

Who cares about populism?

Tracking public interest in “populism in Canada” through Google Trends

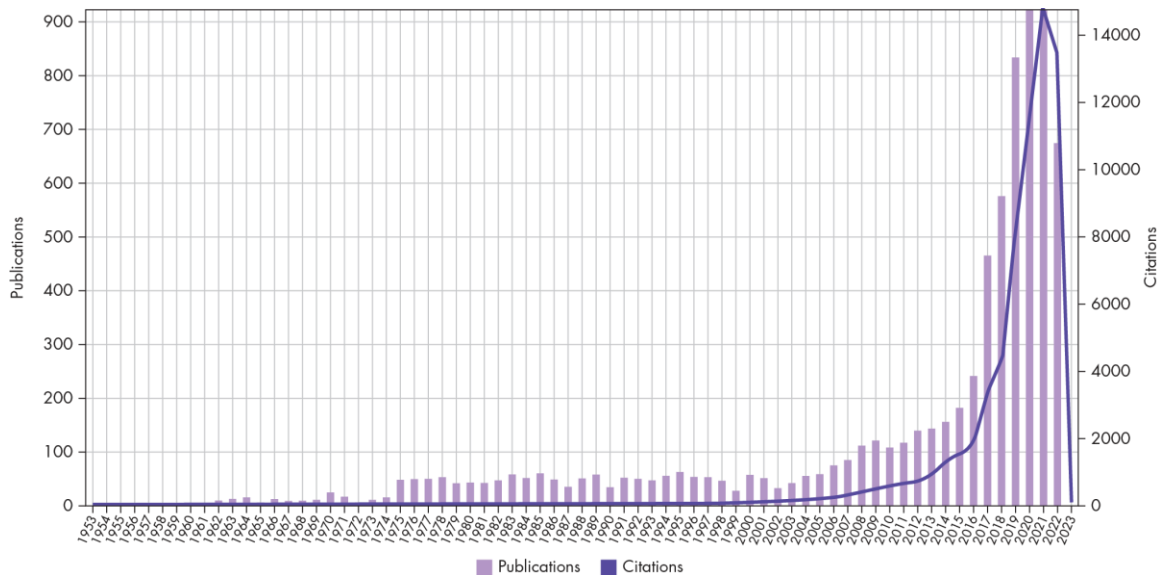
BY EFE PEKER, RÉMI VIVÈS, AND EMILY LAXER | AUGUST 15, 2023

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Populism as a concept has a long history, but it has never been more popular or commonly used than it is today. It would not be an exaggeration to say that over the past decade, the interest in populism has exploded, both in the social sciences and among the general public.

According to the database *Web of Science*, which compiles the highest ranked scholarly journals in English, 7,512 publications between January 1, 1952 and December 31, 2022 included the words “populism(s)” or “populist(s)” in their title, cited 66,053 times in total. What is striking is that 4,624 of these publications (62%) and 34,872 of these citations (53%) have appeared since 2016 (1). That year, adding to the rise of populist movements elsewhere, the Brexit vote in June and Trump’s election in November sent shockwaves through democracies around the world and sparked new curiosity about the concept (2). Figure 1 below illustrates the trend.

FIGURE 1. Total number of publications and citations of research papers that include “populism(s)” or “populist(s)” in their title

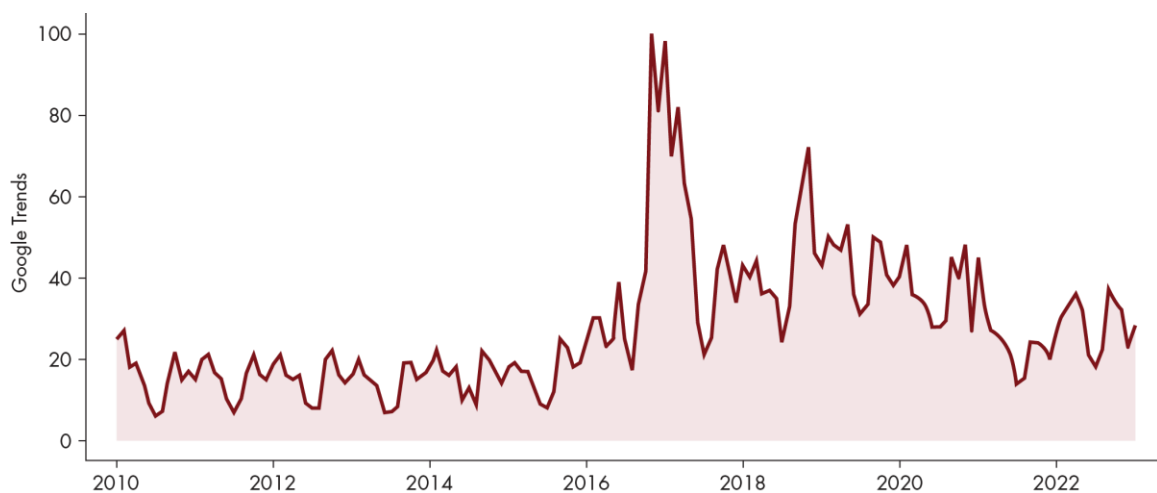


Source: Web of Science.

A similar tendency can be seen in *Google Books*, which includes academic and non-academic works. In English-language books published between 1880 and 2019, the use of the word “populism” (in the entire text, not just in the title) has seen an unprecedented rise since the mid-2010s (3).

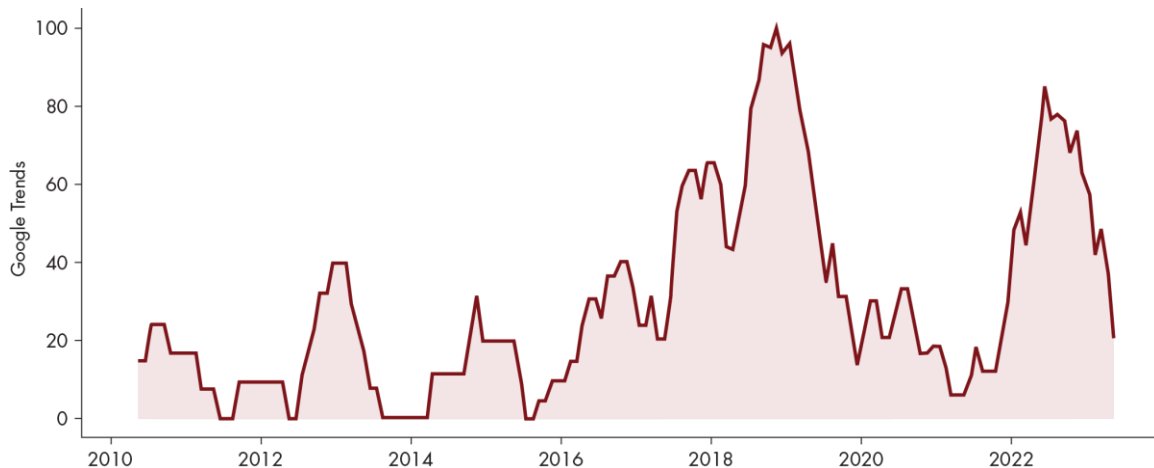
Academic interest in populism has thus increased markedly. But what of the larger public’s interest in the phenomenon? Google search data show that searches of “populism” around the world also rose steeply in 2016 (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2. Worldwide Google trends for “populism”



In Canada, until recently, there has been a tendency to regard populism as a foreign political phenomenon, with limited consequences for Canadian values and behaviour. Yet the public's online engagement on Google suggests a keen and growing interest in the role of populism on Canadian soil. Figure 3 below shows that Google searches of "populism in Canada" have increased dramatically – though unevenly – in the last decade and a half.

FIGURE 3. Canadian Google trends for "populism in Canada"



Six peak moments are clearly discernible, which may arguably be related to multiple developments that have generated journalistic and public discourse on populism. While it is not possible to identify with certainty the events causing these spikes in public interest, we can offer educated hypotheses. The spike in 2013 may reflect public interest in the populist dimensions of Toronto Mayor Rob Ford's style of government, including his rhetorical emphasis on battling "big city elites" (4). Later that same year, some commentators also interpreted Québec's Charter of Values – which, if passed, would have prohibited visible religious signs among all public sector employees – through the lens of populism (5).

On the heels of the Brexit-Trump moment in 2016, the 2017 leadership race in the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC), where Maxime Bernier came in second (6), followed by the creation of his own People's Party of Canada (PPC) in 2018, likely contributed to bringing populism back to the Canadian political agenda (7). In the same year, the election of Doug Ford as the Premier of Ontario also invited debates about populism (8).

Following a dip in Google searches in late 2019, it seems that the COVID-19 context gave new life and relevance to populism in Canada. As one *Washington Post* op-ed put it in its title, "Canada's Main Covid Legacy? Right-Wing Populism" (9). Rising protests against lockdowns and vaccine mandates, the tripling of the PPC votes in the 2021 federal election (compared to 2019), and the paralyzing of Canadian politics for weeks during the Freedom Convoy in early 2022 (10) likely contributed to the rebound in public searches. More recently, leadership changes in the CPC (Pierre Poilievre) and Alberta's United Conservatives (Danielle Smith) in the fall of 2022 were viewed by some as indicative of a further rise of populism in Canada (11).

Alongside the growing public interest in populism is a continued lack of clarity around the concept's precise meanings and manifestations. Populism has many dimensions and can take on various ideological permutations. It is also highly context dependent: the way it presents in Canada (and even across regions *within* Canada) is distinct from elsewhere in the world. The Observatory of Populism of Canada was founded with the objective of bringing clarity to the public conversation around populism in the Canadian context by generating and promoting robust empirical research on the matter.

Visit our website to find out more about our [research team](#), read additional [research briefs](#), and access our [database](#) of academic research on populism in Canada. Explore up-to-date evidence of populism's role in Canadian political discourse through our interactive [#X\(Twitter\)Meter](#).

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