CHAPTER 6

The Populist Impact: The People’s Party and the Green Party

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Abstract The Brexit Referendum and the 2016 election in the United States upended traditional political marketing and branding techniques, not to mention an extended era of politically correct executive leader discourse. But Canada has seen this as well, with the election of Rob Ford in Toronto, the 2015 niqab debate, and more politicians speaking out unfiltered through their own social media channels. This chapter considers the 2019 election as a test of whether populist and nationalist themes, kept relatively isolated in recent Canadian elections, are used as election tactics. It considers the failures of both the People’s Party and Maxime Bernier, and the Green Party and Elizabeth May, in capturing either right wing or left wing populism around issues such immigration and the environment, during an era that seems ripe for these kinds of appeals. The chapter raises the question of whether in Canadian political culture, given the resilience of non-partisan voters and the lack of party identification, these types of appeals are effective.
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INTRODUCTION

The Brexit Referendum in the United Kingdom and the 2016 election in the United States upended traditional political marketing and branding techniques, not to mention an extended era of politically correct executive leader discourse. But Canada has seen this as well, with the election of Rob Ford in Toronto, the 2015 niqab debate concerning wedge issue identity politics (see Chap. 8), and more politicians speaking out unfiltered through their own social media channels. The 2019 election was a test of whether populist and nationalist themes, kept relatively isolated in recent Canadian elections, are used as election tactics. But parties need to be wary of Brexit, as well as the Trump and Clinton 2016 campaigns, since both could be considered failures in terms of generating enthusiasm beyond the base and expanding appeals to moderate swing voters. In Canada, given the resilience of non-partisan voters and the lack of party identification, these types of 2016 appeals may backfire.

The federal election of 2019 saw Canada veer towards both right-wing and left-wing populist appeals with a new party billing itself along the lines of right-wing populism elsewhere in the United States and Europe, and a group of voters focused on climate change as a cause that outweighs all other policy areas. But how impactful populism really is in Canada is less clear. Part of the challenge is that the European-style populism driven by anti-immigration slogans, Islamophobia, and these appeals to nationalism and state sovereignty, does not fit well in Canada which has embraced multiculturalism for decades. That is not to say it has not taken root but support for these populist appeals in Canada was there long before these neo-populist benchmarks like the Brexit referendum and Trump’s 2016 campaign. However, populism failed to take off in 2019 and has shown signs that it is receding. Whether the appeal was about immigration or it was about climate change, it has not manifested itself like other countries. This chapter considers the populist impact with respect to the marketing and branding campaigns of both the People’s Party of Canada and the Green Party of Canada. It attempts to answer the broad question of why these two parties failed to capitalize on right wing populism and left wing environmental populism in a global era that seems amenable to both messages.
To recognize where this outlet is coming from and why it has limited success, the modern roots of populism need to be addressed. There have always been populist tendencies in Canada. If we exclude the histories of the two brokerage parties, the Liberal Party of Canada (LPC) and the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC), populist parties have existed for over a century. Part of the reason is that Canada’s founding and subsequent history never closed off the labour socialism political stream that was snuffed out in the United States in the 1910s. As a result, more radical politics, driven by labour uncertainty in urban areas and poor working conditions, along with an agrarian populism with socialist tendencies from farm collectives, combined to form a brand of populism that challenged the elites of Montreal and Toronto. Two distinct cleavages of that populism formed; one was the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, a prairie-centered party that combined the agrarian, urban labour and socialist strands that would cease being populist following the election of Tommy Douglas’s Saskatchewan government in the 1950s. Prior to the CCF, the success of the various United Farmers Parties of the four western provinces, left-wing progressive populism had always been an undercurrent of the subsequent New Democratic Party. On occasion, such as bringing in universal health care, policies of various CCF and NDP governments have had elements of populism. In recent years, labour and social policy activists have split their support between the NDP and the federal and various provincial Green parties. The Green Party of Canada (GPC) has always had an activist, populist grassroots but the issue of climate change has created a populist fervor among Green parties worldwide.

The other strand is more fitting with the populism that seems to return to Canada every generation. The Social Credit movement was an anti-socialist, social conservative political movement that took hold in western provinces in the 1930s. Elected as the government of Alberta, Bill Aberhart, and later Ernest Manning established a western-based populist party that would become the governments of British Columbia and Alberta until the 1970s.

At the national level and in provinces east of Manitoba, populism did exist but with limited electoral success. The Creditistes in Quebec, various agrarian parties, provincial New Democrats and labour organizations, and small provincial parties organized around a particular policy or grievance with the government sometimes would win provincial seats or form the balance of power.
At the national level, just as the provincial populist parties had died out, with Social Credit losing a landslide 1991 British Columbia provincial election, two parties, the Reform Party of Canada and the Bloc Quebecois (BQ) formed to upend federal politics.

The BQ is not inherently populist but the Parti Quebecois (PQ) during the 1995 Quebec referendum made populist appeals to Francophones in attempts to divide the Quebec population. This was epitomized on the night of the vote when PQ leader Jacques Parizeau blamed “l’argent et des votes ethniques” for the referendum loss. The sop to anti-Semitism and Anglophone immigrants tarnished the reputation of the PQ and BQ. Quebec populism has increasingly focused around Quebec societal values, with former PQ leader Pauline Marois’s secular charter as a prime example. The election of the Coalition Avenir Quebec (CAQ) and Francois Legault in 2018 shows how populist appeals can be absorbed into Canadian political parties.

The Reform Party led by Preston Manning, son of Ernest Manning, was driven by a right-wing populist ideology and grounded in the western alienation felt by voters in the western most provinces but with unique Manning ideological ideas, including a libertarian personal responsibility flank as well as a family values social conservative flank.

While all of these political movements developed on the periphery of the political centre in the eastern cities, they share a common anti-elitist sentiment. But the similarities stop there. Left-wing progressive populists attack corporate control and elite institutions when they fail to protect workers, human rights, and gradually over time, the larger social safety net and services.

Right-wing populists speak to “common sense” solutions, individual responsibility and often blame establishment policies, especially with respect to immigration and social policies that expand rights, and target minority groups they see is destructive to the social fabric. One can draw a direct line from Aberhart’s Social Credit philosophies, with evangelical Christian elements that trafficked in anti-Semitic and anti-establishment views, to Maxime Bernier, leader of the People’s Party of Canada (PPC), the new populist party that advocated “smart populism” with a 50% reduction in immigrants to Canada (People’s Party of Canada 2019) as well as courting Islamophobic and family values candidates and views.
Modern Populism in Canada

Following the Reform/Canadian Alliance merger with the Progressive Conservatives into the CPC, as well as the decline in populist appeals in the era of revived Quebec sovereigntist discussion, both major parties seemed to avoid populist appeals. The post-1995 Chrétien and Martin era as well as all but the last year of the Harper years, populism was relegated to sidelines in national debates. Stockwell Day, the leader of the Canadian Alliance campaigned in the 2000 election on a family values platform that had populist elements but this was rejected by eastern Canada and the failures of the Alliance to capitalize led to the unification of the right. The only really successful populist politician was Toronto mayor Rob Ford, who became mayor in 2010 on a platform of suburban resentment at the downtown Toronto core.

With the final weeks of the 2015 federal election campaign, populism returned to Canadian politics. Canada had largely avoided a national discussion on neo-Islamophobia, stemming from a post-9/11 public ill at ease with Islam. While the Charter of Values discussion in Quebec was driven both by a Quebec cultural nationalist and an anti-Muslim banning of head scarves, the national discussion had been largely avoided by the major parties keeping a safety valve on views outside of the mainstream. But by the end of the 2015 election campaign, as Harper and the CPC slipped in the polls, they chose to discuss the niqab and whether this religious tradition did not fit with Canadian values. It was a campaign tactic that initially aimed at focusing on expanding Conservative support in and around Quebec City but it gradually became a national discussion. The campaign then proposed a Canadian government hotline to focus on “barbaric cultural practices.” Harper tried to claim the high road, arguing that niqabs were “rooted in a culture that is anti-women” but the anti-Islamic hotline proved to be a step too far. While the Conservatives won more seats in Quebec, they lost the national election as the public turned on Harper’s divisive populist desperation. Andrew Coyne (2015), summarizing the fault lines exposed by the Conservative playing the niqab card, argued that:

We talk a lot about Canadian values in this debate. I am inclined to think that, in their own way, it is the niqabistes who best embody those values. In their ornery unwillingness to bend to others’ sensitivities, in their insistence
on going their own way on a matter of principle, those women are in the finest Canadian tradition of hellraising. I think we ought to let them be.

The election of Justin Trudeau led to a Canadian moment in which the prime minister and the values of the country were all of a sudden in step with progressive social change epitomized with the Obama coalition. But it did not last long.

2016 saw both the Brexit referendum in which voters in the UK decided to leave the European Union, driven by populist nationalist UK Independence Party and parts of both the Conservative and Labour parties. The Brexit fault lines exposed a genuine racist undertone to the vote, as hinterland constituencies outside of the England’s major cities condemned the decades of European Union immigration. Part of this was driven by unveiled racism, attacking subcontinent and South Asian immigration even more than European migration, something which had little historical to do with the role of the UK in the Europe. But Brexit became a rallying cry for populists everywhere. In the United States, Donald Trump’s campaign focused on populist anti-immigration closed borders themes as they shook the Republican establishment and won a razor thin election victory over Hillary Clinton. At the same time, driven by the German government decision to allow over a million refugees fleeing the Syrian civil war crisis, right wing populism driven by anti-immigration returned to Europe in almost every country. A mix of old pro-Nazi, pro-communist nationalist forces appealed to public perception of porous borders and racist stereotypes to topple long standing regimes. In Germany in particular, the rise of a far-right alternative has shaken the German political system to its core as Andrea Merkel has seen her party’s support slip amidst German political turmoil.

Canada was not immune to the populist turn but it occurred at the provincial level first. Doug Ford’s Ontario election victory in 2017 signaled that populist appeals could work in Canada and that politicians can play on the resentments of voters. Ford’s victory demonstrated that Trump-style focusing on simplistic messages that explained complex problems to voters could work. It did not help matters that the incumbent Liberals under Kathleen Wynne were deeply unpopular. Ford’s victory also exposed the limitations of populism as well. Only by luck did they avoid an NDP surge in the middle of the campaign that could have hampered their victory. It also showed that had Christine Elliot, the moderate
candidate that nearly defeated Ford in the leadership contest, won she may have even had a larger share of the vote.

But Ford’s family style of playing on suburban resentment was not necessarily a model for long-lasting effectiveness. Within months of the election, Ford’s unpopularity matched Kathleen Wynne’s and his flurry of unpromised cuts to social services angered even diehard Conservative voters.

In 2018, the Quebec and New Brunswick elections also saw populist appeals move to the forefront of the campaign. François Legault and the CAQ won a massive majority government in 2018 as a centre-right soft-sovereignist party with populist tendencies. While not a classic populist party, they certainly took the PQ secular values charter and repackaged as a policy aiming straight at Quebec cultural institutions. Without an effective opposition campaign and with the deeply unpopular incumbent Liberals unable to mount much of a campaign, CAQ won a massive victory. The enacting of Bill 21, a ban on religious symbols in the public sector, has widespread support among Francophone Quebec despite court challenges and protests.

In New Brunswick, an Anglophone based right wing party called the People’s Alliance led by Kris Austin won three seats in the 2018 election and were able to secure the balance of power in the legislature by partnering with the Progressive Conservatives. The People’s Alliance platform is driven by its signature policy, namely an end to duality, a system of bilingual and bicultural accommodation in public services that has been in place since the 1960s. Austin’s party, despite trying to tone down the language rhetoric associated with the upstart Confederation of Regions Party of the 1990s, that formed the official opposition in New Brunswick as an Anglophone rights party, the supporters of the People’s Alliance blamed bilingualism and an unsubstantiated almost paranoid belief that Moncton-area elites control the government.

And in Alberta during the 2019 campaign, Jason Kenney, capitalizing on an unpopular NDP government led by Rachel Notley that surprised everyone four years earlier by winning a majority government, made repeated populist appeals to voters, channeling an almost Republican Party resentment towards Ottawa, Justin Trudeau, the NDP, whom he characterized as communists, and any group that did not fit an Alberta values litmus test. During the campaign, Kenney attacked gay-straight alliances at high schools, perceived Edmonton bureaucratic elitism and the unpopularity of the Trudeau Liberals. While not all populist, some
candidates were openly homophobic and Islamophobic, and yet Kenney won an electoral landslide.

Left wing populism is different from both an organizational capacity and from a political standpoint. Picking up from the social progressivism of the CCF/NDP, populism on the left has not been much of a factor in elections. While social protesting is certainly part of the Canadian political landscape, the NDP had traditionally occupied the populist left space in national elections, especially with respect to labour, environmental and economic justice issues. But since Jack Layton’s passing, the NDP no longer represents all of those populist voices. That has led to a fragmentation politically of the progressive left between the NDP and the Greens. It has also allowed the federal Liberal Party space to rhetorically claim left wing issues such as environmental and Indigenous social justice. Justin Trudeau successfully ran on those issues in 2015. But the failure to deliver on his two signature issues is one of the reasons why Trudeau was reduced to a minority government in 2019.

The difference in 2019 however was that no other party was able to claim the mantle and harness left wing populism. In fact, the Green Party’s very campaign seemed to eschew its activist wing and play for the middle of the road voter. In an era of widespread environmental protests, as well as Indigenous activism on a large scale, the Greens were incapable of managing this populism.

THE 2019 FEDERAL ELECTION: THE PEOPLE’S PARTY, POPULIST APPEALS AND LIMITATIONS

White supremacists, racists, homophobic and transphobic candidates, anti-elite conspiracy theorists, family values conservatives who support gay conversion therapy, anti-feminists who blame elites for an anti-men agenda are all part of the Canadian political scene today. But the 2019 federal election exposed the limitations of any of these appeals at a national level. This despite the creation of a genuine far right populist party that could threaten the amalgamation of Conservative movements in Canada. As Duane Bratt and others have argued, with that unite the right movement, populism ceased being a good national appeal. In many respects, the PPC, with Maxime Bernier, is a throwback to the Reform Party appeals as he tells voters he is the Albertan from Quebec. Bernier has courted a loose amalgamation of fringe political ideologies driven by a reduction in
immigration including Christian Heritage supporters, the alt-right, white supremacists, anti-Islamic voters, Quebec conservatives who lean sovereignist, family values anti-LGBTQ politicians, and supporters like Rob Ford’s widow Renata Ford.

But populism did not play a major role in the 2019 campaign. Bernier has been unable to garner much support nationally and in leaders debate performances, he was mostly ignored. Andrew Scheer, Conservative leader, even distanced himself from Bernier and the PPC in the one English language debate. Even on Bill 21, which is still being debated at the provincial level and is subject to court challenges, the federal parties are unified in their dislike of the law, despite weasel words by all of the leaders in not wanting to offend the Quebec electorate. Legault warned all the parties that any incursion into this debate or attempts to challenge it would hurt their ability to attract Francophone voters. Despite widespread opposition to the law outside of Quebec, and some provincial premiers like Manitoba Premier Brian Pallister forcefully opposing it, it has been more convenient for the federal party leaders to avoid the issue.

The CPC platform offered a half-populist policy promise to lower foreign aid by 25% and to stop providing aid to wealthier countries in exchange for putting that money back in the pocket of ‘hard working’ Canadians. They have also coordinated with provincial Conservative counterparts on a useful populist tack with attacks on the Liberal government focused on the ‘job killing’ carbon tax. While not denying climate change is occurring, Scheer and other provincial Conservative parties suggest that pricing carbon and having taxpayers foot the bill is not good policy. But in terms of populist appeals, the Tories did little to try to win over the far right. Scheer in fact spent much of his time as leader since 2016 distancing himself and the party from candidates who have written racist and homophobic posts on social media, as well as a Conservative senator, Lynn Beyak, who argued that residential schools provided positive experiences. Scheer even categorically promised to take social conservative policy wedge issues off the table with a Conservative government. Further, far right and alt-right media outlets like Rebel Media have been sidelined somewhat from the CPC mainstream after the Canadian public roundly condemned opinion pieces written during the Charlottesville protests. Scheer’s only foray into populist politics was tepid support for the ‘yellow jackets’ but really only in attacking the LPC government’s record on support for the oil and gas industry in Alberta. Unlike many
right-of-centre parties elsewhere, Scheer has tried to steer the Conservatives towards the centre.

Perhaps the most telling moment in the 2019 election campaign with respect to populism came in the only English language debate when Scheer differentiated himself from Maxime Bernier, who he narrowly defeated to win the Conservative leadership. Scheer said that:

You have gone from someone who used to believe in an immigration system that was fair, orderly, and compassionate and now you are making your policy based on trying to get likes and retweets from the darkest part of Twitter. (Aiello 2019)

One of Bernier’s problems was the opportunistic way he has embraced alt-right tropes despite the fact he ran a leadership contest for the Conservatives as a libertarian-minded fiscal hawk. While some populists have probably liked that the People’s Party has some funding and some organization, it was driven top down from one person as opposed to bottom up through a grass roots movement. This made Bernier a bit of an outlier even in the right-wing populist movement. It is as if Bernier was running on a Trump-lite agenda but with Ron Paul as the intellectual force behind it as opposed to Steve Bannon.

Preston Manning’s development of the Reform Party started with a rural Alberta base that grew gradually over three election cycles. Bernier failed to concentrate on an area of the country, including his own backyard in and around Quebec City. The messaging of the PPC in 2019 was inconsistent. Save for the focus on a 50% reduction of immigrants to Canada, they have attracted candidates with different and sometimes competing agendas, most notably with right to life and family values activists joining the party early as well as a number of anti-LGBTQ candidates. Bernier seems to have only been able to attract disaffected Tories who feel they no longer have a party home and outright racists who publicly air Islamophobic and anti-Semitic sentiment, not to mention conspiracy theories. Unlike a populist campaign like the 2016 Trump campaign, where fringe-based supporters made up a small section of his actual voters, Bernier seems to only have a following among these groups.

Bernier was also unable to create a national debate on immigration either. In August 2019, he was criticized for putting up billboards in parts of the country that said “Say No to Mass Immigration.” Instead of a supportive grass roots of the party selling that message, the advertising
company that produced them condemned them after a public outcry and they were taken down. The PPC had such diffuse support that Bernier had to crisscross the country without concentrating on any seats except his own riding of Beauce. Even there, voters turned on him on election night.

Even the PPC advertisements and messaging lacked coherence. What is interesting is that Bernier really does not advance an economic populism about reinvigorating blue-collar and manufacturing jobs. This puts him at odds with successful populist appeals. He focused on corporate welfare abolition and leveling corporate tax rates. He also attacked multiculturalism and political correctness. This fits with the conservative right concerns with elitism and free speech. Bernier also focused attacks on ending equalization, ending supply management for agriculture, and rejecting global climate change. The problem here is that the ‘populist’ elements lack coherence, without that push for an economic populist agenda. And in between the lines of these policies is a libertarian up by the bootstraps ethos, which runs antithetical to pure populism (People’s Party of Canada 2019).

It is telling that the People’s Party chose an advertising campaign that was almost exclusively social media based, driven by the PPC and Bernier’s presence on Twitter and Facebook. Without financing for television ads, the PPC spent $22,645 on Facebook advertising between June–October 2019. Almost all of these ads were targeted at the three youngest male demographics (ages 18–24, 25–34, 35–44) and with no geographical concentration (Facebook 2019a). So even in their targeted ads, the People’s Party did not seem to concentrate on one region specifically.¹

As the election drew to a close, it came out that the CPC had hired long time strategist Warren Kinsella to target Bernier and the PPC in an attempt to get him removed from the leader debates during the campaign. While Bernier was allowed to participate, Kinsella’s involvement demonstrated two interesting things about Canadian populism. The first was that while Scheer and the CPC may have been motivated for political expedient reasons to exclude Bernier and not split the vote on the right, they also publicly differentiated themselves and separated themselves from much of Bernier’s rhetoric. There was no embrace of People’s Party ideas within the Conservative Party platform or in Scheer’s words and speeches on the

¹I am grateful to Tamara Small for sharing her presentation from the 2019 Atlantic Provinces Political Science Association annual conference and for the links to the Facebook Ad Library, which provide details about paid political spending.
campaign trail. The second was that parties and strategists were not afraid to call out racist, xenophobic and homophobic behaviour, even right of centre parties. Credit is perhaps due to Andrew Scheer and Warren Kinsella for standing up to the most virulent elements of populist appeals, especially around immigration, even if the campaign to discredit Scheer was not primarily motivated out of a spirit of altruism.

Bernier’s failure, given the exposure the People’s Party received nationally, likely will set back populism in Canada. Even the so-called Wexit movement that has gained steam following the 2019 election is regionally based, lacks leadership that is articulate or strong, and comes across as a disorganized regional Tea Party movement. The populist caterwauling from Premiers Doug Ford and Jason Kenney is not popular within Ontario and Alberta as “common sense” solutions for delivery of services fall on an electorate disillusioned with their leadership. Given the coronavirus crisis, even the most populist elected leaders have largely fallen in line with support for the Trudeau-led federal government.

THE GREEN PARTY: CLIMATE CHANGE AND POPULISM

On September 27, 2019, just weeks before the Canadian federal election, Greta Thunberg led a climate change protest in Montreal that gathered an estimated half a million people. The majority of Canadians, like other social democratic nations, are strongly in favour of immediate action on climate change. The environment proved to be the most important issue for voters in the 2019 election. Each major party included a climate change plank to their platform. Even the CPC whose support in Alberta might have blunted an environmental message still offered a platform that addressed the Paris agreement. All of this begs the question, left wing eco-populism and environmental populism should have been on the table during this election and yet why did those voices not find a political home in the election? The GPC especially should have been able to marshal grassroots environmental populism in an election that should have provided them with an electoral breakthrough. But this result was not to be. Guided by a hapless marketing campaign and leadership even unaware that it had real strength in parts of the country, Elizabeth May and the GPC actually received less support in the 2019 election than it had previously. Ironically, it was Jagmeet Singh and the NDP, who took the environmental mantle from the GPC and won some of what would have been a green-centred vote distrusting of Trudeau’s rhetoric. Singh effectively used social media
to mock the Liberals’ environmental record. Singh’s tweets about Trudeau’s pipeline purchase started trending and helped lead to a surge of support for the NDP. The hashtag #youboughtapipeline trended online and helped Singh re-establish NDP bona fides on left wing social issues. Still, voters motivated by the environment did not overwhelmingly support the NDP. But nor did they support the GPC.

The GPC problems started with their election slogan. As if focus grouped by middle of the road voters, for some reason it became “Not Left. Not Right. Forward Together”. This is similar to right wing populist slogans as an alternative to the main brokerage parties. It also seemed to suggest that GPC supporters were centrists who had abandoned the LPC and the CPC. While this may be true for some disaffected former party supporters, the GPC grassroots is resolutely left of the NDP on a lot of issues, with the environment often as the most important issue. The slogan and marketing of May as a centrist alternative voice did not match with the party’s true support nor where their growth lies. While it might have been effective in May’s own riding on Vancouver Island, GPC support elsewhere in the country is a grassroots driven left wing support, especially in regions where NDP support has declined like Atlantic Canada.

The messaging by the GPC was also overly complicated. Where Singh saw the opportunity to say no to a pipeline, May had a complicated relationship with this file and at one time had favoured pipelines over rail transport for crude oil and bitumen. But in her responses to how to tackle climate change, May’s brand of nuance was not made for 2019. Instead of screaming from the rafters “Now, and at all cost,” May seemed lost when discussions turned to climate change expressing disappointment with Trudeau but without becoming the leader of the climate fight. Some of this undoubtedly is the double standard sexism on a debate stage with men yelling over each other. But some too rests with her inability to coalition build during this election cycle. That is linked to their failed party messaging.

The one bright spot for the GPC was where environmental populism was harnessed effectively. In the federal riding of Fredericton, in New Brunswick, the GPC activists and organizers on the ground seemed to defy the national party and rely instead on the hard-won gains they had made at the provincial level. Using many of the same activists and supporters at two levels of government, they concentrated on a riding that had been hard hit by climate change. Fredericton had experienced two consecutive ‘once in a century floods’ and in Jenica Atwin, the GPC found a
candidate who was a quick study and who was able to articulate why climate change was important to voters. Fredericton is a bellwether riding for the Liberals and Conservatives, and a reliable indicator of political winds across the country. But in 2019, the GPC won a three-way race that was not a harbinger of any political change. The GPC vote actually declined in most parts of the country in an election where voters cared about climate change.

The GPC campaign team’s lack of understanding of or unwillingness to acknowledge Green support in both New Brunswick and especially in Prince Edward Island, where the provincial Green Party is now the official opposition, helped to tank the campaign where it could have had a breakthrough in a number of ridings. Their failure to mount a serious campaign in Guelph, in rural northern provincial federal ridings where environmental justice, especially in Indigenous communities, could drive Green support, and in particular in Atlantic Canada, was hard for GPC activists to take.

The GPC’s haphazard marketing and branding is particularly evident in analyzing their social media spending in 2019. The Greens spent $54,368 on Facebook ads between June–October 2019. Almost all of the ads were focused on voters in British Columbia and Quebec (Facebook 2019b). The ads in Quebec focused on candidates they believed had a shot, likely the result of uncertainty about the Quebec electorate in 2019. Almost none of the ads targeted Atlantic Canada and not a single national ad focused on Jenica Atwin. Despite internal polling and genuine belief within the Fredericton community that it was a three-way race, the GPC provided almost no support for Atwin until late in the game with local ad-buys. But none of the social media ad targeting funds were spent on her.

**CONCLUSION: IS CANADA A BULWARK AGAINST POPULISM?**

While Canada’s centre-right political parties at the provincial and federal level are willing to engage a populist policy area when it suits them, especially if they see a way to cut into support for left-of-centre parties, and they are willing to use social media and align themselves with right wing organizations willing to spread falsehoods and misinformation, the CPC, as well as most of the provincial PC and Conservative parties, have not endorsed populism. Conservative politicians are well aware of the group of people who would be persuaded by populist messaging. But thus far, including in the 2019 federal campaign, they have refrained from the kind
of race and immigration dog whistling associated with right wing populism. They have stepped over the line before as with the niqab debate but, like the LPC, on most populist issues they tread lightly.

For those concerned about Maxime Bernier and Doug Ford, who are trafficking in populist rhetoric and utilizing strategists who see the potential in populist appeals, they should be worried. So far, we have had a couple of populist leaders win leadership contests and hijack a party, as Ford did in Ontario. We have seen the return of a couple of grass roots provincial movements based around the airing of long-standing grievances. And Bernier was an odd fit for a populist party given his lengthy establishment resume and contradictory ideological leanings. But that is not to say the PPC cannot build a grass roots network that could legitimize contemporary right-wing populism in a Canadian context. It just may take a couple of election cycles to establish how populism succeeds.

In an election year in which a 15-year-old girl from Sweden was the most recognizable face of populism in the world, the GPC seemed to refuse to join that fight to develop a generation of climate change activists. Their timidity and a branding and marketing exercise that placed them to the right of the NDP was a major mistake. The lack of support for candidates who had a credible chance demonstrates that the Greens are hapless with respect to national branding and marketing. Jenica Atwin represents the future of Green populism and is likely best positioned to become the leader of a movement that could combine environmental populism, Indigenous activism, and economic justice issues into a credible alternative to the NDP. The 2020 rail blockades have exposed the governing Liberals as either non-resolute or just hypocritical on Trudeau’s signature environmental and Indigenous files. The Greens have an opportunity to claim that mantle in the next election. But they need a change in leadership and a change in political marketing. Fanning the flames of populism can be a dangerous game sometimes. But the Greens have to realize that it is in their interest to at least try to engage emerging activists in which left wing populist themes are prime motivators.

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