

# “Common sense” is back!

## *Who* is using it, *how*, and *what* does it reveal about populist discourse in Canadian federal politics?

BY EMILY LAXER, RÉMI VIVÈS, AND JACOB MCLEAN | JANUARY 6, 2025

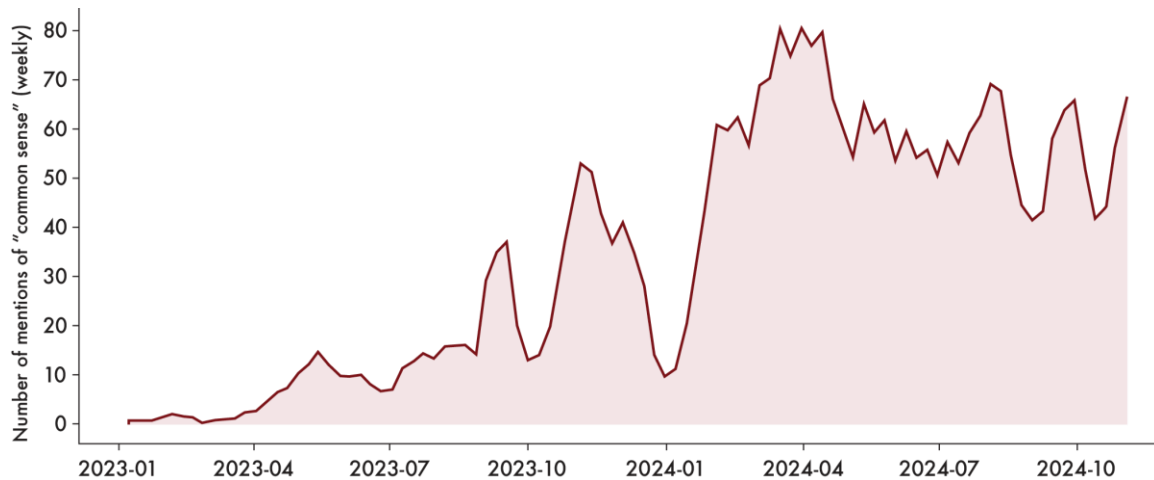
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In the last two years, use of the term “common sense” (or “*gros bon sens*” in French) has virtually exploded in Canadian federal electoral politics. Between January 1, 2023, and November 10, 2024, this term was mentioned by elected MPs a remarkable 3,392 times on X (formerly Twitter), with three quarters of those mentions occurring in 2024 (see Figure 1). What is behind this explosion in political references to “common sense”? What does it reveal about electoral dynamics in Canada?

In this research brief, we explore the relationship between the explosion of “common sense” references by Canadian politicians and populism. As a political discourse, populism invokes the idea of a moral struggle between corrupt, illegitimate “elites” and hardworking, decent “people” (1). The idea that the “people” possess “common sense” knowledge, inaccessible to political, economic, or cultural “elites”, is often elicited as part of, particularly right-wing, populist projects (2). For example, in his recent election victory speech delivered on November 6, 2024, Donald Trump described the win as “a historic realignment uniting citizens of all backgrounds around a *common core of common sense*” (3).

**FIGURE 1. Weekly mentions of “common sense” / “gros bon sens” by Canadian federal MPs on X (January 1, 2023–November 10, 2024)**



Notes: The data for this figure derive primarily from English-language tweets, except in the case of the Bloc Québécois, for whom French-language tweets were analyzed.

We use a dataset of 3,392 tweets by Canadian federal MPs to answer the following questions:

- *Who* is using “common sense” in Canadian federal politics? Is it indeed primarily a right-wing frame, or is its use more widespread?
- *How* is this frame being deployed, and what differences exist across parties?
- *What* does the recent explosion in politicians’ references to “common sense” reveal about the role of populist discourse in Canada?

But first, invocations of “common sense” are not new to Canadian politics. They have deep, impactful roots. Thus, before turning to our main results, we address *historical* uses of this frame by federal and provincial politicians in Canada.

### **A BRIEF HISTORY OF “COMMON SENSE” IN CANADIAN POLITICS**

Appeals to “common sense” among right-wing Canadian politicians are strongly associated with the neoliberal turn that redefined conservatism in the UK – via “Thatcherism” – and in the US – via “Reaganism” – in the 1980s. Prior to this decade, Canadian conservatism had been far less anti-statist, where now it sought to dramatically curtail the role of the public sector (4). This new brand of conservatism sought not only to *appeal* to “common sense”, but also to re-articulate and construct a new “*neoliberal common sense*”, according to which the market is the sole legitimate distributor of economic goods and services to the “people”, whereas state redistributive projects benefit “elites” (5).

This cultivation of and appeal to a neoliberal “common sense” is strongly associated with the rise of the Reform Party, a predecessor to the modern Conservative Party of Canada. Reform’s founding leader, Preston Manning, regularly invoked “the common sense of the common people” when advocating measures to free the market by, among other things, loosening restraints on corporate power (6). In addition to challenging the welfare state in this way, Manning’s “common sense” framework informed his portrayal of rights-based

claims – by minority language and cultural communities, immigrants, and LGBTQ groups, among others – as lobbying on behalf of “special interests” (7).

Although a federal party, Reform had a strong impact on right-wing discourse at the provincial level. Ralph Klein, the Premier of Alberta from 1992 to 2006, rose to power in good part by “satisfying the Reform agitation”, which he achieved by turning the province’s Progressive Conservative Party policy in a neoliberal direction, emphasizing balanced budgets and seeking to harmonize state and capital interests (8). Soon after Klein’s election, this type of politics spread to other provinces, most notably to Ontario. In 1995, Mike Harris was elected Progressive Conservative Premier based on a plan to undertake a “common sense revolution” centered on tax cuts, deregulation, and reduction in the size of government. In effect through 2002, Harris’ policies and cuts were substantial, with implications for just about every area of public policy (9).

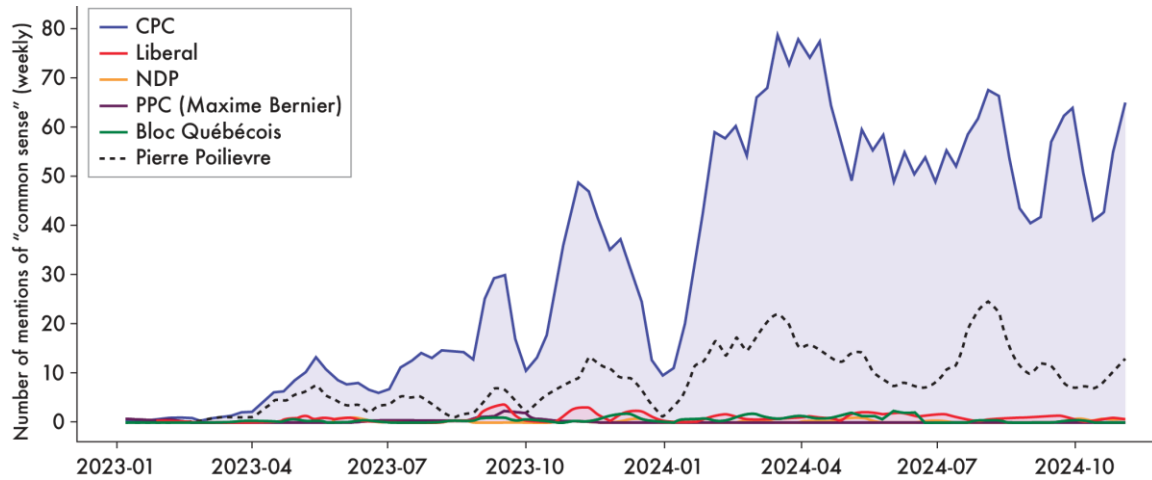
Since the Harris years, the phrase “common sense” has continued to feature in official party-political discourse in Canada. As Minister of Citizenship and Immigration under Prime Minister Stephen Harper, former Alberta Premier Jason Kenney vowed to restore “common sense” to Canada’s refugee and immigration policy, using the phrase to demonstrate the government’s “law and order” approach, which, in part, entailed speeding up several types of deportation, including that of asylum seekers (10). More recently, Premier Doug Ford of Ontario (2018 to present) has utilized the “common-sense” frame to critique technocratic and bureaucratic forms of knowledge as “elite” mechanisms that undermine the interests of the “people,” mainly middle-class taxpayers (11).

Recently, “common sense” has resurfaced as a prominent frame in Canadian federal politics. Who is primarily responsible for this development? Has the “common sense” frame continued to be a tool principally used by right-wing parties and politicians? Or has its use spread across the political spectrum? We turn to these questions in the next section.

#### **THE RETURN OF “COMMON SENSE”: HOW COMMON IS THIS FRAME AND WHO USES IT?**

Figure 2 displays weekly mentions of “common sense” by federal MPs on X, with separate indicators for the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC), the Liberal Party of Canada (LPC), the New Democratic Party (NDP), and the Bloc Québécois (BQ). Although the People’s Party of Canada (PPC) does not possess a seat in parliament, we include its leader Maxime Bernier in our analysis, as he is the subject of much journalistic and academic discussion of populism in Canada (12). The dotted line captures references to “common sense” by CPC leader Pierre Poilievre. While we included the Green Party in our data collection, we found that its MPs did not use the term “common sense” in the period under study.

**FIGURE 2. Weekly mentions of “common sense” / “gros bon sens” by Canadian federal MPs on X, by party and individual leader (January 1, 2023–November 10, 2024)**



Notes: The data for this figure derive primarily from English-language tweets, except in the case of the Bloc Québécois, for whom French-language tweets were analyzed.

Figure 2 elicits several key observations. First and foremost, CPC MPs are responsible for the vast majority (3,217 mentions, 95 percent) of uses of “common sense” by Canadian federal MPs on X during the period examined. Moreover, *within party* data reveal that use of the term is widespread throughout the party, with three quarters of CPC MPs on X citing “common sense” at least once. The fact that Pierre Poilievre himself penned 25 percent of CPC mentions of “common sense” further suggests that, within the party, this frame is subject to a high degree of strategic coordination, spearheaded by the party leader.

@Ryan\_r\_Williams “**Common sense for the common people #pierre4pm**” May 12, 2023

As might be expected given the term’s conservative history, use of the “common sense” frame is far more limited outside the CPC. Liberal MPs cited “common sense” just 82 times in the period examined, compared to 46 uses for the Bloc Québécois (in whose case the term was “gros bon sens”), 17 uses for the NDP, and 21 uses for PPC leader Maxime Bernier. Not only is the total frequency of mentions of “common sense” far lower in these parties; use of the term is also far less widespread, with just 25 percent of Liberal MPs using the term, compared to 19 percent of NDP MPs, and 33 percent of Bloc Québécois MPs. Importantly, Trudeau only mentioned “common sense” once during the period examined, while BQ Leader Yves-Francois Blanchet mentioned it three times, and the NDP’s Jagmeet Singh never mentioned the term in our data.

Quantitative indices thus suggest that the explosion in political references to “common sense” since the start of 2023 is due almost entirely to the CPC. Yet, this tells us little about the precise meaning(s) attributed to this frame, or the topics to which it is applied. In the next section, we address this, asking *how* federal MPs use “common sense” and what this

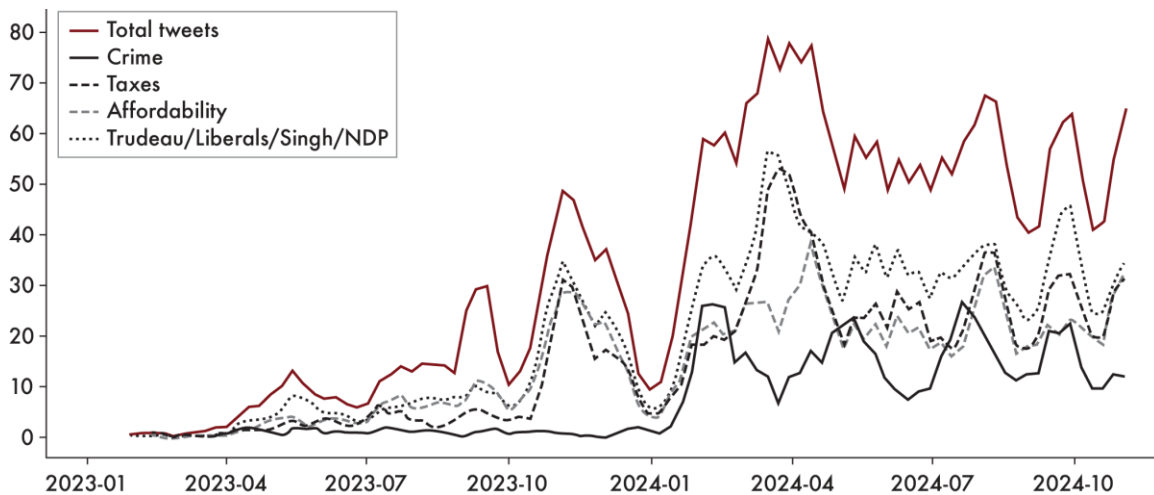
may reveal about populism’s role in Canadian politics. We begin with a close examination of key topics in CPC MPs’ references to “common sense”.

### WHOSE “COMMON SENSE”: HOW DO THE DIFFERENT PARTIES USE THIS FRAME?

#### i. Key topics in CPC MPs’ uses of “common sense”

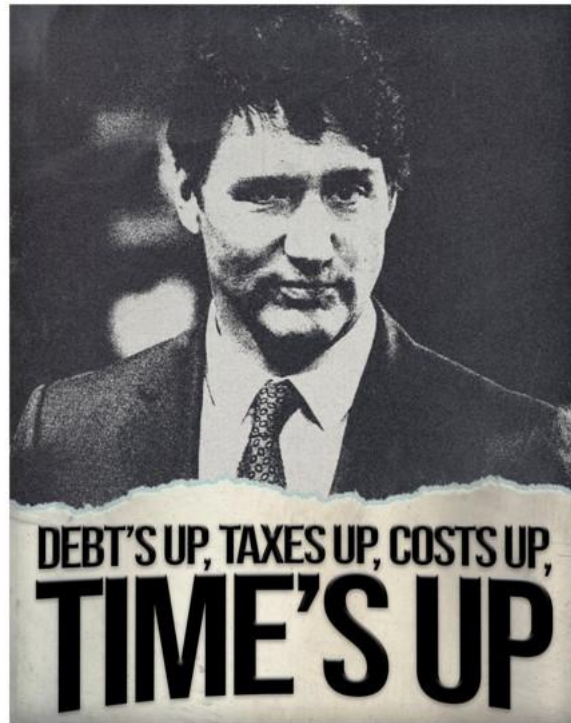
To identify the key topic areas to which CPC MPs apply “common sense”, we first computed the most frequently used terms in tweets containing this frame (13). We then aggregated terms at the top of the list into four topics: (1) Trudeau/Singh and the Liberals/NDP (often referred to as the “Trudeau-NDP coalition”, (2) taxes, (3) affordability, and (4) crime (14).

**FIGURE 3. Weekly mentions of “common sense” by CPC MPs on X, by topic (January 1, 2023- November 10, 2024)**



As illustrated in Figure 3, the most frequent recurring topic in CPC MPs’ tweets invoking “common sense”, appearing in 59 percent of cases, is the Liberal government, the NDP, and the parties’ leaders, Trudeau and Singh, often described as forming a “coalition”. In these tweets, the Poilievre Conservatives’ “common sense plan” is portrayed as the only viable option to Canadians frustrated by the actions of a government described as wholly responsible for rising debt, elevated taxes, and an increased cost of living (see Image 1). As CPC MPs frequently put it, this government is “not worth the cost”. The sheer frequency of such references to an “out of touch” Liberal-NDP “coalition” in these tweets speaks to the role of “common sense” in forging a populist perception of these parties as “elites” working against the interests of the “people”.

**IMAGE 1. Poster of Trudeau linked to CPC “common sense” tweet (@PierrePoilievre, September 23, 2024)**



Unsurprisingly, given historic uses of the term by right-wing politicians in Canada, the second most prominent topic, appearing in 45 percent of CPC MP's tweets mentioning “common sense”, is taxes. A significant share of these tweets identifies the “carbon tax” as a particularly harmful measure, describing it as “bankrupting Canadians” (@ToddDohertyMP, December 6, 2023), particularly “farmers, First Nations and families” (@JohnBarlowMP, December 7, 2023), and as contributing to rising prices, particularly the cost of food (@jasrajshallan, December 14, 2023). In proposing to “axe the tax”, Conservatives claim to offer a “common sense” measure that will, among other things, “bring home lower prices” (@PierrePoilievre, January 8, 2024) and allow Canadians to heat their homes (@PierrePoilievre, January 11, 2024).

**@ScotDavidsonMP “This is just another desperate attempt from the Liberals to distract Canadians from the misery Trudeau is causing. Only Common Sense Conservatives will scrap the carbon tax entirely so Canadians can afford to eat, heat and house themselves”**  
February 15, 2024

The topic of taxation is often discussed in tandem with the third most prominent theme in CPC MPs’ “common sense” uses on X: affordability. In 43 percent of CPC tweets in our data, party MPs claim to possess unique concern for “restor[ing] affordability” (@TimUppal, January 17, 2024), “bring[ing] home powerful paycheques” (@PierrePoilievre, February 8, 2024), and “build[ing] the homes” (@jasrajshallan, February 10, 2024).

The final topic, appearing in 22 percent of CPC MPs' tweets mentioning "common sense" is "crime". In using the "common sense" frame to address this topic, CPC members frequently invoke the idea that a "Trudeau-NDP coalition" is creating "chaos" and jeopardizing Canadians' safety through "tax-funded drugs" and a "catch-and-release" response to "violent offenders". As an alternative to these "radical pro-criminal policies", Poilievre and his team propose a vaguely defined "common sense plan" to "bring home safety" and "safe streets" based on an approach characterized as "jail not bail" (@PierrePoilievre, April 13, 2023, April 16, 2023). In these interventions, criminals are often contrasted with "common sense and law-abiding gun owners" (@BlaineFCalkins, October 11, 2023).

@PierrePoilievre **"Who stops crime? Common sense Conservatives or the Trudeau-NDP coalition? #BringHomeSafety"** April 13, 2023

## ii. Key topics in other parties' uses of "common sense"

Although few in number (116 in total), "common sense" references by non-CPC MPs can contain clues about the frame's larger role and resonance. Is "common sense" subject to a "contagion effect", whereby these other parties co-opt the frame for their own strategic purposes? Or do parties outside the CPC cite "common sense" in a primarily derivative way, with the goal of undermining that party's claims to represent the "people"?

@MarkGerretsen **"Ontarians know how the last "common sense revolution" ended"** September 15, 2023

Since January 1, 2023, MPs in the Liberal Party, NDP, and Bloc Québécois have referenced "common sense" / "gros bon sens" on X in an almost entirely derivative way, with the apparent goal of challenging the legitimacy of the CPC's populist brand. For instance, several tweets by Liberal and NDP MPs recall the widespread hardships produced by Harris' "common sense revolution", which they claim left Ontarians worse off by reducing investments in education, healthcare and housing. As Liberal MP Julie Dzerowicz put it, these actions amounted to "nonsense" rather than "common sense". Poilievre, she warned, is likely to take Canadians down the same path, by "cut[ting] services" and "slash[ing] benefits" (@JulieDzerowicz, September 9, 2023). As in CPC tweets targeting Trudeau, these posts were occasionally accompanied by images of Mike Harris (see Image 2).

**IMAGE 2. Poster of Mike Harris linked to Liberal Party “common sense” tweet (@JulieDzerowicz, September 9, 2023)**



The NDP and Bloc Québécois have adopted similar approaches to undermining the legitimacy of the CPC’s “common sense” frame. Some have sought to belie the Conservatives’ claims to represent the “people”, charging the party with delaying debate on “sustainable jobs and Pharmacare that will help millions of Canadians” (@DonDavies, April 11, 2024) and proposing a healthcare plan that will entail “more cuts” (@LeahGazan, Oct 24, 2024). Bloc Québécois MPs have taken an especially direct approach, accusing the CPC of engaging in “deception” and “Trumpery” (@renevillemure, June 3, 2024) and of acting “in the service of the ultra-rich” (@SPSTremblay, May 16, 2024).

**@renevillemure “Il fut un temps où l’expression « gros bon sens » avait un sens. De nos jours, cette expression n’est souvent que tromperie ou, pire, Trumperie #BlocQC #grosbonsens #polcan #canpoli” June 3, 2024**

**@SPSTremblay “Le peuple, les gens qui en arrachent, les victimes de l’inflation, le gros bon sens bla bla bla. À lire pour ceux et celles qui croient que les #conservateurs ne sont pas au service des ultra-riches. #polqc #blocqc #Blocquébécois #PCC” May 16, 2024**

In contrast to these derivative uses of “common sense” by the Liberals, NDP, and Bloc Québécois, the PPC’s Maxime Bernier has employed the term in an exclusively non-derivative way since January 1, 2023. Referring to the PPC as a “common sense populist alternative to the establishment parties” (January 1, 2023), Bernier has himself promised to undertake a “common sense revolution” (June 19, 2023) in tackling a range of issues, in-

cluding “mass hysteria” over COVID-19 (January 2, 2023), “gender ideology fanatics” (January 24, 2023), “Trudeau’s mass immigration policy” (July 31, 2023), and the environment (September 1, 2023).

@MaximeBernier “I will be back! It’s only the beginning of our common sense revolution” June 19, 2021 (15)

## CONCLUSION

In this research brief, we set out to explore the *who* and *how* behind the recent explosion of “common sense” in Canadian federal political discourse, with a view to understanding *what* the term’s resurfacing reveals about the role of populism. Our findings are threefold:

- First, unsurprisingly given the term’s conservative history, “common sense” on X is overwhelmingly a tool of the right in Canada, particularly the CPC and, to a lesser extent, the PPC. Within the CPC, moreover, “common sense” is subject to a high degree of strategic coordination, with leader Pierre Poilievre adopting the term the most frequently, and three quarters of party MPs following suit. By contrast, the Liberals, NDP, and Bloc Québécois deploy “common sense” very infrequently, and the Green Party refrains entirely from using this frame. When these other parties *do* deploy “common sense”, moreover, it is most often to challenge the legitimacy of the CPC’s populist self-portrayal as acting on behalf of the “people”.
- Second, in citing “common sense”, CPC MPs largely adhere to a script established in earlier iterations of Canadian conservatism, including Harris’ 1990s “common sense revolution”. This script portrays cutbacks to the welfare state – via reduced taxes – and shoring up the penal state – via tougher sentencing laws – as benefiting ordinary Canadians. Poilievre’s Conservatives have adapted this recipe to contemporary political debates, using the “common sense” frame in a coordinated fashion to claim ownership over voters’ (primarily economic) frustrations.
- Third, “common sense” references by CPC MPs contain telltale signs of populism. More often than not, they are accompanied by allegations that “elites” – primarily governing and other opposition parties – are the key (often the *only*) actors responsible for the range of economic and social challenges facing the “people”, namely inflation, the increased cost of living, and limited access to housing.

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13. More specifically, we selected the most frequently used unigrams and bigrams.
14. Our search terms for the topics were as follows: (1) Trudeau/Liberal.s/Singh/NDP (“singh”, “trudeau”, “NDP”, “liberal”); (2) Taxes (“tax”); (3) Affordability (“afford”, “lower price”, “inflation”, “food”, “interest rate”, “home heating”, “money”, “powerful paycheque”, “struggle/ing”, “expensive”, “homes”, “house”, “housing”, “build”); (4) Crime (“bail”, “crime”, “criminal”, “theft”, “jail”, “ban hard”, “repeat violent”, “offender”, “hard drug”, “safe street”).
15. Bernier posted this tweet after the PPC obtained 1.26 percent of the vote in the Winnipeg South-Centre by-election on June 19, 2023.