

Should Canadians have the right to be forgotten? Most would follow Europe on Internet search law

By two-to-one ratio, Canadians support right to petition search engines to remove negative information

January 7, 2019 – In the European Union, citizens [have the right](#) to request that search engines remove information about them that is outdated, inaccurate, or no longer relevant from search results.

This “right to be forgotten” was the product of [a 2014 court case](#) brought by Mario Costeja González, a Spanish man who wanted Google to stop showing news articles about his long-resolved financial troubles when people searched his name.

As Canada's Privacy Commissioner [seeks a court decision](#) on whether Canadians have this same right, a new study from the Angus Reid Institute finds Canadians generally supportive of importing the doctrine.

Nearly one-in-five Canadian adults (18%) – the equivalent of roughly 5 million people – know someone who has a problem similar to González's, with negative information following them around online.

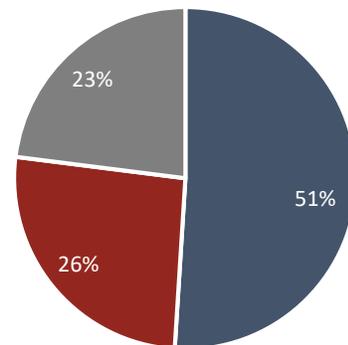
Further, fully half of Canadians (51%) say they believe people should have the right to have certain information about themselves removed from search results, and a slightly larger number (56%) would support legislation enshrining the right to be forgotten in Canadian law.

More Key Findings:

- Only 2 per cent of Canadians say they themselves have had negative information from their past follow them online, but many more know someone who has. Among those under age 35, nearly three-in-ten (29%) have at least an acquaintance who could benefit from the right to be forgotten
- While the majority of Canadians know little about the concept of the right to be forgotten, awareness and support for legislation on this matter increases among younger people

What is your overall view of this legal concept?

- People should have a “right to be forgotten” and have search results changed
- Internet searches are a form of public record, erasing negative information is still erasing history and facts
- Not sure/ can't say



METHODOLOGY:

The Angus Reid Institute conducted an online survey from November 21 – 26, 2018, among a representative randomized sample of 1,500 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 +/- 2.5 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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- The belief that people should have the right to be forgotten is consistent regardless of whether one has heard of the issue or has not

INDEX:

- **Half believe people should have the ‘right to be forgotten’**
- **Awareness of ‘right to be forgotten’ correlates with personal experiences**

Half believe people should have the ‘right to be forgotten’

At the heart of debates over the right to be forgotten is [the tension](#) between two long standing, recognized rights: the right to privacy and the right to free speech.

Proponents of the EU law see it as [an extension of the right to privacy](#) in the digital age. They argue people shouldn’t have to be publicly associated with negative information about themselves forever, particularly if circumstances have changed significantly since the negative information was first published.

Opponents of the right to be forgotten see it as [a dangerous limitation on the right to free speech](#). They argue that removing truthful information from search results, even for noble reasons, sets a precedent that can be exploited by those wishing to limit the public’s access to information.

When presented with these two opposing views, roughly half of Canadians (51%) align themselves with the former, saying:

“People should have a ‘right to be forgotten’ and have search results changed so this kind of negative information doesn’t dominate their online record forever.”

The rest either align themselves with the opposite position:

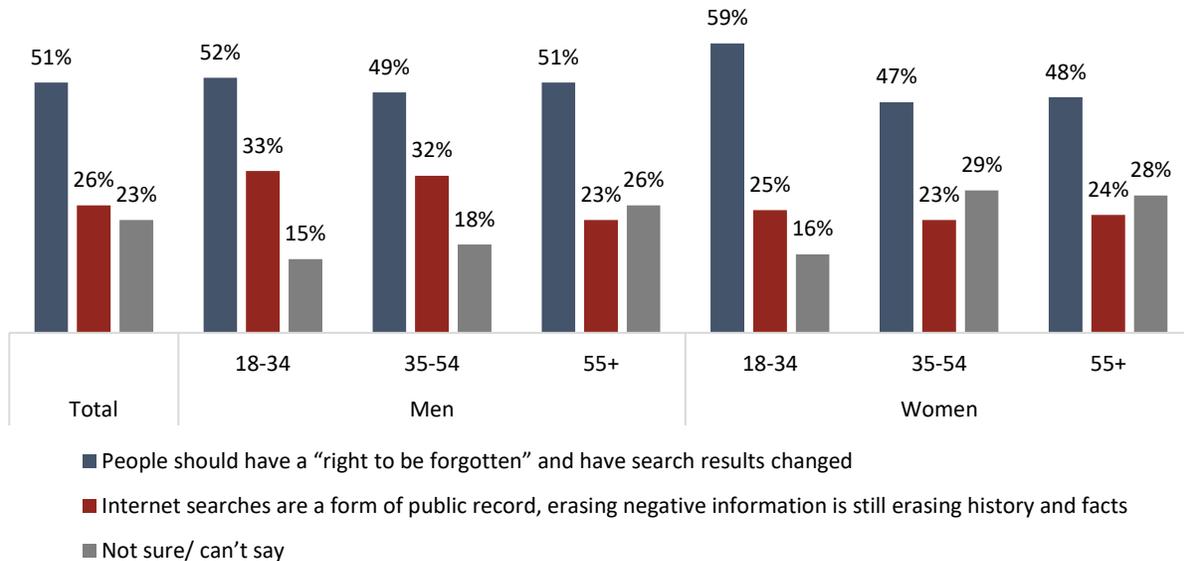
“Internet searches are a form of public record, erasing negative information – even long past or no longer relevant – is still erasing history and facts” (26%) or are unsure how they feel (23%).

At least a plurality of Canadians choose the “people should have a right to be forgotten” side of this face-off across every demographic group ([see comprehensive tables for greater detail](#)). Belief in this legal concept rises to nearly six-in-ten among young women and those with university educations, as seen in the graphs that follow.

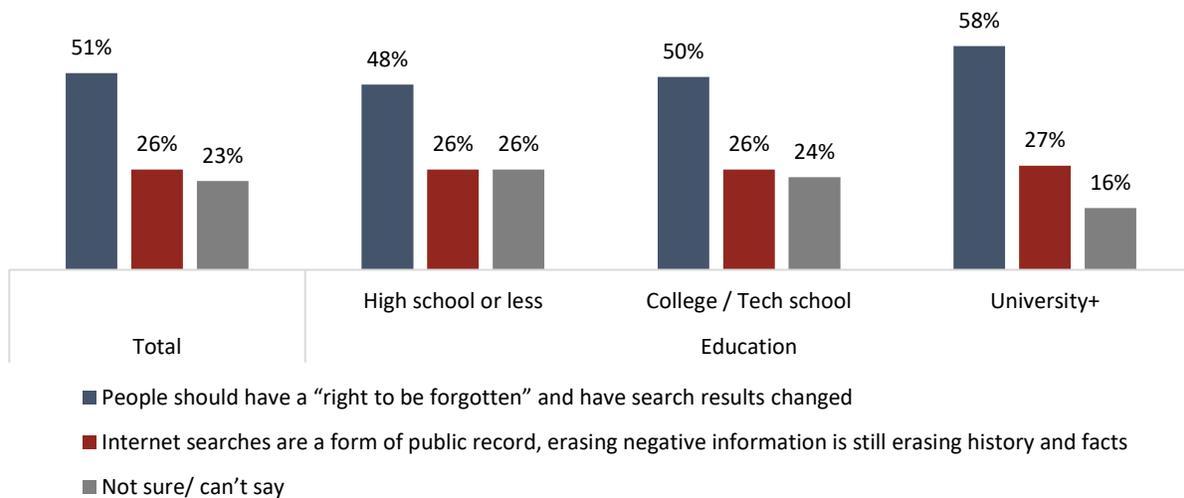
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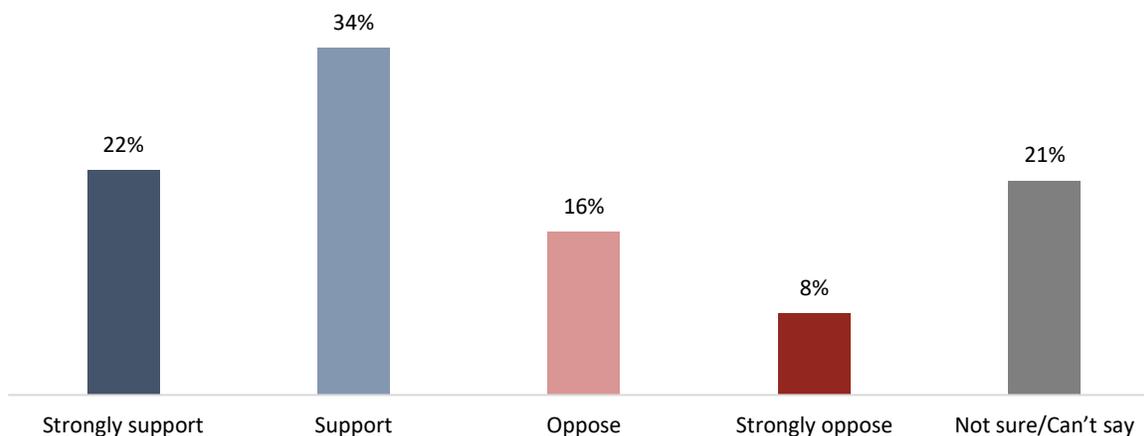


What is your overall view of this?



A full majority (56%) of respondents say they would support Canada adopting a law to this effect, while fewer than half that many (23%) are opposed. Again, a sizeable number are unsure:

Would you support or oppose Canada adopting a "right to be forgotten" law?



Responses to this question follow the same general pattern seen in responses to the more conceptual one. Young women and those with university education are among the most likely to support a right to be forgotten law ([see comprehensive tables](#)).

Awareness of 'right to be forgotten' correlates with personal experiences

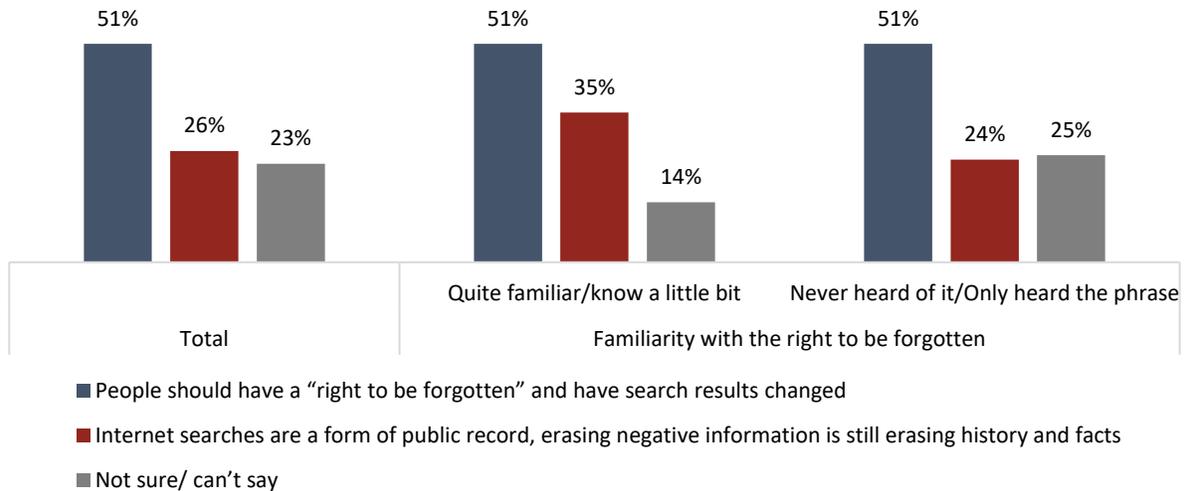
It's worth noting that relatively few Canadians express awareness of the right to be forgotten. Fully six-in-ten (60%) say they had never heard of this concept before responding to this survey, while another 18 per cent say they had "only heard the phrase." Only 5 per cent say they were "quite familiar" with it.

Notably, once the concept is explained to them, Canadians express support for it at roughly the same rate, regardless of whether they had heard of it before. That said, those who were familiar with the concept before reading the explanation provided in this survey are more likely to say they oppose it:

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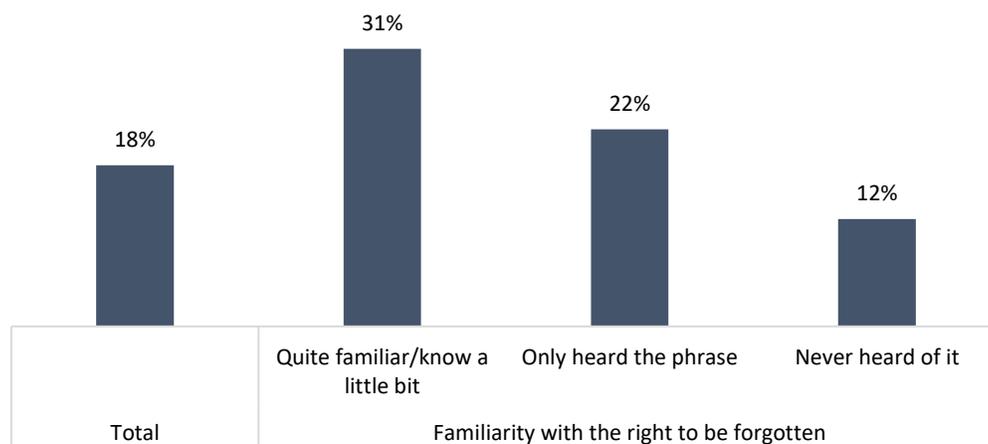


While familiarity with the right to be forgotten doesn't seem to influence one's support for the concept, it is correlated with awareness of someone who might want to take advantage of such a right.

The vast majority of Canadians (82%) say they don't know anyone who has experienced a situation in which negative information has followed them online. It's notable, however, that the 18 per cent who do know someone who has had this experience is the equivalent of roughly 5 million Canadian adults.

Among those who profess familiarity with the right to be forgotten, the percentage saying they know someone who has been haunted by negative information rises to 31 per cent.

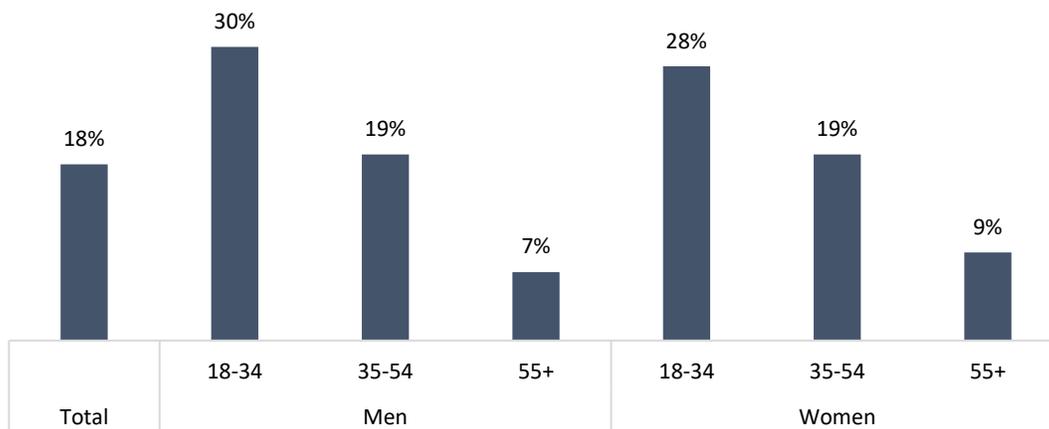
Percentage who know someone who has had negative information from their past follow them online:



In addition to being correlated with awareness, the likelihood that one knows someone who could potentially benefit from the right to be forgotten tends to decline with age.

Younger respondents of both genders are more likely to have acquaintances who have had their reputations harmed by information available about them online, as seen in the graph that follows.

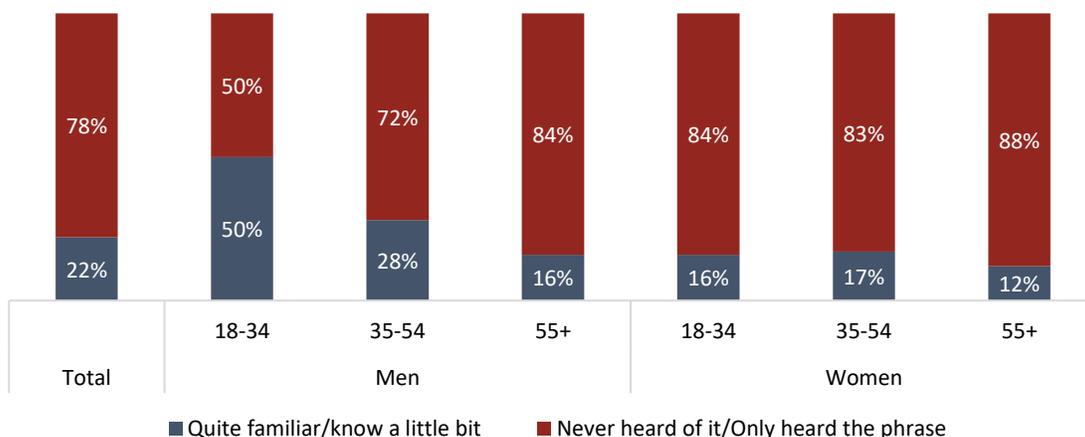
Percentage who know someone who has had negative information from their past follow them online:



In the case of young men, the higher percentage saying they know someone affected by this phenomenon corresponds to an extremely high percentage – relative to other age and gender groupings – who profess a familiarity with the right to be forgotten concept.

Fully half of young men say they knew at least a little bit about this subject before taking this survey. Young women, despite their similarly high exposure to people who might be able to take advantage of the right to be forgotten, say they are mostly unfamiliar with it:

How familiar are you with a concept called 'the right to be forgotten'?



*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.*

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

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