

Protests and Policing: Two-thirds say inconsistent treatment from authorities favours some groups over others

Two-in-five urban Canadians say they've encountered, been disrupted by protests in past six months

May 2, 2024 – New data from the non-profit Angus Reid Institute, the second part in a series examining Canadians' views of and experiences with protests, finds Canadians are near-unanimous (86%) in their belief that the right to protest is fundamentally important to Canadian democracy. But there is a concurrent sense among many that not all groups who set out to demonstrate receive the same treatment from authorities.

Overall, two-thirds of Canadians (64%) say the police give preferential treatment to certain groups when dealing with protests. One-in-five (21%) disagree, led by those over the age of 54 (26%).

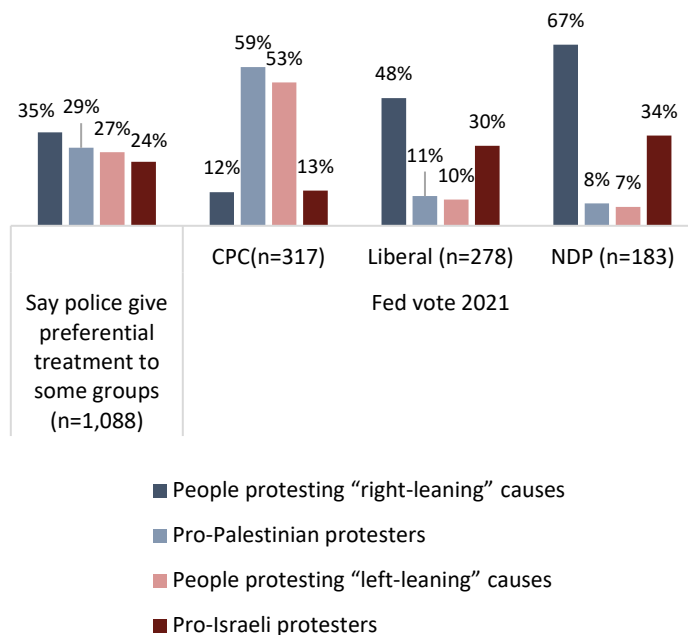
Canadians of all political stripes largely feel that police response and engagement at various protests is not applied consistently, with at least three-in-five past Liberal (60%), Conservative (68%), and NDP (73%) voters saying so. Where they diverge, however, is on the question of *who* receives preference.

Past Conservative voters feel that left-leaning causes in general, and specifically pro-Palestinian protests, are given unfair leeway, while past Liberal and NDP voters are more likely to say the opposite, that right-leaning protest groups and to a lesser extent pro-Israeli demonstrators, are given preferential treatment by police.

That is not to say that Canadians don't see an important role for police in monitoring protests. Indeed, three-quarters of Canadians say that the right to protest should end when laws are broken, suggesting an important responsibility for authorities. Further, half (52%) say that organizers of demonstrations should be liable if laws are indeed broken by those supporting their cause. This concept generates pushback

"Which groups do you believe the police give preferential treatment to when they protest?"

(Follow-up question for the 64% who say police treat certain protest groups differently)



METHODOLOGY:

The Angus Reid Institute conducted an online survey from April 25-28, 2024 among a representative randomized sample of 1,707 Canadian adults who are members of [Angus Reid Forum](#). For comparison purposes only, a probability sample of this size would carry a margin of error of +/- 2 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. Discrepancies in or between totals are due to rounding. The survey was self-commissioned and paid for by ARI. Detailed tables are found at the end of this release.

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from two-in-five (37%) including a plurality of past NDP voters, who feel that holding organizers responsible goes too far.

More Key Findings:

- To better understand experiences over the past six months, ARI asked Canadians about their own experiences with encountering protests during this period. More than one-in-three Canadians say they haven't encountered any protests (36%), rising to more than half (54%) in rural areas.
- 17 per cent of Canadians say they've encountered *and* been upset by multiple protests during this six-month period, rising to 21 per cent for those living in urban spaces,
- The proportion of this group – the “Encountered and Agitated” on ARI's Protest Encounter Index – rises to 24 per cent in Vancouver and 32 per cent in Ottawa.
- What makes them Encountered and Agitated? Among this group, all have run into at least three protests in the past six months, and half say they've encountered five or more. Seven-in-10 say they have experienced a disruption to their day at least twice and four-in-five have been upset about this multiple times.

About ARI

*The **Angus Reid Institute (ARI)** was founded in October 2014 by pollster and sociologist, Dr. Angus Reid. ARI is a national, not-for-profit, non-partisan public opinion research foundation established to advance education by commissioning, conducting and disseminating to the public accessible and impartial statistical data, research and policy analysis on economics, political science, philanthropy, public administration, domestic and international affairs and other socio-economic issues of importance to Canada and its world.*

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Part One: Canadian experiences with protest

Across Canada, there have been major protest movements in recent months. The most notable, and headline-grabbing, are the pro-Palestinian protests which have occurred nationwide since Israel's invasion of Gaza in the fall.

Related:

- [In Gaza-Israel conflict, sympathies now shared equally between both sides after shift in Canadian opinion](#)
- [Protest Positions: Canadians say universities are fair game for demonstrations; hospitals, schools less so](#)

But there also have been [rallies](#), [and highway blockades](#), against the carbon tax, [protests](#) and [counterprotests](#) to school policies in New Brunswick, Saskatchewan and Alberta on gender identity, and [protests by fish harvesters](#) in Newfoundland and Labrador. Last year, protests that blocked roadways and bridges by Extinction Rebellion in Vancouver resulted in [charges for some protesters](#).

The Protest Encounter Index

Angus Reid Institute researchers asked Canadian adult respondents a series of questions assessing their personal experience with protests in their own community in recent months. Using those responses, ARI developed a Protest Encounter Index, which measures the frequency of protests Canadians encountered as well as the extent to which, if at all, those protests disrupted their daily activities.

For scoring and categorization, [click here](#).

This results in four groups:

- Those who Haven't Encountered any protests in the past six months (36%)
- The Largely Unbothered, one-quarter (28%) of Canadians who didn't find the protests came across to be disruptive
- The Encountered and Miffed (17%), who encountered more protests and say their lives were minorly disrupted and rarely upset
- The Encountered and Agitated (18%), who encountered many protests and say they were majorly disrupted. This group also reports being consistently upset at the disruption

The issue of protest – and disruption – is unsurprisingly more an urban phenomenon than rural. More than half (54%) living in rural areas (population centres with fewer than 30,000 people), say they have not seen a single protest at all in the past six months.

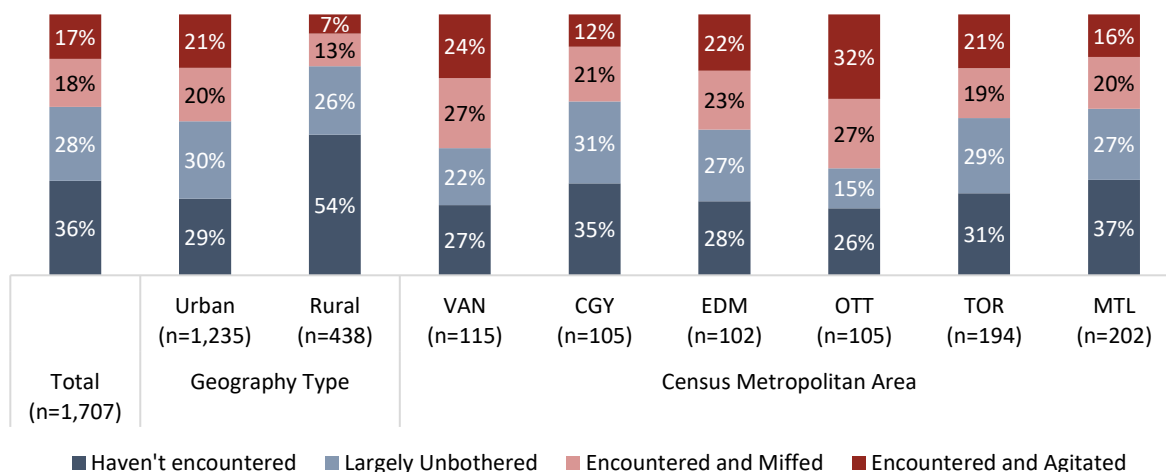
However, seven-in-ten (71%) of those living in Canada's urban centres (more than 30,000 people) say they have seen at least one protest in the past half year, including one-in-five (21%) who have seen many and say their lives have been disrupted in an upsetting way.

Protest appears to be a more common occurrence in Vancouver, Ottawa, Toronto and Edmonton, while those in Calgary (35%) and Montreal (37%) are more likely to report not seeing a protest in recent months:

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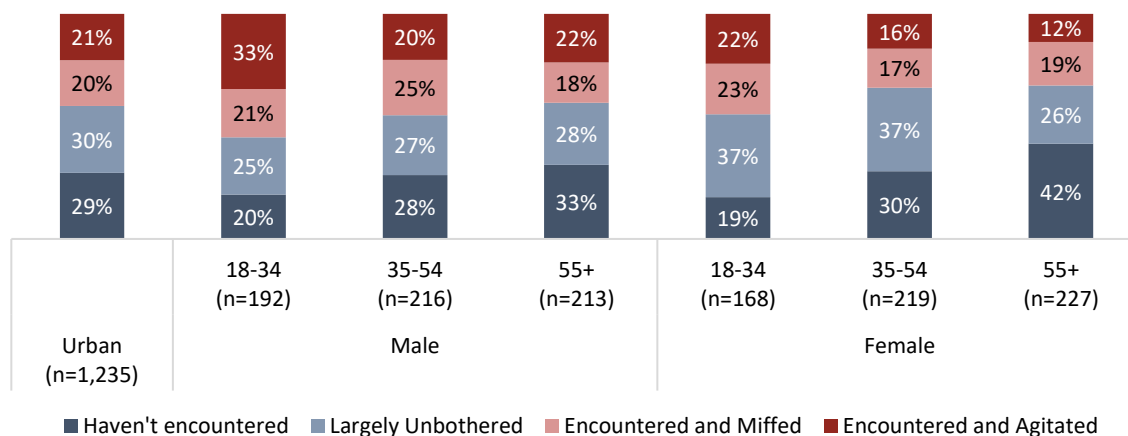
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The Protest Encounter Index



For city dwellers, perceived disturbance is not distributed evenly across age groups. Older Canadians are more likely to say they haven't seen demonstrations or rallies in the past six months, while one-third (33%) of 18- to 34-year-old men say they have seen frequent ones causing significant disruption:

The Protest Encounter Index (Among Canadians living in urban centres with populations larger than 30K)

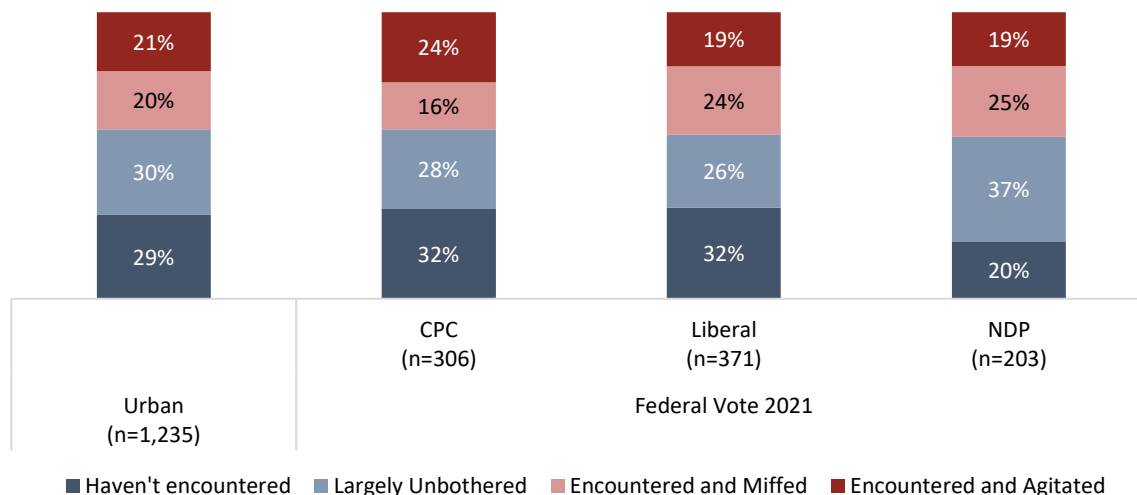


Past NDP voters in urban centres are the most likely to report encountering protests but are also much more likely to be unbothered by them than others based on political leanings. Notably, urban New Democrats are much more likely than those who cast ballots for the Liberals or Conservatives in 2021 to say the protests they encounter are related to issues they support ([see detailed tables](#)). By contrast, one-quarter (24%) of those who voted CPC in 2021 report encountering many disruptive protests that make them upset:

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The Protest Encounter Index
(Among Canadians living in urban centres with populations larger than 30K)



**Bloc Quebecois not included due to small base sizes*

Half of urban Canadians say protests happening more often

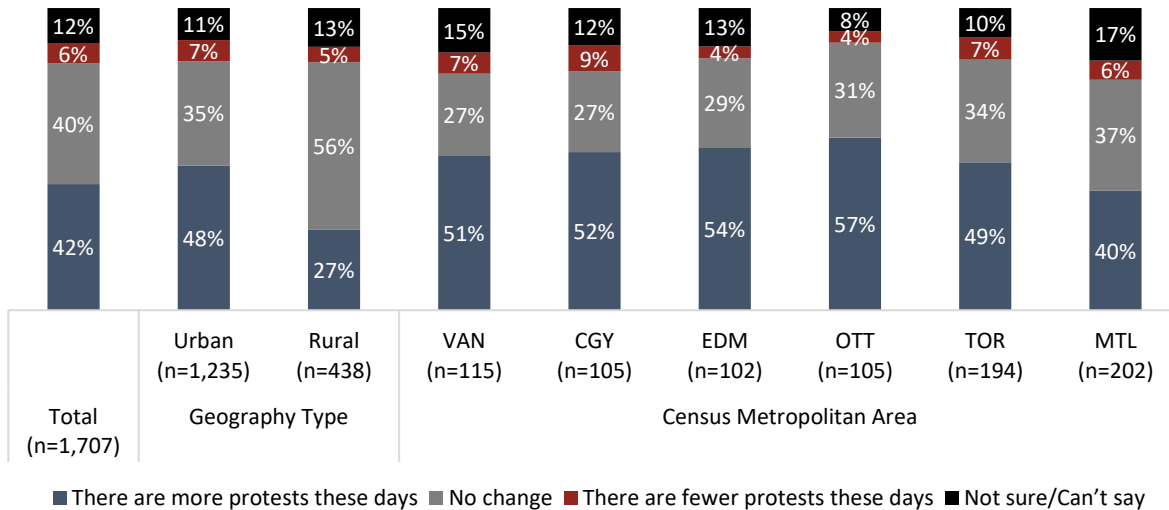
Overall, one-in-ten (10%) Canadians say they have attended a protest or demonstration in the past six months. Younger Canadians are nearly three-times as likely to say they have attended a demonstration as older ones, while two-thirds (66%) of women older than 54 say they have never attended a protest ([see detailed tables](#)).

Two-in-five say protests are happening more frequently in their communities, but again there is a disparity between the experiences of urban- and rural-living Canadians on this front. Half (48%) of those in cities say protests are a more regular occurrence, while one-quarter (27%) of those in rural areas say the same. Notably, few Canadians across the country say protests are happening less often:

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And, in the community where you live, do you feel like protests, rallies or demonstrations involving 10 protesters or more are happening more frequently, less frequently than in the last six months, or no change?

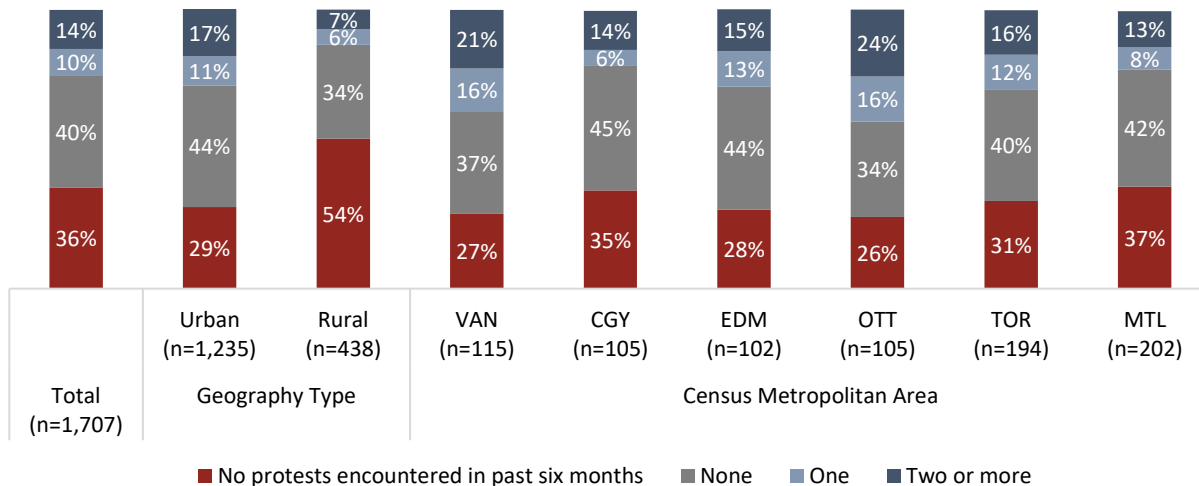


Seven-in-ten Canadians living in urban centres say they've encountered at least one protest in their day-to-day lives in recent months, while two-in-five (43%) say they've come across at least three ([see detailed tables](#)).

Those in Vancouver, Ottawa more likely to say they encounter disruptive protests

One-quarter of Canadians say they've encountered what they would describe as a disruptive protest in the past six months. Vancouver and Ottawa are home to the respondents most likely to say they've been bothered by it all:

And considering all the protests you encountered, how many would you say were disruptive to your day-to-day activities?



Part Two: Protest viewed as fundamental to democracy – but with caveats

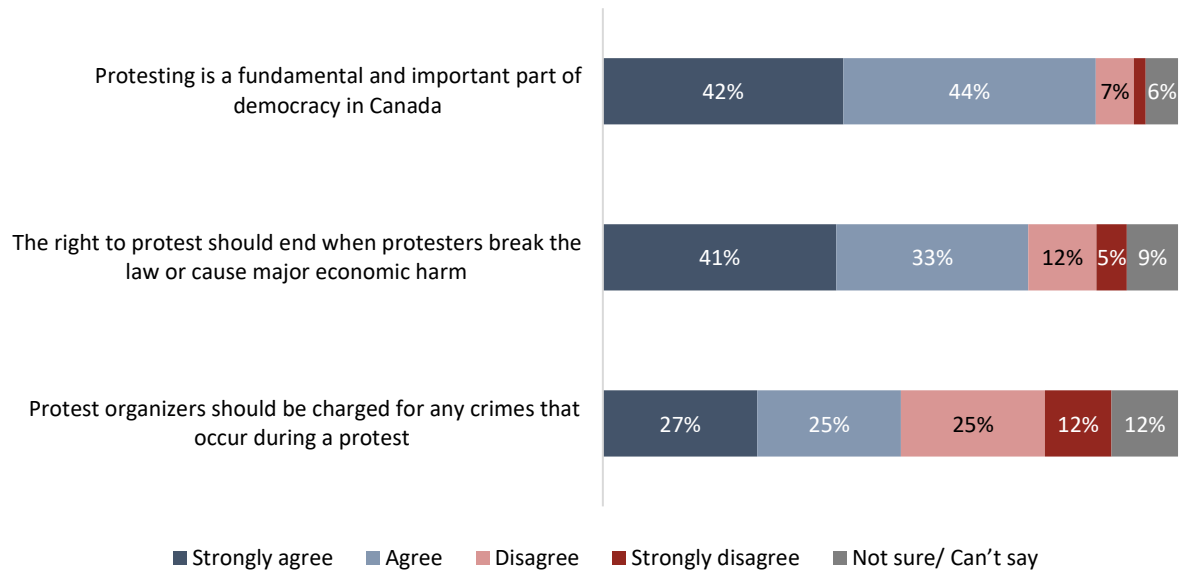
Peaceful assembly is one of the fundamental freedoms guaranteed in Canada’s Charter of Rights and Freedoms and is seen as inextricably linked to freedom of speech, also guaranteed in the charter.

An overwhelming majority (86%) of Canadians view protesting as “a fundamental and important part of democracy in Canada”, while one-in-ten (9%) disagree. However, it appears Canadians’ support for protest is predicated on protesters staying within the law. Three-quarters (74%) say protesters should lose the right to protest once they break the law or cause major economic harm. Additionally, half (52%) believe protest organizers should be charged if crimes are committed during the protests they organize:

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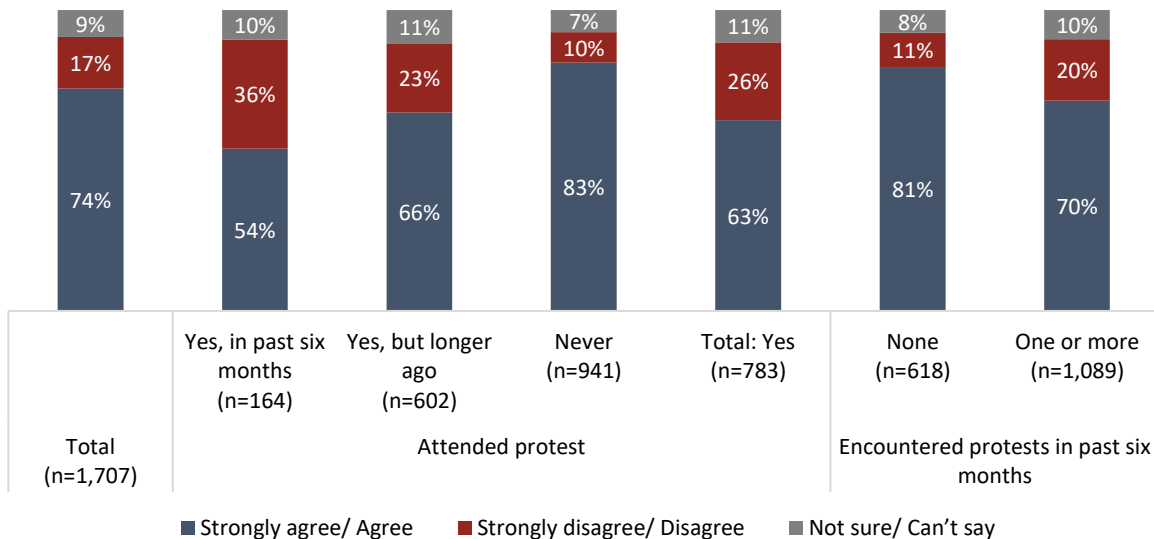
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**Agree vs. disagree
(All respondents, n=1,707)**



Among those who have recently attended a protest, a majority (54%) believe the right to protest ends when crimes are committed or major economic damage occurs, while 36 per cent disagree. Canadians who never have attended a protest are much more likely to believe protests should be stopped once they've incurred major economic cost or crimes have been committed by protesters:

Agree vs. disagree -
"The right to protest should end when protesters break the law or cause major economic harm"



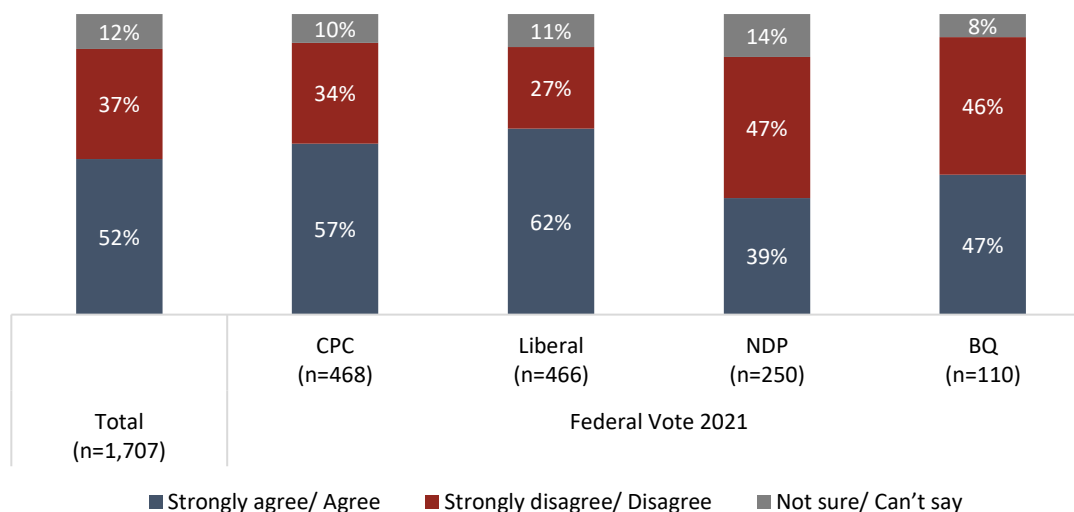
A controversial decision by the Supreme Court in the United States to not hear an appeal in a case where a police officer sued a protest organizer for a rock thrown not by the organizer but by another protester has opened the possibility that protest organizers could be liable for the actions of others at protests in the states of Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas. Previous rulings in the U.S. had determined that holding protest organizers liable for the actions of others at protests infringed on the right to protest.

Nonetheless, half (52%) of Canadians believe protest organizers should be charged if their protests result in crimes being committed, an opinion that hews heavily along political lines:

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**Agree vs. disagree -
"Protest organizers should be charged for any crimes that occur during a protest"**



Two-thirds say some protesters get preferential treatment, but who?

The treatment of protesters by police is always a subject of intense scrutiny. Police were criticized during the Freedom Convoy's occupation of Ottawa for not intervening when convoyers significantly disrupted the lives of Ottawans for weeks. Critics have said police response to [protest movements led by Black and Indigenous protesters have been quicker and more severe](#) than it was to the Freedom Convoy, whose protesters were predominantly white.

Recently, Toronto's police chief was forced to apologize after police [delivered coffee and donuts](#) to pro-Palestinian protesters blocking a bridge. The refreshments were bought by others who were prevented from joining the protest, but the police agreed to bring them over in a move that sparked outrage online.

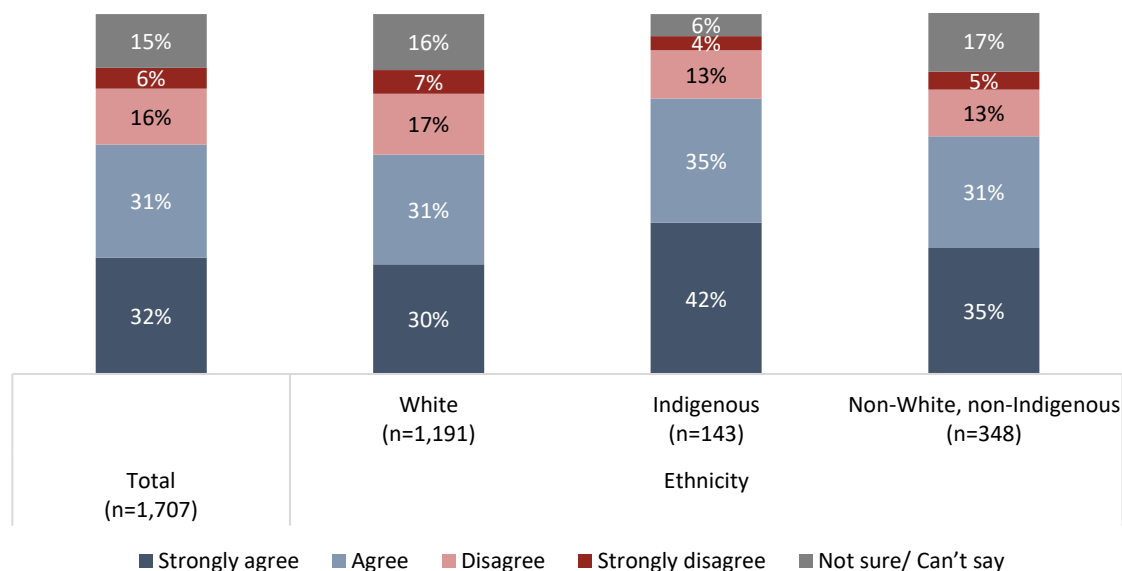
Two-thirds (64%) of Canadians believe some protesters are given preferential treatment. There is broad agreement on this front across the Protest Encounter Index. At least two-thirds of the Unbothered (66%), the Miffed (70%) and the Agitated (74%) believe some protesters receive preferential treatment from law enforcement ([see detailed tables](#)).

Non-white Canadians are much more likely to see police as giving preferential treatment to certain protesters. Three-quarters (77%) of respondents who identify as Indigenous and 66 per cent of those who identify as an ethnicity other than Indigenous or white say police treat different types of protesters inconsistently. A lower percentage, but still a majority (61%), of white Canadians say the same:

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**Agree vs. disagree -
"The police give preferential treatment to some groups over others when they protest"**



The perception of who receives preferential treatment varies across age and gender demographics too. Younger Canadians are much more likely to believe those who protest “right-leaning” causes are treated better by law enforcement, while older Canadians are much more likely to believe pro-Palestinian protesters are handled differently by police than others:

Which groups do you believe the police give preferential treatment to when they protest?							
	Total	Male			Female		
		18-34	35-54	55+	18-34	35-54	55+
People protesting “right-leaning” causes	35%	43%	32%	26%	51%	37%	22%
Pro-Palestinian protesters	29%	26%	35%	43%	9%	20%	37%
People protesting “left-leaning” causes	27%	33%	36%	31%	11%	21%	27%
Environmental protesters	25%	18%	36%	34%	10%	18%	30%
Pro-Israeli protesters	24%	27%	25%	21%	31%	22%	17%
Other, specify	6%	6%	7%	7%	10%	4%	4%
Not sure/Can't say	16%	8%	10%	12%	23%	24%	20%

Across political lines, past voters see those on the opposite end of the political spectrum receiving better treatment from police. Meanwhile, three-in-five (59%) of those who voted CPC in 2021 say pro-Palestinian protesters receive preferential treatment from law enforcement, while one-third (34%) of 2021 NDP voters say instead it is pro-Israeli protesters who are handled differently:

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Which groups do you believe the police give preferential treatment to when they protest?				
	Total	Federal Vote 2021		
		CPC	Liberal	NDP
People protesting “right-leaning” causes	35%	12%	48%	67%
Pro-Palestinian protesters	29%	59%	11%	8%
People protesting “left-leaning” causes	27%	53%	10%	7%
Environmental protesters	25%	51%	10%	4%
Pro-Israeli protesters	24%	13%	30%	34%
Other, specify	6%	5%	6%	8%
Not sure/Can't say	16%	12%	15%	15%

For detailed results by age, gender, region, education, and other demographics, [click here](#).

For detailed results by Protest Encounter Index, [click here](#).

For detailed results for urban respondents, [click here](#).

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