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CANADA

# Why this Trump-Biden showdown has our Canadian hearts racing

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Let's face it: As the clock ticks toward [Election Day](#) in the United States, Canadians are every bit as anxious as Americans over the outcome. We can't stop dissecting and debating the issues, or doomscrolling through coverage of the showdown between [U.S. President Donald Trump](#) and Democratic challenger [Joe Biden](#).

As former prime minister Pierre Trudeau put it in 1969, living next to the U.S. is akin to sleeping with an elephant: "No matter how friendly and even-tempered is the beast ... one is affected by every twitch and grunt."

Five decades later, political observers say, that metaphor couldn't be more apt.

"I think it holds true today," said Stephen Azzi, director of Carleton University's graduate program in political management, who likens Canadian attitudes toward the U.S. over the past four years to watching your best friend "make a terrible mistake and knowing there was no way to stop it."

"Events in the United States are bound to have an effect on Canada. It's not just Trump's policies on trade or pipelines. It's the impact of American political culture. If Americans learn to distrust their media, can Canadians be far behind? If American democracy dissolves, can Canadians hang on to democracy here?"

Opinion polling in Canada has consistently shown that Canadians favour putting Biden, the former vice-president, in the White House.

In a Leger survey of more than 1,500 Canadians in late September, 72 per cent of respondents said they would vote for Biden versus only 14 per cent for Trump. When asked how they would define the relationship between Trump's administration and the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, 59 per cent of respondents said "bad."

David Dozois, a psychology professor at Western University, says he suspects the U.S. presidential race has caused Canadians' anxiety levels to rise, just like the global pandemic.

“What fuels anxiety is uncertainty and lack of control. We want predictability,” he said. “Certainly, the current U.S. administration has been anything but predictable. ... Many Canadians do not have much confidence in Trump. Certainly, the relations between Canada and the U.S. in recent years have been more strained than, probably, in many, many years.”

Dozois was part of the research team behind a survey released this year by the charity Mental Health Research Canada that found Canadians’ anxiety levels had quadrupled in the early stages of the [COVID-19 pandemic](#).

When anxiety levels get that high, it triggers a physiological “fight or flight” response in the body, Dozois said. But because the threat from COVID-19 is unseen, it is harder for people to fight or run away from it.

The ongoing political tension and uncertainty emanating from the U.S. is similarly something we can neither fight nor run away from.

“I know when I watch the presidential debate, I can feel my cortisol levels increase and adrenalin kicking in,” Dozois said.

“The stakes are high for Canadians. When you perceive there to be a high threat, it’s very easy to have anxious thoughts. And sometimes our thoughts — when we’re anxious — get out of control. So, we start to have attentional biases toward things that are more threatening. We start to see more threats than there actually is. That’s true of COVID. I think it’s also true sometimes of political situations, where we say, ‘Oh no, we’re doomed.’”

Janni Aragon, a political science professor and director of the technology and society program at the University of Victoria, says she has seen U.S. “election anxiety” crop up among her own students.

“It feels like it is on our doorstep. I know that my Canadian students are on the edge of their seats watching this election with agitation,” she said.

“I am hearing from students via email, in our learning management system, social media, and even via text. There is election anxiety.”

Aragon said she’s had students approach her after the televised debates to say they won’t be attending class the next day because they felt “attacked.”

“This is mostly from the racialized women, who feel that the tenor of the debate is personal and the increase in racialized sexism hurts their mental health. (I understand this. I’m Latina),” she wrote in an email.

“I am also getting queries about good meditation apps or other tools to help them deal with election anxiety — not sleeping or overall anxiousness.”

Any American election truly does affect Canada, says Veronica Kitchen, a political science professor at the University of Waterloo. Think about the large number of Canadians living in the U.S. or who have loved ones living south of the border.

“Traditionally, the Canadian prime minister is the first phone call to a new American president, and the first visit of a new president is to Canada. The disruption of all of this closeness is legitimately unsettling,” she said.

The Trump administration’s imposition of tariffs on steel and aluminum imports from Canada with the justification being that they pose a potential national security threat has been similarly troubling, Kitchen said.

“Canadian prime ministers and American presidents have not always liked each other, and doing so is not a requirement for Canadian-American relations running smoothly, but the animosity between Trudeau and Trump is a stark contrast to the friendship between Trudeau and (Barack) Obama.”

Many countries turn to Canada to explain our neighbour — its twitches and its grunts — and yet Canada foolishly doesn’t put enough attention into studying the U.S., says Colin Robertson, a former Canadian diplomat and vice-president of the Canadian Global Affairs Institute, which publishes policy papers and commentary on this country’s place in the world.

“More than any other nation — our security and defence depend on the U.S. shield and our economy depends on U.S. trade and investment,” he said.

Robertson says Trump’s ongoing attempts to cast doubts about the legitimacy of the election worry him.

But he says he is encouraged by the fact more than 95 million Americans have voted already. He also finds comfort in the “folk wisdom” of Sam Rayburn, the longest-serving U.S. speaker from Texas.

“Amongst his pithy sayings was that Americans will elect a jackass once, but seldom twice,” he said. “I hope that holds true.”

Asked if he can recall a moment when Canadians looked upon their southern neighbours with such disfavour, Azzi suggests the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

“A significant number of Canadians were against the war and were troubled to see Americans lunge in without seeming to think through what they were doing,” he said.

“Canadians are deeply troubled when Americans betray the values common to both countries. These situations are particularly difficult because we know that Americans aren’t interested in what we have to say.”



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