

## NEWS

# Populist forces have not found home to roost in Canada, report says

By BEATRICE PAEZ    MAY. 7, 2019

If a populist waves comes to Canada, 'it will have more to do with how elites are approaching the issue than an organic change in public opinion,' says Mike Morden, research director at Samara Canada.



Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland, pictured at a presser on April 2, 2019, said in a talk hosted by the Global Centre for Pluralism that economic insecurity faced by the middle class gives rise to a divisive brand of populism. *The Hill Times* file photograph by Andrew Meade

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Canadians may not be immune from being swayed by populist rhetoric, but the level of political discontent isn't high enough to suggest a revolt is afoot in Canada, according to a new report.

In a study titled, "Don't Blame the People," released Tuesday, Samara Canada found that, while an overwhelming number of Canadians surveyed are far from satisfied with their elected representatives and the government writ large, they still seem to have faith in their institutions.

Some 60 per cent of respondents, for example, indicated they don't think the government cares much about what "people like me" think. The report noted that in the mid-1990s, such sentiment was much more widespread, with 75 per cent of Canadians saying they felt this way. This was a time of significant political upheaval, when the Bloc Québécois ascended to become a major political force and the conservative movement was splintered, said Mike Morden, research director at Samara Canada, in a phone interview. Quebecers also voted in the second referendum on independence in 1995.

"As dissatisfied as Canadians are, it is very hard to conclude that Canadians have, in recent years, turned radically against institutions and elites," the report reads. Instead, Samara concluded that there have actually been incremental improvements in Canadians' perceptions on whether politicians are advocating in their interests. In 2014, for example, only 40 per cent said they trust MPs to do what's right, compared to 50 per cent in 2019.

In Canada, it's politicians, rather than everyday citizens, who are leading the charge in making populist rhetoric mainstream, according to the report. "If it [populism] comes, it will have more to do with how elites are approaching the issue than an organic change in public opinion," said Mr.

Morden. “Politicians, when they use the language, will insist they’re listening to the people.”

Some have seized on the “us-versus-them mentality” that seeks to fuel anger towards an amorphous elite in a bid to advance their own political interests. Despite politicians’ apparent efforts to tap into the kind of populist sentiments that have found been a rallying cry in other parts of the world, including in the U.S. and Brazil, Mr. Morden said, the report did not suggest Canadians have been increasingly angry or dissatisfied with the state of politics.

While the report identifies politicians as one of the forces amplifying such rhetoric, it stops short of singling out which political parties—and their leaders—that have been experimenting with populist-tinged slogans. But all parties have, to varying degrees, spoken in populist terms to animate their base, Mr. Morden said. (Samara seeks to position itself as above the partisan fray.)

The report warns politicians against deploying populist rhetoric, arguing that it has the effect of denigrating the profession.

There’s some disagreement over whether populism intrinsically lends itself to authoritarian tendencies.

Speaking at an event on populism hosted by the Global Centre for Pluralism in Ottawa, Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland (University-Rosedale, Ont.) last month warned of increasing political discontent, arguing that economic insecurity faced by the middle class gives rise to divisive populism ([https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2019/05/01/chrystia-freeland-taxes-rich\\_a\\_23720034/](https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2019/05/01/chrystia-freeland-taxes-rich_a_23720034/)), according to HuffPost. But Preston Manning, founder of the populist Reform Party, said in an interview with CBC (<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/the-current-for-april-25-2019-1.5110297/populism-can-be-positive-and-constructive-even-when-fuelled-by-anger-says-preston-manning-1.5110326>) that seizing on people’s anger can energize political engagement and yield constructive results when it offers fixes instead of advocating for a complete teardown of institutions. He noted that both Alberta’s Jason Kenney and Doug Ford in Ontario rode on a wave of populism in their campaigns to become premiers.

The survey was conducted in January and February, just as *The Globe and Mail*’s report alleging political interference in the case against SNC-Lavalin was breaking. Mr. Morden said it’s best to conduct this type of survey in a “fairly neutral moment,” outside of a political scandal, to get a more accurate reading on public sentiments.

*bpaez@hilltimes.com*

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