

# Martin Patriquin: Power has moderated the CAQ's populism

Unlike experiences with populism elsewhere, here in Canada the populist CAQ has bowed to the moderating will of the population it leads.

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Coalition Avenir du Quebec leader Francois Legault speaks to supporters after winning the provincial election Monday, October 1, 2018 in Quebec City, Que. *RYAN REMIORZ / THE CANADIAN PRESS*

With a virtual stranglehold on our neighbours directly to our south, populism's caustic, anti-democratic political discourse has spread across the

globe. Donald Trump's improbable victory essentially gave permission to political parties to appeal to the baser instincts of their electorates. His ensuing scorched-earth reign, seemingly impervious to both shame and consequence, has been further evidence of the movement's resiliency.

This doomsday narrative has been used to explain political victories from Italy to Ukraine, from Ontario to Alberta to Quebec. The barbarians aren't at the gates, this narrative goes, they're actually inside them, and they are in charge.

It's tempting to believe that Trump's words and actions have seeded a worldwide movement. It's also folly — in this country and province, at the very least.

Every two years since 2015, Toronto-based, non-partisan think tank Samara Centre for Democracy has released Democracy 360, a poll-based pulse taking of the nation's political appetite. Predictably enough, its third edition takes on the issue of Canadian populism, which very broadly is a revolt against establishment politicians and parties. The result: "It is very hard to conclude that Canadians have, in recent years, turned radically against institutions and elites." Yes, most Canadians think most politicians are indeed out of touch with the electorate, while a large percentage of them believe majority rule trumps all, including minority rights. But these views haven't changed much over the last decade, according to the centre's polling data analysis.

This contention would seem to bear out in Quebec. At first blush, the rise of the Coalition Avenir Québec was a victory for populism. Did the party come about as a result of widespread discontent with the political status quo? Check. Did it benefit from the electorate's unease surrounding issues of identity and belonging? Check. Did this "us-versus-them" narrative include both establishment politicians and recent immigrants? Check.

Yet power has had a moderating effect on the CAQ. François Legault promised to deviate from the establishment-heavy instincts of his Liberal and Parti Québécois predecessors. Once in power, though, he invested in the very government institutions so often derided by his base, including sizeable boosts to the province's education and health ministries. Right-wing

populists in this province used to pine for things like a flat tax and private health care. Legault has instead delivered \$100 million for recycling centres, \$409-million in electric car subsidies and \$5.5 million for something called “secretariat for relations with English-speaking Quebecers.” This isn’t an anti-establishment, majority-rules budget. It’s a budget of a cautious-yet-flush government that wants to get re-elected in four years.

Yes, a key part of the government’s populist plank, the so-called “laicity bill,” will probably become law, compelling government workers in “positions of authority” (including teachers) to doff their “religious symbols.” Even so, and despite the government’s use of the notwithstanding clause overriding the Constitution’s freedom of religion guarantee, the proposed law is ripe for a court challenge under Section 28 of the Charter on grounds of sexism, according to at least one legal scholar, because it targets the niqab and hijab, but not the Muslim beard. And the CAQ has recently suffered the wrath of establishment justice. In February, the Quebec Superior Court granted an injunction against the government’s attempt to throw out over 18,000 immigration applications. It remains in place.

Meanwhile, Quebec’s economic reality has threatened another of the party’s key identity-based overindulgences. During last year’s election campaign, CAQ leader François Legault promised to decrease the immigration levels by 20 per cent in the name of better “integration.” And yet Immigration Minister Simon Jolin-Barrette has said, albeit relatively quietly (<https://www.ledevoir.com/politique/quebec/551581/immigration-precisions>), that his government plans on raising the levels starting in 2020, if only to meet the province’s colossal and near-chronic labour shortage.

Trump is proof positive of how populist governments erode institutions and undermine democracy. Yet here in Canada, the populist CAQ has instead bowed to the moderating will of the population it leads. Not all news is bad news, after all.

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