

Global Opinions

# Populism in Canada is muted. But it's still a threat.

By David Moscrop

Democracy could fail — domestically, globally, anywhere and everywhere. Popular self-government is difficult to achieve, laborious to maintain and easy to lose. There is no reason to assume that the natural order tends toward democracy; it probably tends away from it.

In 1799, there were no states that sufficiently promoted citizen political participation, constrained executive power and guaranteed civil liberties to count as fully democratic, [according to Our World in Data](#). In 1922, there were 21. The count fell down to nine two decades later, resurged to 35 with the postwar boom between 1943 and 1977, and then vigorously rushed to 74 in 1992. The quality of democratic state varies, but the trend through the mid-to-late 20th century was toward self-government and away from autocracy. By 2009, there were 87 such states in the world.

A decade later, scholars [speak of a global democratic recession](#). With the ever-present and increasingly severe threat of climate change, a shifting global order and growing authoritarian populism, democracies around the world are being put to the test — Canada included.

A [new report](#) from the Samara Centre for Democracy finds that populism in Canada is neither surging nor particularly populist. Instead, it's muted and elite-led. While Samara finds that Canadians are cynical toward government — most feel the government doesn't care about what they think, believe their representatives are out of touch and have little trust in members of Parliament or parties to do what is right — 75 percent of those surveyed remain satisfied with how its democracy works.

Politicians, however, are complaining about “elites” more often and engaging in cynical rabble-rousing. In the 2008 parliamentary session, there were no days in which a member of Parliament complained about “elites.” Between 2011 and 2013, members complained in 3 percent of days. And between 2015 and 2019, this rose to 13 percent. Presumably, they were complaining about their opponents.

As the Samara report indicates, it's encouraging that Canadians, while cynical, are not convinced that democracy in Canada is moribund. But citizens take cues from their leaders. According to the researchers, elite-led populist messages risk encouraging civic distrust, stoking hostility toward checks and balances and dividing the country into “us” and “them.” The researchers conclude that, among other recommendations, politicians should “stop undermining their own role” by weakening their own institutions.

Indeed.

