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Populism Isn't Going Up In Canada, Samara Report Suggests

Populist sentiments were highest in the 1990s.



By Sima Shakeri



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Populist movements are suddenly all the rage, at least that may be the perception based on the political parties sweeping to power across the world — in the U.S., Italy, Spain, the Philippines and many other countries.

But contrary to popular belief, Canadians may not be trending towards populism, a new report from the Samara Centre for Democracy suggests.

This is how the report defines populism:

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.

While populism is often viewed as including economic anxiety, or an anti-immigration sentiment, the report emphasizes that not all populists share those attitudes.

The problem with the term populism, according to the report, is that it's abused by political leaders to go after their rivals and people who stand in their way — including journalists, academics, and judges.

Higher in the '90s

While populist sentiments are fairly high in Canada, they're actually lower than in the 1990s, when the populist Reform Party was active. A Canadian Election Study (CES) then found that 75 per cent of Canadians agreed with the statement "I don't think the government cares much what people like me think." Samara's study found that only 59 per cent of Canadians agree now.

Over half of Canadians — 63 per cent — also agreed that "those elected to Parliament soon lose touch with the people." This sentiment has also gone down: 77 per cent agreed with the same statement in 2004, and 85 per cent agreed in 1993.

Populism is also often associated with the will of the many crushing the few, but those attitudes have also decreased.



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Women of colour attending a town hall meeting.

Surveys in 2011 and 2001 found that 60 and 70 per cent of Canadians, respectively, thought "the will of the majority should always prevail, even over the rights of minorities," only 40 per cent of Canadians shared the same sentiment in Samara's survey.

Furthermore, the report found that less than half — 42 per cent — of Canadians agree that "ordinary people would do a better job of solving the country's problems than elected officials."

"As dissatisfied as Canadians are," Dr. Michael Morden, research director at the Samara Centre, said in a press release, "based on our findings it is very hard to conclude that Canadians have turned radically against institutions and elites."

Politicians exploiting rhetoric

One thing that is on the rise, according to the report, is politicians using populist rhetoric for their own benefit.

"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."



If politicians keep insisting that politicians can't be trusted and institutions are crooked, what reason do citizens have to trust or participate?

—Samara report

The report also noted that during the 42nd Parliament, MPs complained about "elites" in 13 per cent of sitting days, up from only 3 per cent during the first session of the 41st Parliament.

"With a federal election on the horizon, politicians and media alike should avoid using the blunt tool of 'populism' and instead try to listen carefully to what Canadians are actually concerned about," Kendall Anderson, the organization's acting executive director, said.

"On the flip side, citizens should be wary of politicians serving up self-serving populist rhetoric instead of real democratic improvements."

"If politicians keep insisting that politicians can't be trusted and institutions are crooked, what reason do citizens have to trust or participate?" the report says. "Politicians in Canada may not be responding to latent populism in the public, but they can play a role in popularizing populism."



THE CANADIAN PRESS

Maxime Bernier left the Conservative party and founded the populist People's Party of Canada.

It also recommended that politicians and the media need to listen to Canadians instead of "projecting onto them a generalized populism narrative imported from other countries." It also told elected officials and other politicians to stop undermining their positions by pushing using the concept of "elitism" for personal gain. The report also notes that the public should reward politicians who look at the world through a nuanced lens rather than painting an us-versus-them worldview.

For the report, the Samara Centre, a non-profit organization that aims to strengthen Canadian democracy, surveyed over 4,000 Canadians on various measures of populism, like political discontent and a preference for decision-making by ordinary citizens.

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