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MIPP COVID-19 RESEARCH BRIEFING

Purpose of the Note

This briefing note examines how civil discourse of selected economic issues changed in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. We compare media coverage 6 months prior to the crisis, which includes the time of the Canadian federal election, to 6 months after the onset of COVID-19. This note also refers to Canadian polling data. Together, media coverage and polling data of selected issues give us an indication of the flavour of civil discourse before and during the pandemic. The note highlights selected areas of interest; it is by no means an exhaustive account.

This note represents one aspect of a larger research project we are undertaking. For more context on the emergence of COVID-19 and the response of the Government of Canada, please refer to Appendix 1. For more information about the framework we used, please see Appendix 2.

About the MacEachen Institute

The MacEachen Institute for Public Policy and Governance at Dalhousie University is a nationally focused, non-partisan, interdisciplinary institute designed to support the development of progressive public policy and to encourage greater citizen engagement.

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The COVID-19 Pandemic in Canada:
The Economy and Media Coverage Before and During the Pandemic

Key Observations and Recommendations

- When we compare media coverage of the last six months of 2019 with the first six months of 2020, references to affordability, immigration and tax dropped by about half. References to employment insurance, small business, stock market and unemployment more than doubled. Policy issues that concern vulnerable populations such as universal basic income received increased coverage but the overall count of these terms is very low.

- Media coverage reflects concerns in civil society. Canadians are worried about the state of the economy and the increased deficit resulting from COVID-19 but are divided over whether to continue COVID-19 spending or reduce it, and whether to increase taxes or reduce government spending.

Methods

We are trying to understand the tone and flavour of civil discourse vis-à-vis the economy and how this discourse has changed during the first six months of COVID-19. We identified articles in which the following terms appeared in the title or body of the media article: affordability[1], debt[2], immigration, tax, universal basic income[3], gig economy, employment insurance, small businesses, stock market and unemployment. We selected these terms because they featured in the 2019 Canadian federal election, and because they are important concepts in economic policy discussions.

For the period of July 1, 2019 to June 30, 2020, we accumulated articles published in the front-sections of the *Toronto Star*, *National Post*, and by CBC News using the database NexisUni and analyzed them using Excel. We excluded the other sections of these publications and did not do a detailed content analysis of individual articles.

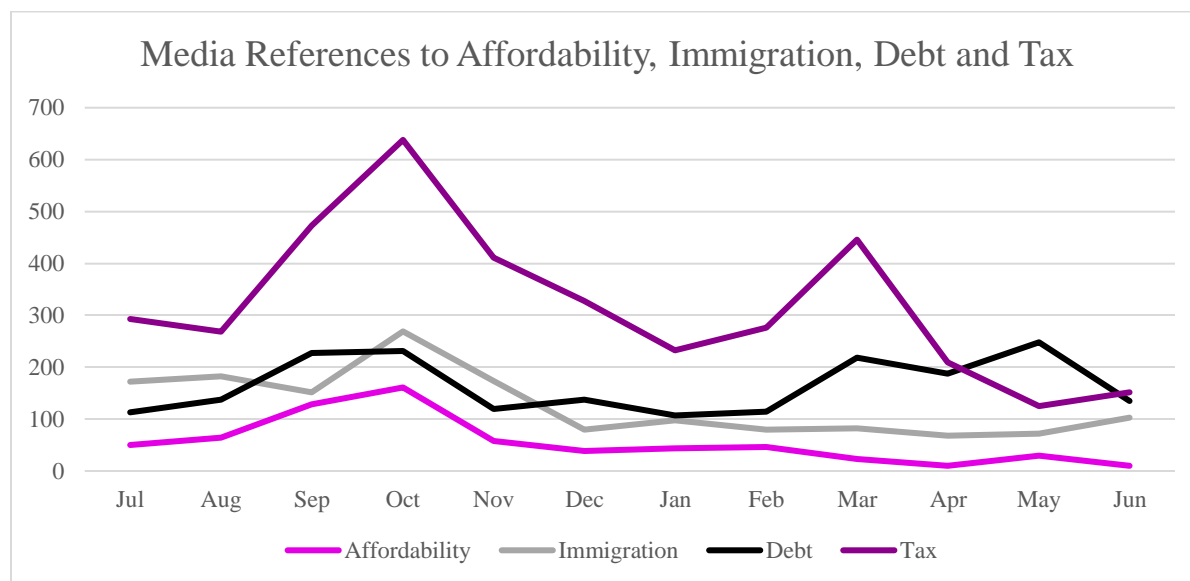# Which issues received less coverage due to COVID-19?

Figure 1: Number of articles mentioning the terms affordability, immigration, debt and tax published between July 2019 and June 2020.

Table 1: Articles mentioning affordability, immigration, debt and tax published by CBC News, *Toronto Star* and *National Post* in 2019 (July–December) and 2020 (January–June)

Key Terms	2019 mentions	2020 mentions	Total	% Change
Affordability	472	157	629	-66.7
Debt	966	908	1874	-6
Immigration	1029	501	1530	-51.3
Tax	2411	1442	3853	-40.2

Affordability (and cost of living), taxes, immigration and debt were all important issues in the 2019 federal election with 27%, 22%, 14% and 12% of Canadians, respectively, indicating that they are among the top 3 ballot box issues in the federal election (Bricker, 2019). The media featured these issues prominently in the run-up to the federal election. (See Figure 1.)

Many of these terms featured much less prominently in the media during COVID-19. References to affordability and immigration decreased by over 50% when comparing the last six months of 2019 to the first 6 months of 2020. In 2020, there was an overall 40% decrease in the number of articles referencing taxes when compared to 2019 (see Table 1); however, a peak in references to taxes occurred in March when compared with other months in 2020 (see Figure 1). After an initial drop in articles mentioning debt following the election, the issue remerged in the media beginning in March. (See Figure 1.)

Canadians are concerned about government spending but divided about the best way forward. In July, the government announced that the 2020 deficit will exceed $343 billion, the largest ever recorded by a Canadian government (Aiello, 2020); 78% of Canadians are worried about the increased deficit. To reduce it, 21% of Canadians are in favour of raising taxes (46% favour increasing large and small business taxes), and 60% favour reducing government program spending. Canadians are divided on whether the government should immediately scale back

COVID-19 pandemic support programs and payments: 41% are in favour of scaling back; 44% are not (see Table 2) (Leger & Association of Canadian Studies, 2020). The survey shows that the older someone is, the more likely they are against raising taxes and the more in favour they are of reducing government spending. (See Table 2.)

Table 2: Percentage of Canadians in favour of each policy to reduce the government's accumulated deficit (Leger & Association of Canadian Studies, 2020)

	Raise taxes	Reduce government spending	Immediately reduce pandemic support program
18-34 years old	26%	57%	37%
35-54 years old	19%	60%	40%
55+ years old	17%	63%	45%
Average	21%	60%	41%

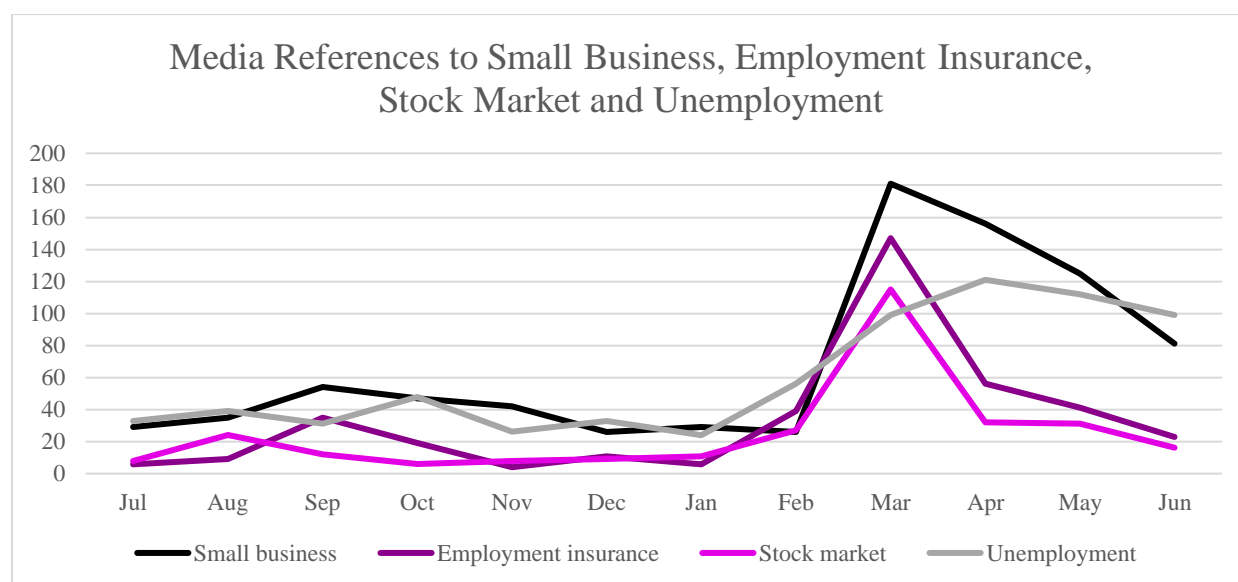# Which issues received more coverage due to COVID-19?

Figure 2: Number of articles mentioning the terms small business, employment insurance, stock market and unemployment published between July 2019 and June 2020.

Table 3: Number of articles mentioning small business, employment insurance, stock market and unemployment published by CBC News, *Toronto Star* and *National Post* in 2019 (July–December) and 2020 (January–June)

Key Terms	2019 mentions	2020 mentions	Total	% Change
Employment Insurance	84	310	394	269
Small business	233	598	831	156.7
Stock Market	67	232	299	246.3
Unemployment	210	511	721	143.3

Reporting on employment insurance, small business, stock market and unemployment appears to be relatively stable between July 2019 and February 2020. (See Figure 2.) The emergence of COVID-19 results in a significant increase in media focus on the aforementioned issues as their coverage by the media more than doubled when comparing the last six months of 2019 to the first six months of 2020. (See Table 3.)
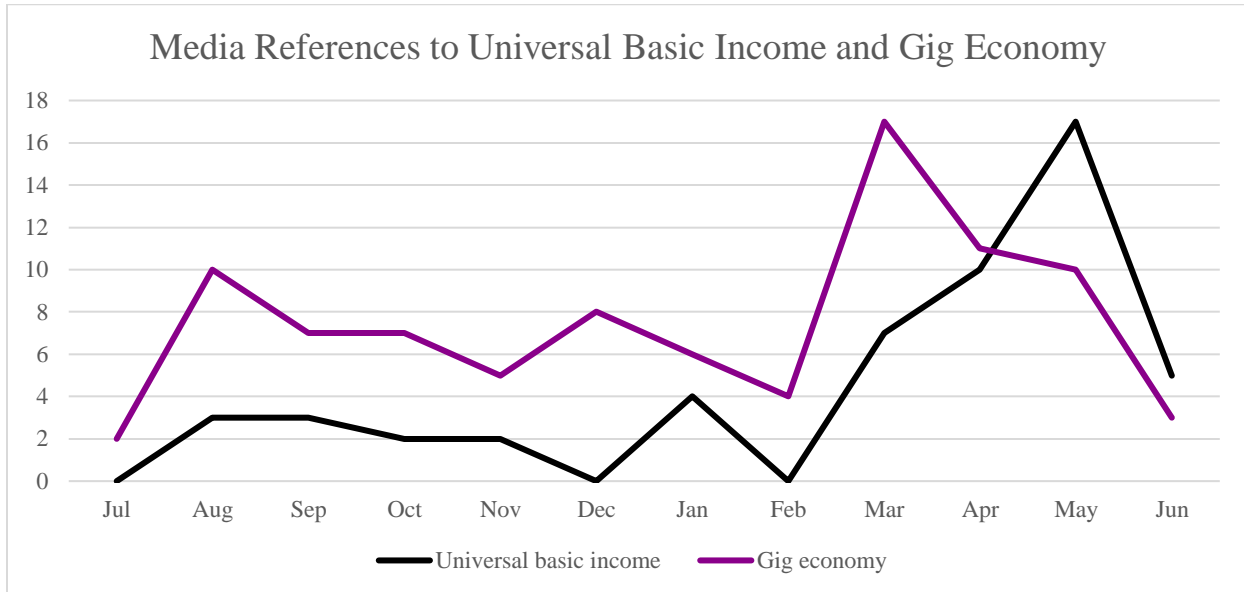
Other Notes

Figure 3: Number of articles mentioning the terms universal basic income and gig economy published between July 2019 and June 2020.

Table 4: Number of articles mentioning universal basic income and the gig economy published by CBC News, *Toronto Star* and *National Post* in 2019 (July–December) and 2020 (January–June)

Key Terms	2019 mentions	2020 mentions	Total	% Change
Universal basic income	10	43	53	330
Gig economy	39	51	90	30.8

Media focus on universal basic income and the gig economy, which relate to vulnerable populations and unstable employment, increased during the pandemic but the overall number is still low compared to other terms in this study.

Endnotes

1   "Cost of living" is a related term included in the search.

2   "Deficit" is a related term included in the search.

3   "Guaranteed basic income" is a related term included in the search.

References

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Appendix 1

On December 31, 2019, a cluster of pneumonia cases in Wuhan City, Hubei Province of China, was reported to the World Health Organization (WHO); these are now known to have been caused by the novel coronavirus (or COVID-19). On January 3, 2020, WHO issued a public warning regarding the virus, and on January 30, it declared COVID-19 a public health emergency of international concern (WHO, 2020a). Canada first took action on January 15 when the Public Health Agency of Canada activated its Emergency Operation Centre to support the country's response to COVID-19 (Government of Canada, 2020a); by February 9, Canada had implemented screening requirements for travellers returning from all areas affected by the virus to 10 airports in 6 provinces throughout the country (Government of Canada, 2020a; Staples, 2020). On March 11, 2020, WHO declared the global outbreak of COVID-19 a pandemic. Following this announcement, the Canadian Government advised Canadians to avoid all non-essential travel outside Canada, required all Canadian travellers entering the country to self-isolate for 14 days, and banned foreign nationals from all other countries, except the United States, from entering Canada (Government of Canada, 2020a). In response to increases in COVID-19 cases throughout the country, one after another, provinces began declaring states of emergency in mid-March (Dawson, 2020). The first case of COVID-19 in Canada was detected in Toronto, Ontario, on January 25, 2020 at which point there were over 1,300 cases confirmed globally. As of August 31, 2020, there have been 128,948 confirmed cases in Canada (114,227 recovered and 9,126 deaths), and over 25 million cases worldwide (848,203 deaths) (Government of Canada, 2020b).

Appendix 2

This briefing note is extracted from a larger research project examining the social and economic pressures exerted on government as a result of COVID-19. Hood, Rothstein and Baldwin (2001) hypothesize that social and economic context shapes the manner in which government regimes act. They define regimes as "the complex of institutional geography, rules, practice and animating ideas that are associated with the regulation of a particular risk or hazard" (p. 9). There are three lenses that Hood et al. use to explore context: (1) the market dynamics, which examine the law, insurance and information and opt-out costs (2) the public's and media's opinions about the risk, which examine polling data and leading media coverage and (3) the role of interests, which examines the concentration of power and influence in affected sectors. The research in this briefing note examines aspects of the second lens, media and public opinion. According to this lens, governments respond to public preferences and attitudes.

More from the MacEachen Institute

The Institute is working to create resources and policy discussions around the COVID-19 crisis. These include briefing notes like this one as well as panel discussions, videos and media commentary. You can find all resources related to COVID-19 on our website.

Other briefing notes in this series

- Observations from Toronto's Tourism Recovery Post-SARS in 2003
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- Quarantine and COVID-19
- People with Disabilities and COVID-19
- Health Care and COVID-19
- Climate Change and COVID-19
- The Rise of COVID-19 Terminology