

Elections and leadership; The impact of Coronavirus on the Democratic Process

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Abstract

COVID-19 has affected politics around the world, particularly in how it impacts elections, electability of political candidates, as well as the democratic process of a sitting administration. This article aims to answer the question of how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected many aspects of democracy internationally. This work refers to statistics and literature that examine the effect of pandemics on every facet of democracy. The methodological tools of this paper include an analysis of past literature on legitimacy, historical pandemic response, as well as the usage of polling data. The findings of this paper show that political processes of various nation states have been disrupted by the pandemic, which has a significant impact on the conduction and outcomes of elections. The paper also draws some comparisons between COVID-19 and the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic.

Key words

COVID-19; electability; legitimacy; pandemic, democracy, crisis-response, 1918 pandemic

I. Introduction

The ongoing outbreak of the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), discovered in December 2019, presents the latest threat to global populations and systems. As in previous worldwide pandemics, such as the 1918 Spanish flu outbreak, COVID-19 has produced numerous major challenges for communities and industries. Health-care systems have failed to keep up with the rising number of cases in hospitals attributed to the global pandemic. Consequently, as employment continues to fall due to global lock-down measures, small businesses have felt the pressure of diminished income and many have been forced to shut down, placing an important economic burden on certain states' financial systems.

Although the short and long-term effects on health systems and financial markets have been the focal point of studies during the global pandemic thus far, research conducted on the effects of COVID-19 on democratic systems and regimes has been quite limited. Gauging the long-term effects of the global pandemic on democratic systems is nearly impossible, but the current and short-term effects such as electoral impacts can be observed and hypothesized to an extent that can allow us to look towards an improbable future. This can especially be hypothesized in regard to the upcoming election within the United States.

Elections in a global pandemic of this magnitude have not been seen since the time of the Spanish flu epidemic and thus, states have begun to seek new methods of ensuring that democracy can live on through the form of elections. At the time of writing this essay, there is a spotlight on a highly contentious election occurring in the United States; not only due to the highly mediatized battle between the two men running for election, but also equally in *how* the election is set to take place. Many critics, including President Donald Trump, have claimed that the use of mail-in ballots and online voting (systems used to avoid in-person voting and,

consequently, the spread of COVID-19) hinder the democratic electoral process and directly impede on the legitimacy of the results, regardless of the victor. Thus, this paper will seek to view the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on elections world-wide by addressing a few important points. These points include how the pandemic poses challenges for elections and the electability of political candidates; how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected elections thus far; how/if the results of said elections can be considered legitimate; and how the democratic process of countries have been affected by the pandemic.

Taking a deeper look into these topics prompted us to view global cases in which a democratic process or system was altered or affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, either directly or indirectly. After having introduced the topic in section I, Section II seeks to review the legitimacy of online/mail-in ballots, as well as studying turnout numbers and the possibility of cyber-crime within these elections. In section III, we will address the disruption of democratic processes within Canadian politics. In section IV, we will analyze the direct effects of the pandemic on electability through collected polling data, and the monumental impacts that COVID-19 has on approval ratings of elected officials. Section V will serve as a comparison between how the 1918 epidemic and COVID-19 epidemic affected American elections, analyzing variables such as voter turnout and electoral processes. Section VI will point out the limitations of this research, and finally section VII will turn to a conclusion.

II. The Legitimacy of Elections & Questions of Democratic Deficit

The global pandemic, as well as the measures put into place to avoid the spread of the COVID-19 virus, shifts the political landscape of democratic systems to an unprecedented magnitude. Democracy is rooted in the people's ability to choose their government, governing legislation, and leader. To this effect, ability is given to the people through the freedom of

speech, the freedom of assembly, equality, and most importantly, the right to vote. However, due to the public health regulations imposed by COVID-19, which include limiting assembly and the prohibition of large congregations, the rights that constitute the very fabric of democracy have been touched, and to some extent, compromised. Inevitably, this begs the question: how legitimate are the results of elections occurring in this time frame?

Legitimacy, “denotes the rightfulness of political authority” (Schneider & Hurrelmann, 2015, p.4); furthermore, Tyler (2001) demonstrates that “a legitimate authority is one which is entitled to have its decisions and rules accepted and followed by others” (p. 2440). The rightfulness of political authority, then, can be measured in the following ways: performance, ideology, national identity, religion, and most notably, democratic procedures (Mazepus, 2017, pp.1-2). If one therefore assumes that the use of proper democratic procedures is a factor in calculating the legitimacy of a leader, authority, or government, then the effects of a global pandemic on the processes supporting democratic regimes cannot be overstated.

Currently, the United States provides us with a clear example to justify the conversation at hand. Given the limitations put in place to limit the spread of COVID-19, the United States has had to adjust and adopt a framework necessary in providing an election, which is scheduled to take place in November of 2020. Although voting rights in the United States have been a contentious issue in the past, the pandemic creates a new level of questioning and uncertainty for American voters. These uncertainties have prompted millions of people in the United States to vote early, either by means of mail-in ballots, or online voting. However, according to Stanford University’s Healthy Elections Project (2020), this election is the most litigated election in the United States in a long time: over 400 election lawsuits have been filed in 44 states against the United States government; namely in regard to changes in the United States Postal Services’

management of the mail-in ballot system. This is by all accounts, a worrying trend. Although voting has shifted from in-person voting stations to voting by means of mail-in ballots, the votes hold the same weight as they did in elections during pre-pandemic times. The same reality applies to online voting. In the months leading up to November's election, many US citizens and elected officials have voiced their concerns regarding the legitimacy and safety of online voting (Tarallo, 2020). Many claim that votes by online means may easily be manipulated, compromised or subject to interference by outside sources—especially given the allegations of foreign interference in the American elections occurring in 2016 (Tarallo, 2020).

These issues feed into a concept known as 'democratic deficit'. A democratic deficit, characterized by the absence or underdevelopment of essential democratic institutions and systems (Letki, 2016), creates uncertainty and instability, and most importantly, heavily impacts a state's ability to turn public opinion into policy and concrete change. Many democratic states may be facing a legitimacy crisis as public skepticism has heavily corroded citizens' opinions on the performance and function of states, namely regarding the democratic institutions enshrined in them (Norris, 2011).

That being said, one wonders how the perceived alterations to democratic processes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic attack the legitimacy of states' democratic institutions. Although it is nearly impossible to determine this on a long-term scale, the legitimacy of current and future elections can be hypothesized. The legitimacy of government, and therefore the power of democratic institutions, rests on public opinion and the trust that populations give to their leaders and the institutions that keep them in power. In the case of the United States, a large part of the population has voiced their discontent with the voting measures put in place by the Trump

administration, by expressing a general sentiment of distrust towards the mail-in and online voting systems put in place to replace in person voting (Alberta, 2020).

Thus, there is a particular interest in the outcome of the US election; a significant portion of the population's citizens are skeptical towards the electoral systems put in place, and consequently do not trust the government bodies charged with providing these electoral systems. This leads one to ask if the use of these systems and the outcomes of these elections be considered legitimate. The level of trust of citizens towards electoral systems constitutes a large part of what it means to be legitimate. If citizens believe that the means by which they voted are prone to manipulation, interference or fraud, the election results cannot be trusted. Without the trust of the population, the government may be deemed illegitimate. However, the opposite is also true; if the systems put in place by governments to ensure an election during the global pandemic receive ample approval from the populations, then the legitimacy of these bodies cannot be denied.

To assume that the plights brought on by sentiments of democratic deficits only affect the United States is however ill-fated. The current crisis has demonstrated that any government can be faced with the depleting support from their population, and the effects that this can have on legitimacy. As the following section will demonstrate, even countries not seeking to hold an election during these difficult times have felt the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on their legitimacy, as well as the way in which their democratic processes can be disrupted. This can be seen in the current Canadian context.

III. COVID-19 Disrupting the Democratic Process of Canadian Politics

Although this research has thus far taken an international perspective to the effects of COVID-19 on democratic processes, it is equally important to address the effects of COVID in

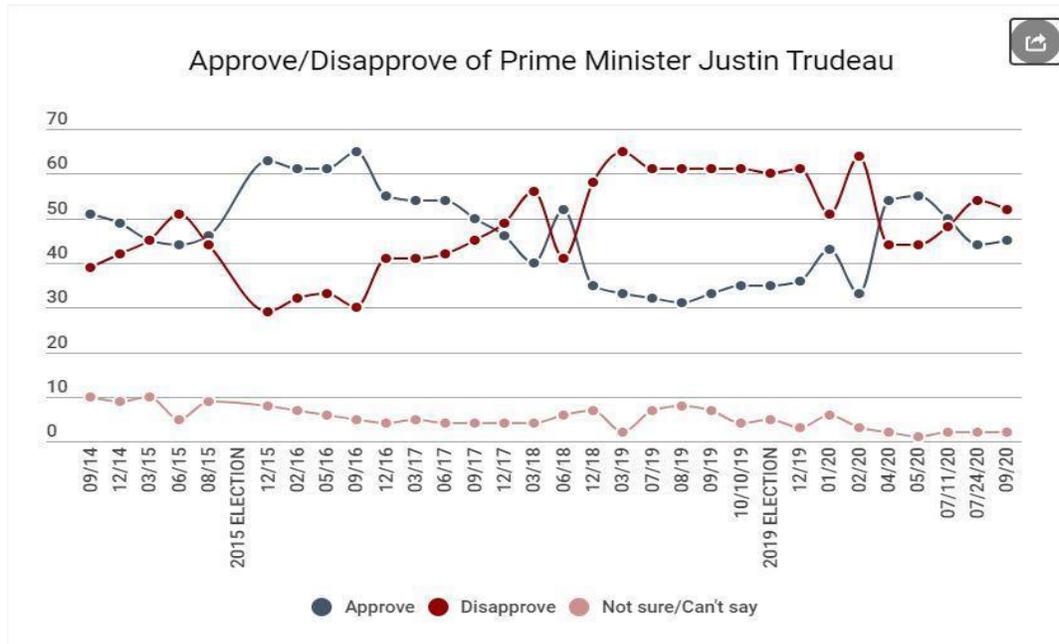
Canada, namely on government legitimacy and democratic institutions. This section will provide a brief overview of the issues COVID-19 has posed on Canada's democratic system.

Although Canada has not undergone a major election since February 2020, and thus has not seen substantial issues regarding their electoral processes, its situation is quite unique. Canada is currently a *minority* government; a government which holds the majority of seats in Parliament, but still less than half of the total seats. This means that the Liberal government, which currently forms the government, cannot make impactful decisions without the help of other parties through the form of coalitions and agreements. This proves quite challenging in situations demanding immediate and lasting action, such as the current health crisis. The inadequacies of a minority government have been brought to light since the beginning of the pandemic, namely in the heavy criticisms brought forward by the two opposition parties of Canada, and the Liberal government's inability to bring forth concrete and effective COVID-19 response regulations on the federal level. In fact, on March 13th, members of the Canadian parliament unanimously voted on a 5-week shutdown of both the House of Commons and the Senate, in order to help curve the spread of the virus (Bronskill, 2020). It was only six months later, on September 23rd, that regular parliamentary activities were resumed in person with seats taken in-house, rather than online (House of Commons, 2020). In that six-month period, the passing of legislation and policy on online platforms was extremely slow and limited. Although the activities of the House of Commons were never completely stopped, the effects of the pandemic heavily affected Canada's democratic processes in this manner.

Furthermore, one major aspect of Canada's situation that may heavily hinder the government's legitimacy is the government's incapacity to call forth an election, in hopes of replacing its current government; an incapability directly brought on by the COVID-19

pandemic. Although prior Canadian minority governments have lasted, on average, a bit more than one year (Ferris & Voia, 2009, p.881), most of these governments have not been challenged by situations as debilitating and precarious as the global pandemic the minority government faces today. A minority government's seeming inability to pass its own legislation in a respectable time frame is not fit to handle a crisis of this magnitude. Opposition governments are aware of this. However, Parliament remains undecided on whether or not an election is adequate during these particular times. Although members of the Conservative Party of Canada have motioned for a snap-election to be held by means of a vote of non-confidence (Coletta, 2020), Jagmeet Singh, the leader of the New Democratic Party has, through a Tweet posted on October 20th, voiced his belief that elections at this time are both unsafe, and unjust for the Canadian population already having to deal with struggles brought on by the pandemic. He stated that it would be "outrageous and absurd" (Jagmeet Singh, 2020) to conduct an election within the context of a pandemic if it can be avoided.

Conclusively, the COVID-19 pandemic brings important limitations and hindrances to Canada's democratic processes. As the concept of a democratic deficit was mentioned in Section II, it is important to note that it applies to Canada's case as well. Currently, Canada's government is falling into a democratic deficit. Namely, regarding the ways in which its main legislative body (the House of Commons) cannot come to terms on many subjects or proposed legislation, and, lacking a majority government, cannot ensure that measures can be put in place quickly to deal with issues such as COVID-19. Furthermore, according to the following graph created by the Angus Reid Institute (2020) on the approval and disapproval rating of Justin Trudeau, a majority of respondents disapprove of Justin Trudeau. Approval rating can be seen as falling to 45%, and going as low as 33% during the period of the pandemic up until September 2020.

Figure 1*Angus Reid Institute*

Note. Angus Reid Institute is a Canadian Non-Profit foundation committed to independent research. The figure demonstrates Angus Reid Institutes polling of the approval and disapproval rating of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in between September 2014 and September 2020.

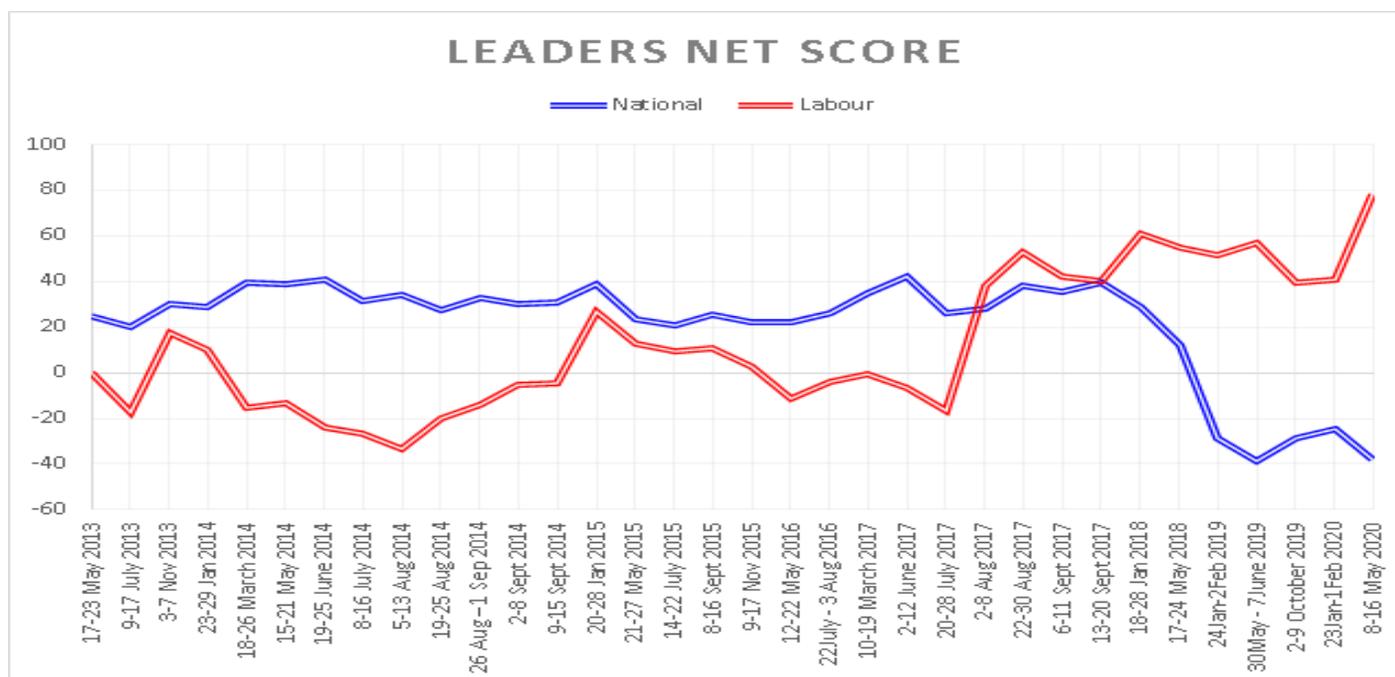
Reprinted from *Trudeau Tracker*, by Angus Reid Institute, 2020.

This shows that the majority of those polled have lost trust in the current government, making Trudeau a less electable candidate if a snap-election did occur. Although it must be noted that there are a variety of factors and controversies impacting this approval rating, similarly to the American example which will be mentioned in the next section. The answer to this deficit would be an election, which would allow Canadian citizens to act on their disapproval and appoint a new leader, if need be. By failing to move into an election, and thereby negating the right of citizens to vote, the Canadian federal government fails to act upon its primary democratic institutions, and to provide a democratic system capable of handling the COVID-19 crisis.

Furthermore, studying the Canadian example displays that the pandemic has had important effects on electoral confidence in Canada, and has demonstrated the deep and lasting effects that this crisis may have on people's views and opinions regarding governments and leaders in the future. As such, the following section will seek to address COVID-19's lasting effects on electability and the electoral system of other nations.

IV. The Impact of COVID-19 on Electability

The pandemic significantly affects politics around the world. Notably, pandemic crisis responses become a defining issue for elections. Governments have often witnessed an increase in popular support during significant crises, which is referred to as the 'rally around the flag effect'. With leaders generally experiencing an increase of their approval ratings during crises, crisis-response could clearly have a large impact on the electability of a candidate, should an election occur during a pandemic. The change that a pandemic can cause to the electability of a candidate has been seen both in theory and in practice. New Zealand serves as a prime example. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern currently sits at around 62% approval rating in polls conducted by Newshub-Reid research (Menon, 2020). The New Zealand government is internationally recognized as having taken quick and decisive action in handling COVID-19. When the 2020 New Zealand general elections occurred on October 17th, 2020, it was clear that voters noticed. Arden's Labour party won a landslide victory. Polling also showed that during the timeframe of COVID-19 featured in the poll, there was a significant change in the Labour party's net score in who New Zealanders would prefer as Prime minister (Reid Research, 2020).

Figure 2*Reid Research Services Limited*

Note. Reid Research Services Limited is New Zealand's leading independent fieldwork company.

This figure demonstrates the net approval rating of the leader of the Labour party and the New Zealand National party from May 2013 until May 2020. Reprinted from *Tv3 Poll Results*, by Reid Research Services Limited, 2020.

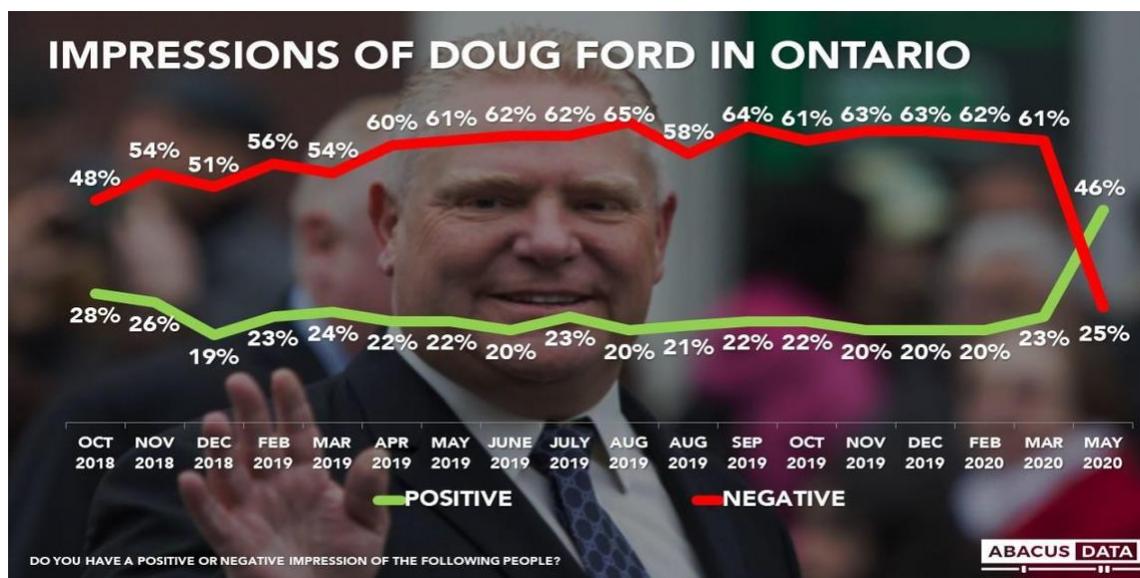
This shows that in the months leading up to the election, support for the labour party nearly doubled, during a time where the paramount issue for voters was COVID-19. This is the first time that one party gained enough seats to hold a majority government in New Zealand since adopting mixed member proportional representation, receiving 49.15% of the vote (New Zealand Electoral Commission, 2020). It can be argued that this election was a referendum on the COVID-19 response of the Ardern administration; Ardern being a resoundingly electable candidate when taking her approval ratings into account.

During the earlier stages of the pandemic in South Korea, President Moon Jae-in was facing significant controversy due to pro-China policies such as sending masks and medical equipment to China, leaving South Korea worse off when the first major wave hit. The public reacted negatively; petitions demanding Moon's impeachment received over a million signatures (Larsen, 2020). The South Korean legislative elections occurred not long after this, and based on the aforementioned information, one would expect significant losses for Moon-Jae in. This was not the case. After the South Korean government's successful response to the pandemic, Moon-Jae-in's platform party won by a landslide in the legislative elections (South Korea's governing party wins election by a landslide, 2020). Although it was not Moon-Jae-In himself on the ballot in this election, the results greatly benefitted his party compared to what one might have expected of the result had it happened before the pandemic. An election during the pandemic is a referendum on the administration's performance, similarly to the example of New Zealand.

Re-electability of a political candidate may be defined by how they have or have not properly responded to the pandemic, both on a federal and subnational level. Crisis response can make or break public perception of an administration. An administration that improperly handles a crisis is seen as not having taken proper care of the safety of its citizens, a violation of one of the most basic aspects of the social contract between a government and its citizens. This leads one to question the legitimacy of an administration if they are not acting sufficiently in this crisis response. Many citizens may be less likely to pay attention to certain realms of politics such as foreign policy and trade deals. But unlike those areas of politics, a crisis of this magnitude is impossible for society to ignore. Before the pandemic, a political candidate could see themselves running on a variety of different policy priorities, but in a world where the COVID-19 is affecting every facet of life, pandemic response becomes the paramount issue for many voters.

This can be explained by the idea that “epidemics start at a moment in time, proceed on a stage limited in space and duration, follow a plot line of increasing revelatory tension, [and] move to a crisis of individual and collective character” (Rosenburg, 1989, p. 2). Similarly to the World Wars, a pandemic is an example of a crisis of individual and collective character, insofar that every citizen is aware of it regardless of age, class, or ethnicity. Therefore, how a government conducts itself during such a crisis can become a major determining factor of public perception. An administration perceived as having properly handled a crisis can see itself make significant political gains for itself, while the opposite is also true. In future elections of incumbent administrations, COVID-19 response will be a defining issue on the ballot, similarly to the current context in the United States.

On a subnational level, COVID-19’s impact on electability becomes apparent when one looks at the Ontario government. In early 2020, only 1 in 5 Ontarians approved of the Ford administration. Yet in early May, data showed that 58% of Ontarians would consider voting for the Ontario Progressive Conservative party in the next election (Coletto & Korbabicz, 2020). The way the government handled the pandemic is essential to this, which can be seen in the large uptick in the Impressions of Doug Ford in Ontario (Coletto & Korbabicz, 2020).

Figure 3*Abacus Data*

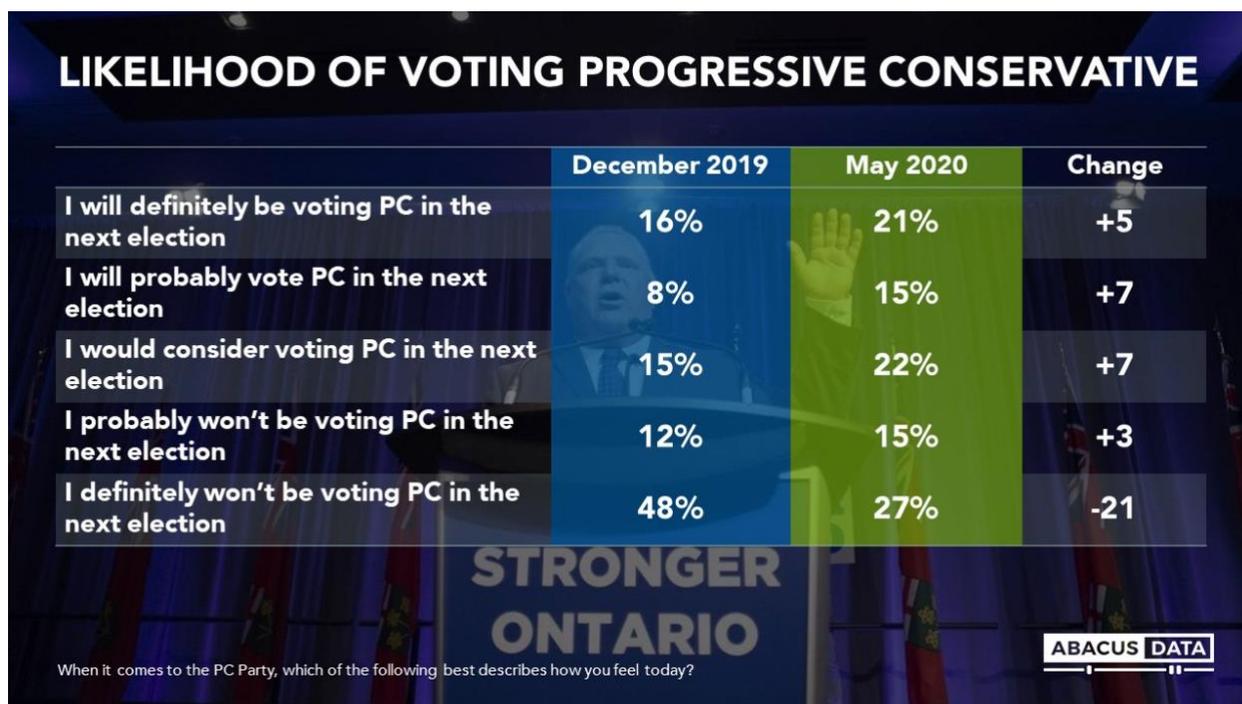
Note. Abacus Data is a precise polling and research firm, and an accredited member of the Canadian Research Insights Council. This figure demonstrates the positive and negative impressions of Doug Ford in Ontario from October 2018 until May 2020. Reprinted From *Doug Ford's Image Goes From Very Bad To Impressive In Less Than Three Months*, by Abacus Data, 2020.

Figure 5 shows that there was a significant uptick in the timeframe of February-May 2020. This corresponds with the timing of when the shutdowns had just begun. Clear comparisons can be drawn between this timeline and the example of New Zealand. If elections occurred in Ontario during the month of May, it can be hypothesized that the Progressive Conservative Party would have received considerably more votes compared to an election that would have taken place in late 2019. The findings of Abacus Data (2020) regarding the ‘Likelihood of voting Progressive Conservative’ demonstrate that Ontarians became more likely

to vote conservative during the months of pandemic, showing a difference of 21% in those polled that “definitely won’t be voting PC in the next election” (Coletto & Korbabicz, 2020).

Figure 4

Abacus Data



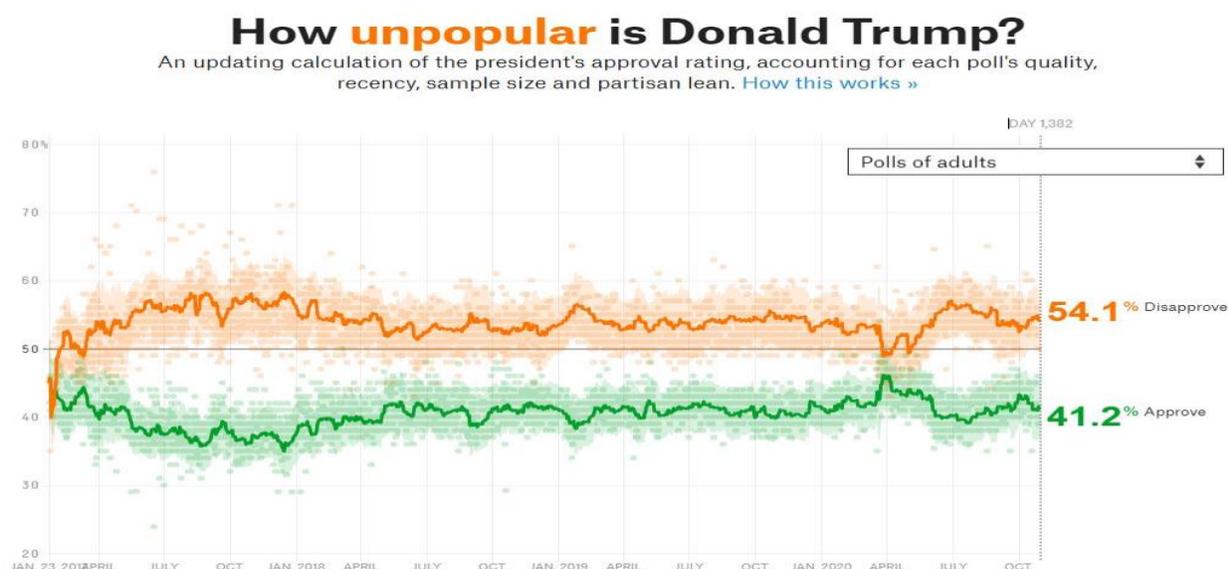
Note. Abacus Data is a precise polling and research firm, and an accredited member of the Canadian Research Insights Council. This figure demonstrates the likelihoods of Ontario voters in voting for or against the Progressive Conservative Party in the next election. Reprinted from *Doug Ford's Image Goes From Very Bad To Impressive In Less Than Three Months*, by Abacus Data, 2020.

Taking the aforementioned examples into account, the outcome of the upcoming American election can still only be theorized, but unlike these examples, Donald Trump has not seen a similar uptick in his approval numbers at any point during the pandemic. Thus, it can be argued that unlike these other political candidates, the pandemic response of the American

administration did not make Donald Trump more electable than he was pre-pandemic (Silver, 2020). FiveThirtyEight's polling data in regard to how popular or unpopular Donald Trump is shows a much different situation compared to the other examples.

Figure 5

FiveThirtyEight



Note. FiveThirtyEight is a website that focuses on opinion poll analysis, politics, economics, and sports blogging, owned by ABC News. This figure demonstrates the approval and disapproval rating of Donald Trump from January 2013 until November 2020. Reprinted from *How Popular Is Donald Trump?*, by N. Silver, 2020.

During the pandemic timeframe of December 2019–November 2020, it is evident that Trump's average disapproval rating fluctuated between a low of 49.6% and a high of 55.9% in July. Meanwhile, the average approval rating fluctuated between 40–45%. The polling shows that there has clearly not been a resounding ‘rally around the flag’ effect like in previous examples. This could potentially forebode disappointing results for the Trump administration during the

upcoming election. Akin to any other election for a second term, this is a referendum on his performance, and COVID-19 is one of the defining issues during his administration. But one must be cautious when comparing the American situation to these other examples. While COVID-19 is one of the defining issues during the Trump administration, it may not to the same extent as the previous examples. Issues of impeachment, the supreme court are other examples of defining issues that voters will be considering when placing their ballots either in person or by mail.

V. Comparisons Drawn Between COVID-19 and the Spanish Flu in the United States

The effects that COVID-19 has had on democracy are not entirely unprecedented. Elections have also been conducted in the context of previous global pandemics, such as the American midterm elections during the 1918 Spanish flu. When one compares the political situation during these two pandemics, there are some clear differences as well as similarities that cannot be overlooked. A notable difference is that during the 1918 midterms, campaign rallies were banned in many cities. Due to the restrictive rules on public gatherings, candidates focused more on newspaper advertisements. Luxuries that the digital age introduced, such as live-streamed online debates, were not available. In 1918, the American surgeon general issued a bulletin that advised all public health boards to “ban public gatherings and close the churches, theaters, saloons and similar locations where such gatherings occurred” (Marisam, 2010, p.142). Many cities went with this recommendation, unlike the present context where restrictions on gatherings have generally been either much less severe, or ignored by a portion of the population. In 1918, there was not the same access to mail-in ballots as seen in the United States today, which certainly impacted why voter turnout was only around 40% in the 1918 midterms (Marisam, 2010, p.145). Similarly, to present-day, politicians considered postponing the election during the time of the

1918 midterms, similarly to how Jagmeet Singh was hesitant to pursue an election in the previous Canadian example.

“The issue of whether to postpone an election during an emergency is closely linked with the issue of absentee voting. If voters cannot make it to the polls, flexible absentee voting laws can still allow them to obtain ballots at the last minute. Absentee ballots were just becoming popular in 1918, as soldiers shipped to Europe for World War I needed a way to vote. However, the infrastructure was not in place to accommodate last-minute absentee voting” (Marisam, 2010, p.150).

Without these flexible absentee voting laws, it is not surprising that a significant portion of the population wound up not participating in the democratic process. In the context of the Spanish flu, those that did vote went to the polling locations with sanitary measures in place, and some states made it mandatory to wear masks while entering polling stations. An important difference between the election process in the current pandemic and the midterm elections during Spanish flu is the drastically different level of voter turnout. With absentee ballots and mail in ballots not being prominent in that time, and without electronic voting, going in-person to vote was the only option for many. Without these luxuries that are currently available, many citizens were too fearful to vote, and therefore many in America missed out on their ability to choose their government. Although there were other factors at play, such as the First World War, the Spanish flu had a significant impact on voter turnout, “perhaps keeping hundreds of thousands away from the poll on election day” (Marisam, 2010, p.146). But the low turnout did not appear to raise concerns about the legitimacy of the 1918 election results (Marisam, 2010), unlike the current context where there are legitimacy concerns during the current American elections.

VI. Limitations of Research

The biggest limitation on research in the area of how COVID-19 impacts politics and elections is that the pandemic is a new and ongoing situation. Academic literature on the subject is limited, and conclusions can only be hypothesized. At the time that this article is submitted, the American elections have not yet occurred, leaving aspects of this paper to be theoretical in nature. The final limitation of this paper is its reliance on polling data. As the result of the United States election showed in 2016, poll results are not a perfect representation of what to expect in the results of an upcoming election. Future research should look at academic literature on the COVID-19 pandemic and answer if the lack of a positive uptick in Donald Trump's approval rating during his pandemic response led to him losing the election or not. Future research should also analyze other election results in nations that are now facing their second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

VII. Conclusion

The political landscape around the world is significantly different than it was during pre-COVID-19 times. This paper examines the variety of democratic issues that may arise within a pandemic. Specifically, how they could delegitimize a government; the pandemic's effect on electability; and how the 1918 Spanish Flu provides precedence into a mid-pandemic election. Using the historical context of the Spanish flu helps one to understand that these current circumstances are not uncharted territory; some degree of precedence does exist. By comparing polling data of various leaders, it becomes apparent that significant political gains can be made by a proper pandemic response. Proper response will hypothetically have a positive impact on the results of an election that follows. On the other hand, if an administration responds to a pandemic improperly, then hypothetically it should have a negative impact on their electoral results, as we have hypothesized regarding the upcoming United States election.

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