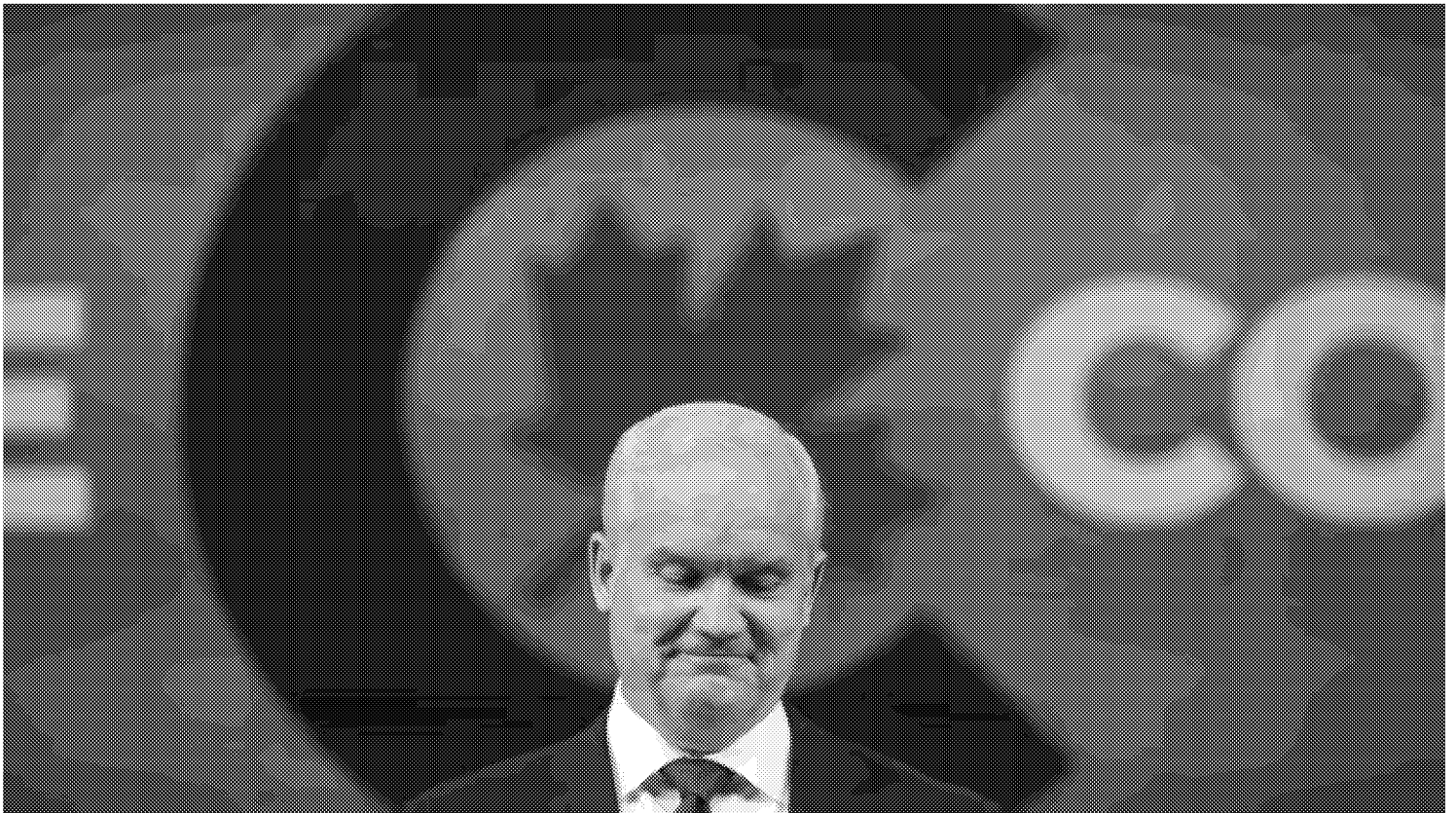


The House

O'Toole claims Chinese interference in 2021 election flipped Tory ridings — but experts urge caution

The former Conservative leader cited evidence from party's internal review

[Christian Paas-Lang](#) · CBC News · Posted: Jun 18, 2022 5:33 PM EDT | Last Updated: June 18, 2022



Then-Conservative party leader Erin O'Toole speaks to supporters during election night, in Oshawa, Ont., on Sept. 21, 2021. O'Toole says Chinese interference cost his party up to nine seats. (Chris Helgren/Reuters)

Former Conservative leader Erin O'Toole claims foreign interference from China in the last election cost his party seats. But some media and national security experts are pushing back, arguing that it's difficult to conclusively prove interference and that any intervention was unlikely to have been so decisive.

O'Toole made the comments about China's state influence during an interview on [CBC's *The House*](#), which aired Saturday. He told host Chris Hall that while the level of interference he's describing would not have changed the overall outcome of the election, it had an effect in several key areas, including B.C.'s lower mainland and some Toronto ridings.

When asked for evidence that the interference was decisive, O'Toole cited his party's internal review of the election but did not share further details. The Conservatives did not reply to a request for comment about O'Toole's allegations or provide further evidence backing up the claim.

Earlier this month, the party [told news outlet Politico](#) it had nothing to add on the subject.

O'Toole spoke specifically about the platform WeChat, a social media and messaging app developed by the Chinese multinational Tencent. He said misinformation about the Conservatives spread on the platform and turned many voters against Conservatives.

LISTEN | Erin O'Toole discusses future of Conservatives, interference in 2021 election:



CBC News: The House 23:06

Erin O'Toole's advice to Conservatives

Former Conservative leader Erin O'Toole opens up in a feature-length, sit-down interview with host Chris Hall to discuss the convoy, China and the caucus revolt that ended his leadership.

Some of it amounted to "voter suppression," he said. "People were worried about appearing on a voters' list as having voted if a Conservative won."

O'Toole said his campaign had been in touch with CSIS before and during the campaign over the issue of interference and he had asked the national intelligence agency to make public what they know.

CSIS declined to comment on this story, referring instead to a statement sent to CBC News earlier in the month. In that an agency spokesperson pointed to a task force set up to monitor interference, which has made no public announcements related to the election. The threshold for an announcement is whether there is a substantial threat to "a free and fair election," according to national security policy.

- [Spy agency warned Trudeau China's tactics becoming more 'sophisticated ... insidious'](#)
- [New federal bill would compel key industries to bolster cyber security — or pay a price](#)

The Chinese embassy in Ottawa did not respond to a request for comment. Asked in December about its activities in relation to Huawei, ambassador Cong Peiwu denied China engaged in espionage.

"China, we don't do this kind of thing, you know, spying, or electronic monitoring. It is the United States that have been doing these kinds of things over the past decades," he said.

No evidence of influential, decisive campaign: report

O'Toole emphasized the level of interference he's describing would not have changed the overall outcome of the election. But he told Liberal MP Nathaniel Erskine-Smith in a podcast it had proved decisive in as many as nine ridings. Former Conservative MP Kenny Chiu, for instance, has argued misinformation played a role in his loss.

O'Toole also said he hadn't been more outspoken about this issue because he believed CSIS would alert the public, and that he didn't want it to look like "sour grapes."

"We should be demanding a better defence against this interference in the next federal election."



Former Conservative MP Kenny Chiu rises during Question Period in the House of Commons in April 2021. He has said that misinformation played a role in him losing his seat. (Adrian Wyld/The Canadian Press)

But some experts are skeptical that interference was as co-ordinated and decisive as O'Toole suggests. The Media Ecosystem Observatory, a joint project between the Max Bell School of Public Policy at McGill University and the Munk School of Global Affairs at the University of Toronto, published a report in March on the issue of misinformation in 2021.

The report did note there was anti-Conservative misinformation spreading on China-based social media platforms, such as a claim the Conservatives would break diplomatic ties with China if elected.

But Aengus Bridgman, the director of the Media Ecosystem Observatory, said his organization had not found evidence of an influential, co-ordinated campaign.

- [Former chief justice McLachlin says she'll stay on Hong Kong court despite crackdown on human rights](#)
- [Ottawa seeks to hide 'sensitive' details of foreign interference case from public view](#)

"Maybe [the Conservatives] have data that points to something very decisive that they found in internal polling," he said. "But I would be surprised."

He said while there was clearly anti-Conservative misinformation on Chinese-language social media channels, his group had not found evidence of systematic attempts to amplify and spread those messages.

Bridgman said his work did not preclude the idea that interference might have had an effect on the margins, but said it was unlikely to have been the factor that tipped eight or nine ridings against the Conservatives.

LISTEN | Former Conservative MP Kenny Chiu discusses election loss:



CBC News: The House 7:47

A departing 'pandemic MP'

Former Conservative MP Kenny Chiu talks about the struggle to settle in as a "pandemic MP" and his efforts to fight what he saw as misinformation circling among Chinese-Canadians during the campaign.

"I don't mean to say it's completely impossible, but I think you need to have a bar for evidence," he said.

Bridgman said that in general his group had found minimal evidence for foreign interference. He also urged Canadians not to be automatically suspicious of people who get their news from other countries or in different languages.

Conclusive evidence of interference elusive: expert

Akshay Singh, an international affairs and security scholar and a non-resident research fellow at the Council on International Policy, said it can be difficult to conclusively establish whether interference occurred, in part because Canada doesn't have the same legislative framework as a country like the United States.

"A lot of the times there's a lot of smoke and there's not enough of an indication of fire," he said.

Difficulty in proving interference can also arise in part, because it's hard to distinguish between genuine beliefs and direction from an outside government, Singh noted.

- [Canada bans Chinese tech giant Huawei from 5G network](#)
- [Trudeau says Huawei, ZTE 5G ban took longer because government wanted to get it right](#)

"You don't always need to give direction to specific groups, if you're a foreign government, to vote a specific way or not. Because some of these groups implicitly understand what is in that country's interest or not and in their own group's interests or not," he said.

Singh said China's "united front" system, a political strategy to influence Chinese communities around the world, is a key example of this dynamic.

"There doesn't need to be direction in those spaces, those groups, to proactively decide to [support China's interests]. And as such, it can be very hard to prove that there's foreign interference because there's no clandestine or deceptive direction."

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