

# Trudeau attacked over election call in French-language debate; O'Toole targeted for vaccinations, childcare <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

Justin Trudeau faced sharp criticism over his decision to call an election during the pandemic, while Erin O'Toole was repeatedly challenged on mandatory vaccinations and child care during the first French-language debate of the federal campaign.

The Liberal and Conservative leaders shared a stage with Bloc Québécois Leader Yves-François Blanchet and NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh in Montreal during the debate organized by the Quebec television network TVA. The French and English debates organized by the Leaders' Debates Commission will take place on Sept. 8 and 9.

Other flashpoints included a heated exchange between Mr. Blanchet and Mr. Singh over a 2020 incident when the NDP Leader was kicked out of the House of Commons for accusing the Bloc of racism for not supporting a motion about systemic racism in the RCMP.

The first debate is a key moment in a federal election campaign that is already past the halfway mark toward voting day on Sept. 20.

Thursday evening's broadcast has the potential of influencing the decisions of voters, particularly in Quebec where party support has swung dramatically at times in recent federal election campaigns.

In 2019, the Liberals won 35 seats in Quebec, followed by 32 for the BQ, 10 for the Conservatives and one for the NDP.

The debate kicked off with a focus on the COVID-19 pandemic and the three other leaders said the election is poorly timed.

"Why did you launch an election in the middle of a pandemic, with forest fires in B.C. and the situation on the ground in Afghanistan?" Mr. O'Toole asked Mr. Trudeau.

Mr. Singh took a similar line of attack, stating that the minority Parliament was working and the campaign is unnecessary.

Mr. Trudeau restated his original justification, noting that the pandemic did not exist when Canadians last voted in 2019 and that now is the time for Canadians to weigh in on big questions about how to manage the pandemic and the ensuing economic recovery. He frequently shifted the focus to Mr. O'Toole and his views on mandatory vaccination.

"Mr. O'Toole ... You need to show leadership," said Mr. Trudeau. "You won't even ensure that your own candidates are vaccinated. And you don't agree with me that people who get on a plane or a train should show proof of vaccination. It's through vaccination that we will get through this."

At one point, Mr. Blanchet asked the other leaders if all of their candidates had been vaccinated. Mr. Singh said yes and Mr. Trudeau replied that all Liberal candidates were vaccinated except for one who had a medical exemption.

Mr. O'Toole did not answer directly.

"It's very important to have rapid testing for people who are not vaccinated. I certainly encourage vaccination," he said. "We need to find a reasonable accommodation as a country. We need to work together in the battle with COVID, not with an election in the middle of a pandemic with lots of division on the question of vaccinations."

Unlike the other three leaders, Mr. O'Toole is a new face for Quebec voters but he has already benefited from a nudge by the highly popular Quebec Premier François Legault who said the Liberals and NDP platforms were "more centralist" and therefore against the province's efforts to be more autonomous.

However, Mr. O'Toole was on the defensive during the debate when he was pressed about whether he would maintain the \$6-billion that the Liberal government promised to transfer to Quebec as part of a move toward a national child-care program.

The Conservatives are proposing a refundable tax credit instead. However, Quebec's subsidized daycare system is popular and a source of pride in the province. The Conservative Leader tried to avoid answering when queried on the issue.

"We'll co-ordinate with the government of Mr. Legault, but we have an additional plan," Mr. O'Toole said.

"What does that mean, co-ordinate? What does that mean?" Mr. Blanchet replied. "Why are you breaking up something that works?"

The Conservative Leader switched to the attack when Mr. Trudeau accused him of being in favour of private health care.

"Mr. Trudeau, Twitter said you manipulated a video," Mr. O'Toole shot back, in reference to a video released by the Liberal Party that Twitter flagged as manipulated media because it showed Mr. O'Toole speaking about private health care options but trimmed out his comments that "universal access remains paramount."

The leaders were asked about the massive death toll in long-term care homes caused by the pandemic.

The Liberals want to set national standards for long-term care homes. Mr. Trudeau attempted to defuse criticisms that he was intervening into provincial jurisdiction.

Mr. Singh said the problem was tied to neglected care in for-profit nursing homes. His message might have been intended for an audience in the rest of Canada because nearly 90 per cent of Quebec nursing homes are public.

The leaders discussed Bill 21, the Quebec legislation that bars some public-sector employees in positions of authority, such as police officers and school teachers, from wearing religious symbols on the job. Mr. Trudeau said the issue is playing out in court and the federal government may ultimately intervene. Mr. O'Toole said he would not introduce such a law federally, but he respects provincial jurisdiction.

Mr. Blanchet then challenged Mr. Singh over two battles between the parties that occurred during the previous Parliament. Mr. Blanchet raised a 2020 dispute over an NDP motion on systemic racism that led to Mr. Singh being removed from Parliament for the day for accusing the Bloc of racism.

Mr. Blanchet also called on Mr. Singh to denounce an online post earlier this year in which NDP MP Matthew Green sided with a Twitter post by University of Ottawa professor Amir Attaran that said Quebec was led by a "white supremacist government."

"It's completely unacceptable to attack Quebec like that. I've already denounced that," Mr. Singh replied, referencing Prof. Attaran but not Mr. Green. "But if we want to talk about what happened in the House of Commons, let's talk about it," Mr. Singh continued. "We proposed a motion to address systemic racism in the RCMP. A federal area. Because I spoke with people who have lost their lives - families who have lost loved ones - because of police violence.

"And when I proposed a motion to address this racist discrimination ... one single [Bloc] MP said no to a motion to say no to racist discrimination in the RCMP... It's negligence."

Mr. Blanchet rejected the NDP criticism.

"When we don't support a motion in Parliament, we get accused of racism, and it's completely unacceptable," he said.

The debate took a very local turn with a segment on the "third link," a polarizing \$10-billion tunnel project popular with commuting drivers in the Quebec City suburbs but condemned by others.

The Conservatives have endorsed the tunnel project. "It's important for the local economy," Mr. O'Toole said.

**Region:** Canada <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** federal election 2021 <sup>[4]</sup>  
debate <sup>[5]</sup>

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