

DATA DIVE WITH NIK NANOS

# TRUDEAU AND THE FEDERAL LIBERALS SAW A HISTORICALLY BAD YEAR

Polling shows 2023 was the worst year for the party since it was in the political wilderness about a decade ago

OPINION

Nik Nanos is the chief data scientist at Nanos Research, research adjunct professor at the Norman Paterson School for International Affairs at Carleton University, a global fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington and, the official pollster for The Globe and Mail and CTV News.

From a polling perspective, 2023 was a horrible year for the federal Liberals. It doesn't matter if the government was sometimes a victim of forces outside its control – it felt as if everything that could have gone wrong went wrong.

There are certain public opinion records governments don't like to break, and according to annual tracking by Nanos over the past 17 years, the Liberals broke the record last year for the lowest positive performance score for the federal government. Only 23 per cent of Canadians scored the government as doing a very good (5 per cent) or good (18 per cent) job.

This is down 37 points compared with when the Liberals assumed office in 2015, and lower than in the last year of the previous Conservative government: In the year before Stephen Harper was defeated by the Justin Trudeau Liberals, more than one in three assessed the performance of the Harper government as very good (16 per cent) or good (21 per cent).

It doesn't get much better when it comes to how Canadians feel about our international reputation: The Liberals registered the lowest positive score of any government in 17 years with only 13 per cent of respondents saying that Canada's reputation around the world over the past year has improved (3 per cent) or somewhat improved (10 per cent).

What is striking about the trend line is the same Liberal government has registered both the highest and the lowest scores both on performance and our self perception of our international reputation. Also, views on these matters are more likely to be more negative among Canadians who are under 55 years of age compared with those over 55.

When asked about whether Canada is moving in the right or wrong direction, the Trudeau Liberals have tied the Harper Conservatives with the lowest right-direction score (31 per cent) over the past 17 years.

People that live in the West, men and middle-aged Canadians were more likely to assert that Canada was moving in the wrong direction compared with others. The current right-direc-

tion assessment for the Liberals of 31 per cent is the lowest of their mandate, with right-direction scores being twice as high at the beginning of their first mandate in 2015.

It's hard to see any silver linings for the Liberals. Asked about the state of federal-provincial relations, those that said they have improved or somewhat improved increased from

10 per cent in 2022 to 13 per cent in 2023. Still, on this measure, Canadians were more than four times as likely to share a negative rather than a positive assessment.

It's no wonder the federal Liberals trail the Conservatives in the double digits and Mr. Trudeau is behind Pierre Poilievre by double digits in the weekly Nanos preferred prime minister tracking.

More importantly, the trending relationships have also changed.

Between 2015 and August, 2023, the Liberal and New Democratic trend lines had an inverse relationship. When Liberal support went up, NDP support declined. This scenario was one of consolidation and deconsolidation of progressive voters.

Since August, 2023, a new relationship has emerged. NDP ballot support decoupled from the Liberals, and currently the relationship is primarily between Liberal and Conservative ballot numbers. The decline in Liberal support since August has benefited the Conservatives and not the NDP. This suggests former progressive-leaning voters swinging to the Conservatives.

The past four months have witnessed an unravelling of the Liberal progressive voting coalition. Liberal political fortunes are now weaker among voters under 55 years of age both in Ontario and in Atlantic Canada.

Although Liberal support is comparatively stronger among female than male voters, it is near or at the lowest level since 2015.

By the numbers, 2023 was the worst year for the Liberals since they were in the political wilderness about a decade ago.

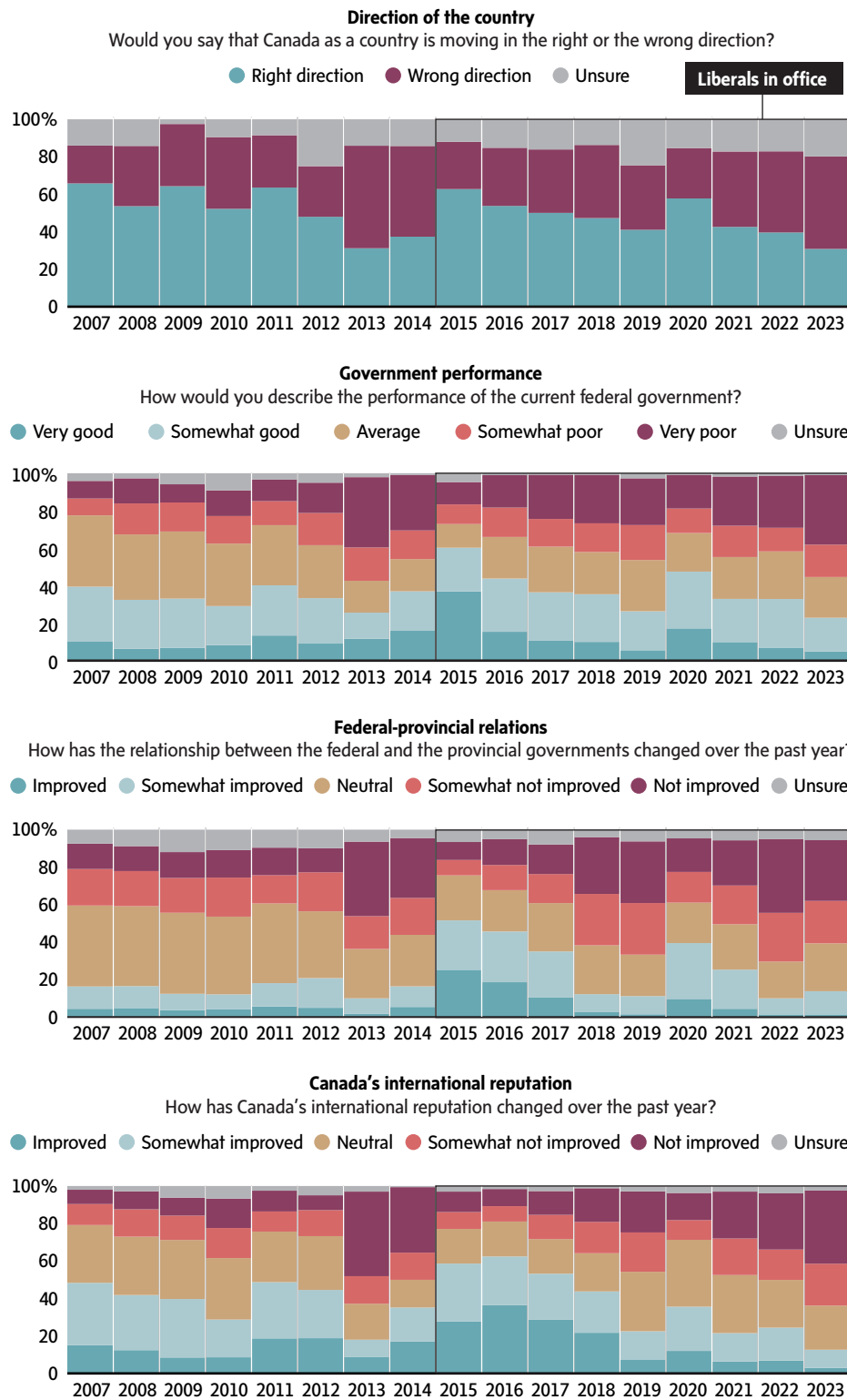
Nothing is set in stone and one should never underestimate the ability of any politician to make a blunder – whether it be the front-runner or the person in second place. In the case of the Liberals, it will require Mr. Poilievre to make a monstrous blunder, indeed.

However, time is running out to change the trend line.

The good news for the federal Liberals is that the election is not today. The bad news is that turning these numbers around and hoping everything goes wrong for your opponents may be wishful thinking. Every government has a best-before date. For the Liberals, it might have been 2023.

## The whither report

### CANADIANS' VIEWS ON HOW THE COUNTRY HAS CHANGED



MURAT YÜKSELİR / THE GLOBE AND MAIL, SOURCE: NANOS RESEARCH

# If AI is threatening democracy, protect democracy first

SAM JEFFERS

OPINION

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In 2024, there will be at least 65 elections in 54 countries, and even more when you count individual countries' votes for their leaders in the European Parliament. Like the circling of some great democratic comet, we won't see the likes of this again until 2048. And as we enter a year where more than two billion people will vote, Silicon Valley and the political system are panicking about the impact of artificial intelligence on elections.

In March, 2022, a deepfake video of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky declaring his country was "surrendering" was posted online. In May last year, an AI-generated photo of an explosion at the Pentagon caused U.S. markets to dip briefly. In September, AI-generated videos and audio purporting to demonstrate election rigging circulated in Slovakia just as citizens were headed to the polls, and in October, fake audio of Keir Starmer (likely Britain's next prime minister) berating a staffer spread across British Twitter for an hour or so.

All are cited as examples of the risks to democracy and truth that AI can pose. But it's important to note that each was quickly debunked, and they never made

their way into more authoritative news sources, where they might have had a wider impact.

Currently, generative AI produces convincing, but short-lived, fakes. The quick debunking in these cases also shows us that information, disinformation and misinformation, as piecemeal phenomena, generally don't matter very much on their own. If they are to be dangerous, they need to hitch themselves to a wider, more convincing narrative.

Over the past few years, we've seen the American right create these narratives in the form of conspiracy theories such as Pizzagate and QAnon, as well as the MAGA movement (all without the use of AI). Fortunately, to have a similar effect, AI-generated content will also need skilled human operators, with knowledge across politics, news and distribution. Without these skilled humans, generative AI isn't autonomous enough to create, spread or sustain stories like the ones that have taken hold in the U.S. Just as most human political campaigns fail, AI-enabled ones will, too. But we may not be far off from a world where they succeed.

We also need to consider how generative AI content reaches us. Currently, this mostly happens through social networks, which actually place further limitations on AI's ability to have an impact on elections in 2024. Why? Because the contemporary media ecosystem is incredibly fragmented, and is only becoming more so. As the previously concentrated user group from Twitter/X fragments into separate communities

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on Threads, BlueSky and Mastodon, and as Facebook's users head to Instagram, TikTok and beyond, this fragmentation slows things down and limits the effects of bad content to ever-smaller corners of the internet. It makes detection and explanation of the phenomena more difficult, but it also makes it more marginal.

These three factors alone – the short-lived impact of most fakes, the need for them to be attached to larger narratives and the fragmentation of our information diet – are our first layer of "natural" protections against the potential harms of generative AI when it comes to elections.

But we shouldn't rely solely on these features of the landscape to protect us. Instead, we should take a pro-active position in favour of democracy and elections as human activities that are by and for people.

We can do this by limiting excessive technological personalization in election campaigns, whether by AI, social media or paid ads. Many voters do want to learn what a politician can do for them, but they also want to know what's being offered to everyone else. Just as candidates can't speak to each of us individually, nor should thousands of AI agents be able to do so on their behalf. We must prevent this from becoming a normal practice for political campaigns.

We must also be mostly able to trust that someone is who they say they are online. Anonymity plays an important role in voting and we should cherish it when it's needed, but otherwise, it should

be discouraged in general, particularly when votes are at stake. We should expect to know, in almost all cases, who is saying what, and therefore what motivates their position. AI should never hide, or be hidden from us.

Social-media platforms must play an active role, too. Not all of them are going to end up as big players in generative AI (though all of them are trying to be), but as the largest carriers of the information we see, they will need to help users understand which content is AI generated, monitor for large-scale manipulation of accounts and comments, prevent co-ordinated AI harassment of politicians and civil society, and allow for proper research into and auditing of their systems.

Together, we need to push back hard against those who try to harm democracy, a problem that has increasingly come from within in recent years. Disinformation often comes from the very top of the tree, as do polarization and fragmentation. Where leaders lead, society, at least in part, seems to follow. We should set a higher standard, and collectively draw the line that shouldn't be crossed, by calling out politicians and campaigns who use AI to mislead us or our fellow citizens.

The AI frenzy is very much here, and when it comes to threats to democracy from generative AI, we should be prepared, even if the risks don't quite end up matching the hype. We should also prepare ourselves with a particular perspective – one that puts democracy, rather than AI's progress, at the centre of our thinking.