DON’T BLAME "THE PEOPLE"

The rise of elite-led populism in Canada

The Samara Centre for Democracy
In March, the Samara Centre for Democracy released the 2019 Democracy 360, our biennial report card on how Canadians communicate, participate, and lead in politics. The Democracy 360 is partly based on data from the Samara Citizens’ Survey, conducted in English and French between January 16 and February 6, 2019, using an online sample of 4,054 Canadian residents over 18 years of age. Drawing from that survey, this report is one of several short data stories on particular issues and themes in Canadian politics. The 2019 Democracy 360 as well as the 2019 Samara Citizens’ Survey methodology can be found at samaracanada.com/2019-democracy-360.
The word populism is on everyone’s lips. It’s blamed for bringing President Donald Trump to power and causing Brexit. Recent media and political commentary, including from senior leaders on the left and right, suggests that populism is growing in Canada too—even that it is transforming our politics.

This report uses new data to help answer the question: is Canada having a populist moment? And if so, why is that a problem?

What is populism?

Populism is a style of doing politics, and also a set of attitudes and beliefs about politics and society. The substantive goals of populists vary from country to country, but the basic message of populism is clear.

Populist leaders describe politics as a conflict between two groups, with elites (people with economic and political power) ruling over The Real People. Populists say that elites must be swept away, leaving government to be led by someone who truly represents The People. Only The People have legitimacy, and little or nothing should stand in the way of a leader who represents them.

Populism is sometimes conflated with other attitudes that frequently come with it, like anti-immigration sentiment, or economic anxiety. The relationship between these different sets of attitudes is important, but it’s also important to distinguish populism. Not every xenophobe is a populist, and vice versa.

So why is populism a problem for democracy? Isn’t democracy supposed to be about The People?

Yes, democracy is about all people and a healthy democracy requires much more than an election every four years. A healthy democracy requires regular engagement from a wide swath of citizens or it does, indeed, become a plaything of the elite.

So why is populism seen in such a negative light?

Populist leaders on the left and right have won elections claiming to work for The People. But once in power they have used their attack on the
elite as a pretext for going after political rivals, journalists, judges, academics, and others who stand in their way. A recent analysis of populist administrations found that they were uniquely likely to cause damage to democratic institutions. (See the side bar for examples.)

In other words, populism is used and abused by authoritarian leaders.

Populist leaders don’t emerge from nowhere. Sometimes they’re successful because they’re responding to real anger about the way politics has been working for regular people. They capitalize on a truth that citizens can see: that politics often does reward insiders, and keeps others away from power. Citizens are not wrong to want a leader who promises them access to power.

So whether populism is a self-serving style of doing politics, or a reflection of genuine anger, it can signal a poorly-performing democracy.

Is Canada having a populist moment?

Every two years, the Samara Centre releases our Democracy 360 report card on the health of Canadian democracy, based on the attitudes and perceptions of Canadians. This year we added a short set of questions that measure some aspects of populist thought, like political discontent at politicians and a preference for decision-making by ordinary citizens. We specifically chose some questions that had been asked before in Canada, so that we could look for changes or trends that would suggest a populist revolt. We also tried to mirror questions about political

How populism can be used to hurt democracy

○ Populism fuels distrust in all institutions in order to manipulate citizens’ cynicism and undermine those institutions for personal gain.

During the 2016 presidential election campaign, Donald Trump declared that “the system is rigged,” and that “I alone can fix it”—instructing citizens to doubt their institutions and to respond not by seeking reform, but by placing absolute faith in his leadership.

○ Populism is hostile to checks and balances.

Populist leaders claim a mandate from The People to sweep away structures that interfere with their exercise of power.

Hungarian President Viktor Orbán has reformed his country’s court system so that it is subservient to his government. His supporters attack the notion that judges could legitimately interfere with decisions of the government, given its popularity.

○ Populism divides society into Us versus Them, resulting in more conflict in society. Political opponents have their legitimacy taken away. Populist leaders also decide who counts as “real people,” which can mean leaving people out, especially minorities and newcomers.

Nigel Farage, then-leader of the populist United Kingdom Independence Party, declared the Brexit vote a “victory for the real people”—implying that the nearly half of Britons who voted against Brexit somehow did not count as “real people.”
discontent that have been found to go along with support for populist parties in Europe.\(^5\)

To start, we asked Canadians if they agree with the following statement:  

*I don’t think the government cares much what people like me think.*

In 2019, about 60% of Canadians agreed with this statement, indicating a (perhaps deserved) cynicism towards government.

More than half of the population feels government doesn’t care about them, let alone listen to them. But this is far from the most negative Canadians have felt towards the government; in the mid-1990s, 75% of Canadians felt this way.

We also asked Canadians if they agree or disagree:  

*Those elected to Parliament soon lose touch with the people.*

Again, in 2019 a strong majority of Canadians agree: 63%. But while a chasm remains between ordinary people and elites, this is not a recent development. Indeed, more Canadians felt far apart from parliamentarians 20 years ago.

In both cases, the long-term picture looks
similar. It shows that Canadians have been alienated from our politics for a long time. But cynicism and frustration peaked in the early 1990s, and have actually receded since.

In other words, as dissatisfied as Canadians are, it is very hard to conclude that Canadians have, in recent years, turned radically against institutions and elites.

That’s not to say that Canadians are happy with our political leadership. As 63% of Canadians feel that politicians are out of touch, it is clear they are not. That number also masks loud pockets of concentrated dissatisfaction—and attitudes can also change quickly.

However, there are also indications that most Canadians do not believe that so-called elites should be thrown out wholesale. Along with anger toward the political establishment, populism is thought to include “people-centrism”—a preference for control by ordinary people. Our survey found some division on this question, but nearly six in 10 Canadians disagree that “ordinary people would do a better job of solving the country’s problems than elected officials.”

Populists also hold a more “majoritarian” vision of democracy: they believe government should do what a majority decides, and it should not have to compromise with those who hold opposing viewpoints. Additionally, they don’t believe that government should be constrained by rights and freedoms, which exist to protect individuals and minorities from the will of the majority. Our survey found a large minority (40%) of Canadians agree that “the will of the majority should always prevail, even over the rights of minorities.” This suggests that the compromises, nuance, and limits on majority rule, which are so essential to a sophisticated liberal democracy, may be unwelcome to a significant number of Canadians.

But this, too, is not new. For example, in 2011 approximately 60% of Canadians said “letting the majority decide” was more important in a democracy than “protecting the needs and rights of minorities.” And in fact, 10 years before that, around 70% of Canadians prioritized majority decision-making over minority rights.6

Taken together, what do the responses to these simple questions tell us?

Yes, Canadians are alienated from their political leadership, and significant minorities of Canadians hold populist views. But on the basis of levels of political discontent, as seen in measures of satisfaction and trust—a critical ingredient in populism—the Canadian people have not entered a unique populist moment. Instead, across a range of indicators we repeatedly measure, the Samara Centre has found that Canadians’
attitudes toward politics have broadly stayed the same or improved over the last five years.

So, we’re good then?

Not quite.

First, these are high levels of alienation, even if they aren’t notably higher now than in the past. The Samara Centre is not content with a status quo in which most Canadians believe the government doesn’t care about them.

Second, our democracy has very real problems, including centralized control, degraded legislatures, unhealthy political parties, and low voter turnout. These problems require solutions, which citizens should demand. Populist leaders may not always be good for democracy, but critical, engaged, and involved citizens are.

Third, while these survey questions indicate that Canadians are not turning strongly against elites, political leaders can still use the rhetoric of populism to advance their own interests. If our politics has taken on stronger populist overtones, that change is ironically coming from elites—politicians themselves.

Since 2009, when we first started interviewing Members of Parliament after they left office, researchers at the Samara Centre noticed how often politicians claimed to be outsiders to politics, despite having served in it—insisting that they were never really on the inside, always desperate to get away from the “Ottawa bubble” and talk to Real People. Sometimes these feelings are genuine—a reflection of real culture shock, frustration, and disappointment. But the language they used is a populist way of talking about politics which sometimes denigrates the entire profession.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures of Political Discontent</th>
<th>2014</th>
<th>2019</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Satisfied with how democracy works</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust MPs to do what’s right</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust parties to do what’s right</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfied with how MPs do their jobs</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfied with how parties do their jobs</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>48%</td>
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That impulse is getting stronger. At the same time that citizens have become less politically discontented, a simple analysis of Hansard, the written record of Parliament, shows that politicians are complaining way more about “elites” than ever (see the figure above).

In other words, populism in Canada may be more about what elites say than what The People think.

**What does this mean?**

Elite-led populism has consequences. Citizens take cues from politicians about how to behave in politics. If politicians keep insisting that politicians can’t be trusted and institutions are crooked, what reason do citizens have to trust or participate? Politicians in Canada may not be responding to latent populism in the public, but they can play a role in popularizing populism.

This comes at a time when economic anxiety is, in fact, on the rise.7 Technological disruption is raising fears about the future of work, with implications for community and social cohesion. In 2019 we have major policy challenges to tackle together, and that requires a level of trust in one another and commitment to our democracy.

This is also a time when aggressive authoritarian powers are specifically trying to instill populism and division in order to undermine liberal democracies like our own.8 Against the influx of disinformation and manipulation, resilient democracies need to stand strong and self-confident, and resist the easy temptation to split into various configurations of Us and Them.

Elite-led populism also wastes energy. It stands in the place of real concern for our democracy, and directs attention away from the serious reform needed.
Conclusion

With a federal election coming, we should evolve the conversation on populism, and challenge those leaders who use the language of populist outsiders to manipulate.

Media, politicians, and thought leaders should listen carefully to Canadians, rather than projecting onto them a generalized populism narrative imported from other countries. When a populist revolt is simply assumed to exist, the result is that populist voices get amplified in media, given more gravity and momentum than they deserve. What are Canadians’ true concerns, and how can they best be resolved? Economic uncertainty? A power imbalance between regions? Climate change? The future of Canadian multiculturalism?

Politicians—at all levels—need to stop undermining their own role. Most candidates in the 2019 election will run because they think politics can be a way to serve their community and their country. They want to sit in our Parliament because they believe in the legislative and leadership duties of parliamentarians. They should communicate their trust in and respect for our democratic system. They should support representative democracy, even while seeking—every day—to make it more responsive, transparent, engaging, and inclusive.

Citizens also have a responsibility to hold our leaders to account. Canadians should make clear that they want less disingenuous, self-serving, warmed-over rhetoric about elites and Real People; and more serious, substantive commitment to challenge the status quo and make our democracy better. They can do so by learning more about the platforms and promises of political parties; demanding transparent policy and decision-making; and rewarding and supporting politicians who give nuanced, realistic, and fair solutions.
End notes


7. Abacus Data (2019), The Affordability Equation: How a rising concern about cost of living presents a threat and opportunity to Progressives, Broadbent Institute, available online from: https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/broadbent/pages/7356/attachments/original/1554824400/The_Affordability_Equation_-_Report.pdf.
