

Introduction

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What is populism? What drives its emergence in specific times and places? How can it be reliably identified and measured in real-world politics, and what does it mean for democracy, rights, and social cohesion? These questions have animated the work of York's Observatory of Populism in Canada since 2023, when we founded it with the goal of attaining a deeper, evidence-based understanding of populism's role in contemporary Canadian politics, in both French and English. This work is timely and necessary given evidence that—contrary to a longstanding perception of Canadian “exceptionalism”—parties, leaders, and movements deploying populist styles and strategies have gained visibility, both regionally and federally.

This issue of *Canada Watch's* Policy Intervention Series presents eight research briefs undertaken by the Observatory to illuminate various dimensions of Canadian populism. We are pleased to contribute to this series, which provides a valuable forum for connecting scholarly work with broader public and policy debates. While our research does not take a prescriptive stance on specific policies, it sheds light on how populist rhetoric and strategies shape the terrain on which policy questions are framed, contested, and understood in Canada.

In this short introduction, we draw readers' attention to the briefs' key insights on the following themes: methodological opportunities and challenges; the strategic use of blame in populist messaging; the role of digital media and hashtag activism; the amplification and strategic capitalization of crises; regional dynamics; and the impact of transformative events.

Given its fluid nature across ideational, discursive, and stylistic dimensions, populism presents a host of analytical and methodological challenges for researchers. A key debate concerns whether it is possible—even desirable—to treat “populist” and “non-populist” as mutually exclusive categories. Like many others in the field (e.g., Diehl, 2022; Meijers & Zaslove, 2021), the Observatory of Populism in Canada adopts a non-categorical approach, focusing on the relational and context-dependent nature of populist appeals, rather than labelling entire parties or leaders as inherently “populist.” To measure the prevalence and nature of such appeals, the Observatory team compiled a first-of-its-kind database of over 500,000 tweets by federal MPs and party leaders since 2021, which is regularly updated. These data offer an unprecedented window into how populist appeals are deployed across Canada's federal political spectrum, via social media.

Analyzing this dataset is not a straightforward task, as populism is notoriously difficult to define, measure, and operationalize. Defining populist appeals in practice is challenging, since what counts as “populist” can vary by context, speaker, and strategic intent. Semantic nuances further complicate measurement and operationalization. Indeed, shared terms like “freedom” may signal populist framing in one context but not in another. Moreover, shifting public norms can alter the meaning and resonance of certain terms over time, making longi-

tudinal comparison challenging. A key insight across the Observatory's briefs is the value of mixed-method approaches combining quantitative data with qualitative analysis to interpret populist appeals in context.

A second insight concerns the distinctive nature of anti-"elite" blame in right- versus left-wing populisms. Experts broadly agree that, rather than comprising a distinct ideology, populism draws on many ideological traditions to forge antagonisms among "people" versus "elites" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013). The Observatory briefs highlight the significance of this ideological diversity in Canada, showing for instance that right- and left-wing parties blame different "elite" culprits for rising inflation. Conservative Party of Canada (CPC) MPs—especially Pierre Poilievre—primarily blame the Liberals and former Prime Minister Trudeau for rising prices, while New Democratic Party (NDP) MPs point to corporate profiteering as the main culprit. Both narratives simplify the causes of inflation to mobilize popular anger, yet they draw on differing ideological traditions to identify different "elite" offenders.

A third revelation of the briefs concerns the strategic use of digital platforms—particularly X (formerly Twitter)—to amplify populist messaging. For instance, one brief compared the extent to which Canadian federal opposition parties use hashtags—versus plain text—to frame inflation through populist narratives. It found that the CPC, particularly under Pierre Poilievre, has adopted a more coordinated and visible hashtag strategy to assign blame to political "elites," while the NDP's messaging focused on corporate profiteering but lacked the same digital coordination, limiting its reach and impact. Another brief demonstrates how this kind of messaging can spread through a contagion effect: once a handful of CPC MPs invoked the "gatekeeper" trope popularized by Poilievre, others quickly adopted the language, reinforcing a unified populist narrative through repetition and digital amplification. Together, these findings underscore the importance of analyzing both hashtag use and broader rhetorical trends in order to fully grasp how digital strategies shape populist communication.

Fourth, the briefs offer concrete evidence that populist appeals entail the performance and propagation of "crisis" narratives (Moffitt, 2015). Pierre Poilievre's communication style best exemplifies this. Between his CPC leadership win on September 10, 2022, and February 25, 2025, 49.4 percent of his tweets (~3,000 tweets) negatively mentioned Justin Trudeau, often blaming him for an array of social crises facing Canadians. After Trudeau's resignation in December 2024, Poilievre swiftly redirected blame onto Liberal leadership frontrunners Chrystia Freeland and especially Mark Carney, using hashtags like "#CarbonTaxCarney" and "#JustLikeJustin" to argue that, regardless of its leader, the party serves an out-of-touch "elite." Though unsuccessful—Poilievre lost both the election and his Ottawa seat—this strategy suggests that a populist invocation of crisis underpins the CPC's approach under his leadership. Closely linked is the use of simple rhetorical appeals—such as the CPC's invoking "common sense"—to present complex policies as obvious, urgent solutions.

A fifth theme explores the regional distinctiveness of Canadian populisms, particularly in Alberta. One brief explores populist elements behind the *Alberta Sovereignty Within a United Canada Act*, passed in 2022 to allow the provincial government to bypass federal laws and policies it deems "harmful" to Albertans. Framed as a defence against federal "overreach," the Act taps into a longstanding narrative of "Western alienation" that frames Ottawa elites as hostile to Alberta's economic interests, especially its fossil fuel industry. The

Observatory's brief illustrates how regional grievances were not only central to this provincial policy but have also historically influenced populist currents at the federal level, with earlier movements like the Reform Party helping to shape national conservative discourse.

A final theme underscored by the briefs featured in this issue emphasizes the critical role of transformative events in accelerating mobilization through populist discourse. The Freedom Convoy of early 2022 stands out as a catalytic event that galvanized public frustration over pandemic mandates and reinforcing narratives around personal freedom and government overreach. The Observatory's work shows that Pierre Poilievre's visible support for the convoy significantly boosted his popularity and helped consolidate his political identity in the early days of his campaign to lead the Conservative Party of Canada. More broadly, the briefs show that major disruptions—such as COVID-19, Brexit, or the rise of Trump—often correlate with spikes in public interest in populism, offering fertile ground for political actors to assert themselves as champions of “the people.”

Together, the briefs presented in this issue depict Canadian populism as a dynamic force—ideologically flexible, digitally savvy, and responsive to both structural discontent and timely political opportunities. The Observatory of Populism in Canada, housed at York University's Glendon Campus, aims to continue analyzing these dynamics and to pursue new methodological innovations that capture the evolving nature of populist strategies and discourses in Canada. This initiative is supported by a York Research Chair in Populism, Rights, and Legality. The Observatory has also received crucial logistical support from York's Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies, which has been instrumental in sustaining its activities. ■

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