

Facebook and the Federal Election: A New Platform for Civic Engagement

Kevin Chan

With digital technologies and platforms, Canadian voters now have a new and important way to discuss issues and to engage directly with each other and their leaders. Facebook, with over 20 million Canadian users, is a platform like no other. Recognizing this potential, Facebook Canada sought to play a helpful civic engagement role in the 2015 Federal Election.

Canadian voters have traditionally had numerous options with which to engage in meaningful ways during election campaigns, both with each other and with candidates vying for public office—town halls, public rallies, door knocking. These activities offer opportunities for direct and often face-to-face engagement, a unique quality of the democratic process.

With digital technologies and platforms, Canadian voters now have new and important ways online to discuss issues and to engage directly with each other and their leaders.

With over 20 million unique Canadians on our service, Facebook Canada sought to play a helpful civic engagement role in the 2015 federal election. We approached this challenge in a few ways:

1. We helped connect Canadians with their candidates and party leaders—a natural extension of our mission to make the world more open and connected;

2. We helped show how Canadians are engaging and talking about the election by offering insights gleaned from Facebook conversation data; and
3. We encouraged Canadians to get out and vote.

Facebook breaks down the barriers between Canadians and their political leaders. Well before the official campaign period started, and throughout the writ period, we worked with the parties to develop organic and paid engagement strategies. We witnessed a number of innovative examples and best practices from the election that are worth highlighting.

Over the course of the campaign, all three main party leaders participated in live Q&A sessions on Facebook, enjoying an authentic dialogue with Canadians. NDP Leader Tom Mulcair was the first to hold a Facebook Q&A, and used the platform to engage directly with voters on a wide variety of poli-

cy issues, from the small business tax rate to government surveillance. Conservative Party Leader Stephen Harper conducted a live Q&A on Facebook the day the Trans-Pacific Partnership was announced, dedicating the entire session to getting his party's position out on that important issue.

Facebook also provides party leaders with an opportunity to be more lighthearted with Canadians, and reveal aspects of their personality that are harder to get across in a traditional campaign event. Justin Trudeau was the first political leader globally to take the Facebook 60-second Challenge, answering rapid-fire questions designed to help Canadians get to know him better. For example, we learned the last movie he saw was *Frozen* (for the 19th time because he has kids) and that he'd choose poutine over a BeaverTail as his favourite food.

Another trend we saw this election was the use of Facebook to make exclusive policy and political announcements. Leaders turned to Facebook because it allowed them to drive engagement, shore up support, and reach far more people than a typical press conference. For example, Harper announced a commitment to renew funding for Brain Canada exclusively on Facebook. Calgary Mayor Naheed Nenshi used our platform to speak to a national audience on the importance of municipal infrastructure as a federal campaign issue.

Working with the Mayor's Office and the University of Ottawa's iVote—Je Vote, Facebook supported Nenshi in a live Facebook address to Canadians across the country.

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Perhaps most notably of all, Trudeau unveiled the full Liberal campaign platform live on Facebook. This was an innovative way for Trudeau to connect directly with his over 450,000 Facebook supporters. He asked them to send him questions directly while

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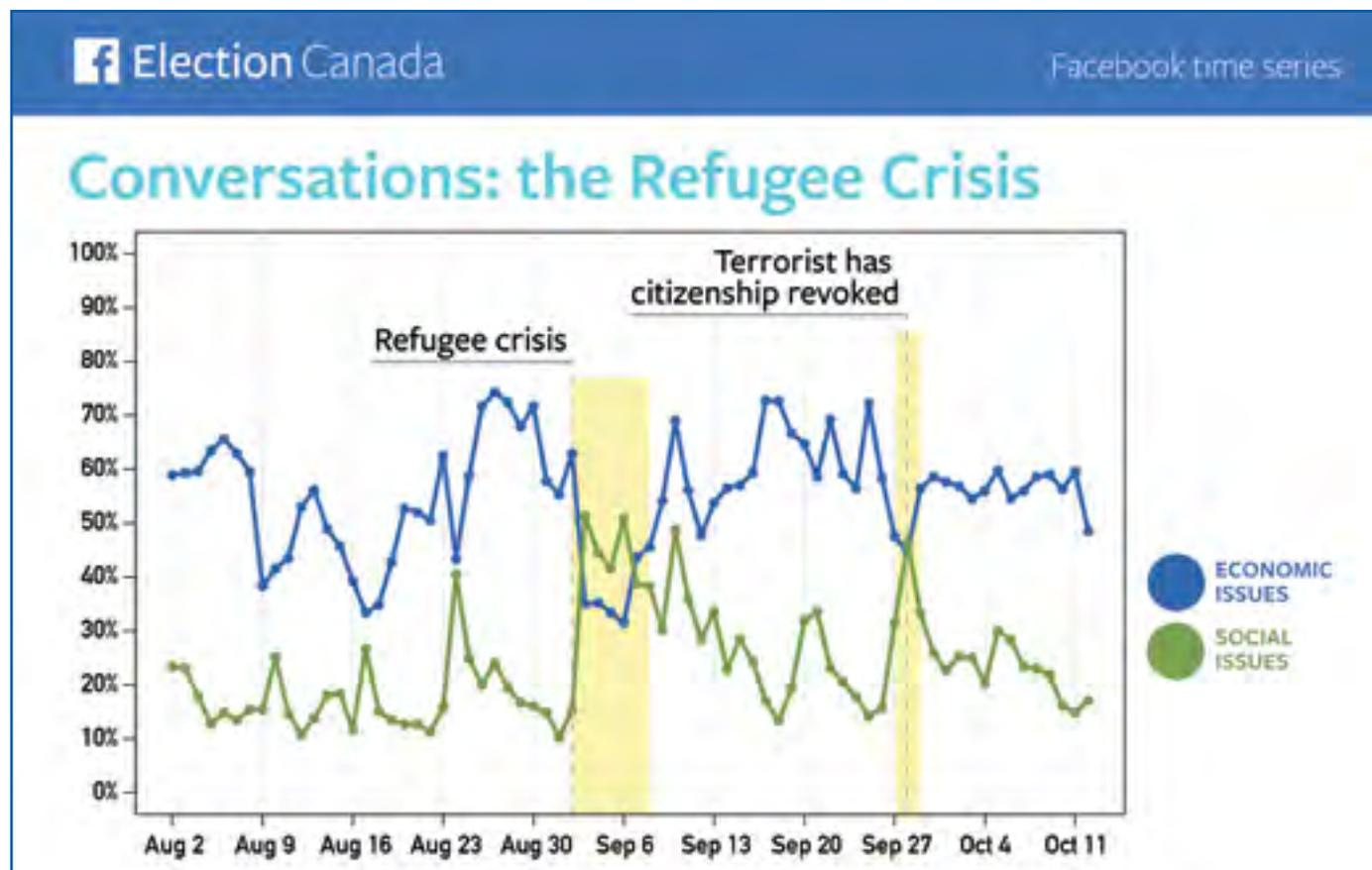
they watched the livestream, and then spent another half an hour afterwards answering them live in a town hall.

Canadians go to Facebook to talk about the things that matter to them, and this election was no exception. From June 1 to October 19, there were 7 million people and 50 million interactions about the Canadian Election on Facebook. These spontaneous conversations between real people clearly demonstrate that Canadians very much cared about this election.

To provide insights into this phenomenon, we worked with Facebook's data science team to better understand, in

an anonymized and aggregated way, what leaders, parties and issues Canadians were talking about, and how these changed over the course of the campaign. Partnerships with CTV News and Radio-Canada helped us tell some of these stories.

For example, we found that Harper dominated the conversation on Facebook throughout the campaign until Election Day, which is not unusual for an incumbent prime minister nearing 10 years in office. It is interesting to note though that on Election Day, an hour before the polls closed in the province of Quebec, Trudeau leaptfrogged ahead of Harper as the most talked about leader in the province.





Mulcair had dipped to fourth place behind Duceppe. Based on the results of the election in Quebec, Facebook conversation may very well have been an early indicator of things to come. In terms of the most discussed political issues on Facebook, it is perhaps not surprising that the economy was top-of-mind throughout most of the campaign. However at the height of the refugee crisis at the end of August, social issues did over-take the economy as the most talked about campaign subject, and did so again when the government revoked the citizenship of the Toronto terrorist (see time series chart on the previous page).

Facebook also partnered with the *Maclean's/CityTV* Leader's Debate, the Munk Debate on Foreign Policy, Radio-Canada's debate, and TVA's *Face à Face*. We livestreamed the Maclean's and Munk debates on Facebook, ensuring accessibility to everyone with an Internet connection, and for each debate, pulled data insights on the most talked-about moments, leaders,

and issues. Interestingly, Trudeau, who trailed Harper in terms of volume of conversation on Facebook throughout the campaign, consistently rose to become the most talked about leader during the debates.

With over 20 million Canadians on Facebook, we felt strongly that we should help to get out the vote. Voting is a deeply personal act, but it can also be incredibly social. Our belief that Canadians would be more likely to vote if they saw that their family and friends on Facebook were also voting led us to partner with Elections Canada on two important initiatives during the campaign.

First, for the International Day of Democracy on September 15, we worked with Elections Canada to send a story to all voting-age Canadians in their News Feeds promoting online voter registration (image above) The millions who saw this story had the option of sharing it with their family and friends, or clicking through to Elections Canada's online voter reg-

istration tool. On Election Day, we partnered again with Elections Canada to place a prominent "I'm A Voter" megaphone at the top of voting-age Canadians' News Feeds, reminding them of their civic responsibility to vote and giving them the opportunity to share that they did. By our own calculations, the Megaphone reached 12.4M Canadians on Election Day, resulting in 814K shares.

Additionally, we partnered with comedian Rick Mercer in support of his "I Will Vote" profile picture filter. Inspired by Facebook's own "Pride Filter", which went viral after the US Supreme Court ruled in favour of same-sex marriage earlier this year, the initiative allowed Canadians to filter their Facebook profile picture with a public pledge to vote. Mercer's theory was that "voting is contagious", and by urging Canadians to filter their profile pics, we hoped it would spread the importance of voting across people's social networks.

While Facebook provided the online platform and the digital tools, it was ultimately the millions of Canadians, and their political parties, candidates and leaders, who made use of them and pioneered new kinds of political interactions and dialogue. **P**

Kevin Chan is Head of Public Policy, Canada for Facebook Inc. In this capacity he leads the company's public policy efforts in Canada, facilitating an ongoing dialogue with policy-makers about Facebook's products and services, and engaging on a broad range of issues that impact the Internet sector.