

Populism and digital strategy

Comparing the use of hashtags in MPs' X (Twitter) discourses on inflation

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In an earlier brief, “Inflation, in Search of a Culprit,” we examined the prevalence and nature of populist discourses addressing inflation in Canadian federal MPs' activity on X (formerly Twitter) through the analysis of two hashtags: #justinflation and #greedflation. We emphasized that both hashtags present inflation as inflicted on ordinary Canadians by self-interested “elites”. In the case of #justinflation, the elite at fault is Justin Trudeau, while #greedflation targets corporations, namely, grocery store chains.

We reported that #justinflation was used 757 times between October 2021 and July 2023 (99% of the time by members of the Conservative Party of Canada, CPC), while #greedflation was used only 19 times (100% of the time by members of the New Democratic Party, NDP) during the same period. We also reported that use of #justinflation was much more concentrated in the tweets of the CPC leader Pierre Poilievre, whereas NDP leader Jagmeet Singh never mentioned #greedflation. Based on this, as well as a qualitative analysis of the tweets, we offered conclusions about the differing ways that – and degrees to which – right and left politicians in Canada utilize populist framing to address inflation.

Although social scientists frequently use hashtags to estimate the prevalence of various political discourses (1), these data alone cannot reveal the broader array of meanings attached to frames like “justinflation” and “greedflation”.

- How often do politicians deploy these frames beyond the use of hashtags?
- What might drive decisions to use hashtags versus not, and what might those decisions reveal about the differing digital strategies behind right- versus left-wing populist framing of inflation in Canada?

In this brief, we address these questions by comparing federal MPs' plain text (i.e. non-hashtag) versus hashtag uses of “justinflation” and “greedflation” on X (Twitter). We begin by estimating the broad numeric significance of such uses across parties. We then consider how those uses are distributed among MPs within the CPC and NDP. We conclude with a summary of implications for understanding the digital strategies behind hashtag use in the context of populism.

COMPARING PLAIN TEXT AND HASHTAG USES OF “JUSTINFLATION” AND “GREEDFLATION” AMONG MPS

Table 1 compares the number and percent of plain text versus hashtag uses of “justinflation” and “greedflation” in tweets by all Canadian federal MPs with X (Twitter) accounts between October 2021 and July 2023, broken down by party affiliation. The results reveal that plain text uses of “justinflation” appear significantly less often than hashtag uses of the term (12 vs. 757 uses). By contrast, MPs more often cited “greedflation” in plain text than in hashtag form (38 vs. 19 uses).

TABLE 1. Number of times “justinflation”/“#justinflation” and “greedflation”/“#greedflation” were used on X (Twitter) by party, October 2021 to July 2023

		CPC	Liberal	NDP	Green	Bloc Québécois	Independent	Total
“Justinflation”	Count	12	-	-	-	-	-	12
	%	100	-	-	-	-	-	100
#Justinflation	Count	748	-	2	-	-	7	757
	%	98.8	-	0.3	-	-	0.9	100
“Greedflation”	Count	2	-	36	-	-	-	38
	%	5	-	95	-	-	-	100
#Greedflation	Count	-	-	19	-	-	-	19
	%	-	-	100	-	-	-	100

Notes: Percentages rounded to nearest decimal.

A second implication of these results is that the CPC and NDP display opposite digital strategies with respect to using hashtags to generate popular concerns around “elites’” role in generating inflation: CPC MPs clearly favour hashtags when addressing “justinflation” whereas the NDP’s strategic preference with respect to “greedflation” is less clear. Why might this be?

According to research, X (Twitter) users opt for hashtags mainly as a way to organize content, to enable other users to tag or describe their tweets, making them more easily searchable, and to emphasize links to other topics (2). Based on this, we can speculate that, by using the hashtag #justinflation, CPC members may be seeking a consolidated use of the slogan as a way to “mobilize collective action” (3). In contrast, the more even balance exhibited by the NDP between plain text and hashtag uses of “greedflation” suggests a lesser degree of strategic coordination around the use of this frame as a way to influence Canadian public opinion. Whatever the motivations, there is reason to expect that these choices affect user engagement.

COMPARING THE DISTRIBUTION OF PLAIN TEXT AND HASHTAG USES OF “JUSTINFLATION” AND “GREEDFLATION” AMONG CPC AND NDP MPS

In our prior brief focusing on hashtags, we noted that NDP leader Jagmeet Singh did not use #greedflation a single time during the period examined, whereas Pierre Poilievre (CPC leader since September 2022) accounted for 61% of uses of #justinflation within his party. We interpreted this as indicating that attributing inflation to “elites” is a more concentrated digital strategy in the party leadership of the CPC than in the NDP.

However, when we consider the within-party distribution of plain text uses of “justinflation” and “greedflation” (Table 2), an opposite pattern emerges. Although Singh did not use the hashtag #greedflation during the period examined, he accounts for about 70% of the NDP’s text-based uses of the term. This suggests that the two party leaders have adopted different strategic orientations to hashtag use when addressing inflation. Poilievre’s highly frequent use of #justinflation suggests a coordinated effort to mobilize Canadians around a framing of Trudeau as responsible for inflation. By contrast, Singh’s use of “greedflation” is less coordinated and more ad hoc, suggesting a lesser emphasis on digital strategic mobilization around this frame.

TABLE 2. Number and percent of “justinflation” and “greedflation” uses on X (Twitter) by most frequent users, October 2021 to July 2023

“Justinflation”				
	@PierrePoilievre	@abouttaifziad_	Other	Total
Count	6	1	5	12
%	50	8.3	41.7	100

#Justinflation				
	@PierrePoilievre	@jasrajshallan	Other	Total
Count	456	173	119	748
%	61	23.1	15.9	100

“Greedflation”				
	@theJagmeetSingh	@CharlieAngusNDP	Other	Total
Count	25	3	8	36
%	69.4	8.3	22.2	100

#Greedflation					
	@AMacGregor 4CML	@MPJulian	@MatthewGreen NDP	Other	Total
Count	5	4	4	6	19
%	26.3	21.1	21.1	31.6	100

Notes: Percentages rounded to nearest decimal.

CONCLUSION

In this brief, we explored the implications of hashtag use for understanding the role of digital strategy in the context of populist claims-making about inflation in Canadian politics.

- We found that, within the CPC, hashtags are a highly preferred strategy for convincing audiences that inflation is the fault of Justin Trudeau. This, combined with evidence that the #justinflation hashtag is used especially frequently by party leader Pierre Poilievre, suggests that this party places a premium on achieving a coordinated, and easily searchable, message on the culprits behind rising inflation.
- By contrast, the NDP’s federal MPs are much less coordinated in their digital communication strategy pertaining to inflation on X (Twitter) than the CPC. In trying to convince audiences that inflation is the fault of big corporations, the NDP employed a mixed use of “greedflation” as plain text and as a hashtag, with plain text usages being more highly concentrated in tweets by leader Jagmeet Singh.

Whatever their underlying strategic motivations, these differences highlight the importance of digital strategy in determining how, and by whom, populist discourse gets articulated by political leaders online. In relying too narrowly on hashtags, studies risk underestimating these nuances.

1. See, for instance: Bruns, A., & Burgess, J. E. (2011). The use of Twitter hashtags in the formation of ad hoc publics. Paper presented at 6th European Consortium for Political Research General Conference, August 25–27, University of Iceland, Reykjavik; Caldeira, S. P., & Machado, A. F. (2023). The red lipstick movement: exploring# vermelhoembelem and feminist hashtag movements in the context of the rise of far-right populism in Portugal. *Feminist Media Studies*, 1-17; Demata, M. (2018). “I think that maybe I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for Twitter”. *Donald Trump’s Populist Style on Twitter*. *Textus*, 31(1), 67-90; Gainous, J. & Wagner, K.M. (2014). *Tweeting to power: The social media revolution in American politics*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press; Papacharissi, Z. (2016). Affective publics and structures of storytelling: sentiment, events and mediality. *Information, Communication & Society* 19(3), 307-324; Trere, E. (2018). From digital activism to algorithmic resistance. In G. Meikle (Ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Media and Activism*. New York: Routledge; Wikström, P. (2014). #srynotfunny: Communicative functions of hashtags on Twitter. *SKY Journal of Linguistics*, 27, 127-152; Zappavigna, M. (2011). Ambient affiliation: A linguistic perspective on Twitter. *New media & society*, 13(5), 788-806.
2. Demata, M. (2018). “I think that maybe I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for Twitter”. *Donald Trump’s Populist Style on Twitter*. *Textus*, 31(1), 67-90; Zappavigna, M. (2011). *Ambient affiliation: A linguistic perspective on Twitter*. *New media & society*, 13(5), 788-806.

3. Caldeira, S. P., & Machado, A. F. (2023). The red lipstick movement: exploring#vermelhoembelem and feminist hashtag movements in the context of the rise of far-right populism in Portugal. *Feminist Media Studies*, 1-17, p.2.