

# Unveiling: An Unexpected Mid-campaign Court Ruling's Consequences and the Limits of Following the Leader

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Strong evidence exists that major campaign-relevant events can have substantial impacts on vote intentions. We know less about how information about such events diffuses and why only some events become salient. We posit that voters often become aware of such exogenous events via a media mechanism. As the salience of the policy issue in the media increases, we argue that, under certain conditions, the media primes the voters to defect from their party and its leader. We investigate these processes by studying an unexpected court ruling during the 2015 Canadian federal election campaign. Based on difference-in-differences and text-as-data approaches, we find that an exogenous court ruling related to immigrant integration led to between a 5 and 11 percentage point decline in the leading party's support. Beyond modeling how campaign-relevant events become salient through the media, we provide evidence about circumstances where leaders should not expect party loyalty to override crystallized opinions.

Identifying the effects of campaign-relevant events on voter behavior is notoriously difficult (Erikson and Wlezien 2012). One approach investigates events beyond the control of politicians and evaluates these events' electoral impacts by exploiting surveys in the field at the time of these exogenous events (Muñoz, Falcó-Gimeno, and Hernández 2019). Within this approach, events such as high-impact natural disasters or terrorist attacks have received the most scholarly attention (e.g., Achen and Bartels 2016; Balcells and Torrats-Espinosa 2018). We investigate a different type of event—a high-impact court ruling.

Little is known about both the mechanism through which voters become aware of campaign-relevant events and the circumstances under which they are then primed to make the issues raised by such events a central part of their voting calculations (Iyengar and Kinder 2010). Theorizing why, under

what conditions, and how exogenous events influence voting behavior requires scholars to closely examine issue types, diffusion mechanisms, and priming processes.

With respect to issue types, Lenz (2012) posits that, for policy issues, voters will follow their leader. Lenz provides evidence that as the salience of a policy issue increases, voters come to adopt their leader's or party's policy position. While often applicable, we argue that Lenz's theory has scope conditions. We focus on a two-part scope condition: high levels of crystallized opinion among the population (Tesler 2015) and a leader who holds a policy position out of line with this strongly held opinion. We theorize that, under these conditions, as the salience of a policy issue increases, voters may defect from the leader or party. We anticipate that electoral defection may be particularly common in systems with weak partisan attachment, such as Canada and Western Europe (Dalton 2004).

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Like others, we observe that at times a leader may hold a view out of line with their constituents' preferences on a given issue (Butler and Dynes 2016). A leader who holds such an unpopular opinion may not suffer electorally, even if voters hold crystallized opinions on the issue, when the issue is not part of the current public discourse (Edwards, Mitchell, and Welch 1995). However, an exogenous event can increase media attention to this issue during an electoral campaign. The salience of the issue may then be heightened for voters, who may consequently be primed to change their voting behavior. Under such conditions, a leader can then lose support.

We posit that an important mechanism by which public awareness of an event and associated issues increases is media coverage of that event. Although the existing literature often assumes that an entire electorate is made immediately aware of important events (e.g., Bali 2007; Bechtel and Hainmueller 2011), instant and complete diffusion of event-related information is often unrealistic, particularly for an event such as a court ruling. Instead, diffusion is a gradual process whereby an exogenous event can induce increased coverage and attention of an issue that gradually heightens its salience and can lead to priming.

To demonstrate this media mechanism and the scope conditions for Lenz's argument, we leverage an exogenous shock that occurred during the 2015 Canadian federal election. While many electoral campaigns across the developed world have focused on immigrant integration issues in recent years, these issues arose in the 2015 Canadian federal election campaign only after an unexpected court ruling in which the country's Federal Court of Appeal affirmed the right for women to wear the niqab (a face veil worn by some Muslim women) during their Oath of Citizenship ceremony. This decision was not supported in the large province of Quebec, where, for historical and cultural reasons, the population displays far lower levels of support for religious accommodation than the population in the rest of Canada (Turgeon et al. 2019).

Prior to the ruling on September 15, 2015, polls estimated the three major political parties—the Liberal Party of Canada (LPC), the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC), and the New Democratic Party (NDP)—to be at parity across Canada, each with 30% of decided voters. Moreover, and despite their previously declared support for women to take a citizenship oath wearing the niqab, the NDP was leading in Quebec, with approximately 45% of decided voters.<sup>1</sup> The NDP stuck to its position in the weeks after the ruling and was subsequently crushed at the ballot box on October 19, notably losing most of its seats in Quebec.

1. Based on Local Parliament Project (Loewen et al. 2015) data from August 25 to September 14,  $n = 1,936$ .

## THE EFFECT OF THE COURT RULING ON MEDIA COVERAGE

To support our argument that media coverage heightens the salience of a policy issue associated with a campaign-relevant event, we present results from an original data set of French- and English-language print media coverage from July 1 to October 31, 2015, that mentions either the niqab or the economy (a baseline campaign-relevant coverage category). Figure 1 shows that there was effectively no discussion of the niqab ban in the media prior to the court ruling. However, after September 15, the media paid substantial attention to the issue in both Quebec and the rest of Canada. In Quebec, the court ruling had a strong effect on media coverage that peaked at a daily rate akin to coverage of the economy, while in the rest of Canada, coverage peaked at approximately half that of the coverage of the economy.<sup>2</sup>

## INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL ANALYSIS

The media coverage shown in figure 1 and statistical treatment in appendix C (apps. A–H are available online) indicate a strong media response to the court ruling. Given this causal effect and the NDP's opposition to the niqab ban, we turn to evaluating the impact of the court ruling on their electoral support. To do so, we rely on two sources: the same media coverage data set visualized in figure 1 and the 2015 Canadian Election Study (CES).

With the CES data (Fournier et al. 2015), we employ a difference-in-differences (DID) design with cross-sectional data to measure the impact of the ruling.<sup>3</sup> As both Quebec and the other Canadian provinces were exposed to the court ruling, our models estimate the heterogeneous effects of the event, with the Quebec residents as the treatment group.

For all models, the outcome variable is an indicator of whether the respondent intends to vote for the NDP (1) or is either undecided or intends to vote for any other party (0). We rely on linear probability models for our main DID estimations (a strategy endorsed by Hellevik [2009]). We focus on the interaction of two variables: the niqab court ruling and residence in Quebec. Specifically, the niqab court ruling variable is binary and scores 0 up to and including September 15 and 1 starting on September 16, the day after the ruling. The Quebec dummy variable registers whether a respondent is a resident of Quebec. We run specifications both with and

2. Appendix B details the context of the election and the distinct attitudes of Quebecers and rules out alternative explanations. Appendix C discusses the exogeneity of the court ruling and provides estimates of the causal effect of the ruling on media coverage.

3. DID can be employed with both panel and cross-sectional data, although the latter strategy is less frequent (Lechner 2011).

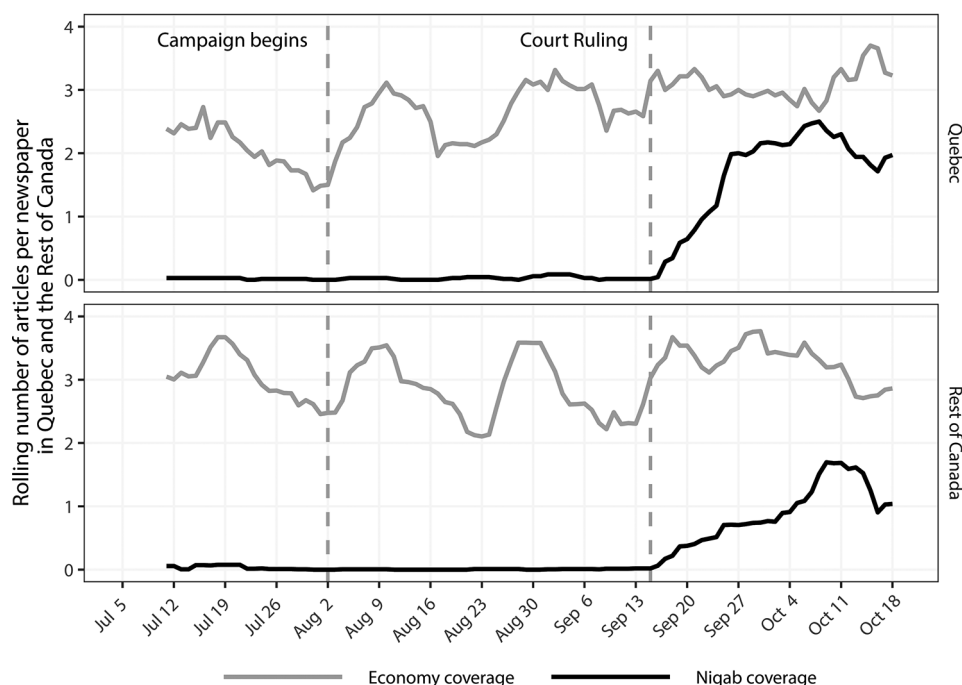


Figure 1. Media coverage in Quebec and the rest of Canada during the 2015 campaign (seven-day rolling average); see app. A for descriptive statistics and data collection strategy.

without standard controls used in the Canadian context (Gidengil 2013) and find reliably similar results.<sup>4</sup>

We supplement our main models with two additional approaches. First, we employ a text-as-data approach showing how the media strongly and negatively associated the NDP with the niqab ruling. Second, we use CES panel data showing how voters with crystallized opinions were primed on the issue.

### INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL RESULTS

Table 1 displays the results for several DID models with controls. Model 1 shows a naive estimation, which assumes a sharp discontinuity. In this model, the exogenous event was significant and negative for the NDP in Quebec: the coefficient ( $\text{Ruling} \times \text{Quebec}$ ) indicates an almost 11-point drop in the 33-day post-ruling period.

However, a sharp discontinuity in levels of electoral support is unrealistic. Few Canadians are made immediately aware of technical court rulings. Unlike a terrorist attack or a natural disaster, coverage of such an event develops over the subsequent weeks (as shown in fig. 1). Therefore, as we have argued, voters will gradually be exposed to information and subsequently react. This reasoning suggests that the effect of the ruling would not be sudden but, rather, the result of increased

salience over time. To test this, model 2 introduces a variable that accounts for a post-September 15 linear trend. The variable scores 0 up to and including September 15, and afterward it counts the number of days since September 15 (the first stories appeared on September 16).

As expected, when we include both the court ruling dummy and the linear trend in model 2 of table 1, the effect of the interaction between Quebec and the ruling disappears, while the coefficient for the post-ruling trend for respondents in Quebec ( $\text{Trend} \times \text{Quebec}$ ) is negative (0.59 percentage points).<sup>5</sup> We find that the effect of the ruling is approximated by a linear trend that links the September 15 event with the drop in support for the NDP in Quebec. Vote intention in the rest of Canada experiences neither a sharp discontinuity nor the downward linear trend in the post-ruling period.

The linear trend proxies here for the increased salience of the issue, as days passed since the ruling are not themselves consequential. We theorize that the media increases the salience of the niqab issue and primes voters to place the issue centrally in their vote evaluations. We thus model vote intention as a function of media coverage.

### MEDIA MECHANISM

To estimate the relationship between increased salience and NDP support, we substitute the court ruling dummy and linear

4. Appendix D details our DID empirical strategy, provides balance checks for respondents' as-if randomization, and gives evidence for the parallel trend assumption.

5. See app. E for tests and robustness checks confirming that the data show a trend and not a clear discontinuity.

Table 1. The Effects of the Niqab Ruling on Vote Intention for the NDP

	Binary DID (1)	Linear Trend (2)	7-Day Media (3)
DID effects:			
Ruling × Quebec	-10.62 (2.60)*	-.03 (4.12)	
Trend × Quebec		-.59 (.18)*	
7-day niqab × Quebec			-.67 (.25)*
Other coefficients:			
Constant	15.45 (4.13)*	15.32 (4.13)*	14.95 (4.18)*
Voted NDP 2011	48.98 (1.55)*	48.87 (1.55)*	48.95 (1.34)*
Ruling	-2.69 (1.51)	-2.51 (2.33)	
Quebec	8.32 (2.93)*	7.92 (2.93)*	7.61 (2.68)*
Trend		-.01 (.11)	
7-day niqab			-.32 (.21)
R <sup>2</sup>	.28	.29	.28
No. observations	3,789	3,789	3,789

Note. Linear probability models for DID estimations with robust standard errors for models 1 and 2 and clustered standard errors at the day level for model 3 in parentheses. Dependent variable is vote intention for the NDP (binary variable). All models use full CES web sample.

\*  $p < .05$ .

trend with a measure of media coverage that approximates the informational environment of the campaign. We match each respondent with a media environment measure, based on their location and date of their interview, which captures a rolling sum of niqab coverage for the previous week. Model 3 displays these results.

The data show a strong association: for every story published on the niqab in the previous seven days in the average Quebec newspaper, support for the NDP vote in Quebec dropped by approximately 0.67 percentage points (7-Day Niqab × Quebec). A hypothetical Quebec-based individual sampled on October 5 (two weeks before the election) who read only one newspaper would have been exposed to an average of 16 articles on the niqab over the previous week and the model estimates they would be 10 points less likely to indicate vote intention for the NDP relative to a respondent interviewed on September 15. The volume coverage of the niqab over the previous week is associated with a steep decline in support for the NDP among Quebec voters. There is no similar effect found in vote intentions in the rest of Canada. When coupled with the causal relationship between the court ruling and the media coverage of the niqab issue, our model indicates that the ruling exerted a pronounced effect on electoral support for the NDP.<sup>6</sup>

6. We show strong robustness of our estimation strategies in models 2 and 3 to alternative specifications and a different survey sample, all with substantively similar results, as reported in app. F.

### Text analysis

Students of Canadian politics might observe that the LPC and the NDP held similar positions toward the niqab before and during the 2015 campaign, but we have shown that the niqab issue particularly hurt the NDP in Quebec and not the LPC. If the media coverage simply informed voters of party positions, then support for the LPC should have decreased in a manner similar to the NDP, while parties whose positions were more in line with mainstream Quebec opinion should have benefited. To solve this puzzle, we must consider the media associations and evaluations in the diffusion process.

To do so, we perform two forms of text analysis on Quebec news articles that mention the niqab ( $n = 489$ ). We use two hierarchical dictionary count (proximity count) methods, looking both at associations and sentiment. First, we test whether the media was more critical of the NDP than the LPC during the election campaign. We identify key terms associated with both parties. We then use the French-language Lexicoder sentiment dictionary (Duval and Pétry 2016) to identify negative and positive sentiment in proximate word tokens (15 words in either direction) to the party-affiliated words. We find that tokens proximate to NDP-associated terms are more negative than those of the LPC-associated terms (mean difference of 5%,  $p = .03$  for an article-based  $t$ -test). A “net tone” analysis (Lowe et al. 2011) confirms the difference ( $p = .03$ ).

Second, we test for association between mentions of the niqab and the NDP to determine whether this issue is being

specifically linked with the NDP. We check the frequency of NDP and LPC mentions across our article sample. Here we find large differences, with the NDP-associated terms appearing much more frequently in the articles as compared with the LPC-associated ones (3.68 vs. 2.20 average mentions per article,  $p = .0007$  for a daily average  $t$ -test). Media coverage during the election strongly and negatively associated the NDP with the crystallized issue of religious accommodation.<sup>7</sup>

### Panel data results

We find a strong effect of the court ruling on media coverage related to the niqab ban, a proxy for religious accommodation, and on vote intentions. We present results of individual-level panel data analysis from the CES to further show the power of the media priming mechanism. If priming occurred, we would expect that those in favor of the ban would be less likely to express vote intention for the NDP once the issue became primed (after the ruling). To test this expectation, we use a postelection question asking whether the respondent is in favor of a ban on the niqab during citizenship ceremonies to identify individual positions on the issue. As expected, those in Quebec who responded to the preelection survey prior to the court ruling and were in favor of the ban were equally likely, as compared to those against a ban, to express vote intentions for the NDP (39.6% vs. 37.8%). This indicates that their position on the issue was not integral to their vote decision for the NDP at the time of their survey. However, after September 15, with the issue newly salient as a result of heavy media coverage, the same comparison shows that those who were in favor of a ban were far less likely to indicate vote intention for the NDP (20.3% vs. 27.6%). There is no evidence that these results are driven by the timing of the survey. Respondents in the pre-election survey later self-report (in the post-election panel component of the survey) voting for the NDP at similar levels and express similar support for the niqab ban. Model-based difference-in-differences estimates find similar effect sizes ranging from a 5–8 percentage point difference.<sup>8</sup>

This panel analysis provides evidence for our priming explanation: an important mid-campaign shift occurred where the niqab ban issue went from a marginal consideration to one central to the evaluations of voters with negative (and crystallized) opinions on the niqab ban. The same comparisons for those residing in the rest of Canada or those who are against the ban do not show any difference.

7. Appendix G visualizes the media tone and mentions during the campaign, provides illustrative passages from the media analysis, and details the methods we employ.

8. Appendix H provides these and other details and statistical tests.

### CONCLUSION

Our analysis uses an unexpected court ruling to shed light on two important and difficult to study phenomena: how policy issues become salient during campaigns and how voters react to newly salient policy issues. First, we have shown a media process through which a policy issue becomes salient and the electorate is primed to act. Second, we have shown how the electorate reacts when a party (and its leader) maintains its position on a newly salient policy issue when such a position conflicts with the electorate's crystallized opinion. Indeed, contrary to some previous research from the United States, our case demonstrates that policy issues can matter for vote choice and voters may reject the policy leadership of politicians.

Our case thus provides empirical evidence for placing scope conditions on Lenz's (2012) follow-the-leader theory. We examine a case where voters hold crystallized views on a policy issue. In these circumstances, we demonstrate that Lenz's argument that voters generally disregard policy information may not always hold. We show that, for a certain type of issue, policy information may become electorally relevant through priming, and voters may choose not to follow their leader. Admittedly, we expect these scope conditions to apply in situations of weaker partisanship, such as Canada and Western Europe (Dalton 2004), but also in midlevel democracies with nascent partisanship, such as Mexico (Greene 2011). We urge more research to take up cases similar to ours to further test our claims.

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