Politics and performers: Canadians split over whether to ‘cut the mic’ on political awards show speeches

Most support political expression by celebrities and athletes, but chosen venue is a key driver of opinion

February 24, 2016 – As Canadians gather with friends and family this weekend to watch the spectacle of high-fashion, gossip, rivalries, and film known as the Oscars, they are also sure to also witness some winners at Sunday’s 89th Annual Academy Awards ceremony turn their acceptance speeches into political statements.

And while most in this country are fine with well-known entertainers using their notoriety to advocate for causes they believe in, a slim majority also say that stars doing so on stage at an awards show is “inappropriate and annoying.”

This, according to a new public opinion poll from the Angus Reid Institute, which finds Canadians broadly supportive of the rights of celebrities and athletes to use their platforms to advocate for political causes, but considerably less supportive of the ways this advocacy manifests itself.

Canadians find it acceptable for celebrities and athletes to take to social media to share messages about causes they believe in, but just over half would rather artists stick to thanking families and managers at awards shows, and that professional athletes stick to sports at post-game press conferences.

Key Findings:

- 55% say they oppose political speeches at awards shows, while 45 per cent this is a positive thing than can inspire and inform a broad audience

- Six-in-ten Canadians say celebrities (61%) and athletes (57%) using their platform for political purposes is OK, while the rest (39% and 43% respectively) say they should focus on their work and avoid making political statements

- While most Canadians are OK with athletes making political statements, three-quarters of respondents (73%) say that they should not use the national anthem to do so

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Part 1 – Celebrities and Politics

Many don’t want to listen to political awards speeches

Acceptance speeches at awards shows can be boring or entertaining, eloquent or messy. And for decades they have provided opportunities for notable people to expound upon topics of social importance to them. Most recently, at the Grammy awards, Beyoncé delivered an impassioned speech about her hopes for a more inclusive world for her children. At the Golden Globe awards last month, Meryl Streep spoke out against perceived bullying by then-President-elect Donald Trump. Beyoncé and Streep are hardly the first celebrities to court controversy in this way.

If the majority of Canadian viewers had their choice, however, delving into political topics would see award show winners played off stage more quickly. Just over half (55%) say that political speeches at award shows are inappropriate or annoying, while the rest – a significant minority – say this is an appropriate time to spread their message:

Making political statements during acceptance speeches at awards shows

This is not to say that Canadians don’t respect the rights of performers to share social or political messages. A full six-in-ten (61%) say that it’s OK for celebrities to use their platform in a political way. That said, not all audiences are created equal. Young people, especially young women, are much more likely to support celebrities making political statements, while men over 35 tend to oppose them:

When it comes to celebrities publicly expressing their political views, which of these statements is closest to your opinion?

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Two-thirds support other forms of protest

There are numerous other forms of celebrity political protest that Canadians find more palatable than award show speeches. A high level of support is found for those who actively take part in public demonstrations.

Some celebrities have done just that in recent weeks. A number of them joined demonstrators at Los Angeles International Airport in response to President Trump’s executive order barring travel for many people from seven Muslim-majority countries. Others, including actress Shailene Woodley and mixed martial arts star Ronda Rousey, have been involved in the Dakota Access Pipeline protests.

Celebrity and political culture are so intertwined that in 2012 Time Magazine compiled an all-time list of the [top ten celebrity protesters](#). Personalities ranged from staunch Second Amendment activist and rocker Ted Nugent, to actress Jane Fonda, who recently made waves after calling Justin Trudeau a “disappointment” for approving pipelines in Canada. Fonda is hardly a newcomer to protest circles. She was branded a traitor by many Americans for infamously posing with North Vietnamese troops during the Vietnam War, earning the nickname “Hanoi Jane”.

Almost three-quarters (72%) of Canadians say celebrities taking part in such events can be informative and can generate positive consequences. This number drops slightly among men (66%) and increases slightly among women (78%).
Responses are slightly less accepting on the question of celebrities using their own social media platforms to communicate political ideas. Two-thirds of Canadians (67%) view this as a positive move, while one-third would prefer them to stay away from political topics. This opinion is held most strongly by millennials, who make up 40 per cent of their potential Twitter audience.

Canadians fond of political song writing

Bruce Springsteen, Lauryn Hill, Billie Holiday, U2 – some of the globe’s most popular artists have built careers on protest songs. Some are more coded than others – Springsteen’s “Born in the USA” has been famously misinterpreted, and was used by Ronald Reagan in his 1984 presidential campaign until Springsteen requested he stop. The song itself is a protest of the harms done to Americans during the Vietnam War, and the poor treatment of veterans once they returned home from war.

This trend is a familiar one in Canada as well. Political songs dot the history of this country’s musical compendium. For example:
• Neil Young’s song “Southern Man” – which lamented racism in the South – was the inspiration for Lynyrd Skynyrd’s track “Sweet Home Alabama”

• The Guess Who were told not to play “American Woman” at the White House when they were invited to perform for President Richard Nixon – they agreed not to play it

• Joni Mitchell’s “Big Yellow Taxi” was embraced by the environmental movement and became her biggest commercial hit

• Tragically Hip frontman Gord Downie recently released an album described as “wrenching history lesson” regarding Canada’s treatment of First Nations people

With the massive commercial success of many political songs, it may not be a surprise that fewer Canadians voice opposition to this form of political expression. As Recording Academy Chair John Poppo recently stated, despite ideological differences, “very often they’re singing the same songs on both sides of the battlefield”:

What do you think of celebrities voicing such views in each of the following ways?

'Writing a song with a political message'

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>BC</th>
<th>AB</th>
<th>SK</th>
<th>MB</th>
<th>ON</th>
<th>QC</th>
<th>ATL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not appropriate</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Is taking a stand worth the risk?

What are entertainers putting on the line when they take a public stand on an issue? Many performers risk alienating a sizeable portion of their potential audience. One-in-five Canadians (22%) say that they’re less likely to support a celebrity with whom they disagree politically. Equal numbers of Canadians, roughly four-in-ten in each group, say that political action by Hollywood stars either doesn’t affect their likelihood to support that person’s work (38%), or that it really depends on the issue (40%).
Canadians are similarly supportive of the right to political expression for another group of people in the public eye – professional athletes. Close to the same number (57%) say it’s OK for athletes to use their platform to give voice to causes they believe in, though the avenue they choose draws a stark divide in support.

Part 2: Athletes and Politics

‘Stick to Sports’

For many North Americans, sports are a valued escape. The intersection of sports and politics in recent years, however, has increasingly encroached upon this space, prompting real discussions about socio-political issues to take place in a forum many view as separate from these topics. Basketball fans in Toronto likely noticed this recently when both Raptors guard Kyle Lowry and Nigerian-born General Manager Masai Ujiri voiced displeasure with President Trump’s travel ban.
Political expression in sports however, is nothing new. Muhammad Ali was banned from boxing over his opposition to the Vietnam War, and John Carlos and Tommie Smith certainly made their mark at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City.

That said, the advent of social media and an increasingly divisive political environment has given athletes both a platform and an impetus to make their personal political musings known in recent years. The backlash against this movement is a call that started on social media for athletes and sportswriters to #sticktosports. In this age of division, it appears fewer professional athletes are willing to do so.

More than half of Canadians (57%) say it’s OK for professional athletes to use this platform to speak out in support of political causes they agree with. However, this leaves a significant portion (43%) who say athletes should forget about political platitudes and focus on their work. Interestingly however, high-profile athletes like Tiger Woods and Michael Jordan, who famously (allegedly) said he avoids taking political sides because “Republicans buy sneakers too”, have been chided for not speaking up enough.

When it comes to professional athletes publicly expressing their political views, which of these statements is closest to your opinion?

- It's OK for professional athletes to use their platform to give voice to political causes they believe in (57%)
- Professional athletes should just focus on their work and avoid making political statements (43%)

Millennials are more likely than older generations to support political expression from athletes. Seven-in-ten (69%) Canadians ages 18 – 34 are supportive of their political expression, while those 55 and older are split evenly on each side.

When it comes to professional athletes publicly expressing their political views, which of these statements is closest to your opinion?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>18-34</th>
<th>35-54</th>
<th>55+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional athletes should just focus on their work and avoid making political statements</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It's OK for professional athletes to use their platform to give voice to political causes they believe in</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Is there a line with athletes and politics? Where should it be drawn?

The Angus Reid Institute presented respondents with four situations that may arise in professional sports, asking which of these activities they would see as positive and potentially inspiring, and which of them they view as inappropriate.

Of the four options given, Canadians are least likely to say athletes sharing their political opinions on social media is either inappropriate or annoying. In fact, two-thirds (65%) say this is a venue that may allow them to inspire others to action. The results for the other three options are not as accepting:

**What do you think of athletes voicing such views in each of the following ways?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Positive and inspiring</th>
<th>Innappropriate and annoying</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sharing political opinions on social media</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refusing to visit the White House after winning a championship</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wearing clothes that express a political opinion during warm-ups</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not standing during the national anthem</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**National anthems off-limits for most**

San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick created a firestorm after he first sat, then later knelt, during the American national anthem before each NFL game this season. Numerous other players across the league joined his protest, which Kaepernick said was designed to bring attention to the treatment of black Americans by police officers in the U.S.

Perhaps closer to home for many Canadians, this story reached the hockey rink as well.

During the World Cup of Hockey in September, American national team and Columbus Blue Jackets coach John Tortorella told ESPN “any of my players sit on the bench for the national anthem, they will sit there rest of the game”. It appears that most Canadians would agree with the outspoken NHL coach. While most are fine with athletes making political statements, they are much less likely to say it’s OK to use the national anthem as a means of doing so. Nearly three-quarters (73%) of Canadians say that this action would be
inappropriate. Those in the 18 – 34 age group are more accepting, though even among them, just four-in-ten say this can generate positive results:

What do you think of athletes voicing such views in each of the following ways?
Not standing during the national anthem

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Positive and inspiring</th>
<th>Innappropriate and annoying</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-34</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-54</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55+</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Split on whether to skip the White House

Six members of the New England Patriots have said they will take a pass on their involvement in a common American tradition – visiting the White House to celebrate a championship. Winners from the major sports leagues – the NFL, NBA, MLB, and NHL – have accepted this customary invitation for decades, though the practice of athlete visits to the White House apparently dates back to 1865.

Many athletes have declined the invitation before, including Michael Jordan, Boston Bruins goaltender Tim Thomas, and Patriots quarterback Tom Brady. Attention this year is being driven by the growing number of players voicing their unwillingness to partake. Defensive captain Devin McCourty told reporters “I believe certain people might feel accepted there while others won’t,” in reference to President Trump.

Weighing in from this side of the border, Canadians are generally split on whether this decision is a positive one. Half (48%) say that such a move has the potential to generate positive outcomes, while another half (52%) say skipping the visit would be inappropriate. In terms of their political affiliation, those who supported the Conservative party in the 2015 election are close to twice as likely to say that skipping an invitation to meet the President is inappropriate, perhaps owing to higher levels of support for Trump from Conservatives than other parties in Canada.

What do you think of athletes voicing such views in each of the following ways?
'Refusing to visit the White House after winning a championship'

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Positive and inspiring</th>
<th>Innappropriate and annoying</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPC</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NDP</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>40%</td>
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</tbody>
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Political statements in pregame

Canadian opinion is similarly split on professional athletes expressing their political views in pregame warmups. Perhaps most famously, NBA superstar Lebron James wore an “I Can’t Breathe” shirt during a 2014 warmup, in response to the death of Eric Garner, who died after an altercation with New York police. Other NBA players have also expressed support for specific African American individuals involved in high profile police incidents over the past few years. Similarly, NFL wide receiver DeSean Jackson donned cleats emblazoned with yellow police tape to protest what he called the “senseless killings” by police. He was fined $6,000 by the NFL for breaking the dress code.

Asked whether this is a positive way to make a statement, a slight majority of Canadians (54%) say it is not. A significant age divide exists on this question: opposition more frequently comes from men and women over 55, while young women (18-34) are most likely to support it:

What do you think of athletes voicing such views in each of the following ways?

‘Wearing clothes that express a political opinion during warm-ups’

![Image of Lebron James wearing an “I Can’t Breathe” shirt]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Positive and inspiring</th>
<th>Inappropriate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male 18-34</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male 35-54</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male 55+</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 18-34</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 35-54</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 55+</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Majority say teams should have a policy in place

Sports franchises across the major professional leagues in Canada and the U.S. have mixed policies regarding political expression. The NFL, for example, mandates certain criteria for uniforms, which led to DeSean Jackson’s fine, but they have no specific policy in place for national anthem protests, meaning Colin Kaepernick was able to kneel through the season without formal repercussions. And, while the NBA has pregame policy in place requiring players to wear their brand-specific, team-issued clothing, commissioner Adam Silver took no action against players wearing protest shirts prior to games.

There isn’t much desire among Canadians to prohibit political expression by athletes. Indeed, only 10 per cent say that it should be prohibited, and that offenders should be fined. The largest percentage, half of Canadians (50%) say that there should be formal policies in place that clearly outline the circumstances in which political speech by players is acceptable. Four-in-ten (40%) opt for an even more laissez-faire
approach, saying that professional teams and leagues should have no policy at all and players should express themselves as they please.

Regardless of whether you think these actions by athletes are appropriate or not, in your opinion, is this the sort of thing sports teams and leagues should have a policy on?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes, they should have policies that clearly outline when and where political speech by athletes is acceptable</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No, teams and leagues should not have a policy on this</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, they should prohibit political speech by athletes and punish violations with a fine or suspension</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
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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 organization 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.

For detailed results by age, gender, region, education, and other demographics, click here.