Populism in Canada
Observations from the 2019 Federal Election: Should We Be Worried?

By Anders Bretsen and Chelsea Tao

Synopsis

The authors present their findings after conducting extensive research on the nature of populism in the recent Canadian federal election, surveying a wide range of public statements from political candidates. These were compiled and assessed to determine whether Canadian democracy was risk of being eroded. Daniel Ziblatt and Steven Levitsky’s 2018 book, *How Democracies Die*, was used to establish benchmarks for what constituted a threat to democratic institutions and processes. Ultimately, there were no instances where Ziblatt and Levitsky’s thresholds were met - a positive but not entirely unconditional sign that Canadian democracy is in good health.
About the Authors

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Why Populism?

Populism, as we see it today, is a unique phenomenon. It transcends traditional left-right distinctions, cuts across conventional party divides, and builds unusual coalitions. Across an array of political cultures, populist politicians – from Nigel Farage to Marine Le Pen and Rodrigo Duterte – have carved out steadfast bases of support. They rail against existing electoral, social, and economic structures as fundamentally rigged and unjust. As if this weren’t relevant enough, the emerging possibility that Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump could be vying for the American presidency – two populists from the two major parties – begs the question of whether Canada might be next. This paper seeks to address part of that question.

Why Canada?

For researcher and pollster Frank Graves, the notion of populism existing in Canada “has been belittled, dismissed, with most expert opinion falling into two categories: patronizing and sneering”. Graves argues that while the majority of Canadians reject the orientation towards populism, increasing economic inequalities and a rise in populist-friendly politicians provide real opportunities for authoritarianism to take hold. On the other hand, for Environics President Michael Adams, entrenched Canadian commitments to anti-xenophobic, pro-cultural tolerance and equality serve as a fragile yet notable buffer against the authoritarian and populist forces taking root elsewhere in the west.

Studying the 2019 Federal Election

In How Democracies Die, Harvard political scientists Daniel Ziblatt and Steven Levitsky analyze how the turn to authoritarianism and democratic backsliding “begins at the ballot box”, with a gradual drift towards democratic breakdown rather than a sudden and precipitous event (see Figure 1 at bottom for further details). For Ziblatt and Levitsky, the “guardrails of democracy” are mutual toleration and institutional forbearance – the recognition of political opponents as rivals rather than enemies, and the idea that politicians should exercise restraint in using their institutional prerogatives. These guardrails are more important than even well-designed constitutional and structural safeguards including bicameral legislatures, electoral institutions, and codified constitutions, as they organize and protect guiding democratic norms. Ziblatt and Levitsky provide four major risk factors (listed below this article) that indicate a candidate’s propensity to work against or break these guardrails.

Throughout the month of September and October, we combed through party and leadership statements, press releases, social media posts, interviews, and debates with the goal of identifying whether any candidates in the 2019 Canadian federal election exhibited populist-authoritarian tendencies, as defined by Ziblatt and Levitsky in How Democracies Die.

Close Calls

While we found no examples of budding authoritarianism as indicated in the above chart, there were certain instances where candidates approached one of these metrics without fully crossing the line.

Case 1

For instance, while Andrew Scheer’s stated intention of launching a wider investigation into the SNC-Lavalin controversy relies on language that can appear related to Indicator 2 – according to Scheer, Trudeau is “unfit to lead” – he frames it in the language of accountability, with relatively straightforward motives (if somewhat sensationalist in tone). Scheer’s assertion that “no longer will a corrupt prime minister be able to be the gatekeeper of his own misconduct” hits on one of his campaign’s major themes – painting himself as the responsible adult. Partisan sentiments, it is worth noting, do not constitute a threat to democracy unless they spill over into denying an opponent’s legitimacy on unfair grounds. Mr. Scheer subsequently claimed that “these measures will safeguard our democracy against the whims of sleazy and unscrupulous
politicians”, another unsubtle jab at the Prime Minister. While Mr. Scheer indeed implies that Mr. Trudeau is “sleazy” and “unscrupulous”, he doesn’t baselessly (‘baseless’ being Ziblatt and Levitsky’s key descriptor) suggest that he is “an existential threat, either to national security or to the prevailing way of life”. The nature of the SNC-Lavalin situation, and the processes of cabinet confidence and disclosure, mean that much is still unrevealed; additionally, the federal ethics commissioner concluded that the Conflict of Interest Act was violated by the prime minister in applying pressure to his attorney general, Jody Wilson-Raybould. Therefore, Scheer could not be construed as having baselessly described his rival as a “criminal, whose supposed violation of the law (or potential to do so) disqualifies them from full participation in the political arena”. It is a fine line, but the issue at hand is sufficiently contested so as to make it a viable topic of political discussion and policy – particularly thorny in nature – and not conspiracy theorizing.

Case 2

While the People’s Party of Canada has been criticized for racist, xenophobic, and otherwise inflammatory statements and language, such behaviour does not explicitly undermine democratic institutions, norms, and guardrails in a manner severe enough to reach the bar set by Ziblatt and Levitsky. Specifically, they’ve fallen short of “supporting laws or policies that restrict civil liberties, such as libel or defamation laws, or laws restricting protest, criticism of the government, or certain civic or political organizations”. Global News reported that “the former leader of a U.S. neo-Nazi group, a former Soldiers of Odin member and a Pegida Canada official were among those whose signatures were submitted to Elections Canada last year to officially register the People’s Party of Canada, records show”.

While concerning, this does not conclusively show that the party intends on adopting prejudicial policies, or will exhibit undemocratic and authoritarian characteristics in political office. Moreover, the thresholds identified by Ziblatt and Levitsky, in Indicator 4 (“readiness to curtail civil liberties of opponents, including media”) do not extend to the curtailment of religious liberties, or the demonization of particular ethnic groups. In response to the Global News article, the PPC had the following to say:

The party accepts any members or candidates “regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, gender or sexual orientation. This is why our party is ethically and religiously diverse. However, the diversity of our candidates and members is never mentioned by Global News and seldom reported on by any other mainstream media. A month ago, we cut ties with a PPC member who was involved, years ago, with an extremist organization while living in the US, which is the reason why our vetting process had found nothing about him. For most Canadians, our actions clearly showed that we will not stand for bigotry. Global News wants to advance a fiction.”

The willingness to combat accusations of racism clearly indicates a desire to conform to standards of moderation. However troubling the accusations of biased press treatment may be, they do not appear to preface a threat to “take punitive action against critics in rival parties, civil society, or the media”. The party claims to venerate free speech and is yet to approach the metrics of Indicator 4, such as praising “repressive measures taken by other governments”. This space is worth vigilantly monitoring, particularly as the party reassesses its strategies with a view to winning seats in the future.

Case 3

No political party, aside from the Liberals, had expressed an intention of overturning (through federal judicial intervention) Quebec’s fraught Bill 21. The law bars public servants ‘in positions of authority’ from wearing religious symbols while working. According to the National Post’s Andrew Coyne - “for many observant persons, particularly Muslims, Sikhs and orthodox Jews, this amounts to a religious hiring bar: the wearing of the hijab, turban and kippa are key requirements of their faith, and as such core elements of their identity. . To demand that they work uncovered is, in effect, to post a sign saying Muslims, Sikhs and Jews need not apply.” Whether one agrees with that statement or not, the endorsement of, or lack of condemnation for, Bill 21 could be viewed as an infringement on civil liberties. That being said, Ziblatt and Levitsky do not refer to religious freedoms in Indicator 4. Instead, they primarily focus on the domain of civil society, namely through “laws restricting protest, criticism of the government, or civic and
political organizations”. As such, the action or inaction of candidates with respect to Bill 21 doesn’t quite fit within the scope of this assessment. The legislation could, however, be seen as a violation of civil liberties, and therefore illustrates a theoretical shortcoming with the remit of Indicator 4.

Case 4

On October 19th, in Richmond Hill, ON, Conservative leader Andrew Scheer ran one of his final major rallies. In his closing remarks, Mr. Scheer reiterated his pledge to expand the judicial inquiry into the SNC-Lavalin affair, reminding supporters of the ethics commissioner’s report and detailing how Trudeau had twice been guilty of breaking ethics laws. Scheer announced, in no uncertain terms, that “when we form government, I will hold a judicial inquiry into his scandal to get to the bottom of what he’s done”. Subsequently, chants of “lock him up” began circulating. The phrase harkens back to 2016, when Trump would goad supporters into refrains of “lock her up”, referring to Democratic opponent Hillary Clinton’s brush with the FBI, a probe into the use of a private email server while she was Secretary of State. The slow-burning, complex investigation that followed – ultimately resulting in no criminal action against Ms. Clinton – was distorted and manipulated by Mr. Trump to stoke distrust of both Ms. Clinton herself, and the institutions and bureaucracies she operated astride.

Mr. Scheer, however, opted for a very different response from Mr. Trump’s rabble-rousing. He quickly addressed the chants head-on: “we’re going to get to the bottom of this scandal...we’re going to vote him out. Vote him out! Vote him out!” The crowd ran with the emendation and followed with brief choruses of ‘vote him out’. While the opportunity to maliciously capitalize on discontent clearly presented itself, Mr. Scheer walked the crowd back from its hyperbolizing energy. Instead of (per Indicator 2) baselessly construing Mr. Trudeau as a criminal, unable to participate in the political arena, or (per Indicator 3) encouraging violent, mob-like behaviour directed at an opponent, he drew a firm line. Mr. Trudeau was, in Mr. Scheer’s amended chant, to be removed from office using legitimate, established electoral processes, and afforded due process; not, in the Trumpian mold, ‘locked up’ without hesitation or further inquiry.

This is a defining distinction that marks how, while the 2019 federal election cycle was decried as unpleasant and combative, no political leader turned old-fashioned mud-slinging into an assault on democratic political processes. That Mr. Scheer was so swift to roll back the crowd’s incendiary language reflects a democratic climate that appears to persist, despite some impediments, across the political spectrum.

Case 5

During a campaign stop in Montreal in the final week leading up to election day, Justin Trudeau stated that “the Conservative party is running one of the dirtiest, nastiest campaigns based on disinformation that we’ve ever seen in this country”. Mr. Trudeau’s statement was made in response to a question about the Manning Centre’s funding for a web of anti-Liberal advertisements on Facebook that generated a slew of targeted political attacks – some of which were pulled from Facebook due to the depiction of excessive violence, as well as Conservative claims that the Liberals would impose a hefty tax on home sales (which the Liberals have continuously denied). To the latter point, Mr. Trudeau stated that the home sales tax is “one of those things that Conservatives are spreading and it is totally false.”

Though Mr. Trudeau’s accusation against the Conservatives can appear to satisfy Indicator 2 (the denial of the legitimacy of political opponents) – because Mr. Trudeau seems to describe his political enemy as subversive, or opposed to the existing constitutional order – the statement still lacks the severity required to constitute a threat to democratic institutions, norms, and guardrails. Though it’s certainly worth noting that populist tendencies are by no means confined to the outer edges of the ideological spectrum.

Mr. Trudeau’s claims that his political opponents are “adopting the politics of fear and negativity”, despite suggesting malicious intent within the Conservative
Party, are akin to statements made earlier in this election cycle that still fell squarely within the domain of political attacks. Like Mr. Scheer’s labelling of Trudeau as a “phony and a fraud”, in the English language debate, and suggestion that he’s a “sleazy and unscrupulous politician”, with relation to the SNC-Lavalin affair, the statement reflects the uncomfortable and sometimes disrespectful tone of the 2019 Federal Election. However, it fails to qualify as a democratic backslide demonstrative of authoritarian tendencies.

Conclusion

Despite instances of questionable conduct by party leaders, a survey of statements, interviews, and rallies has yielded no conclusive evidence that – when assessed with Ziblatt and Levitsky’s metric – the increasingly populist tone of Canadian politics points to a democratic backslide. Our current findings reflect a lack of any authoritarian behaviour within the six major federal party candidates.

The aforementioned cases, however, serve to illustrate a robust, persistent democratic tradition. Had Mr. Scheer decided to run with the “lock him up” chants, this election could have been far more damaging than the name-calling spats seemed to suggest. In spite of enduring political tension, Canadians can be fairly confident in the durability of the democratic process. However, in the context of contemporary global threats to democracy, including the solidification of populist and authoritarian roots in other Western liberal democratic nations, constant vigilance is required to ensure it remains that way.
About the CIC

The Canadian International Council (CIC) is Canada’s foreign relations council. It is an independent, non-partisan membership organization and think tank dedicated to advancing constructive dialogue on Canada’s place in the world and providing an incubator for innovative ideas on how to address the world’s most pressing problems.

The non-profit CIC integrates the voices of a diverse and multidisciplinary group of societal actors from academia, business, civil society, government and the media, and endeavours to inform and develop the capacity of the country’s next generation of foreign policy leaders.

One of Canada’s oldest and most respected think tanks, the CIC is not only dedicated to nurturing dialogue on Canadian foreign policy domestically, but also in projecting a Canadian perspective on the international stage. In our rapidly changing world, this effort to promote greater understanding and foster meaningful debate on critical challenges is more important than ever.

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