Privacy law may be key to electors' engagement with party personnel at election time

Thursday March 5, 2020

Political parties and other political actors are making growing use of personal information in electoral campaigns. Canadian political parties [may collect electors' religion, gender, ethnicity, and expressed views, retaining that information in a database](#).

A study led by McMaster University Associate professor and Canada Research Chair in Communications Policy and Governance Sara Bannerman, and Brock University Assistant professor Nicole Goodman, with Research Coordinators Julia Kalinina and Jenny Zhan, sought to answer whether Canadians are aware that federal political parties collect their personal information, whether awareness of parties' collection of personal information and party privacy policies makes a difference in willingness to speak with party campaign personnel. The study finds that many electors are not aware of the types of personal information parties collect. Results further suggest that knowledge of parties' collection of personal information discourages some electors from engaging with party personnel during elections. Overall, Canadians care about what happens to their personal information, and regulating parties' collection of personal information is an important consideration in an era of increasingly digital elections.

As a part of the [Digital Ecosystem Research Challenge](#), the team surveyed 1,594 Canadian electors during the 2019 federal election campaign. Respondents were asked about their knowledge of federal political parties' collection of personal information, and about whether collection of this information or a party's stance on privacy affected their willingness to engage with party campaign personnel.

CANADIANS NOT AWARE OF THE FULL RANGE OF PERSONAL DATA THAT PARTIES MAY COLLECT

Study findings reveal that Canadians were not aware of all of the types of information that may be collected by Canadian political parties. Furthermore, many respondents were not aware of the extent to which political parties collect personal data. While respondents were more likely to report knowing that parties collect names (63%), contact information (57%), and gender (52%), a minority said they were aware that political parties may also collect and use information about political views (33%), ethnicity (33%), and religion (25%).

Political parties in Canada may collect data about voters through door-to-door canvassing, telephone canvassing, or social media. They may collect your name, contact information, religion, gender, ethnicity, and political views, retaining that information in a database. Are you aware that Canadian federal political parties may collect your personal information? Please check all that apply:
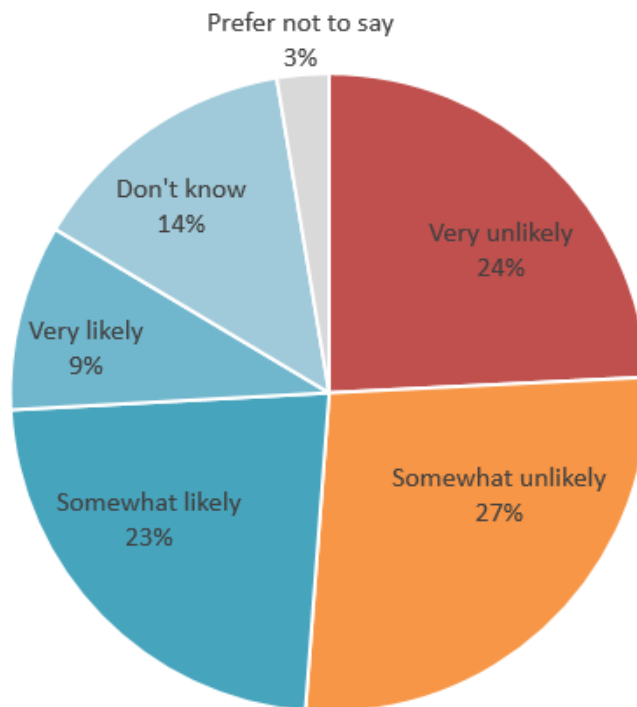I am aware that Canadian federal political parties may collect my ____ for use in electoral campaigning:
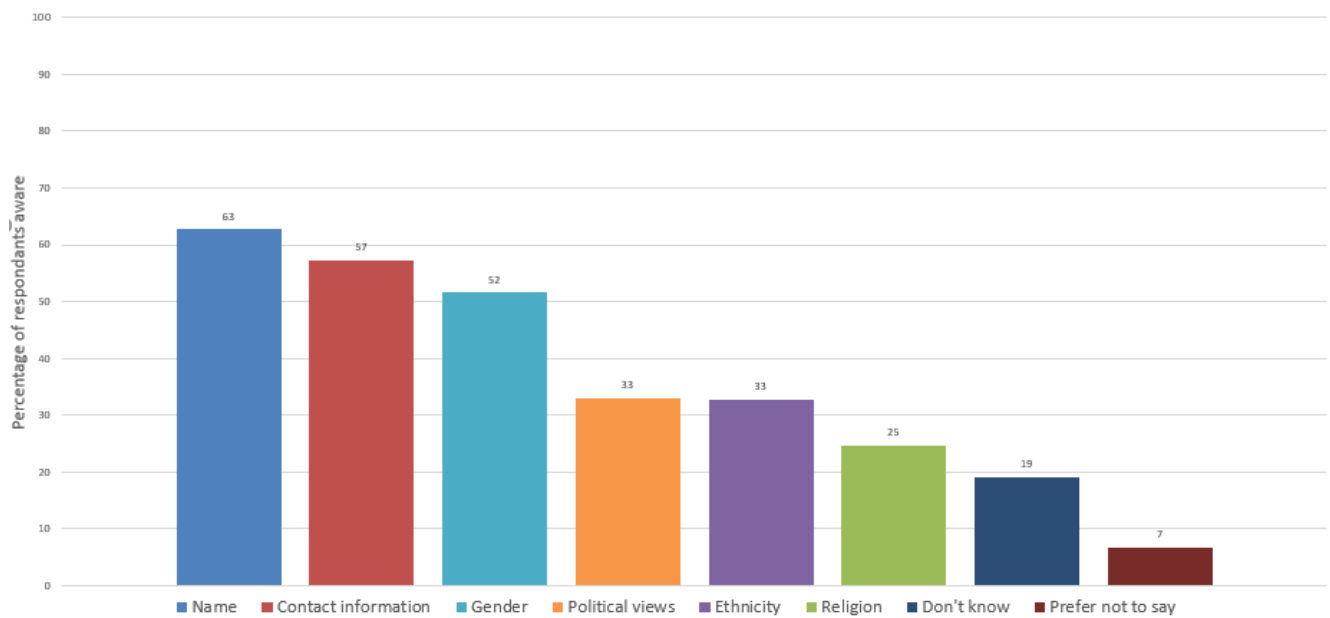
Suggested quote: *"Although most respondents identified 'name,' 'contact information,' and 'gender' as information that parties collect, a majority were not aware that parties may also may collect information about electors' ethnicity, religious affiliation, and political opinions. This suggests that most voters really don't know about the kinds of data that Canadian political parties may be collecting." – Sara Bannerman*

AWARENESS OF INFORMATION COLLECTION MAY AFFECT ENGAGE-MENT WITH PARTIES

After learning about some of the information that parties collect, 51% of respondents said they were "somewhat" or "very" unlikely to speak with campaign personnel. This finding suggests that awareness of federal parties' collection of personal information may discourage some electors from engaging with party personnel during elections.

Knowing that parties may collect personal information such as your name, contact information, religion, gender, ethnicity, and political views, how likely are you to speak with party campaign personnel?


- Prefer not to say 3%
- Don't know 14%
- Very likely 9%
- Somewhat likely 23%
- Somewhat unlikely 27%
- Very unlikely 24%

Suggested quote: *"As Canadians become more aware of big data campaigning, our study raises concern that some electors may be discouraged from engaging with party personnel during elections. This could impact parties' mobilization of electors and raises concerns regarding public trust and democratic engagement." – Sara Bannerman*

PARTIES' STANCE ON PRIVACY MATTERS

Respondents were also asked whether "a party's stance on privacy make[s] a difference" in their willingness to speak with party personnel. A majority, 55%, indicated that a party's stance on privacy did alter their willingness to engage with campaign personnel; 16% said it made a "major difference;" 25% said it made a "moderate difference;" and 13% reported that it made a "minor difference." In contrast, 27% of respondents indicated that privacy policies made "no difference" in their willingness to engage with campaign personnel.

Federal privacy law does NOT currently apply to federal political parties. Parties have different privacy policies. Some parties believe that federal privacy law should apply to federal political parties while others think they should be exempt. Does a party's stance on privacy make a difference in your willingness to speak with party campaign personnel?

Prefer not to say
3%

Don't know
16%

No difference
27%

Major difference
16%

Minor difference
13%

Moderate difference
25%
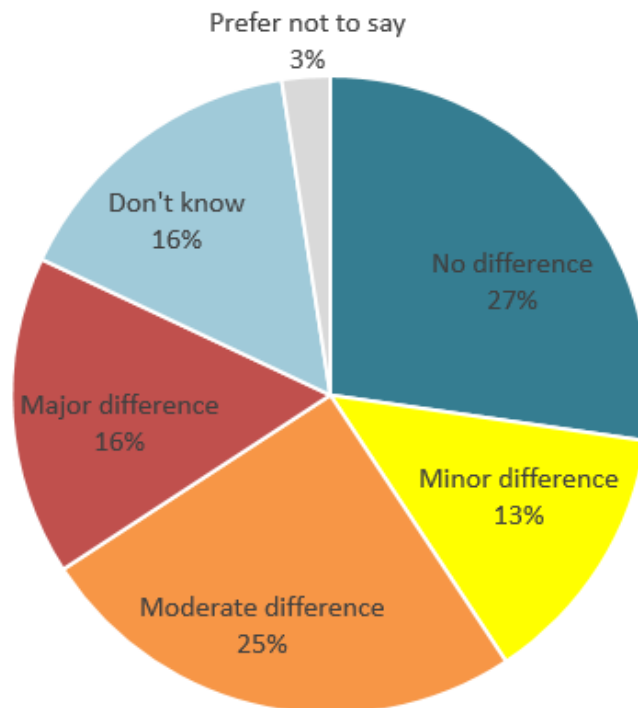
Suggested quote: *"Our study suggests that Canadian political parties' stances on privacy are an important consideration in Canadians' willingness to engage with party personnel. Appropriate data practices and privacy policies are needed in Canada to reinforce Canadians' confidence in party institutions and support continued democratic engagement at election time." – Nicole Goodman*

The study concludes that the regulation of Canadian political parties' collection and use of data is increasingly important to support the democratic process in the digital age. Collection and use of electors' personal data could not only play a decisive role in election campaigns, but such practices could also affect interactions between electors and party personnel. Voters should be assured that parties are following established standards in their practices with electors' data.

This study is part of the [Digital Ecosystem Research Challenge](#), a collaborative and interdisciplinary effort between Canadian universities to study data privacy and digital communication in the 2019 federal election led by Elizabeth Dubois (University of Ottawa) and Taylor Owen (McGill University).