the study, all data will be transferred to a locked cabinet in Dr. Patrick McCurdy's office (DMS room 11118) until the end of the conservation period (5 years) when it will be securely deleted (digital) or destroyed (hard copy).

Compensation: During the focus group, pizza and light refreshments will be provided, so participants are asked to indicate any allergies or dietary restrictions prior to participation.

Voluntary Participation: I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences if I choose to withdraw. However, given the free flowing nature of discussion in a focus group setting, if participants request to withdraw after the focus group discussion, any data collected up to that point will not be removed as this could negatively affect or make useless other information gathered.

Acceptance: I _____ agree to participate in the above research study conducted by Cody Reed of the Department of Communication, Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, University of Ottawa, which research is under the supervision of Dr. Patrick McCurdy.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or his supervisor.

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5
Tel.: (613) 562-5387
Email: ethics@uottawa.ca

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

Participant's signature: Date:

Researcher's signature: Date:

Appendix 2- Participant Pre-screening Survey

Pre-Screening Survey

This pre-screening survey is completely confidential and is intended to determine which focus group volunteers will take part in upon acceptance to participate in the study, and as supplementary data which may be used to provide background context on each participant's answers. All focus groups will be video recorded for accurate representation and documentation during the report. There is a chance that by participating in this study, you may be placed in a focus group with someone that you know, however, you will remain completely anonymous in the final report. Focus group videos will only be accessible to the primary researcher and the research supervisor.

Name:

Contact Information:

Email:

Phone number:

Sex:

Male / Female

Age:

Please indicate your program of study:

-

Please indicate what year of study you are currently enrolled in:

1 2 3 4

In the past 12 months have you:

1. **Been a member of a political party? If so, please identify.**

   Yes / No Party: _____

2. **Consistently identified with one party? If so, please identify.**

   Yes / No Party: _____

3. **Volunteered for a political party? If so, please identify.**

Yes / No Party: _____

4. **Volunteer for another, non-political, organization (please identify)?**

   Yes / No Organization: _____

5. **Expressed your views by contacting a politician or media organization either online or offline?**

   Yes / No

6. **Signed a petition (online/offline) or attended a public meeting or virtual town hall?**

   Yes / No

7. **Participated in a protest/demonstration/march?**

   Yes / No

8. **On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being the lowest and 10 being the highest) how interested are you in following the news and current affairs?**

   1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

9. **Did you vote in the last federal election held on October 19, 2015?**

   Yes [Please go to Question 11]

   No [Please go to Question 10]

10. **If you answered "No" to Question 9, please indicate why you chose not vote:**

-

11. **On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being the lowest and 10 being the highest) How interested are you in politics?**

    1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

12. **If you voted in the last election, did you run into difficulty proving your address or ID at the polling station? If so, please elaborate.**

    Yes / No

-

Focus groups will run approximately 1 to 1.5 hours. What is the best time for you to take part in a focus group?:

- Mornings Afternoons Evenings Weekends

Participants will receive pizza and drinks for their participation. Please indicate any allergies or dietary restrictions:

-

Thank you for your time!

Appendix 3- Focus Group Guide/Questions

Focus Group Discussion Guide

Sign In/Consent Process:
Sign in sheets will be signed by participants upon arrival. Consent forms will be explained by the primary researcher/moderator before the study begins. Participants will be given the opportunity to ask any questions or raise any concerns prior to signing the consent form.

Materials and Supplies required

- Consent forms (signed: one copy for participant and one copy for the researcher)
- Sign in sheet
- Name tents
- Paper and pens for each participant, the moderator, and assistant moderator
- 2 video recording devices and appropriate charging device or extra batteries
- Pizza & bottles of water

I. Moderator Introduction: (*This section will be read aloud by the moderator*)

Welcome:

- Hello and welcome everyone. Thank you all for volunteering your time to participate in this focus group.
- Introduce self and explain that this study will contribute to my final thesis.
- Introduce assistant moderator (if applicable) and explain responsibilities.
- Reminder that the discussion will be recorded with video cameras. This is strictly for transcription purposes.
- If you haven't done so already, please help yourself to some pizza and a drink.

Purpose of the Focus Group:

Canadian youth (aged 18-24) have the lowest voter turnout numbers of any other voting demographic in federal elections (38.8% in 2011) and there have been no signs of significant/sustained improvement. At the same time, American style attack ads have been introduced both during and outside of Canadian federal election campaigns. The purpose of this focus group is to discuss your perceptions of attack advertising and whether or not this form of political communication influences your perceptions of the broader Canadian democratic

process. As members of the demographic being studied (youth), your opinions are a valuable contribution to this research.

Explanation of the Process:

- This focus group discussion will run for approximately 60 minutes.
- Before we begin the discussion, we are going to watch three political attack ads from before and during the 2015 federal election, twice each, to ensure full comprehension of the material. If we need to watch them again later in the discussion we can.
- You have all been provided with a pen and paper so that you can take notes during the screenings. The notes can include: anything that you personally feel is worth mentioning, from the design of the ads (imagery/visuals, audio) to the claims being made. The ads are brief, so they will be screened three times each to ensure full comprehension of the material. I ask that during the screenings, there is no conversation between participants. Following the screenings, we will have a discussion about the ads you witnessed.
- As the moderator, I am here to facilitate the discussion only, so in the interest of time, I will try to keep the discussion focused. There may be times when I will have to move on to another question or topic to ensure that everything is covered and that everyone has had a chance to provide their input. Please silence/turn off all cell phones for the duration of the focus group.
- Finally and perhaps most importantly and in the interest of confidentiality, everything discussed in this focus group stays within this room, so that everyone can be comfortable expressing their opinions freely/without judgement.
- There are no right or wrong answers to the questions.
- The questions are in no way intended to convince or persuade anyone of anything and all, as it is solely your personal opinions which are valuable to the study.
- That being said, it is likely that at times there will be agreement but also difference of opinion amongst the group. Important to voice your opinion as other outside of this study may share it.

Also, please make sure your name card is facing out so that I can see everyone's name… Thanks for that.

II. Participant Introductions & Pre-study Ice Breaker:

Turn on video recording device

Before we start, I'll have everyone introduce themselves, where they are from and their program of study or another interesting fact about themselves. I already kind of introduced myself at the beginning but again… (*Moderator: name, reason for the study*).

Pick people at random, once everyone has spoken…

Are there any questions at all before we get started? (*Moderator: answer any questions if applicable*).

Play the first ad ("Justin Trudeau – Marijuana – He's in way over his head") 3 times

…

Play the second ad ("The Interview") 3 times

…

Play the third ad ("Economically Clueless") 3 times

…

Continue to Focus Group Questions…

Focus Group Questions

1. **Had you seen any of the attack ads we just watched before? If so, where did you see them (TV, online)?**

2. **If you had seen these ads before, did you share them or talk about them with friends, colleagues, or family members?**

3. **Whether you had or had not seen these ads before, do you discuss politics or share political content in general with friends/colleagues/family?**

   Prompt: online (e.g. Twitter, Reddit, Facebook) or offline [re: public sphere]

4. **While you were watching the ads, what sounds, images, text, voiceovers stood out to you? [**See Prompts**]**

5. **What shared themes were the ads trying to convey, and what was the tone of each ad? [**See Prompts]

6. **I would like to conduct a fact-check on at least one of the ads… [fact-check on Prompts sheet]. Has this fact-check influenced or changed your perception of the ad? How?**

7. **Would you perceive any of the ad claims to be helpful in making an informed decision on Election Day? Why?**

8. **Did any of the ads screened speak to issues that matter to you? If not, what issues would you like to see addressed in campaign ads or during election campaigns more generally?**

9. **Do you think attack ads could help engage or mobilize youth to participate in politics, or more specifically, vote in federal elections? Why?**

10. **What do you think could be done to increase political engagement amongst Canadian youth?**

11. **Was there anything we did not cover or that you would like to add before we end the discussion?**

Closing (This section will be read aloud by the moderator)

That concludes our focus group. Thank you again for participating in the discussion today. All of your input will be a valuable contribution to my research. Help yourselves to any remaining pizza before you leave, and have a great day.

Appendix 4 – Certificates of Ethics Approval

File Number: 01-15-13 **Date (mm/dd/yyyy):** 03/11/2015

Université d'Ottawa University of Ottawa
Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

Certificate of Ethics Approval

Social Science and Humanities REB

Principal Investigator / Supervisor / Co-investigator(s) / Student(s)

First Name	Last Name	Affiliation	Role
Patrick	McCurdy	Arts / Communication	Supervisor
Cody	Reed	Arts / Communication	Student Researcher

File Number: 01-15-13

Type of Project: Master's Thesis

Title: GOING ON THE OFFENSIVE: Attack Ads & Canadian Youth Engagement With & Perceptions of the Democratic Process

Approval Date (mm/dd/yyyy)	Expiry Date (mm/dd/yyyy)	Approval Type
03/11/2015	03/10/2016	Ia

(Ia: Approval, Ib: Approval for initial stage only)

Special Conditions / Comments:
N/A

550, rue Cumberland 550 Cumberland Street
Ottawa (Ontario) K1N 6N5 Canada Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6N5 Canada
(613) 562-5387 • Téléc./Fax (613) 562-5338
http://www.recherche.uottawa.ca/deontologie/ http://www.research.uottawa.ca/ethics/index.html

File Number: 31-15-13 **Date (mm/dd/yyyy):** 03/11/2015

Université d'Ottawa University of Ottawa
Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

This is to confirm that the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board identified above, which operates in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement and other applicable laws and regulations in Ontario, has examined and approved the application for ethical approval for the above named research project as of the Ethics Approval Date indicated for the period above and subject to the conditions listed the section above entitled "Special Conditions / Comments".

During the course of the study the protocol may not be modified without prior written approval from the REB except when necessary to remove subjects from immediate endangerment or when the modification(s) pertain to only administrative or logistical components of the study (e.g. change of telephone number). Investigators must also promptly alert the REB of any changes which increase the risk to participant(s), any changes which considerably affect the conduct of the project, all unanticipated and harmful events that occur, and new information that may negatively affect the conduct of the project and safety of the participant(s). Modifications to the project, information/consent documentation, and/or recruitment documentation, should be submitted to this office for approval using the "Modification to research project" form available at: http://recherche.uottawa.ca/deontologie/submissions-and-reviews.

Please submit an annual status report to the Protocol Officer 4 weeks before the above-referenced expiry date to either close the file or request a renewal of ethics approval. This document can be found at: http://recherche.uottawa.ca/deontologie/submissions-and-reviews.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the Ethics Office at extension 5387 or by e-mail at: ethics@uOttawa.ca.

Germain Zongo
Protocol Officer for Research Ethics
For Dr. Barbara Graves, Chair of the Social Sciences and Humanities REB

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Université d'Ottawa University of Ottawa

Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board

APPROVAL OF MODIFICATIONS

May 31, 2016

Cody Reed
2-496 Cooper Street
Ottawa, ON K1R 5H9

Patrick McCurdy
Department of Communication
Faculty of Arts
University of Ottawa
55 Laurier East
Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5

RE: Going on the Offensive: Attack Ads and Canadian Youth Engagement With and Perceptions of the Democratic Process (# 01-15-13)

Dear Mr. Reed and Professor McCurdy,

The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board has examined your request for ethics approval of the following modifications to your research project:

- As planned in the initial application the researchers will recruit participants through ISPR.

Your request has been accepted. The certification of ethical approval renewed on March 11, 2016 and valid until March 10, 2017 covers this modification.

During the course of the study, any further modifications to the protocol or forms may not be initiated without prior written approval from the REB. You must also promptly notify the REB of any adverse events that may occur.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at extension 5387.

Sincerely yours,

Germain Zongo
Protocol Officer for Research Ethics
For Dr. Barbara Graves, Chair of the Social Sciences and Humanities REB

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Appendix 5 – Attack Ads Screened

1. **Marijuana:**

2. **The Interview:**

3. **Economically Clueless:**