

#TruckersNotTrudeau

How the “Freedom Convoy” transformed Pierre Poilievre’s presence and popularity on X(Twitter)

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#TruckersNotTrudeau: How the “Freedom Convoy” Transformed Pierre Poilievre’s Presence and Popularity on X(Twitter) (Observatory of Populism in Canada: Research Brief 0003).

@PierrePoilievre “I am running for Prime Minister to give you back control of your life. Sign up now to help me replace Trudeau & restore freedom.” February 5, 2022.

When Pierre Poilievre tweeted the above on February 5th, 2022, it struck a resounding chord in the Twitter(X)sphere. Marking the unofficial start of his campaign for leader of the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC), the tweet garnered 103,187 “likes,” making it by far the most popular tweet ever penned by Poilievre (1). Poilievre’s promise to “give back control” to Canadians and “restore freedom” came at the apex of the controversial “Freedom Convoy,” the series of anti-COVID-mandate blockades and protests taking place from January 22 – February 23, 2022 that shut down Ottawa’s city centre. Prime Minister Trudeau and NDP leader Jagmeet Singh both condemned the convoy, citing a threat to public order and safety. By contrast, several high-profile Conservative Party members pledged varying degrees of support for the protesters.

Among the most unequivocal in his support was Pierre Poilievre, then a Conservative MP best known for his prominent roles in government during the Harper years. A vocal opponent of federal COVID-19 mandates before the convoy began, Poilievre applauded the protesters, stating on several occasions that he “stands by” their efforts to defend “freedom.” These statements have led commentators to conclude that Poilievre “hitched his wagon” to the “Freedom Convoy,” and harnessed the divisions it fostered to propel himself to victory in the Conservative leadership race (2). However, the precise impact of the convoy on his popularity, especially compared to that of other Conservative candidates, remains unknown. We aim to fill this gap, using Twitter (now “X”) data to ask three questions:

- First, did the “Freedom Convoy” produce a discernible shift in Poilievre’s X(Twitter) presence and popularity? If so, how significant?
- Second, how did the convoy’s effect on Poilievre’s X(Twitter) popularity compare to that of other CPC leadership candidates, some of whom also supported the protesters?

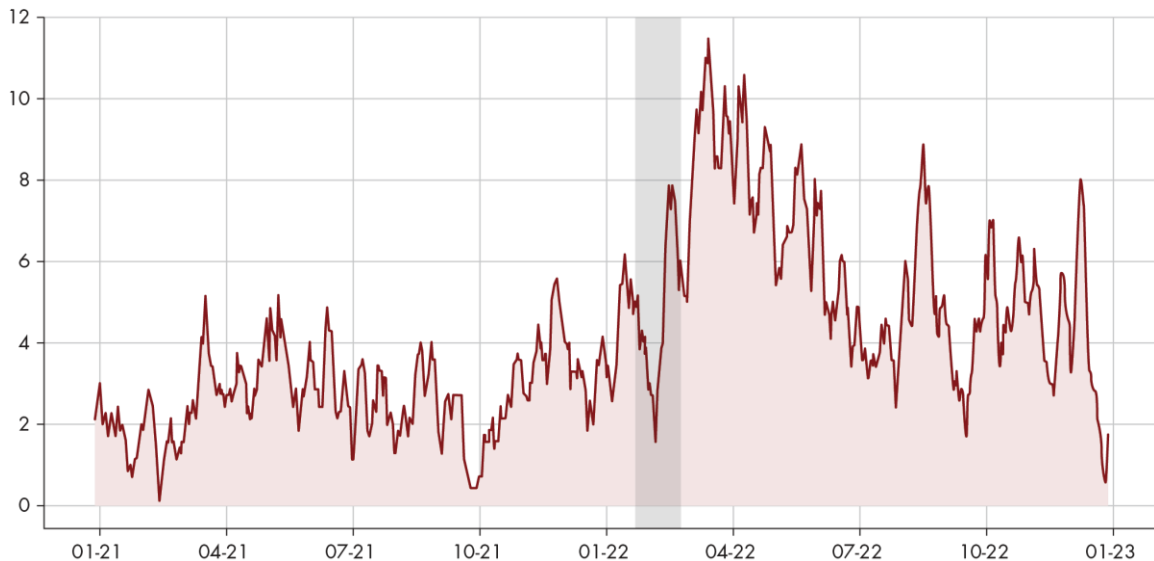
- Finally, what do these results suggest about the role of the “Freedom Convoy” in Poilievre’s larger political brand and legacy?

To answer these questions, we undertook a quantitative analysis in two stages, starting with a statistical comparison of the number of “likes” and “retweets” received by Poilievre’s X(Twitter) account before and after the “Freedom Convoy,” followed by a comparison of the same data for five other CPC leadership candidates: Roman Baber, Leslyn Lewis, Scott Aitchison, Patrick Brown, and Jean Charest.

POILIEVRE’S X(TWITTER) PRESENCE AND POPULARITY BEFORE AND AFTER THE CONVOY

Figure 1 provides a timeline of the daily number of tweets posted by @PierrePoilievre from January 2021 – December 2022. It shows that the convoy, highlighted in grey, marked a substantial break in Poilievre’s X(Twitter) activity, with the number of tweets peaking during and shortly after the protests and remaining higher on average in the months that followed.

FIGURE 1. Daily tweets by @PierrePoilievre, January 1, 2021–December 31, 2022



Several of the tweets posted by @PierrePoilievre during the convoy were geared toward de-demonizing the protesters in response to widespread criticisms and channeling the grievances of “truckers” against Trudeau:

@PierrePoilievre “Just talked with hundreds of cheerful, peaceful, salt-of-the-earth, give-you-the-shirt-off-their-back Canadians at the trucker protest. They choose freedom over fear”. January 31, 2022.

@PierrePoilievre “These are the people the media & Trudeau want to silence. Bright, joyful, peaceful Canadians championing freedom over fear on Parliament Hill. #TruckersNotTrudeau”. January 31, 2022.

Other tweets leveraged the discontent expressed by the convoy to elicit broader concerns about the threat of COVID mandates to Canadians’ “freedom” and to channel those concerns into support for Poilievre in the leadership campaign:

@PierrePoilievre “Freedom is on the move. Keep it going. Sign up to end mandates”. February 9, 2022.

The convoy was therefore accompanied by a notable acceleration in Poilievre’s X(Twitter) activity. But what of the impact of the tweets? How did they register with audiences? Figure 2 addresses this by displaying the number of likes and retweets obtained by Poilievre’s X(Twitter) account from January 2021 – December 2022. Each of these metrics captures a different dimension of popularity. Likes indicate users’ approval of a tweet, and thus arguably reflect popularity most directly. For the sake of robustness, we also considered retweets, which, though they may not reveal users’ (dis)approval, are an established indicator of impact.

FIGURE 2. Daily number of likes and retweets for @PierrePoilievre, January 1, 2021–December 31, 2022



The results show that, in terms of both likes and retweets, Poilievre’s popularity increased dramatically during the convoy and remained higher in its aftermath (3).

In order to ensure the robustness of these findings and confirm that the surge in Poilievre’s X(Twitter) popularity during the convoy was not due to random effects, we compared the number of likes and retweets that Poilievre obtained before and during the “Freedom Convoy” while controlling for patterns over the same period one year earlier. The results (shown in the technical section) reveal that Poilievre’s popularity increased substan-

tially during the convoy compared to the 30 days prior. It also suggests that this spike in popularity is not a random result of seasonal patterns, given that no measurable increases were observed over the same period in 2021.

Standardized regression results (shown in technical section) confirm this conclusion. Compared to the 30 days preceding it, the Freedom Convoy multiplied the number of likes Poilievre received by 2.93. In other words, the convoy made Poilievre nearly 3 times more liked on X(Twitter) than he had been previously.

COMPARING THE EFFECT OF THE CONVOY ON POILIEVRE'S X(TWITTER) POPULARITY TO THAT OF OTHER CONSERVATIVE LEADERSHIP CANDIDATES

What of the other CPC leadership candidates? To what extent and how did the “Freedom Convoy” affect their X(Twitter) popularity? How do they compare to Poilievre in this regard?

Besides Poilievre, Roman Baber and Leslyn Lewis were the most favourable toward the “Freedom Convoy” among the CPC leadership candidates. Both publicly supported the truckers and framed their efforts as part of a battle for “freedom” and “democracy.” They also decried the Trudeau government for deploying the Emergencies Act to end the blockades. Scott Aitchison was more equivocal in addressing the convoy, drawing a line between peaceful and unlawful protest. The most critical were Patrick Brown, who questioned the motives of the protesters, and Jean Charest, who condemned the convoy outright and called Poilievre unfit to lead based on his endorsement of its activities.

Our findings reveal substantial differences in the effects of the convoy on the five other candidates' popularity. Results for each candidate show that Baber, Lewis, and Aitchison saw spikes in the daily number of likes and retweets during the convoy. However, except for Lewis, there was no discernible lasting effect on their popularity, and the peaks observed during the convoy have since been matched or superceded. For Brown, the convoy had no discernible effect on popularity. For Charest, a before- and-after comparison was not possible because he only joined X(Twitter) in March 2022.

How, then, do the effects of the convoy on popularity compare for Baber, Lewis, Aitchison, and Brown versus Poilievre? Standardized regression analyses (shown in the technical section) showed that the effect of the “Freedom Convoy” on X(Twitter) likes was 6 times greater for Pierre Poilievre than it was for any other candidate. In other words, despite being joined by Baber and Lewis in supporting the convoy, Poilievre was by far the most successful in using the opportunity of the convoy to generate a marked increase in popularity.

CONCLUSION: THE IMPACT OF THE “FREEDOM CONVOY” ON POILIEVRE'S POLITICAL BRAND

Endorsement of the “Freedom Convoy” was highly propitious for Poilievre. Other CPC candidates, like Baber and Lewis, also hitched their wagons to the convoy. Compared to Poilievre, though, their increased Twitter activity did not produce nearly the same surge in popularity. Poilievre is therefore an outlier among Conservatives in seizing the opportunity afforded by the “Freedom Convoy” to tap potential voters who, for various reasons, opposed COVID-19 mandates. Poilievre's continued public support of the convoy in the months that followed suggest this event left a lasting mark on his political brand.

1. The next most popular tweet, also posted during the convoy, attracted 40,845 likes.
2. Vieira, P. "Canada's Conservatives Pick 'Freedom Convoy' Sympathizer to Lead Party Against Trudeau", *The Wall Street Journal*, September 10, 2022. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/canadas-conservatives-pick-freedom-convoy-sympathizer-to-lead-party-against-trudeau-11662855757>; Wherry, A. "Conservatives hitch their wagons to the convoy protest without knowing where it's going", *CBC News*, February 10, 2022. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/poilievre-conservative-otoole-convoy-vaccine-mandate-1.6335286>
3. Giving further context to these results is the fact that, of the 50 most "liked" tweets ever penned by Poilievre, nearly half – 24 – were posted during the "Freedom Convoy".

DATA

We use the X(Twitter) dataset of the Observatory that comprises the historical tweets of the Canadian MPs and party leaders since 2020. We create two samples for the two quantitative analyses that are presented below. The first sample includes original tweets posted by Pierre Poilievre from December 25th, 2020 to February 23rd, 2021 and from December 25th, 2021 to February 23rd, 2022. The second sample includes tweets posted by the six final verified candidates for the CPC leadership election (Scott Aitchison, Roman Baber, Patrick Brown, Jean Charest, Leslyn Lewis and Pierre Poilievre) from December 25th, 2021 to February 23rd, 2022.

We use four variables to proxy the Twitter popularity of Poilievre and of the five other politicians: the daily number of likes, the daily mean of likes, the daily number of retweets and the daily mean of retweets. We selected these variables for three primary reasons. First, liking a tweet is a direct sign of endorsement and support. Second, while the number of likes is an unambiguous measure of popularity, there are a number of different reasons why a user might retweet. For example, a user might retweet to endorse a tweet, but also to criticize it. We use the number of retweets as a robustness check, but one can expect mitigated results for the above reason. Finally, using the daily number of likes and retweets allows us to control directly for *volume*, while the mean is a more conservative approach that we also use for robustness. Tables A1 and A2 provide some descriptive statistics.

TABLE A1. Descriptive statistics of sample 1

		Obs.	Mean	Median	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
25/12/2020 to 23/02/2021	Likes	105	1,709.752	1,347	1,419.74	38	7,265
	Retweets	105	437.924	333	412.408	5	1,883
25/12/2021 to 23/02/2022	Likes	273	4,228.117	1,602	8,078.391	66	103,187
	Retweets	273	882.344	103	1,908.227	15	24,461

Notes: This table includes descriptive statistics on the original tweets posted by Pierre Poilievre from December 25th 2020 to February 23rd 2021 and from December 25th 2021 to February 23rd 2022.

TABLE A2. Descriptive statistics of sample 2

		Obs.	Mean	Median	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
Aitchison	Likes	60	20.617	1	108.391	0	822
	Retweets	60	79.717	14	354.977	1	2,726
Baber	Likes	161	419.130	320	414.608	6	2,756
	Retweets	161	1,452.236	1,164	1,208.203	96	7,854
Brown	Likes	217	29.691	4	143.363	0	1836
	Retweets	217	148.253	32	593.265	1	7,395
Charest	Likes	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Retweets	-	-	-	-	-	-
Poilievre	Likes	279	886.161	280	1,899.414	15	24,461
	Retweets	279	4,270.125	1,602	8,084.723	66	103,187
Lewis	Likes	47	668.596	319	961.294	11	5,337
	Retweets	47	3,051.489	1,526	4,112.485	72	24,411

Notes: This table includes descriptive statistics on the original tweets posted by the six final verified candidates for the CPC leadership election from December 25th 2021 to February 23rd 2022.

To facilitate the interpretation of the coefficients in the quantitative analyses, we perform two transformations. First, to investigate question 1, we express our data (sample 1) relative to the average daily number (or mean) of likes (or retweets) pre-Freedom Convoy. Second, to investigate question 2, we express our data (sample 2) relative to the average daily number (or mean) of likes (or retweets) of the 5 other candidates for the leadership of the CPC (i.e. all the candidates but Poilievre) prior to the convoy.

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

We implement a quasi-experimental approach to investigate how the Freedom Convoy affected Poilievre’s X(Twitter) popularity.

Did the Freedom Convoy produce a discernible shift in Poilievre’s X(Twitter) presence and popularity?

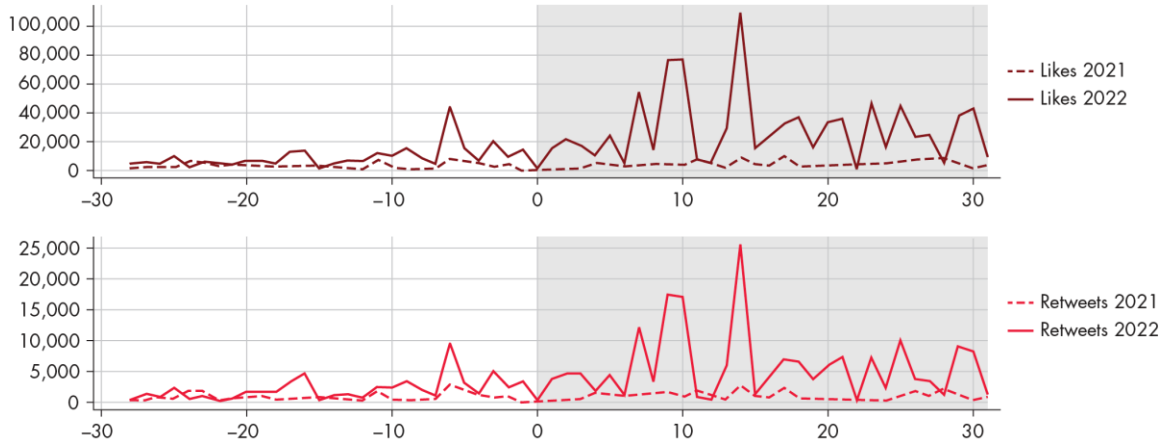
We use several Difference-in-Difference models in which the calendar year prior to the convoy serves as a counterfactual outcome. We estimate four specifications. The first specification is

$$X_t = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Y22t + \beta_2 Freedom1t + \beta_3 (Freedom1t \times Y22t) + \epsilon t \tag{1}$$

where X_t is the transformed daily number of likes that Poilievre receives on his tweets relative to the average daily number of likes he received on his tweets prior to the Freedom Convoy. This first measure of popularity gives more weight to the daily *volume* of likes. Both

$Y22t$ and $Freedom1t$ are binary variables. More specifically, $Y22t$ takes the value 1 for the days of 2022 and $Freedom1t$ takes the value 1 either on the period of the Freedom Convoy or on the days matching that period a year prior (2021). εt is the error term. Figure A1 illustrates this setting.

FIGURE A1. Difference-in-Difference setting of equation (1)



Notes: Dashed lines span from December 25th 2020 to February 23rd 2021 and plain lines span from December 25th 2021 to February 23rd 2022. The horizontal axes are expressed in terms of distance in days relative to January 22nd of the respective year (the Freedom Convoy started on January 22nd 2022).

β_3 is our parameter of interest. The validity of our estimation results rests on the standard parallel trend assumption that no significant shocks other than those related to the Freedom Convoy impacted Poilievre’s popularity during the year of the Freedom convoy and the control period a year prior (i.e. in the period of sample one).

TABLE A3. Estimation results associated with equation (1)

	Likes (sum)	Likes (mean)	Ret. (sum)	Ret. (mean)
<i>Y22t</i>	0.259** (0.113)	0.565*** (0.180)	0.276* (0.143)	0.633*** (0.215)
<i>Freedom1t</i>	1.026*** (0.262)	0.435*** (0.145)	0.900*** (0.273)	0.327* (0.174)
<i>Y22t × Freedom1t</i>	2.932*** (0.762)	2.301*** (0.863)	2.298*** (0.755)	1.715** (0.864)
Constant	0.535*** (0.0708)	0.668*** (0.0709)	0.577*** (0.101)	0.688*** (0.0992)
Observations	106	106	106	106

Notes: This table reports Difference-in-Difference estimates associated with equation (1). ‘*Y22 × Freedom1t*’ measures the average impact of the Freedom Convoy on Poilievre’s Twitter’s popularity relative to his own popularity during the same period the year before. Data span from December 25, 2020 to February 23, 2021 and from December 25, 2021 to February 23, 2022. Robust standard errors are included in parenthesis. ***p<0.01, **p<0.05, *p<0.1.

Column (1) of Table A3 shows the result of this regression. One can see that the treatment effect is 2.93, which means that the tweets that Poilievre posted during the Freedom Convoy were 2.93 times more liked than the tweets he posted before the convoy. In other words, the Freedom Convoy made Poilievre 3 times more popular than he was prior to that event. This result is very significant.

The other specifications are very similar to equation (1) but consider different proxies of popularity (as discussed in the previous subsection) such as the daily mean of likes (column 2), the daily number of retweets (column 3) and the daily mean of retweets (column 4). The effects of the Freedom Convoy on these other measures of popularity is very robust.

How did the convoy’s effect on Poilievre’s X(Twitter) popularity compare to that of other CPC leadership candidates, some of whom also supported the protesters?

We use several Difference-in-Difference models in which the popularity of the other candidates serves as a counterfactual outcome. Here too, we estimate four specifications. The first specification is

$$Z_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Poilievre_i + \beta_2 Freedom2t + \beta_3 (Freedom2t \times Poilievre_i) + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (2)$$

where Z_{it} is the transformed daily number of likes that politician i receives on their tweets. $Poilievre_i$ is a binary variable that takes the value 1 for the tweets of Pierre Poilievre. $Freedom2t$ takes the value 1 for the period of the Freedom Convoy. We apply a transformation to Z_{it} to allow for a multiplicative interpretation: for example, $\beta_3 = 2$ signifies the Freedom Convoy had a significantly greater impact – twice as much – on the popularity of Poilievre than on that of all other candidates. ε_{it} is the error term.

TABLE A4. Estimation results associated with equation (2)

	Likes (sum)	Likes (mean)	Ret. (sum)	Ret. (mean)
<i>Freedom2t</i>	0.436 (0.289)	0.552 (0.443)	0.390 (0.217)	0.495 (0.359)
<i>Poillievrei</i>	2.812*** (0.268)	1.081*** (0.226)	2.392*** (0.344)	0.901** (0.287)
<i>Freedom2t</i> * <i>Poillievrei</i>	6.373*** (0.289)	3.465*** (0.443)	4.816*** (0.217)	2.811*** (0.359)
Constant	0.564 (0.268)	0.448 (0.226)	0.610 (0.344)	0.505 (0.287)
Observations	234	234	234	234

Notes: This table reports Difference-in-Difference estimates associated with equation (2). '*Freedom2t* * *Poillievrei*' measures the average impact of the Freedom Convoy on Poillievre's Twitter's popularity relative to the popularity of the remaining final verified candidates for the CPC leadership election during the same period. Data span from December 25, 2021 to February 23, 2022. Robust standard errors are clustered at the individual level and included in parenthesis. ***p<0.01, **p<0.05, *p<0.1.

Column (1) of Table A4 shows the result of this first regression. One can see that over the entire time period of sample 2 (i.e. December 25th 2021 to February 23rd 2022), Poillievre was 2.8 times more popular than the other candidates. The treatment effect is 6.37, which means that the tweets that Poillievre posted during the Freedom Convoy were 6 times more liked than the tweets posted by the other candidates. In other words, Poillievre was 6 times more popular than the other candidates during the period of the Freedom Convoy. This result is very significant.

For robustness, we run three other specifications in the spirit of equation (2) considering the other proxies of popularity. Results using the transformed daily mean of likes, transformed daily number of retweets and the transformed daily mean of retweets are shown in columns (2), (3) and (4), respectively. Here again, the effects of the Freedom Convoy on the other measures of popularity are very robust.