RIDING THE POPULIST WAVE?
POPULIST CONTAGION IN THE 2021 CANADIAN FEDERAL ELECTION

by

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ABSTRACT

The 2021 Canadian federal election witnessed the emergence of a stronger People's Party of Canada (PPC) and its populist communication style. Although the party ultimately failed to secure seats, previous research suggests that populist parties can disrupt electoral dynamics through populist contagion, wherein established parties adopt a populist communication style to contend with the threat of emergent populist competitors. Using a mixed-methods approach, this thesis examines whether the populist communication style employed by PPC candidates resulted in a contagion effect in the rhetoric of Conservative Party of Canada's (CPC) local campaigns in the same district. To test this, this study analyzes the extent of populist rhetoric utilized by PPC and CPC candidates in 60 electoral ridings, drawing from an original dataset of over 7,500 tweets. Additionally, the study presents findings from a semi-structured interview with a PPC campaign official to further explore the context of the 2021 election.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED

CPC – Conservative Party of Canada

CCF – Co-operative Commonwealth Federation

NDP – New Democratic Party

MP – Member of Parliament

PC – Progressive Conservative Party

PPC – People's Party of Canada

SMP – Single-Member Plurality

UKIP – United Kingdom Independent Party

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In the aftermath of the 2021 federal election, the media derided the affair as little more than "a $600-million cabinet shuffle" (Blackwell 2021), "the most boring and pointless exercise in the history of democracy" (Menon 2021), and "the vote only one Canadian — Justin Trudeau — really wanted" (Winnipeg Free Press 2021). Indeed, despite Prime Minister calling it "the most important election of his lifetime" (The Canadian Press 2021a), the election resulted in very little change from the previous 2019 election, both in terms of vote share and parliamentary seats, as the Liberal Party once again formed a minority government. Focusing exclusively on electoral results, however, risks missing the unique dynamics of the 2021 federal election, which Stewart (2022) aptly describes as "far from boring."

The 2021 Canadian federal election was marked by intense polarization and heightened tensions, partly a result of the COVID pandemic, which presented unprecedented challenges and influenced every aspect of the electoral process, from campaigning to voting logistics, to voter turnout (Loewen and Merkley 2021). The pandemic underscored existing electoral issues such as healthcare, the economy, and the environment, while creating new concerns, including vaccine mandates, government responses to COVID-19, and debates over civil liberties. At the same time, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's decision to call an early election drew significant criticism, with opponents and commentators labeling it a blatant power grab, in an attempt to convert a minority government into a majority, during a critical period (see, for instance, Brean 2021). While the parliamentary schedule allowed for no election until 2024 (5 years since

the 2019 election), Prime Minister Trudeau argued Canadians should elect the government that lead the pandemic recovery. While such criticisms were not inherently unique, the context of the ongoing crisis exacerbated the backlash against Trudeau and the Liberal Party. The convergence of these issues ultimately led to an election that was uncharacteristically divisive.

While touring Canada, as part of his national campaign, for instance, Trudeau faced protesters everywhere he went. These protests, according to Toronto Star's Susan Delacourt (2021), were frequently marked by "vile" allegations and conspiracy theories, accusing Trudeau and other Liberal ministers of indoctrinating children, injecting people with microchips, and human trafficking. The intensity of this political polarization is perhaps best illustrated by what Delacourt (2021) described as "one truly terrifying poster depict[ing] the Liberal leader as he is about to be executed." Yet, surprisingly, a Postmedia-Leger poll (Tumilty 2021), found that a majority of Canadians believed the Prime Minister had led "a cynical and angry campaign," and that while 50% of respondents felt sorry for how he was treated, 43% believed Trudeau was somewhat responsible for the protests. Similarly, while 49% considered these protests un-Canadian, 63% said they understood the frustration that led to them.

What distinguished this electoral contest, however, were not only the challenges posed by COVID and the heightened polarization, but also the emergence of the People's Party of Canada (PPC). Founded in 2018 by former Conservative minister Maxime Bernier, the PPC is a self-described populist, right-wing alternative party to the mainstream Conservative Party of Canada (CPC) (Toronto Star 2021e). Although populist movements have existed in Canadian politics before, the PPC's brand of populism became distinctive,

as the party capitalized on the divisiveness of the 2021 election and garnered support from far-right actors such as Canada First and the Canadian Nationalist Front (Boutilier 2021). The party's members and supporters have also made headlines with controversial statements, such as former Ontario PPC organizer Nicola Hanson's remarks on Islam[1] (Kamel, Patriquin and Picazo 2019), and engaged in confrontational protests against pandemic health measures and the Prime Minister. In a remarkable episode of the 2021 election, Shane Marshall, head of the PPC's Elgin-Middlesex-London riding association, was arrested after throwing gravel at Trudeau and reporters who had joined the tour (Richmond 2021; Toronto Star 2021b). Maxime Bernier himself faced legal problems and was arrested during a campaign stop in Manitoba for violating public health orders (Abas 2021).

However, the party's true impact may be best assessed by its impact on the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC). Although the PPC did not win a single seat in the House of Commons, it earned 800,000 votes nationally, increasing its vote share from 1.6% in 2019 to 5% in 2021 (Raycraft 2021). For reference, the PPC's vote share was twice as large as the Green Party's (2.33%) (Toronto Star 2021e). Previous studies suggest that, despite their small size, emergent populist parties have the potential to disrupt electoral patterns by triggering a "populist contagion effect" (see for instance Rodi 2019; Bayerlein 2021; Schwörer 2021; Järviniemi 2022). Populist contagion occurs when traditional or major political parties feel threatened by the success of populist rivals, and adopt populist

[1] In a Twitter post, Hanson, an Ontario PPC organizer, said that "Islam was not Canadian" and Muslim individuals had the intention "to take Canada." Although Hanson would later say that the post had been shared without her consent, she was removed from the party (Kamel, Patriquin and Picazo 2019). This post represents a common populist communication strategy to create a divide between "the people" and "others."

communication strategies in order to remain competitive (Schwörer 2021). In particular, these studies indicate that a populist contagion effect is more likely to occur when traditional parties perceive that these populist parties can succeed at their expense, whether or not they win seats (Harmel and Svasand 1997; Schumacher and van Kersbergen 2016). Thus, this reaction, known as an accommodative strategy, allows mainstream parties to gain electoral support, while pre-emptively countering the appeal of emerging populist challengers (Rodi 2019).

In the context of the 2021 federal election, concerns about the PPC's impact on Conservative electoral prospects may have presented such a threat. As the election approached, media coverage increasingly suggested the PPC had the potential to split the Conservative vote or "siphon" votes away from the CPC (Kheiriddin 2021; Taube 2021; Platt 2021; Huras 2021; Platt and Karadeglija 2021; Taylor 2021; Toronto Star 2021c; The Brandon Sun 2021), with some reporters referring to the PPC as the new "kingmaker" (see Goldstein 2021). Pollsters also pointed out that the PPC's ability to attract a significant segment of the Conservative base posed a substantial threat for the CPC, particularly in tightly contested ridings (Platt 2021). The perception that the PPC was a threat, even as they party remained in single digits in the polls, was underscored by the public statements of CPC insiders. Former Harper strategist Jennifer Byrne, for instance, publicly expressed concerns about races where the Conservatives and Liberals were separated by a margin of less than five percent (Huras 2021)[2], while longtime Conservative pollster Nick Kouvalis released a report titled "A vote for the PPC instead of the CPC will give Trudeau a minority

[2] Talking to *New Brunswick News,* Byrne said ""There is a real threat to Conservatives in close ridings" (Huras 2023).

and potentially a majority" (Platt and Karadeglija 2021). Canada Proud, a third-party advertiser led by Jeff Ballingall (digital director of Erin O'Toole's 2020 leadership race), similarly cautioned about right-wing vote splitting as the election drew to a close (Taylor 2021). In perhaps the clearest sign of concern, CPC leader Erin O'Toole spent the final days of his campaign issuing warnings against vote-splitting, emphasizing that a vote for the PPC could result in another Liberal government (The Canadian Press 2021b).

Remarkably, concerns about the impact of the PPC on the CPC continued, even after the party was defeated, as some argued the PPC had cost the CPC seats in the House of Commons (Ellis 2022). Following his loss in Alberta to the Liberals' Randy Boissonnault, former MP James Cumming launched a review to investigate whether the CPC had lost votes to the PPC immediately after the election concluded (The Canadian Press 2021c). Another MP, Marilyn Gladu, who was re-elected in Sarnia-Lambton, said in an interview that she believed the PPC had split the Conservative vote, and that the party had work to do to avoid a similar outcome in future (Bailey and Stone 2021). This perception that the "conservative vote" in Canada had been split between the CPC and the PPC, likely also served to worsen the existing fractures within the CPC. During the 2021 election, reports indicated significant discontent within the CPC, with members expressing frustration over policy positions and the overall direction of the party (Toronto Star 2021a).

Given the unique circumstances of the 2021 election – a highly polarized political environment and the threat that the PPC could successfully capitalize on this divisiveness – this study aims to explore whether PPC candidates' populist rhetoric could have triggered a populist contagion among CPC candidates who, fearing they would lose their electorate's support to the PPC, similarly adopted populist rhetoric. Specifically, the study seeks to

answer the following research questions: 1) How populist were local PPC constituency campaigns? 2) Did the populist rhetoric employed by PPC candidates in their local campaigns during the 2021 federal election result in a contagion effect in the rhetoric of CPC candidates in those same districts? To address these questions, I use a mixed-method approach where I first empirically measure the extent to which 60 PPC and 60 CPC candidates utilized populism as a communication style during the 2021 federal election, drawing from an original dataset of over 7,500 Twitter posts. I then include the reported use of populism in a multivariate regression analysis, to account for alternative factors, to determine if there is a positive correlation between PPC and CPC candidates' use of populist rhetoric in the same electoral districts, indicative of populist contagion at the constituency level. Following the quantitative analysis, I present findings from a semi-structured interview with a PPC campaign official, who oversaw multiple campaigns in 2019 and 2021, to further explore the context of the election. These findings provide more detail to the empirical results and suggest further avenues for research.

In answering these research questions, I find that, during the 2021 election, PPC candidates had a higher proportion of populist rhetoric in their social media than CPC candidates, although both PPC and CPC candidates use of populist rhetoric was low. I also find that, even when controlling for alternative factors, there is a strong and positive correlation between the extent of populist rhetoric used by CPC and PPC candidates in local campaigns in the same electoral district, indicative of a populist contagion effect. Finally, I find that CPC populist rhetoric is associated with PPC vote share – CPC candidates used a higher proportion of populist rhetoric in districts where the PPC performed better. Overall, the results of this study suggest there is compelling evidence that

during the 2021 Canadian federal election, in the electoral ridings included in this study, CPC candidates felt threatened by PPC candidates, and in response, adopted shifted toward more populist rhetoric.

The approach adopted here, and the results that follow, make three contributions to the literature. First, the majority of studies on populist contagion have tested the use of accommodative strategies by mainstream parties in the context of Western European countries (see for instance Bale 2003; Schwörer, 2021). In Canadian politics, however, spatial analyses have been more limited to electoral patterns and parliamentary voting behaviour (see for instance Dow 2001; Godbout and Hoyland 2011), leaving party competition an understudied topic (notable exceptions include Godbout and Hoyland 2013). This study addresses this research gap by conducting the first analysis of populist contagion in the Canadian context. The results, therefore, provide new evidence to the literature and further explore the dynamics of the 2021 election. Second, this study also departs from previous populist contagion research methodology and further contributes to the literature by considering the potential of a populist contagion effect when including local campaigns as the units of analysis (as opposed to party leaders), and populist rhetoric in social media (as opposed to party manifestos). In other words, it changes the unit of analysis from parties (treated singularly) to local party candidates. Finally, this study contributes to the current normative interest in the potential impact of populism on democracy, by exploring the circumstances under which populism can spread and become mainstream, as well as the impact of small populist parties on elections.

This study will proceed in the following four chapters. The second chapter is the literature review, where I situate this study within the existing scholarship of populism,

models of party competition, and populist contagion. I similarly provide an overview of populism in Canadian politics, to understand the background of the PPC's emergence and its potential influence. In this chapter I propose three hypotheses. The third chapter presents the methodology and this study's mixed method approach, and provides a justification for the sampling process, the selection of variables, and the operationalization of populism. In the fourth chapter, I report the empirical results of coding the Twitter posts' dataset and report the results of the multivariate regression and the interview, and interpret the findings. In the fifth and concluding chapter, I examine the limitations of this study and possible avenues for future research.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

In the last decade, use of the term "populism" has increased exponentially in both the media and scholarly work. In 2017, the prominent use of the term in the media and public opinion led *The Cambridge Dictionary* to select "populism" as its word of the year[3] (Brown and Mondon 2020). To further illustrate, *The New York Times* used the terms "populism" or "populist" 671 times in 2015, a number that exponentially increased to 2,537 in 2017 (Rooduijn 2019, 362). Similarly, Rooduijn (2019, 362) shows that the use of the word populism in published academic articles quadrupled between 2010 and 2017. The interest is, of course, not devoid of context, as modern capitalist democracies find themselves amid more populist political actors across the world and the ideological spectrum (Inglehart and Norris 2017), from the Republican Party in the United States to Austria's Freedom Party and Greece's SYRIZA in Europe (Rooduijn 2019).

Yet, despite the extent of the debate and the renewed interest in the subject, the broad literature reveals that populism is not only a highly contested concept, with scholars offering diverse interpretations, but one that has proven difficult to operationalize. As an illustration, in canvassing recent literature, Rooduijn (2014b, 578) found that scholars had used no fewer than 12 different conceptualizations of populism. Years later, Hunger and Paxton's (2022, 627) observations show that populism remains a concept that is often used inconsistently and as a label for a wide range of phenomena. As such, while it is not my

[3] In explaining this choice, Wendalyn Nichols, Publishing Manager at Cambridge University Press argued that what set populism apart was that it represents "a phenomenon that's both truly local and truly global as populations and their leaders across the world wrestle with issues of immigration and trade, resurgent nationalism, and economic discontent."

intention to resolve this debate, it is critical for this study to provide a clear and measurable definition of populism. In establishing this study's conceptualization, however, it is worth first reviewing the fundamental characteristics and competing approaches to populism.

As a political phenomenon, populism emerged in the 19th century in Russia and the United States, as democratic ideas and political systems spread worldwide (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 21). That populism is tightly linked with democracy may be counterintuitive given current normative concerns, but it is critical to recognize that democratic theory is at the centre of populism's minimal definition. That is, at its core, populism focuses on the dyadic dynamic of representation between "the people" and those in power, "the elite" (Mudde 2004, 543). In a more maximalist conceptualization, populism can be generally defined as a reaction and an attempt to rectify perceived democratic failures or crises, by creating a vertical division of society, between "the people," who have been wronged, and "the elite" or the establishment, who have betrayed them (Gagnon et al. 2018, viii; Schwörer and Fernández-García 2021, 1401). Consequently, populism heavily centres around two essential characteristics. First, populism entails the negative portrayal of "the elite," viewed as corrupt, inefficient, and exploitative (Stanyer, Salgado and Strömbäck 2017, 360). Second, populism characterizes populist actors as champions and defenders of the "right" people, those perceived as the "heartland," a constructed subset of the population that is romanticized, akin to an imagined nation[4] (Taggart 2002; Mudde 2004, 546). However, beyond these fundamental definitions, scholars hold divergent views

[4] It is important to distinguish this concept from those linked to nationalist or ethno-nationalist ideologies and movements, which focus more heavily on nation-building and autonomy (e.g. Pamir 1997). Although populism is often part of these ideologies and movements, populism is not exclusively nationalist or ethnonationalist.

on the defining catalysts driving populism, and the distinctive features of both populist actors and ideologies, which has resulted in numerous approaches.

Ideational approaches, as Gidron and Bonikowski (2014) argue, frame populism as a "bundle of ideas," emphasizing the centrality of content and programmatic considerations as the primary units of analysis. Essentially, these approaches focus on the broader perception that populism extends beyond political strategies or organizational structures and are instead fundamentally grounded in the ideas promoted by political actors. In particular, the classical work of Cas Mudde (2004, 547) conceptualizes populism as moralistic and centred around a programmatic divide between "the elite" and "the people", that is reflected in a normative discourse meant to address "persisting political resentment." As Mudde (2004, 544) argues:

> Essential to the discourse of the populist is the normative distinction between 'the elite' and 'the people', not the empirical difference in behaviour or attitudes. Populism presents a Manichean outlook, in which there are only friends and foes. Opponents are not just people with different priorities and values, they are evil! Consequently, compromise is impossible, as it 'corrupts' the purity.

At the same time, populism is also conceived as ambiguous, a "thin" political ideology, that is remarkably adaptable and capable of coexisting with a wide spectrum of diverse political ideologies (Mudde 2004, 544). Within these ideational approaches, some scholars argue, populism serves as an alternative form of governance, one that seeks to reshape liberal democratic representation through exclusive majoritarianism (Urbinati 2019). In other words, populism asserts that democratic institutions having failed, must be replaced instead by more authoritarian forms of governance that better reflect the will of

"the people," through populist leaders who have unrestrained access to power (Taggart 2002; Gagnon et al. 2018).

Although ideational approaches have proven to be effective evaluative tools to identify populist movements and actors (see for instance, Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017), they are less capable of understanding populism as a gradation (as opposed to a binary), where different actors may employ one or more populist elements, without necessarily engaging in populist policy choices. In other words, while ideational concepts of populism are useful for understanding a populist outlook on politics and democracy, they can overlook the significance of populist forms of communication, which, though perhaps weaker on ideological content, can still significantly impact and influence politics. As such, I turn to a different framework[5]: socio-organizational approaches.

In contrast to ideational approaches, socio-organizational conceptualizations of populism focus on its structural aspects such as mobilization and communication strategies, leadership dynamics, and relationships with other political actors (Moffit and Tormey 2014). These approaches largely derive from the influential work of Pierre Ostiguy, which emphasizes the bidirectional nature of populism: the fundamental relationship between populist actors and the people. Indeed, the crux of this approach lies in its contention that populism results from political actors actively bringing forth and representing "the people" through performance and articulation (Ostiguy 2017). What Ostiguy (2017, 105) characterizes as "a representation ("acting") of the representation ("portrayal") of the

[5] At a minimum, the majority of scholarly work recognizes three main approaches to populism: ideational, socio-organizational, and strategic (see Kaltwasser et al. 2017, for instance). The latter centres around populism in institutional arrangements, and thus was excluded from this study. It is worth noting, however, that other scholars such as Gagnon et al. (2018) identify as many as six distinct approaches to populism.

people “as is.” Importantly, and unlike other political phenomena, populism is achieved through transgressive or improper performances designed to create closeness (between “the people” and the populist actor), by “flaunting the low,” which contrasts with the “the high ways” of standard politics (Ostiguy 2017, 105). For example, populist messages are often emotionally charged, either as a result of the negative resentment towards “the elite” or the positive infatuation for the populist leader, which stand in stark contrast to the more pragmatic and bureaucratic messages of traditional politics. In essence, this relational approach views populism as a style, emphasizing not its content, the focus of ideational approaches, but its performative aspect and its crucial role in conveying political messages (Moffitt and Tormey 2014). To emphasize, it is the style, not the substance, which makes populism a distinct political phenomenon (Moffit 2017). From this socio-organizational approach, derives the definition of populism, as a political style, used in the present study.

2.1 Conceptualizing Populism as a Political Style

Moffit and Tormey (2014, 387) define political style as “the repertoires of performance that are used to create political relations.” In other words, political style encompasses the strategies, communication techniques, and symbolic gestures employed by political actors to convey their message, connect with their audience, and establish their identity. In terms of populism as a political style, the objective is for populist actors to invoke “the people” (Moffit and Tormey 2014; Wirth et al. 2016), through either oral, written or visual discursive devices, such as rhetoric, images, self-presentation, body language, framing, priming, and staging (Moffit 2017; Reinemann et al. 2017). In terms of this study’s research questions – how populist were PPC local constituency campaigns in

the 2021 federal election and whether this triggered a contagion effect with CPC local campaigns – this concept is critical to evaluate the role of populism as a communication tool in political campaigns and as a function of an actor's articulation of a political platform. In the particular case of contagion effects, Wirth et al.'s (2016, 39) conception of populism is especially useful, as the "rhetorical figures and means of presentation common among populists [that] may be employed by a politician to mimic, to a certain degree, the external appearance of populism without sharing its inner meaning." In particular, to invoke "the people," populist actors may use one or all of the following communication strategies.

First, political actors employ rhetoric designed to define and empower "the people," as a monolithic and virtuous group, united under a common banner (Wirth et al. 2016; De Vreese et al. 2018, 425). Such messages are also meant to prime social identity aspects, in order to delineate in-groups (the "virtuous people") and construct out-groups (minority groups and "the elites") (Reinemeann et al. 2017, 21; De Vreese et al. 2018, 428). Second, "the elite" is portrayed as corrupt, antagonistic, and self-serving through statements that explicitly or implicitly stress the negative aspects of elite groups, blame them for past or current circumstances, and present them as a threat to "the people" (Moffit and Tormey 2014; Bornschier 2017, 306). Importantly, in attacking "the elite," populist rhetoric does not necessarily refer exclusively to the political establishment but may include special interest groups and those categorized as illegitimate people or "the other," including ethnic, racial, and sexual minorities (Reinemeann et al. 2017, 21). In other words, "the elite" (much like "the people") is highly contextual and reflects the unique characteristics and circumstances of a community, whether national or local. Finally, populist communication

strategies centre on articulating greater demands for sovereignty and "the people's" return to power, which may include denying "the elite" access to power (Wirth et al. 2016).

Notably, populism as a political style consists of both the message and its stylistic features. As Ostiguy (2017) argues, a core characteristic of populism is "flaunting the low." As a political style, thus, populism is distinguished by its use of inappropriate forms of communication that seek to disrupt conventional politics and create exclusionary groups. In contemporary politics, these may include the use of flash mobs and protests, aggressive language, and appeals to the "common sense" in the face of threats, crises and breakdown (Moffit 2017). This is key in the context of today's media-driven environment, where traditional social cleavages have been increasingly displaced by branding (Taras 2015, 98). As marketing strategies have permeated the communication industry, political communications have adapted accordingly, prioritizing the use of performative tools to create ready-made content, centred around political infotainment and superficial messages (Kellner 2003; Mazzoleni 2008, 52; Marland 2020, 312). This mediatization, as Mazzoleni (2008, 55) argues, has incentivized political actors to employ populist communication strategies including attacking traditional media or playing the role of the "underdog."

Building on this theoretical foundation of populism as a political style, it is essential to consider how this phenomenon has materialized within Canada's national context.

2.2 Populism in Canadian Politics

In Canadian politics, the use of populist rhetoric by political parties is far from a new phenomenon. Some of the earliest examples include the nativist groups of British Columbia in the 19th century (Ambrose and Mudde 2015) and the agrarian movements of the 20th century in Western Canada (Wiseman 2017). The first populist political party to make inroads in Parliament was the Progressive Party, an agrarian protest party, founded in 1920 by Thomas Cerar, former Minister of Agriculture under Prime Minister Robert Borden. Established by disillusioned members of the Liberal Party who felt alienated, the Progressive Party campaigned largely on an American-inspired "single dimension of politics:" the conflict between "the people" and the financial industry, perceived as "the elite" (Johnston 2017, 136). In 1921, the Progressives became the first opposition third party (Patten 2017, 7), after capturing 65 seats and displacing the Conservatives (Ellis 2005, 6). Despite this early success, the party did not last long and disappeared completely by 1935, when the majority of its members crossed the floor back to the Liberal Party (Wiseman 2017).

Still, the emergence of the Progressive Party marked the beginning of subsequent populist groups and political parties in Canada[6], primarily linked to anti-elitism and the perception of an unresponsive establishment (Farney and Rayside 2013), as well as Western concerns about central Canada's dominance in politics (Ellis 2005; Bickerton 2007). For

[6] Although provincial politics is outside of this study's scope, it is worth noting that there also are numerous examples of provincial populist parties, from the Alberta Social Credit Party of the 1930s to Mike Harris' "Common Sense" campaign in Ontario in the 1990s (Farney and Rayside 2013, 44). In contemporary politics one can also point to BC's United (formerly BC's Liberal), Alberta's Wildrose Party (Farney and Rayside 2013, 52), and Ontario's Progressive Conservative Party under Doug Ford (Budd 2020).

instance, the United Farmer and Labour MPs and the Ginger Group (Patten 2017, 8) helped establish, in 1932, the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CFF), a federal party that centred around socialist populism (Wiseman 2017). The CCF would decades later transform into the current New Democratic Party in 1961, after merging with the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC). In 1935, the Social Credit Party, a conservative and agrarian populist party, was also established in Alberta. With a different orientation from the CCF, the Socreds' platform focused on defending the West – it only ran candidates in Western ridings – and opposing the party system (Johnston 2013, 289), who constituted "the elite" and "the people's" enemy (Laycock 2002 56).

Although both the CCF and Social Credit elected members to Parliament in several elections following their establishment, the Socreds were particularly successful in gaining seats and were often overrepresented[7] in the House of Commons (Johnston 2013, 291). Their success, however, was cut short when, under the leadership of John Diefenbaker, the Progressive Conservative Party (PC) achieved a historic victory in 1958 and secured the largest majority government in Canadian history (Ellis 2005, 13)[8]. The influence of the Social Credit Party, however, was far from over. While the PC's initial brokerage style proved successful, as it aimed to appeal voters nationwide (Farney 2009, 244), it ultimately served to undermine the party (Ellis 2015, 18), particularly in Western Canada. In 1993, the PC faced a resounding defeat and was reduced to two parliamentary seats (Laycock 2012, 48). This poor performance was partly due to the emergence of another populist

[7] The Social Credit Party was overrepresented ever year before 1958. In particular, between 1935 and 1940, the Socred elected more members than the CCF, and between 1962 and 1963, it elected more members than the NDP (Johnston 2013, 291).
[8] Particularly in Western Canada, Diefenbaker's success came at the cost of Social Credit, whose popular vote plummeted (Ellis 2005, 13).

party, the Reform Party, whose legacy is perhaps the most enduring aspect of populism in contemporary Canadian politics.

The Reform Party was founded in 1978 in Alberta by Preston Manning, son of former Alberta Premier and Social Credit Party leader, Ernest Manning, with whom he shared most of his political views (Patten 1996, 105), particularly neo-conservative and what they perceived as Judaeo-Christian political values (Laycock 2012). The Reform Party was largely considered a quintessential populist party, with rhetoric that expressed a clear vertical divide between "the elite" and "the people." On the one hand, "the elite," which encompassed the "old-line parties" and the broader political establishment, was characterized as antagonistic and self-interested (Clarke et al. 2000, 88). The argument, a remanent of Social Credit's view of politics, was that "the people's enemies were central planners, bureaucrats, and the creators and administrators of the state's social-welfare programs" (Laycock 2002, 56). The latter played an especially important role in the Reform's populist rhetoric. In particular, the rejection of the welfare system and its redistributive policies were central to a broader derision of the political, which was perceived as an intrusion in the private lives of "the people." As Laycock (2002, 93) contends, the Reform argued that "politicians and public life deserves our disdain because it is wrong to seek public, political solutions to problems that are essentially private."

In delineating "the elite," the Reform also included "special interest groups," who benefited from the political establishment to the detriment of "the people" (Laycock 2002, 56). These groups encompassed those advocating for an expanded welfare state, social redistribution, and increased rights for marginalized communities, such as visible minorities, Indigenous peoples, women, the LGBTQ+ community, immigrants, and

francophone Québecois (Laycock 2012, 49). This rejection of "special interest groups" was underscored by the party's opposition to affirmative action programs characterized as "obnoxious" and "abhorrent" (Patten 1996, 117). In contrast, "the people" were portrayed by the Reform Party as "hard-working, law-abiding, and overtaxed individuals" who were not represented by "the elite," and drew no benefits from government programs expressly designed for these special interest groups (Laycock 2012, 50).

Importantly, the Reform Party was also rooted in regionalist and Western grievances that perceived both a lack of "the people's" representation in the political establishment in Ottawa, and a hostility from "the elite" towards Western interests. As Bickerton (2007, 55) contends, the Reform Party was based on a model of regional representation known as "defensive regionalism," best captured by the party's slogan "The West Wants In." For instance, shortly after being elected, Deborah Grey (the Reform's first elected MP) used her maiden speech to reply to the Speech of the Throne, urging Mulroney's government to stop neglecting the West and her constituents, who she said were looking forward to be Canada's equal partners: "It is the West's grievances which this government should be addressing with at least as much fervor as they bring to Quebec's demands" (Edmonton Journal 1989). This populist regionalism was also reflected in empirical evidence. In surveying the Reform's electorate base, Harrison and Krahn (1995, 142) found that feelings of political alienation, particularly the perception that "big government doesn't care," had an independent and significant effect on Reform Party support. In particular, those living in Western provinces, especially Alberta, were found to feel more alienated from the federal government and thus more likely to identify with the Reform Party.

Despite its regional focus, the Reform Party was a generally successful third party. In its second federal election, in 1993, the party managed to jump from a single seat in the previous election to 52 seats (Frizzell, Pammett and Westell 1994, 6), and by 1997, the Reform Party became the official opposition, after electing 60 members to Parliament (Laycock 2012, 48). Success, however, brought ideological factions within caucus, especially as party discipline increased[9]. In 2000, the party rebranded itself as the Canadian Reform Conservative Alliance or simply Canadian Alliance, and Preston Manning was ousted in 2002. Despite the loss of the party's leadership, as Sayers and Denemark (2014, 18) argue, Manning had always had the intention for the Reform Party to become a major national party and viewed this dissolution as necessary for the party to become the conservative option in Canada. The Canadian Alliance, under the leadership of Stephen Harper, would ultimately merge with the Progressive Conservative Party, to form today's Conservative Party of Canada (CPC).

In contemporary politics, populist rhetoric has continued to find new forms of expression, both through the now mainstream party, the CPC, and through emergent parties, like the People's Party of Canada (PPC). In terms of the CPC, the party's discourse continues to have a fundamental "negative" orientation, which messages have been often framed as reaching out to "the people" who feel overlooked by "the elite"[10] (Farney and Rayside 2013, 45; Laycock 2012, 46). This is a result, not only of remaining ideological

[9] Despite an earlier commitment to "grassroot" politics, partly reflected on a relaxed party discipline (Laycock 1994, 221), in practice, and particularly after becoming the opposition, the Reform Party turned into a highly disciplined, "loyal" party. As the Reform struggled with intra-party conflicts and the centralization of power around its leader, an increasing number of caucus members were expelled or defected, such as MP Jake Hoeppner, for expressing views in public that diverged from the leader (see Dafoe 1999).

[10] It is important to note that programmatically, the CPC is not considered a populist party (Farney and Rayside 2013, 45).

and rhetorical components of the Reform's platform, but an early perception that "elements of populist appeal and policy moderation would each be required for a conservative party to contend for power in Canada" (Laycock and Weldon 2019, 66).

For instance, recent scholarly work suggests populism figured prominently in Stephen Harper's rhetoric as prime minister, which, similar to that of the Reform Party, centred around "wedge" politics to create a division between "the people" and "others" (Snow and Moffit 2021, 271), particularly in issues such as citizenship, immigration, multiculturalism, and national identity (Carlaw 2017, 806). As an illustration, in a party leader's debate during the 2015 election, Harper claimed "bogus refugee claimants" ("the others") were to blame for "old stock," hardworking Canadians' ("the people") lack of access to high-quality health care (CBC News 2015). This division was further underscored by Harper's preference for plebiscitarian leadership messaging, tightly scripted by the Prime Minister's Office, and designed to claim representation of "the people" against "special interests" (Laycock and Weldon 2019, 74).

In terms of emergent parties, the PPC represents a uniquely "ideologically polarizing" party (Budd and Small 2022, 148), and a return to the "unapologetic" populism of the Reform (Medeiros and Gravelle 2023). The PPC was founded in 2018 by Maxime Bernier, a former Member of Parliament and cabinet minister, who left the Conservative Party after a failed leadership campaign and policy differences with the party leader, Andrew Sheer, that resulted in his removal as opposition critic[11] (Dickson 2018). As a

[11] It is worth noting, that Bernier had been previously involved in significant political turmoil. In 2008, Bernier resigned as Minister of Foreign Affairs after leaving NATO-summit documents in Romania, in the home of his former girlfriend, Julie Couillard. Bernier had risen in the Conservative party since his first appointment in 2006, as Industry Minister, under Stephen Harper (Thompson and Blanchfield 2008).

newly established party, the PPC has quickly positioned itself as a right-wing alternative to the CPC. The party's main objective has been to challenge the status quo of mainstream politics, by advocating for the importance of family and community, reduced government intervention and free-market principles, and individual liberties (Smith 2019; Budd 2021, 169). Yet, the PPC has also established itself as a populist party, focused on representing the "silent majority" and protecting "the people" from the interests of "the elite" and the failing mainstream political parties (Smith 2019). Talking to the media, for instance, shortly after creating the party, Bernier claimed the PPC "represents people who are tired of Canadian politics being hijacked by special interest groups, cartels and lobbyists" (Dickson 2018, A10). According to Budd and Small (2021, 164), the party's more extreme positions such as support for the elimination of official multiculturalist policies, reduction of immigration, and rejection of "political correctness" also reflect the traditional features of anti-establishment populist parties of the United States and Europe (Budd and Small 2022,144). This rejection of the establishment, much like it was in the Reform Party's rhetoric, is rooted in the perception that "special groups," favoured by "the elite," take precedence over "the people." In the 2019 election, for example, a PPC organizer for the Quebec City area claimed that "the main issue of our times right now is that you have a political class that's pandering systematically to politically correct interests, and that makes them unable to address serious issues that concern people a lot, and they feel they're disenfranchised" (Smith 2018).

During the 2021 election, the PPC's populist rhetoric also focused heavily on opposing COVID-19 restrictions and the vaccine. To put it in perspective, during the 2021 election, at least 25 PPC Ontario candidates were known to have participated in "vitriolic"

anti-vaccine protests targeting hospitals and politicians (Toronto Star, 2021), at a time when large gatherings were a prohibited. Bernier, himself, as party leader, was fined twice and arrested once for attending political rallies in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, in violation of public health orders (Harder 2023). Bernier also became famous on social media, particularly Twitter (now X), for characterizing government officials and public servants as authoritarian, and regularly labelling Prime Minister Trudeau as a "fascist psychopath" for imposing pandemic-related restrictions (Harder 2023). Previous research suggests there is a strong link between holding anti-elitist, populist views and vaccine hesitancy (see Carvalho Bivar et al. 2021; Edwards et al. 2021; Stoeckel et al. 2022), as a part of a broader distrust for intellectuals and experts (often crumpled together with politicians in "the elite") (see Mede 2020; Merkley 2020). Medeiros and Gravelle (2023) in a post-election survey, for instance, find that while generally voters with populist attitudes were more likely to vote for the PPC, individuals' opposition to COVID-19 restrictions mediated the total effect of populist attitudes on voting for the PPC.

Given Canada's historical background of populist movements and political actors, it is unsurprising that populist sentiments continue to find resonance in the Canadian electorate. As Kanji et al. (2012) argue, Canadians have had highly negative perceptions of politicians and the political elite since the first of election studies was carried out in 1965. Medeiros (2021), for instance, shows that populist attitudes have had a negative impact on vote choice for the Liberal Party, even when populist supply-side factors are missing, as the party is typically associated with "the elite" and the political establishment. This is in line with other studies, such as Pruysers (2021), who, in studying the relationship between personality traits and populist tendencies, finds an overall significant populist inclination

in a representative sample of Canadians. In particular, he finds that 80% of participants believed it was essential for parliamentarians to align with the "will of the people," while 59% considered that political differences between "the elite" and "the people" were larger than those among "the people." Similarly, 50% of respondents in both the 2019 and 2021 Canadian Election Studies felt that "most politicians don't care about the people," while 54% believe "the people, not politicians, should make important policy decisions" (LeDuc, Lawrence, and Clarke 2023). More recent research also shows that current socio-economic cleavages have stoked the perception, among certain voters, of an existing "elite" (Karimi 2024), that is unresponsive to the Canadian people (Farney and Rayside 2013), while Pruysers and Schminke (2024) find that members of the electorate who support populist ideals tend to have negative views of migrants and refugees.

The reviewed background and empirical evidence suggest that the recent efforts of the PPC, a self-proclaimed populist party, to establish itself in the Canadian party system raise important considerations. Undoubtedly, in terms of electoral success, the PPC has remained marginal at best. In the 2019 Canadian federal election, the PPC received approximately 1.6% of the national vote share. The 2021 election represented a considerable improvement, as the PPC earned 4.9% of the vote share, but nevertheless failed to translate these votes into any seats[12]. Yet, this study argues, using electoral success as the only proxy to understand the influence of the PPC in Canadian politics runs the risk of underestimating its impact. Historically, third parties have transformed the political landscape by disrupting the Canadian party system and its agenda (Laycock 2002, 150;

[12] The Green Party, while receiving a smaller vote share, was still able to secure two seats in the House of Commons in the 2021 federal election.

Cochrane 2010, 591). Elsewhere, scholarly work has also demonstrated that populist parties are often capable of resetting political agendas, by triggering a reaction from other political parties (Wolinetz and Zaslove 2018, 13). Moreover, as discussed earlier, throughout the 2021 federal election, the PPC was perceived to be a considerable threat to the CPC[13], even when its poll numbers remained in single digits. An avenue to understand the impact of the PPC on Canadian politics, therefore, is to consider the extent to which the PPC candidates utilized populism as a communication style and whether this had an impact, such as triggering a populist contagion effect.

2.3 Accommodative Strategies: Populist Contagion

The concept of populist contagion is rooted in spatial theories of party competition[14] that contend that political parties react to one another in an effort to remain competitive. According to Anthony Down's (1957) influential work on party behaviour, political parties are rational-efficient political actors that compete to maximize electoral support[15]. Two important assumptions result from Downs' theory. First, parties' interest in maximizing

[13] It is worth noting that the PPC was also perceived as a threat in 2019, although to a lesser extent. According to a report published by *The Globe and Mail* in 20221, during the 2019 election, the CPC allegedly hired the consulting firm Daisy Group to execute "Project Cactus," an effort described as a "seek and destroy" initiative, aimed at discrediting Maxime Bernier and the PPC (Curry 2021). At the time, however, the PPC polled below 5% nationally. As support increased in 2021, concerns intensified.

[14] Spatial models of party competition refer to theoretical frameworks used to understand how political parties position themselves on various policy issues to attract voters. These models treat party competition as occurring in a "space" where policies exist along a number of ideological axes or dimensions (Adams, Merrill III, and Grofman 2005).

[15]This Downsian model of political party behaviour, vote-seeking, is not without competing views or criticisms. This model, while useful to understand parties' strategies to gain electoral support, fails to account for parties that do not prioritize winning elections or forming governments. In contrast, alternative frameworks, such as responsible models, conceptualize parties as organized around issues of principle (White 2006). That is, while in the Downsian model (or vote-seeking model) parties formulate policies to win elections, in the responsible model (or policy-seeking model) parties attempt to win elections to formulate policies (Katz 2006). It is also worth noting that the Downsian model differs from the office-seeking model, a rational-choice framework that focuses on the maximization of office benefits rather than electoral votes (Strøm and Müller 1999).

their electoral support requires them to appeal, not only to their supporters, but to the "median" or "mean" voter (Schwörer 2021, 21), understood to represent the mid-point of the ideological spectrum in the electorate (Ezrow et al. 2010, 276). This assumption suggests, in effect, that parties are likely to converge toward the ideological center, or the equilibrium point, and the optimal position for parties to capture the most votes (Jones, Sirianni, and Fu 2022). Second, it is assumed that because political parties' main objective is to maximize votes in order to control government (Strøm and Müller 1999, 8), they are less interested in implementing desired policy platforms, and instead willing to adapt (Downs 1957). As a result, Down's theory suggests that political parties' strategic behaviour is responsive to and will adjust to competitive pressures, by either moving toward their competitors' ideological space, also known as convergence, or away from it, also known as divergence (Meguid 2005, 348).

An important limitation of this theory, however, is that it centres around two-party systems, not considering the implications of multiparty systems on party behaviour (Schwörer 2021, 22). Moreover, it cannot account for established parties' responses to the emergence of niche parties. A niche party is a political organization that focuses on a specific and often narrow set of policy issues or ideological positions, differing from mainstream parties whose platforms tend to encompass a broad range of policy and ideological interests (Ezrow et al. 2010, 278). Furthermore, niche parties, unlike mainstream parties, are not necessarily interested in forming government but emerge to address policy areas or societal concerns that have not been adequately represented by existing political actors or structures (Ezrow et al. 2010). In other words, niche parties can fill gaps in the political space that resulted either from neglect, on the part of mainstream

parties, or from lags between voter and party movements (Rydgren 2005, 418). As such, niche parties can be conceptualized as "issue entrepreneurs" that impact the broader party system agenda (Harmel and Svasand 1997, 316) by politicizing new or neglected issues (Abou-Chadi 2014, 417). A significant number of populist parties across Western Europe, have been classified as niche parties, centred around specific issues like immigration or environmentalism (see for instance Van Spanje 2010; Spoon et al. 2013).

In response to these shortcomings, issue evolution theories and neo-Downsian approaches have emerged, focusing not only on changes in party position but on whether parties engage with certain issues (Schwörer 2021, 23). In particular, Meguid's (2005) modified spatial analysis, which builds upon Down's framework, recognizes that political parties not only react to one another on the basis of ideological positioning, but also seek to strategically compete in terms of issue ownership and saliency (Abou-Chadi 2014, 219), particularly between mainstream and niche parties. Issue ownership refers to parties' claim of dominance over specific policy domains (Walgrave and Soontjens 2019, 136), and is achieved by consistently addressing these issues, developing expertise, and presenting themselves as the most credible and capable actors to handle those policy challenges (Schwörer 2021, 23). Issue ownership, thus, allows political parties to differentiate themselves from their competitors by priming voters in the process (Meguid 2005, 349; Bale 2003, 76). For instance, in the United States, the Democratic Party has been historically associated with education and welfare, while the Republican Party has been largely perceived as owner of issues like taxes and foreign affairs (Petrocik 1996). Perceptions of issue ownership, however, are not static and a party's credibility can be diminished overtime or by the emergence of other parties. In Canada, in the 1990s, for

example, the Liberal Party was able to effectively "claim" ownership over most political and economic issues in the public's perception, even after the party had formed government. In contrast, the Progressive Conservative's (PCP) time in office, between 1984 and 1993, severely diminished their credibility of competently owning most national issues (Bélanger 2003, 553).

Accordingly, by considering both issue ownership and salience, Meguid's (2005) model contends that mainstream parties react by adapting their platforms and re-shaping the salience of issue dimensions, by following three ideal-typical strategies. First, in response to a niche party's issue ownership, a mainstream party may hold their policy position by simply reinforcing their original platform (Meguid 2005; Bale et al. 2010, 413). Second, a mainstream party may employ a dismissive strategy, designed to downplay the significance of a niche party's flagship policy issues (Meguid 2005, 348). Finally, a mainstream party may react by trying to undermine a niche party's issue ownership, through an accommodative strategy by engaging with its competitor's policy platform in an attempt to persuade voters that they are "rightful owners" (Meguid 2005, 349)[16]. The use of accommodative strategies, or the convergence towards a competitor's platform to close down the issue space, results in a "contagion" effect, where mainstream parties typically "end up mixing and matching, boxing and coxing, in the hope that they can stay competitive without surrendering too many of their values, and too much of their credibility" (Bale et al. 2010, 423).

[16] Notably, evidence suggests that mainstream parties are able to employ accommodative strategies and systematically respond to changes in public opinion, because voters are less likely to penalize them for these shifts. Niche parties, on the other hand, have less flexibility (Adams et al. 2006, 514).

In studying anti-immigration policies, for instance, McKeever's (2020) study finds evidence that suggests a contagion effect. Specifically, she finds that intensification of anti-immigration rhetoric and hostile immigration policies in France and the United Kingdom resulted partly from mainstream parties' concerns about defection of their electorate to niche, populist, parties. In France, anti-immigrant rhetoric increased after the party Front National, led by Jean-Marie Le Pen, became a credible threat during the 2002 presidential elections, when the party made it to the second round. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, the threat of the United Kingdom Independent Party (UKIP), led to an increase of the Conservative Party's adoption of anti-immigrant policies (McKeever 2020, 142). The threat of the UKIP, as McKeever (2020) notes, was well-founded – while the Conservatives tried to pre-emptively change their immigration policies to challenge the UKIP on issue ownership (an accommodative strategy) during the 2015 election, the UKIP still managed to capture one third of the Conservatives' electorate. McKeever's (2020) results are also in line with Van Spanje's (2010) comparative study of immigration policies in 11 Western European countries between 1990 and 2004, where successful electoral performance of anti-immigration parties had a similar contagion effect on mainstream parties. Spoon et al. (2013) also finds evidence of contagion among mainstream parties in their time-series cross sectional analysis of green parties in Western Europe.

The existing body of literature has important implications in the context of this study's research question on populist contagion. Populist contagion refers to "communicative or programmatic shifts of parties towards more populist discourses or policies due to changes in political surroundings" (Schwörer 2021, 1). A mainstream party's preference for an accommodative strategy is particularly expected when it perceives

a populist niche party's success to come at its expense or when it is positioned too closely in the ideological spectrum (Harmel and Svasand 1997, 317; Schwörer 2021, 24). As such, an accommodative strategy may occur in response to both the policy positions of challenger parties and the rhetoric used to communicate and articulate these positions (Rooduijn, de Lange and van Der Drug 2014, 565; Bayerlein 2021, 419). In particular, as populist parties gain electoral traction, mainstream parties may react by excluding populist actors from political power while simultaneously incorporating populist themes and communication styles into their strategies (Rodi 2019, 56), as a form of "soft populism" (Mazzoleni 2008, 58). That is, mainstream parties may seek to appeal to disaffected voters and regain electoral support while pre-emptively countering the appeal of emerging populist challengers (Rodi 2019, 57; Schumacher and van Kersbergen 2016, 309). Importantly, perception of success is sufficient to trigger accommodative strategies, without the need for the competing niche party to achieve concrete results (such as winning a seat in the legislature or forming government) (Harmel and Svasand 1997; Schumacher and van Kersbergen 2016).[17]

Empirical evidence of populist contagion, however, has been a subject of considerable debate with the literature showing mixed results. In studying populist contagion of policy positions, for instance, Bale et al. (2010) find ambiguous results in Western European countries. In particular, they find that mainstream parties adopt populist rhetoric on an *ad hoc* basis rather than reacting to populist parties. Other studies have

[17] Not at all scholars agree with this assertion. Rooduijn et al. (2014) argue that mainstream parties are not likely to adjust to competing populist parties if these are relatively unsuccessful. Similarly, Bayerlein (2021) finds no evidence that mainstream parties accommodate policy positions of right-wing populist parties (RWPP) prior to their electoral success.

entirely ruled out a populist contagion, arguing that mainstream parties do not respond to populist parties by adopting a different rhetoric (Rooduijn et al. 2014, 569), even when confronted by electoral loss (Manucci and Weber 2017, 331; Bornschier 2017, 308). Yet, data from several studies suggests that the widespread presence of populism in some Western democracies since the 1990s has led mainstream politicians, both in government and opposition, to adopt populism, partly to counter populist challengers (Mudde 2004, 551). This "populist contamination of mainstream political discourse" (Mazzoleni 2008, 57) has been found among mainstream political parties in countries such as Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands, Italy, Spain, Norway, Finland, and the United Kingdom, both in policy positions (Harmel and Svasand 1997; Schumacher and van Kersbergen 2016; Abou-Chadi 2014) and in rhetoric (Bayerlein 2021; Bale 2003; Rodi 2019; Schwörer 2021[18]; Järviniemi 2022).

To illustrate, in her study of populist contagion in rhetoric in the United Kingdom, Rodi (2019) finds that the rise of the UKIP acted as an incentive for the Labour Party to adopt a more populist form of communication. Specifically, Rodi (2019, 67) finds that UKIP's success coincided with an increase in Labour's use of elite negativity and people-centrism in party manifestos and speeches. When using quantitative approaches, Bayerlein (2021) and Schwörer (2021) make similar findings. Based on policy positions on the GAL-TAN dimension (Green/Alternative/Libertarian vs. Traditional/Authoritarian/Nationalist), Bayerlein (2021) regressions suggest a populist contagion in several Western European countries. In particular, his study shows a positive and statistically significant correlation

[18] Schwörer (2021) finds evidence of populist contagion in all countries included in his study (Spain, Italy and Austria), with the exception of Germany, where evidence indicates populist communications have developed independently from the success of populist parties.

between an increase of right-wing populist parties' (RWPP) vote-share and a decrease in the distance between conservative mainstream parties and RWPPs on the GAL-TAN[19] (Bayerlein 2021, 423). In other words, Bayerlein's (2021) results indicate conservative mainstream parties respond to the threat of populist parties by changing policy positions and closing the distance towards RWPPs. Schwörer (2021, 68), whose study measures the frequency of populist messages over time, also finds an increase in the use of populism by mainstream parties in Spain and Italy during periods when new successful populist parties first contested elections.

2.4 Hypotheses

Based on the previously discussed literature, this study advances the following three hypotheses.

Populist rhetoric in Canadian politics has a long and well-documented history, marked by various movements and parties. Notably, while populist issues have been expressed in different ways, Canadian populism has consistently centered around themes of distrust of the political establishment. From the Progressive Party, the first significant populist political party, to subsequent populist parties, including the Social Credit Party and the Reform Party, populist rhetoric has largely focused on anti-elitism and regional grievances. In contemporary politics, the CPC is argued to have integrated elements of this anti-elitist populist rhetoric, while more recently the PPC has emerged as a vocal opponent

[19] Bayerlein (2021) does not find evidence of populist contagion between RWPPs and mainstream political parties that were not labeled as conservative.

of what they call the "fascist" political establishment. This study's first hypothesis is therefore:

> **H1:** When CPC and PPC candidates used populist rhetoric in their local campaigns, during the 2021 federal election, they primarily adopted anti-elitist rhetoric.

Previous research suggests that the impact of niche populist parties is not limited to electoral success but can be understood through the strategic responses they elicit from mainstream parties. Niche parties, like PPC, often emerge to address policy areas or societal concerns neglected by mainstream parties. The PPC's rhetoric, especially on issues like immigration, COVID-19 restrictions, and vaccine mandates, portrayed the government as authoritarian elites, resonating with a segment of the electorate that felt disenfranchised by mainstream politics. Consequently, the CPC faced strategic decisions on maintaining its electoral base and preventing possible defections to the PPC. Both parties competed for similar voters, particularly on the right of the political spectrum. In the past, niche populist parties in Canada, such as the Reform Party, have been able to attract right-wing voters with "antiparty" attitudes and dissatisfied with established political parties (Bélanger 2004, 19). To maximize electoral support, the CPC may have felt compelled to adopt populist rhetoric similar to the PPC's, in an accommodative response. As such, this study puts forth its second hypothesis:

> **H2:** The extent of populist rhetoric employed by CPC candidates in local campaigns correlates with extent of populist rhetoric used by PPC candidates in local campaigns, as part of a populist contagion effect.

Finally, as discussed earlier, previous research has demonstrated that the choice of a mainstream party to adopt an accommodative strategy typically results from the

perception that a niche party's success comes at its expense, whether or not the party succeeds in gaining seats. The performance of a niche party, therefore, plays a critical role in whether a populist contagion effect can be expected. Although the PPC did not win a single seat in the 2021 federal election, media coverage at the time suggested growing apprehension within the CPC about the possibility of vote-splitting by the PPC. There were concerns that this phenomenon could jeopardize close races or constituencies where the CPC had traditionally held strong majorities. This study, thus, argues that the CPC's internal polling[20] likely accurately predicted the resulting PPC's performance in each riding, and thus, prompted the CPC to adopt populist rhetoric to pre-emptively counter this challenge. This study's third hypothesis is therefore:

> **H3:** CPC candidates in districts where the PPC performed better will exhibit higher levels of populist rhetoric.

In sum, this study advances three hypotheses based on the historical and contemporary context of populist rhetoric in Canadian politics. First, it hypothesizes that both CPC and PPC candidates adopted primarily anti-elitist rhetoric in their 2021 federal election campaigns, (H1). Second, it hypothesizes a correlation between the extent of populist rhetoric used by CPC and PPC candidates in local campaigns, indicative of a populist contagion effect, (H2). Finally, it expects that this populist contagion effect was likely stronger in electoral districts where the PPC performed better, as the CPC's strategic use of populist rhetoric was influenced the perceived threat from the PPC (H3).

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[20] Unlike the United States, where comprehensive congressional polling is conducted, riding polling is not yet common in Canada. Consequently, data on anticipated performance are unavailable. I argue that the PPC's vote share in the 2021 election likely matched CPC's polling data and, therefore, is a reliable proxy for anticipated performance. A more detailed explanation of this rationale is included in the methodology.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

To answer the research questions – How populist were PPC local constituency campaigns in the 2021 federal election and whether this triggered a contagion effect in the rhetoric of the CPC local campaigns – and test the three hypotheses, the present study uses a mixed method approach. Methodologically, populist contagion research has heavily focused on the use of quantitative models with large N-samples, particularly regressions and time-cross analyses, using data from sources such as the Chapel Hill Expert Survey and the Comparative Manifesto Project (e.g. Bayerlein 2010; Abou Chadi 2014; Schumacher and van Kensberg 2016). Although this has allowed for more precise measurements of the extent to which populist rhetoric spreads, others, have argued that quantitative models miss the more granular aspects of populism, particularly societal contexts. As a result, other studies have focused instead on qualitative and descriptive case studies of party manifestos and speeches (e.g. Bale 2003; Bale et al. 2010; Rodi 2019). One exception to this pattern is Järviniemi's (2022) study of populist contagion in Finland, which employs a comparative thematic analysis of party leader interviews during parliamentary elections in 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019. Qualitative studies, however, have their own set of drawbacks, including small sample sizes (often limited to two case studies) and a lack of precision. These limitations make it difficult to determine if the comparative use of populism is statistically significant or to establish more robust, generalizable relationships.

Ideally, as Schwörer (2021, 72) argues, studying populist contagion should be approached using a process-tracing framework, that allows researchers to examine the

sequence of events and decision-making processes as to uncover or at least identify causal mechanisms. However, as he similarly contends, this approach is also time-consuming and is not apt for comparative work. Consequently, while this study cannot fully integrate both qualitative and quantitative methods due to its relatively small sample size and limited resources, the use of mixed methods is a deliberate attempt to leverage the strengths of each approach. Mixed method approaches can mitigate the limitations inherent in any specific method, particularly the inability to capture multiple aspects of a phenomenon (Denzin 1973), while incorporating the methods particular to the theories under consideration (Jick 1979). While primarily quantitative, this study uses a mixed method approach known as expansion (Onwuegbuzie and Collins 2007), where quantitative data are followed by qualitative data. In social sciences, expansion designs are used to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research question and increase the clarity and validity of findings (Johnson et al. 2007; Maggetti 2018; Creswell and Creswell 2023).

In this study, I first empirically measure the extent to which each PPC and CPC candidate (in the sample) utilized populism as a communication style during the 2021 federal election, as the percentage of tweets that are considered populist, within the total number of tweets included in the dataset. The percentage, or extent of populism, is then included in a regression analysis to determine if there is evidence of populist contagion between PPC and CPC candidates at the constituency level. Following the quantitative analysis, the study incorporates a qualitative phase involving an elite interview with a PPC campaign official who oversaw multiple campaigns. This interview is strategically conducted to enhance and contextualize unexpected findings from the quantitative analysis. By speaking directly with a campaign official, the qualitative component aims to provide

a better understanding of the motivations behind the adoption of populist rhetoric, as well as to expand on those empirical results that may not be fully explained by the quantitative data alone.

3.1 Unit of analysis: Electoral Districts

The unit of analysis for this study is the individual candidate within an electoral district[21]. This choice is informed by the stratarchical nature of Canadian political parties, in which each party level[22] enjoys a different degree of autonomy over distinct areas of decision-making, while remaining interdependent (Cross 2018). In Canadian politics, this stratarchical arrangement, as well as the Single Member Plurality electoral system (Cross and Young 2011)[23], have led to a franchise system, where the party in "public office is assured of disciplined support in exchange for the party on the ground receiving local autonomy in the management of its affairs" (Carty and Cross 2006, 97). This can provide political parties the flexibility to meet the requirements of the national landscape through central branding and management standards while accommodating the needs of local supporters and incorporating local demands (Carty 2002).

[21] As defined by Elections Canada, an electoral district is geographical areas represented by a member of Parliament (MP) in the House of Commons. Electoral districts are often referred to as "ridings," therefore, this study uses both labels interchangeably.

[22] Political parties are understood to consist of three levels or faces (although not all parties necessarily consist of these levels): party on the ground, party in public office, and party central office. According to Katz and Mair (1993), the party on the ground includes grassroots members and supporters who engage in membership recruitment, local campaigning, and candidate selection (to an extent). The party in public office consists of elected officials who develop legislation and represent constituents. Finally, the party central office encompasses the national leadership and executive committees that handle strategic planning, resource allocation, and communications. For a discussion of the Canadian case see Cross et al. (2022).

[23] The Single-Member Plurality (SMP) electoral system, also known as "first-past-the-post," is a voting method where each electoral district elects one representative, who earns the most votes regardless of whether they achieve a majority. As a result, SMP incentivizes political parties to consider local politics while campaigning, as nationwide vote shares do not determine government formation.

Notably, however, the relationship between party levels is tense and always evolving, as each level competes for influence over the other (Carty and Cross 2006). In elections, cooperation (or alternatively hostility)[24] between the national and local levels of the party varies between ridings (for example, in terms of rural-urban ridings) and the type of candidate. Carty and Eagles (2003), for instance, find that while high-profile candidates often attract the attention of the central party, local notables, whose nomination typically stem from substantial recruitment of new members, are less beholden to the central party. Similarly, Pruysers (2015) finds that ridings where the party has been less successful are less likely to be integrated (in terms of constituency associations). As such, some electoral ridings may enjoy more autonomy than others and certain situations may lead to the intervention from either the party in public office or the party's central office. In other cases, these central elements may lack the necessary resources to exert control over the party on the ground, weakening party discipline. Consequently, as Carty (2002, 18) argues, "Canadian parties are open and opportunistic, disciplined yet fragile," resulting in a relative decentralization of local campaigns, where electoral district associations become one of the parties' basic organizational units.

Decentralized campaigns also allow for greater localization and personalization (Pruysers and Cross 2018), both key concepts for this study's understanding of how PPC and CPC candidates used populism in their campaigns, and whether this could have resulted in a populist contagion at the district level. Previous research indicates that, although Canadian elections are often dominated by party leaders and their national

[24] For government-seeking parties, in particular, the ability to manage the relationship between party levels is crucial to their dominant positions (Cross, 2018).

campaigns (see Bittner 2018, for instance), political parties' local campaigns exhibit a varying but significant degree of localization (Pruysers and Cross 2018; Robbins-Kanter 2022). For instance, Cross and Young (2015) find that in the 2000 election, a majority of constituency candidates frequently raised local issues and produced advertising independently from the national campaign. This pattern is echoed in Robbins-Kanter's (2022) later study of the 2015 and 2019 elections, which also revealed a considerable degree of localized campaigning that had deviated from the national party's strategy[25]. Similarly, central party levels can be limited in their ability to supervise and direct certain candidates, such as senior candidates or those in secure ridings, who can sometimes afford to deviate without consequences (Robbins-Kanter 2022; Yates 2022). Moreover, some evidence suggests that local candidates have a modest effect on vote choice, particularly in closely contested or rural constituencies (Carty and Eagles 2005; Cross and Young 2011; Marland 2011; Sevi, Mendoza Aviña and Blais 2022)[26].

Personalization, on the other hand, refers to the phenomena where "the individual politician become[s] the main anchor of evaluation and interpretation" (Adam and Maier 2010, 273). As such, personalization shifts the focus from the political party and its platform to the public image of candidates, who are assessed by the electorate for their

[25] This is not to say that party discipline does not play a role in local campaigns or that candidates have absolute freedom from the party's headquarters. Research shows that, with the emergence of the modern campaign, politics have become increasingly dominated by messaging and branding. As a result, political parties exert significant influence in shaping campaigns (Wesley and Nauta 2020; Marland and Wagner 2020), and often assume a supervisory role, directing candidates to adhere to the party's official position and messaging. This can leave little to no room for "freelancing" or deviation, and depending on the circumstances, failure to comply with party directives can lead to severe consequences, including the suspension of a candidacy (Marland 2016).

[26] The impact of local campaigns is, nevertheless, limited. In the 2000 federal elections, local candidates played a decisive role for only 5% of Canadian voters (Blais et al. 2003), while in 2015 they played a decisive role for only 4% of voters (Stevens et al. 2019).

"rootedness" (Lalancette, Raynauld and Ozorai 2022, 152), or commitment to issues of local or regional salience (Robbins-Kanter 2022; Yates 2022; Cross and Young 2015). The relation between personalization and localization is an important contribution to the possibility of a populist contagion. When personalized, candidates are often portrayed as "virtuous experts" whose "close[ness] to the people" legitimizes their political credibility and authenticity (Lalancette, Raynauld and Ozorai 2022, 154).

Focusing on individual candidates within ridings, a departure from previous studies on populist contagion[27], presents two advantages, particularly in light of localization and personalization. First, the relationship between personalization and localization is crucial for understanding populist contagion. When campaigns are personalized, candidates become the main focus of evaluation, and their closeness to the people becomes a key aspect of their appeal. This dynamic makes it more likely for candidates to adopt populist rhetoric that resonates with local electorates, particularly in response to the presence of niche parties like the PPC, which emphasize issues neglected by mainstream parties. Second, this focus allows for the examination of multiple cases across different ridings, creating a broader and more diverse dataset.

Although selecting all 338 electoral districts would undoubtedly provide the most comprehensive assessment of both PPC and CPC local campaign in the 2021 federal election, it is outside of the scope of what this study can accomplish. Thus, to overcome limitations of time and resources, the selection of a riding, one unit of analysis, is determined through a purposive sampling technique. The rationale for this technique is

[27] Research on populist contagion typically focuses on political parties as a whole (see Bale 2003; Rodi 2019; Bayerlein 2021, Schwörer 2021 for instance).

two-fold. First, the objective of this study is to explore whether a populist contagion occurred during the 2021 federal election (or a positive correlation between the PPC candidates use of populist rhetoric and the CPC candidates') through a mixed-methods approach. Non-random sampling techniques are frequently used in mixed-methods and multi-stage research, such as the present study, to examine and analyze underlying phenomena (Onwuegbuzie and Collins 2007). The objective is to select units of analysis that are "information rich" (Patton 1990, 169) and can maximize analytical leverage of the research question (Seawright and Gerring 2008). Second, purposive sampling is designed to avoid ridings that did not have a PPC candidate and maximize the variation of ridings in terms of province, level of competitiveness, and candidates' performance without having to collect data in all 338 districts.

To anchor the selection process, the primary criterion is the PPC's performance in the 2021 federal election. Empirical studies of populist contagion typically consider previous election results (as opposed to "anticipated"), arguing that changes in seats and electoral performance trigger populist contagion (see for instance Rooduijn et al. 2014; Van Spanje 2010; Bayerlein 2020). While I do not dispute this approach, previous research, as discussed earlier, has also demonstrated that a mainstream party may adopt an accommodative strategy based on the perception of a niche party's threat, regardless of actual seat gains (Harmel and Svasand 1997; Schumacher and van Kersbergen 2016). In this case, although the PPC did not win a single seat in the 2021 federal election, media coverage suggests that the party was perceived as a "real threat" to the CPC by the public and pundits (Canadian Press 2021). Such fears were underscored by public comments by some CPC operatives, including former Stephen Harper strategist, Jennifer Byrne, who

expressed concerns about races where the Conservatives and Liberals were in a tight race (Huras 2021). There is an additional reason why vote share from the previous 2019 federal election is not used as proxy for anticipated performance. This study infers that the circumstances of each riding went through considerable changes between the 2019 and 2021 elections. In particular, I argue that the timing of the 2021 federal election and the context of COVID-19 pandemic (see Stewart 2022), make the 2019 election results a more unreliable indicator for expected performance. To recapitulate, the anticipated performance of the PPC in the 2021 election, likely played critical role in whether a populist contagion effect occurred. Unlike the United States, however, where comprehensive congressional polling is conducted, individual candidate or riding polling is not yet common in Canada. Consequently, data on anticipated performance are unavailable. While the CPC's internal polling is not publicly reported, I argue that the PPC's vote share in the 2021 election likely matched CPC's polling data and, therefore, is both a reliable proxy for anticipated performance and useful as the main selection criterion.

Data on the PPC's vote share are obtained from the Elections Canada database, which contains all 338 riding results for each registered candidate in the 2021 federal election. To the data, several criteria of inclusion and exclusion are applied. The principal criterion for inclusion is the participation of the PPC in the riding's electoral contest, therefore, districts where the PPC did not campaign or suspended its campaign are automatically excluded. A second criterion is then applied, where all ridings in Québec are also excluded, even if the PPC campaigned. Québec is excluded to prevent potential errors in the discourse analysis arising from the use of French. From the remaining 260 ridings, 60 are selected as the cases for this study: 20 ridings with the highest PPC vote share, 20

ridings with the lowest PPC vote share, and 20 ridings that represent the most typical values – 10 ridings immediately above and 10 ridings immediately below the median[28]. Importantly, only ridings are included when both the CPC and the PPC candidate have available tweets from the 2021 federal election. To be clear, the objective is to maximize this study's ability to explore populist contagion by selecting the 20 most likely cases for contagion (highest PPC vote share), the 20 least likely cases (lowest PPC vote share), and 20 ridings that fall near the median. As a result, 60 ridings or 120 candidates are included in this study (60 from the PPC and 60 from the CPC).

Given that this study's technique is designed to ensure sampling variation, it is worth noting that it effectively produces a sufficiently diverse case population[29]. As expected, the PPC's vote share, the main criterion for inclusion, presents the highest level of variation, with the lowest value at 2.20%, the median at 6.15%, and the highest value at 21.60%. In terms of regions, the case population remains relatively diverse and includes electoral ridings from Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, Nova Scotia, Ontario[30], and Saskatchewan (see Appendix A for the complete list of candidates included).

[28] Data on vote share followed a non-normal distribution, thus, the median, rather the average, is calculated to select the units of analysis.
[29] Of note, several electoral ridings needed to be excluded because the PPC candidate had their Twitter account suspended or removed for rules violations.
[30] As expected, Ontario is overrepresented in this sample with 27 out of the 60 ridings selected.

3.2 Quantitative Data: Measuring Populism

As described earlier, in order to answer both research questions, this study first measures the extent to which PPC and CPC candidates utilized populism as a communication style during the 2021 federal election. To quantify this, I employ a coding scheme to analyze the tweets and re-tweets shared by PPC and CPC candidates. The choice of analysing Twitter posts is another departure from previous studies on populist contagion. A scan of the literature reveals that, whether qualitative or quantitative, research has typically centred around party or election manifestos as sources of data, for both policy positions (e.g. Schumacher and van Kersbergen 2016; Abou-Chadi 2014; Rooduijn et al. 2014) and communication style (e.g. Schwörer 2021; Bayerlein 2021; Rodi 2019). Understandably, party manifestos are valuable resources to systematically analyze parties' policies and rhetorical strategies. In particular, datasets such as the Comparative Party Manifesto and the European Election Study, allow for comprehensive, comparative work.

However, in the study of populism as a communication style, especially during political campaigns (as opposed to parties in government or in the opposition), I agree with Järviniemi's (2022) observation that the exclusive use of party manifestos is a limitation, as these are mostly intended for internal communication, such as members and operatives, and voters may be unaware of their content. While Järviniemi (2022) uses party leader interviews, I contend that neglecting social media in the study of populist contagion is a missed opportunity. Both parties and candidates utilize populism as rhetorical device to invoke "the people," while maligning those defined as "the elite." As such, however unidirectional it may be, the implied intention of a politician's populist communication is to interact with the electorate. In this sense, social media, in particular, has proved to

facilitate populist rhetoric by providing a platform that allows political actors to bypass traditional gatekeepers and directly communicate with the public (Gerbaudo 2014; Engesser et al. 2015; Bracialle and Martella 2017). In the Canadian context, and in this new era of permanent campaigning[31], political parties, candidates, and officeholders increasingly utilize online communications to target and directly engage with the public (Small 2012; Esselment 2014). A Liberal Party operative, for instance, describes the important role of digital communication as "[the] opportunity to bypass traditional media and go directly to audiences, as well speaking to our base and quickly communicating a message that the base of our party needs to understand" (Giasson and Small 2017, 113). For opposition parties, research in Canada and elsewhere, also shows that online platforms allow for innovative and riskier communication strategies (Giasson and Small 2014).

Among social media platforms, Twitter (now X) has become especially adept at hybridising the political information cycle (Chadwick 2017; Jungherr 2015) and providing political actors with the flexibility to modify their political agenda through "microblogging" (Bruns and Burgess 2011; Meraz 2011). In Canadian politics, Giasson and Small (2017, 114) also find that opposition parties frequently use Twitter as a strategy to broadcast daily party messages and target specific groups, particularly party supporters. Consequently, I measure the extent of populism used by PPC and CPC candidates by creating an original dataset with all 120 candidates' Twitter posts (60 PPC candidates and 60 CPC candidates, from the same 60 electoral districts). To appropriately cover the election, I code tweets shared from August 15, 2021 (when writs of election were issued)

[31] Permanent campaigning refers to a "mindset" where politicians' or parties' campaign efforts begin immediately after election day, often driven by the desire to achieve positive media coverage and maximize all available resources (Marland, Esselment and Gisasson 2017, 5).

to Election Day on September 20, 2021, inclusive. Based on Boyd et al. (2010), I also include retweets, as part of an actor's efforts to appeal to their audience by indirectly engaging other accounts (see also Small 2010).

Importantly, certain exclusion criteria are applied in selecting tweets and re-tweets for the dataset. As the coding scheme is designed exclusively for textual discourse analysis, only tweets and re-tweets with text or those with a caption (if they include photographs, images, memes, GIFs, or videos[32]) are coded. Similarly, posts that only contain account tags (for example, "@ElectionsCan_E"), emojis, hashtags, or a combination (with no added text) are also excluded. Hashtags are not coded, only the accompanying text. Finally, as mentioned earlier, electoral districts in Québec were not included to prevent potential errors in coding arising from the use of French. Therefore, tweets or re-tweets in French, regardless of candidate or electoral district, are also excluded.

In coding, I follow Ernst et al.'s (2017) coding scheme to operationalise populism as a style, using a communication-centred approach (Stanyer, Salgado, and Strömbäck 2017) designed to capture the strategies, communication techniques, and symbolic gestures employed to invoke "the people" in contrast to "the elite" (Moffit and Tormey 2014; Wirth et al. 2016). The coding scheme was also designed for social media posts, particularly Facebook and Twitter, and has been used as the basis for coding populist messages from political actors in a variety of European countries, including the United States, Italy, France, and the Netherlands (e.g. Schmuck and Hameleers 2018; Ernst et al. 2019; Blassnig et al. 2019; Hameleers 2021).

[32] Alt-text for media is not included in coding.

In their study, Ernst et al. (2017) consider the presence of three key dimensions, represented by a group of key words that guide the coding scheme, to determine whether a political actor engages in populist rhetoric: anti-elitism, people-centrism, and restoring sovereignty (see Table 1). The operationalisation of each dimension consists of identifying the communication strategies that encompass each dimension.

Table 1. Populist communication coding scheme

Populist Dimension	**Message Intent**	**Tweet Content**
What is the core characteristic of the message?	**What does the message intend to communicate?**	**How is the message worded? What does it contain?**
Anti-elitism	Portray the elite as corrupt, antagonistic, and self-serving. Statements explicitly or implicitly stress the negative aspects and harm of the elite.	Elites are: • called names and accused of being malevolent, criminal, lazy, stupid, extremist, racist, undemocratic, etc. • described as a threat, responsible for negative developments or a mistake/crime. • detached from the people (i.e. not representing/ knowing/speaking/caring for the people)
People-centrism	Define the people as a monolithic, virtuous group, united under a common banner. Statements explicitly or implicitly praise the people's achievements and virtues, demonstrating closeness.	People are: • described as sharing common feelings and desires. • bestowed with morality, credibility, and competence. • responsible for positive developments The speaker claims to represent or embody the people.
Popular sovereignty	Articulate greater demands for sovereignty and the people's return to power, including denying the elite access to power.	Demands for: • direct-democratic elements or increasing political participation. • granting less power to elites in particular policy issues.

* This table is an adaptation of Ernst et al. 2017.

Anti-elitist messages consist of three communication strategies: discrediting "the elite," blaming "the elite," and detaching "the elite" from "the people." These strategies, in opposition to those of people-centrist messages, seek to define "the elite" as corrupt and harmful, either a threat or a burden, as well as a failure of representative democracy. People-centrist messages consist of four strategies: stressing "the people's" virtues, praising their achievements, considering "the people" as a monolithic, and demonstrating the actor's closeness to "the people." These strategies focus on delineating "the people" as an in-group, that stands in contrast to "the elite" or to out-groups, who do not share these virtues or characteristics. Finally, messages that seek to restore sovereignty consist of two strategies: demanding popular sovereignty and denying the elite sovereignty. These strategies seek institutional reforms that return power to "the people," while simultaneously reducing that of "the elite." In coding, I also add a fourth dimension "anti-elitism (other)," to further distinguish between anti-elitism targeting political actors and the non-political elite, although the words in the coding scheme are the same for both. I follow Engesser et al. (2015) to identify "non-elite" actors and include the media, supranational elites (such as the United Nations), legal elites (such as courts), and economic elites.

In this study, tweets of both the PPC and CPC candidates in a riding are coded for each of Ernst et al.'s (2017) populist communication dimensions – anti-elitism, people-centrism, and restoring "sovereignty." The presence of each dimension is coded separately, allowing to both measure the percentage of each populist communication dimension (Hypothesis 1). At the same time, whenever one or more of these dimensions is coded as "1," a post is also coded as populist (using a dummy variable), for Hypothesis 2 and Hypothesis 3.

To illustrate this coding scheme, consider the following[33]:

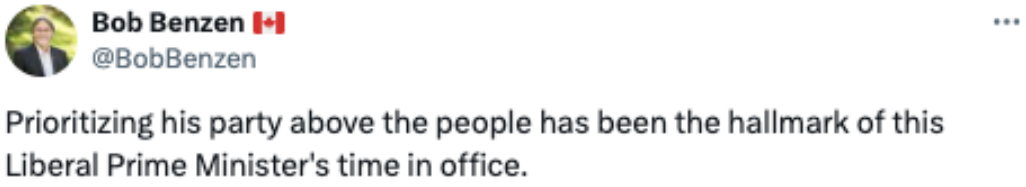

Figure 1. Bob Benzen (tweet) – September 8, 2021

Figure 1 is a tweet posted by CPC candidate and incumbent Bob Benzen (Calgary Heritage, Alberta) on September 8, 2021. Based on the remark "prioritizing his party above the people," this tweet is coded as "anti-elitist." Recall that the coding scheme includes in anti-elitism the intention to portray "elites" as antagonistic and self-serving. These messages, as is the case of this tweet, are communicated as "elites" who are detached from "the people," including not caring for "the people." Because the tweet is coded as "anti-elitist," the tweet is also coded as populist.

Figure 2. Jane MacDiarmid (tweet) – September 7, 2021

[33] Screenshots were obtained by the author following the coding of the dataset. While the original screenshots include date and time, these have been cropped to avoid confusion by including accompanying media (such as photos, memes or videos) which were not coded. The date, however, is always included in the figure title of each screenshot. At the time of writing, these tweets were publicly available and could be found using Twitter's (now X) search engine.

This next tweet, Figure 2, was posted by PPC candidate Jane MacDiarmid (Saint Boniface—Saint Vital, Manitoba) on September 7, 2021. This tweet was coded as "people-centric," where the speaker (in this case MacDiarmied) claims to embody "the people," representing their interests and concerns. This also implies "the people" as united under a common banner. The tweet is additionally coded as "anti-elitist" and "anti-elitist (other)," for those remarks that demonstrate detachment from "the people" on the part of political elites (traditional parties) and media elites (the mainstream media). Nevertheless, the tweet is only coded once as populist.

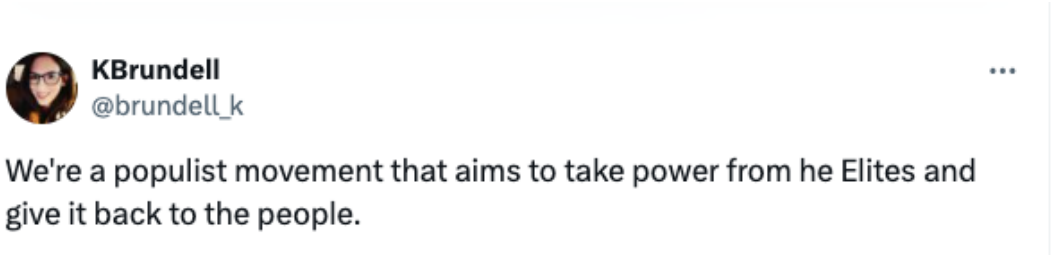

Figure 3. Kimberly Brundell (tweet) – September 7, 2021

In this last example, Figure 3, this tweet was posted by PPC candidate Kimberly Brundell (Coquitlam-Port Coquitlam, British Columbia) on September 7, 2021. Although the self-identifying remark ("we are a populist movement") clearly marks this tweet as populist, the coding scheme adds nuance to this classification. In particular, this tweet is coded as "popular sovereignty," where the speaker articulates greater demands for the people's return to power and denying the elite access to power. As a result, this tweet is also coded as populist.

The results of coding these posts are then reported as the extent of populist messages for each candidate, where "extent" represents the percentage of tweets coded as "populist" from the total included for each candidate. Along with coding, I report the date

and time of each tweet, its original text, and the URL. To recapitulate, the percentage of populist tweets represents the independent variable, when coding for each PPC candidate's posts, and it represents the dependent variable, when coding for the CPC candidate.

The reported use of populism is then included in an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression to determine if there is a positive association (i.e., evidence of populist contagion between the PPC and CPC at the constituency level) (H2), and whether these trends are more pronounced in constituencies where the PPC had a stronger electoral performance (H3). Thus, for the independent variable, in these regressions, I manually code the use of populist rhetoric by the PPC, and for the dependent variable, the use of populist rhetoric by the CPC. To account for alternative explanations, in the regressions, I also control for additional independent variables, that aim to capture those factors that may influence a CPC candidate to employ populist rhetoric, including those factors related to the electoral riding context (the demand-side of populism), as well factors related to the candidate and the party (supply-side of populism). As a result, in the control variables, I include the following: a riding's median income level, voter turnout, whether the riding qualifies as urban/rural, the gender of the CPC candidate, PPC's vote share in the 2021 election, and whether the riding is a competitive district.

A riding's median income is coded in thousands of Canadian dollars, as reported by the 2021 Census by Statistics Canada. Recent comparative research suggests a voters' perception of economic insecurity, defined partly as a voter experiencing income

difficulties, has a positive effect on support for populist parties[34] (e.g. Guiso and Sonno 2024; Ivanov 2023; Bischi, Favaretto and Carrera 2022; Rodrígues-Pose 2022; Norris and Inglehart 2019). This study infers that candidates running in a riding with a low median-income may be more likely to employ populist rhetoric.

Table 2. Operationalization of variables and data sources

Variable	Operationalization	Data Source
Independent (Explanatory)		
Use of populist rhetoric by PPC candidates	A tweet is labeled as populist if the message is anti-elitist, anti-elitist (others), people-centric, and/or people sovereignty.	Tweets and re-tweets from each of the 60 candidates, from August 15, 2021, to September 20, 2021.
Dependent		
Use of populist rhetoric by CPC candidates	A tweet is labeled as populist if the message is anti-elitist, anti-elitist (others), people-centric, and/or people sovereignty.	Tweets and re-tweets from each of the 60 candidates, from August 15, 2021, to September 20, 2021.
Controls		
2021 PPC Vote Share	% of votes per electoral district	Elections Canada
Rural/Urban	1 = rural, 0 = urban	
Voter Turnout	% of voters in each district	
District Median Income	in thousands of Canadian dollars	2021 Census – Statistics Canada
Gender of CPC Candidate	1 = woman, 0 = man	Library of Parliament
Competitive District (CPC)	0 = Ridings where a CPC incumbent obtained more than 40% of the votes in 2021, and where the CPC obtained more than 40% in 2019 and more than 40% in 2015 elections. 1 = Any ridings that do not meet the above requirement.	Elections Canada
Number of PPC tweets	# tweets for each of the 60 candidates	Tweets from August 15, 2021, to September 20, 2021.

[34] In Canadian politics, the research on the effect of income on populist attitudes has mixed results. Pruysers (2021) and Kiss, Perrella and Spicer (2019) do not find a link between income and populist attitudes. Yet, in his study of PPC supporters, Erl (2020) finds these are more likely to be low-income.

Next, voter turnout is coded as the percentage as reported by Elections Canada and acts as a proxy for disenchantment and mistrust of the political establishment, especially mainstream political parties. Previous research has shown a link between lower voter turnout and dissatisfaction with the democratic and political systems (e.g. Karp and Banducci 2008; Hobolt 2012), lower levels of external political efficacy (e.g. Rosenstone and Hansen 2003; Harder and Krosnick 2008), and political mistrust (e.g. Grönlund and Setälä 2007; Cox 2003)[35].

Each electoral district is also coded as either urban or rural with a dummy variable (rural = 1, urban = 0), using data reported by Elections Canada. Including whether a district is urban or rural is a standard sociodemographic control given the differences in voting behaviour (e.g. Armstrong, Lucas, and Taylor 2022; Loewen, Spear and Bertolo 2021; Scala and Johnson 2017) and the style of political campaigns (e.g. Cross and Young 2015; Eder, Jenny and Müller 2015). In the Canadian context, in particular, and over the past 15 years, the urban-rural divide has become a significant factor in understanding Canadian election outcomes (Armstrong, Lucas, and Taylor 2022), and personalization of local political campaigns is more likely to occur in predominantly rural ridings (Cross and Young 2015). Most importantly, in terms of populism, rural contexts play a critical role. Research across various Western democracies shows populist actors target and appeal to rural communities by tapping into their sense of alienation from the political establishment, fear of cultural displacement, and economic anxiety (e.g. Rodríguez-Pose 2022; Cox, Lienesch,

[35] Of note, the link between voter turnout and overall dissatisfaction with the political system (whether in terms of political efficacy or political trust) is contested. Some authors argue that distrust and dissatisfaction may actually lead to higher levels of voter turnout, especially over time (see for instance Ezrow and Xezonakis 2016; Kostelka and Blais 2018).

and Jones 2017; de Lange and Rooduijn 2015). Historically, protest and populist political parties in Canada have emerged within agrarian movements centred around Western alienation and anti-elitist narratives (Conway 1978; Harrison and Krahn 1995), which continue to fuel electorates' attitudes and political preferences (see Banack 2021, for instance).

Additionally, I code for the gender of the CPC candidate using a dummy variable (woman = 1, man = 0)[36]. The data are obtained from the Library of Parliament's dataset "Women Candidates in General Elections," as well based on the pronouns used to refer to candidates in the media. Previous research on populism suggests men are generally more likely to hold populist attitudes. For example, when considering the effect of personality traits, in the Canadian context, Pruysers (2021) finds gender (specifically male) to be positively and significantly associated with populist attitudes. Elsewhere, Bernhard and Hänggli (2018) make a similar finding. Among Swiss voters, men are much more likely than women to hold populist attitudes. This finding also aligns with previous research, such as Elchardus and Spruyt's (2016) study in Belgium, which suggests that gender has a modest but statistically significant direct effect on populist attitudes. Specifically, their research indicates that men are more prone to hold populist views than women. Considering the potential predisposition to populist attitudes, this study controls for the gender of the CPC candidate to explore whether it serves as an alternative explanation for the use of populist rhetoric.

[36] Gender is coded as a binary, since non-binary candidates in the 2021 federal election represented less than 1%.

The PPC's vote share in the 2021 election, per electoral district, is also included in the control variables, as reported by Elections Canada. The rationale behind the inclusion of this variable (which also acts as the anchor for the sample selection) has been discussed at length elsewhere in this study. However, to succinctly review, research has shown that mainstream parties often adopt an accommodative strategy when they perceive that a niche party's success could come at their expense, regardless of whether the niche party wins any seats (Harmel and Svasand 1997, Schumacher and van Kersbergen 2016). The performance of a niche party is thus crucial in determining the likelihood of a populist contagion effect. This study suggests that the CPC's internal polling likely accurately predicted the PPC's performance in each riding, making the PPC's vote share in the 2021 election a useful proxy for its perceived impact.

Finally, each riding is coded for its degree of "competitiveness," vis-à-vis the CPC's competition with other established major parties (the Liberal Party and the New Democratic Party), as a dummy variable. A riding is coded as "0" if the riding has a CPC incumbent who obtained more than 40% of the votes in 2021, and where the CPC obtained more than 40% of the vote share in the 2019 election and more than 40% of the vote share in the 2015 election. Conversely, a riding is coded as "1" if it does not meet at least one of these criteria. This is an attempt at identifying those districts which are not CPC's "strongholds,"[37] and where the possible use of populist rhetoric, by a CPC candidate, may have been the result of a strategic choice to portray opponents negatively as part of "the

[37] While more sophisticated and accurate methods exist for identifying electoral strongholds and battlegrounds (see Bodet 2013 and derivations, such as Thomas and Bodet 2013), these methods are often time-consuming and complex. Consequently, I employed a simpler approach by considering previous electoral performances. This method, though less comprehensive, provides a practical and efficient means of analysis.

elite," in order to discredit them. Recall that in local campaigns, the rootedness of a candidate, or closeness to the people, plays an important role (Lalancette, Raynauld and Ozorai 2022; Cross and Young 2015), and thus one can expect a candidate to challenge an opponent on these terms. Research also shows that competitive elections are more likely to feature negative campaigns (Lau and Pomper 2004), and that "negative personalization," where candidates negatively personalized their opponents, has become a current feature of Canadian elections (Pruysers and Cross 2016).

3.3 Qualitative Data: Elite Interviews

The quantitative analysis outlined in the previous section is followed by a qualitative phase aimed at enhancing and contextualizing the primary findings through an elite interview. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the use of mixed methods to study populist contagion is uncommon – research has predominantly focused on large-N comparative work, which often precludes detailed qualitative studies or the use of process tracing. Consequently, while these studies provide empirical evidence of populist contagion, they do not account for the decision-making processes of the actors involved or the pressures they may have faced. If populist contagion results largely from mainstream political parties feeling the pressure of niche populist parties, as the data suggest, then understanding political actors' perceptions is essential to gaining a more complete picture of electoral competition. In particular, qualitative insights can help reveal the motivations and strategies of political actors, offering a richer understanding of how and why parties adopt populist rhetoric.

While this study is constrained by limited resources and time and therefore cannot extensively use mixed methods, a semi-structured elite interview is utilized as a secondary source of data. This interview[38] is meant to provide additional details and insights into the patterns identified through the regression analysis. Given the practical limitations, careful selection was essential to maximize the insights gained. In selecting the interviewee, I was guided by the results of my regression analysis, to ensure relevance and alignment with the key findings. The selected PPC campaign coordinator had overseen three campaigns, both in 2019 and 2021, and could provide a more detailed perspective on the party's strategies and campaign platform[39]. More importantly, the respondent can speak to aspects of the PPC that have not been previously included in past research on the party. Thus, the interviewee was chosen deliberately to ensure depth and relevance in the findings, despite the practical limitations. In other words, for the interviews, this study employs a purposive sampling design informed by the results of the regression analysis, and intended to maximize findings that can help explain and confirm the meaning of empirical findings.

The interviewee was contacted through publicly available emails on the electoral riding website, and the interview was scheduled one week after first contacted. The interview was carried out online and lasted for an hour. Data from the interview were collected through notes, as no audio was recorded, and the respondent was kept anonymous[40]. The interview was semi-structured, as these allow for the flexibility of

[38] Further research should consider a stronger qualitative component by including several interviews with more key players. I expand on this limitation in the conclusion.
[39] While multiple attempts were made to secure an interview with a similarly situated CPC campaign official, I was unfortunately unable to conduct an interview with a member of the Conservative Party.
[40] The recruitment of interviewees and the conduct of interviews were approved by the Dalhousie University Research Ethics Board.

follow-up questions, while maintaining the focus on key topics (Brinkmann 2020). The questionnaire (see Appendix B) was designed to understand the interviewee's perceptions of the 2021 election, specifically their views on ideological positioning, campaign strategies, and the overall impact of PPC party on the 2021 election. The questions aimed to explore whether there were any significant changes or adaptations in their campaigns in response to other parties, as well as their thoughts on the influence and potential "contagion effect" of political rhetoric and policies among Canadian parties.

Within the subfields of political communications and management, interviews not only serve as common research instruments (Lees-Marshment and Marland 2012; Reinemann et al. 2017; Gillies and Coletto 2018), but are also often used to address some of the limitations of quantitative data, which may not capture the rationale behind strategic decision-making in a political campaign (Lees-Marshment 2012; Marland and Giasson 2013; Marland and Esselment 2018). Elite interviews, in this sense, provide crucial data, as an elite's privileged position offer them unique knowledge and information (Natow 2020). In this case, the use or lack thereof of populist rhetoric cannot be completely ascribed to a populist contagion effect, without considering the specific circumstances or challenges a campaign faces, and its decision-making. As Marland and Esselment (2018) contend, without qualitative data, empirical results may reflect a limited understanding of politics.

Previous research using elite interviews on populism has provided unique and interesting data, such Salgado et al.'s (2019) groundbreaking study on politicians' perceptions of populism and populist parties. In interviewing politicians from 11 European countries, from parties at either side of the spectrum and including populist actors, Salgado

et al. (2019, 54) find that, above all else, populism is perceived as a political style based on opportunism and exploitation of emotions to gain power. Policy issues, on the other hand, are not frequently associated with populism. Notably, when asked about the success and popularity of populist leaders, interviewees demonstrate a high level of awareness regarding some of the demand-side factors contributing to populism. In their view, while national contexts matter, success of populism is mainly driven by disillusionment and disappointment with mainstream politicians, neglected voters, and unresolved problems (Salgado et al. 2019, 57). Similarly, the study finds that generally, interviewees believe certain issues on the political agenda (such as immigration to Europe) "clearly call for a populist political style" (Salgado et al. 2019, 62).

CHAPTER 4

Results and Discussion

This chapter presents the findings from analyzing local campaign rhetoric employed by PPC and CPC candidates during the 2021 federal election. The study addresses this study's research questions concerning the extent and impact of populist rhetoric. First, it examines the prevalence and dimensions of populist messages in PPC campaigns across electoral districts. Second, it investigates whether there was a contagion effect where the populist rhetoric used by PPC candidates influenced CPC candidates within the same districts. The hypotheses tested include whether the adoption of anti-elitist rhetoric was predominant among both PPC and CPC candidates, and whether there is a correlation between the extent of CPC and PPC populist rhetoric as indicative of a contagion effect, and the influence of PPC electoral performance on the level of populist rhetoric adopted by CPC candidates.

To explore these questions and test the hypotheses, I first downloaded[41] the posts shared by each selected candidate during the 2021 election period, applying the previously established inclusion and exclusion criteria. This process resulted in a dataset containing 7,505 posts, encompassing both tweets and retweets from all 120 candidates. Every candidate included in the final dataset had at least two posts, whether tweets or retweets (or a combination), and the dataset reveals highly varied levels of participation on Twitter (see Table 3). PPC candidates were more active on Twitter, with an average of 75 posts per

[41] To download the tweets for each candidate, I used the tool "Tw Exportly" (the premium version of the Google Chrome extension) which allows to download all posts for any public account, for a specific time period, as a CSV file. One CPC candidate MP, Matt Jeneroux, had his Twitter account set as private. Tweets from this account were not downloaded until the author's "Following" request was approved.

candidate and median of 42. In contrast, CPC candidates had an average of 45 posts per candidate with a median of 27, suggesting more moderate activity. The two candidates with the highest number of posts were PPC candidate Mark Friesen (Saskatoon—Grasswood, SK), with 667 posts, and CPC candidate and party leader Erin O'Toole (Durham, ON), with 281 posts[42]. Conversely, the two candidates with the lowest number of posts were PPC candidate Jennifer Peace (Edmonton Riverbend, AB) with 3 posts, and CPC candidate Liane Rood (Lambton–Kent–Middlesex, ON) with 2 posts.

Table 3. Candidates' Twitter Posts (Final Dataset)

	Number of Twitter posts					
	N	Mean+	Median+	Std Dev	Min*	Max
Complete Dataset	7,505	31	5	67	0	667
PPC Tweets	4,499	75	42	105	3	667
PPC Retweets	266	4	0	17	0	104
CPC Tweets	2,691	45	27	55	0	281
CPC Retweets	49	1	0	3	0	12

*Only candidates who posted during the 2021 federal election were included, as such, this reflects a CPC candidate in the dataset who only re-tweeted during the election.
+The median and standard deviation were rounded to the nearest number (to avoid referring to "a post and a half")

Next, I coded every post included in this dataset using Ernst et al.'s (2017) populism coding scheme, discussed in the previous chapter. In describing these data, however, I first explore the complete dataset, looking at the extent to which all 120 candidates employed populist rhetoric on Twitter during the 2021 election. I report the proportion of posts coded as populist, along with each populist dimension (anti-elitism, non-political anti-elitism,

[42] This number does not represent the total number of posts shared by Erin O'Toole during the election. The party leader, unlike most candidates included in this study's sample, regularly tweeted both in French and in English, as such the number of tweets is likely twice as large. As mentioned earlier, however, to reduce the possibility of errors, posts in French were excluded.

people centric, and popular sovereignty), for each candidate. These percentages aim to answer the first research question (How populist were PPC local constituency campaigns?), and represent the independent variable (PPC's use of populism) and the dependent variable (CPC's use of populism). In reporting the levels of populism for each half of the dataset – PPC candidates and CPC candidates – and its dimensions, I also report the findings of the interviews, to expand on the empirical results.

The data shows that the use of populist rhetoric is not uniformly distributed. Both PPC and CPC candidates use of populist rhetoric is low[43], moderate at best – on average, only 6% of posts were coded as populists, although this figure is highly influenced by outliers. More importantly, the median of 3% of posts indicates that half of the candidates in the dataset have less than 3% of their tweets coded as populist. The wide range and high standard deviation (8%) also indicate significant differences in how much individual candidates relied on populist themes, with some candidates using populist rhetoric extensively, as seen in the maximum value of 50%.

Table 4. Percentage of Populist Twitter Posts (Final Dataset)

	Mean	Median	Std Dev	Min	Max
Populist	6.00	3.00	8.00	0.00	50.00
Anti-Elitist	4.16	1.27	7.44	0.00	50.00
Non-political Anti-Elitist	0.89	0.00	2.36	0.00	20.00
People Centric	0.86	0.00	2.69	0.00	23.08
Popular Sovereignty	0.34	0.00	1.86	0.00	18.18

[43] For reference, in Jagers and Walgrave (2007, 327) study of populism as a communication, they classify Agalev's Green Party's use of populism as low with 8%. Jagers and Walgrave (2007) use a computational method for content analysis and operationalize populism differently (by considering the number of times "the people" is mentioned). Nevertheless, their findings serve as reference for classifying this study's findings.

Considering each dimension of populism, the data show that anti-elitist rhetoric is the most prevalent dimension (mean of 4.16% and median of 1.27%), which bodes well in support of Hypothesis 1 (both CPC and PPC candidates adopted primarily anti-elitist rhetoric, when employing populist messages in their 2021 federal election campaign). Nevertheless, is important to emphasize that despite anti-elitism being the most prevalent populist dimension, candidates use of this rhetoric was low, moderately at best. The high standard deviation (7.44%), in particular, and a maximum value of 50%, both suggest that only a handful of candidates relied heavily on anti-elitist rhetoric. In contrast, dimensions such as non-political anti-elitism, people-centric rhetoric, and popular sovereignty are much less common. Rhetoric focusing on popular sovereignty is the least common of the coded dimensions, with a mean of 0.34% and a median of 0.00%. The standard deviation of 1.86% and a maximum of 18.18% indicate that this populist dimension is used infrequently, with most candidates not employing it at all. It is important to note that the extent of populism in the candidates' posts may be underestimated in this analysis. The expression of populism can be highly nuanced and at times even vague (particularly when it comes to defining the speaker's intent), therefore, I adopted a more conservative approach[44] when coding for populist rhetoric.

In answering the first research question "How populist were PPC local constituency campaigns?" I find that on average, 6.70% of PPC candidates' posts were coded as populist, with a median of 4.75%. In terms of frequency, this means that, on average, PPC candidates

[44] To illustrate, a Twitter post attacking opponents was not coded as populist, unless it explicitly contained messages included in the coding guide. For example, the following Tweet shared on September 1, 2021 by PPC candidate Michael Bator, from Burlington, criticized his CPC opponent but was not coded as populist: "Oh my, another one who sees through the Liberal Lite CPC. You don't stand up to vaxports, lockdowns, churches burning you get burned by leaving your base high and dry chasing liberal scraps."

shared 5 populist posts between August 15 and September 20, 2021. The data also show that anti-elitist rhetoric is the most prevalent dimension with a mean of 4.11%, and a median of 2.31%, both considerably higher than that of other populist dimensions.

Table 5. Populist Twitter Posts (PPC Candidates)

	Mean	Median	Std Dev	Min	Max
Populist	6.70	4.75	7.34	0.00	29.41
Anti-Elitist	4.11	2.31	5.94	0.00	25.35
Non-political Anti-Elitist	1.56	0.00	3.12	0.00	20.00
People Centric	1.68	0.00	3.63	0.00	23.08
Popular Sovereignty	0.34	0.00	1.18	0.00	6.38

Figure 4 is an excellent example of a typical anti-elitist post shared by PPC candidates, who heavily targeted federal officials (particularly Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and prominent ministers, such as Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland), provincial officials (such as Premiers Doug Ford and Jason Kenney), municipal officials (such as Saskatoon Mayor, Charlie Clark), other political parties' candidates and leaders (particularly Erin O'Toole and Jagmeet Singh), as well as international political figures (such as Barack Obama and Joe Biden). The main purpose was to present these individuals as part of a political establishment that is detached from or attacking "the people," as well as self-interested and incompetent.

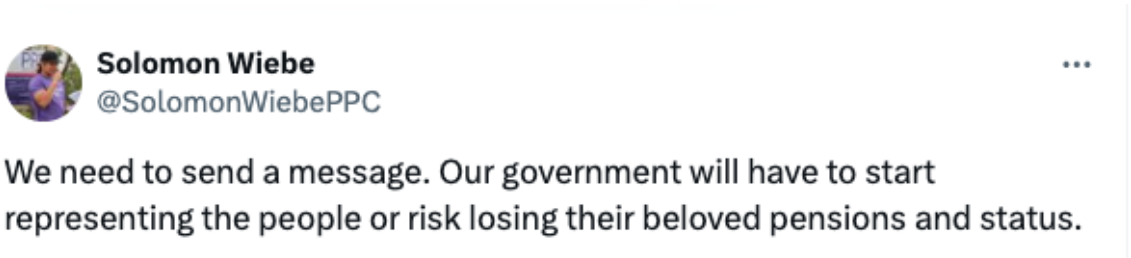

Figure 4. Solomon Wiebe (tweet) – August 29, 2021

Particularly, in light of the COVID pandemic, many posts discussed the failure of mainstream parties to represent "the people," defend their rights and freedoms, and fulfill campaign promises. Similarly, posts of this nature regularly called for "the establishment" to consider all "Canadians" and not only "special interest groups," in messaging reminiscent of the Reform Party's.

Ernst et al.'s (2017) also considers name calling (such as referring to politicians as malevolent, criminal, lazy, stupid, extremist, racist, or undemocratic) as part of the anti-elitist communication style. Anti-elitist posts shared by PPC candidates, in this sense, characterized politicians and public officials as being racist, fascists or Nazis, narcissistic, sleazy and tyrannical, while also calling them "idiots" and "psychopaths"[45]. Additionally, some PPC candidates used "alt-right" phrases (see Figure 5 for an example), intended as insults, including referring to politicians as "brownshirts" (a reference to fascism, regularly used with words like "medical apartheid" and "Nuremberg code"), "globalists" (a reference to the "global elite" and sometimes used as an anti-Semitic slur), and "soy boys" (pejorative term used to describe men as "less masculine") [46].

Figure 5. Michael Bator (tweet) – August 29, 2021

[45] Due to time restrictions, I did not systematically quantify for the use of these words, this is an estimate based on the entire PPC dataset. Future research, however, would benefit from considering the frequency and context of these words to have a clearer picture.
[46] For discussions on the meaning and usage of these phrases see Matthews (2016), Zimmer (2018), and Hosie (2020), for instance.

The use of non-political anti-elitist rhetoric is less prevalent (mean of 1.56% and median of 0%) while a lower standard deviation (3.12%) shows that while some candidates use it, it was not as widespread. The typical target of these posts (see Figure 6) was the "mainstream media." The candidates frequently accused the media of working against "the people" and aligning with "the elite," which included other political parties and the government. They argued that the mainstream media engaged in unfair or "fake" coverage, distorting facts and manipulating public perception to serve the interests of "the elite" rather than those of ordinary citizens.

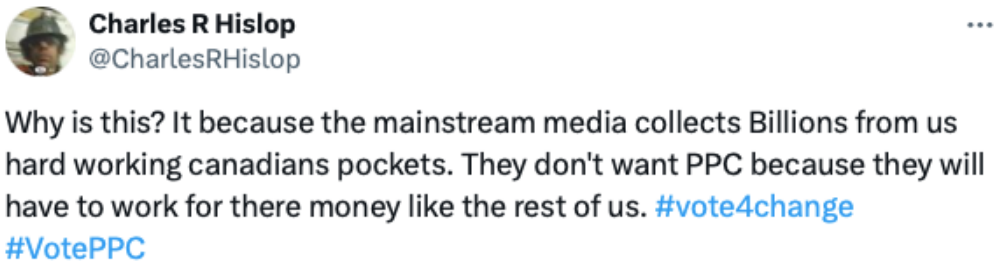

Figure 6. Charles Hislop (tweet) – August 23, 2021

Other non-political anti-elitist tweets centered around Canadian politicians' ("the elite") unresponsiveness to the needs and desires of "the people." These posts often framed "the elite" as favouring or imposing the interests of purported "globalist elites" (see Figure 7)[47].

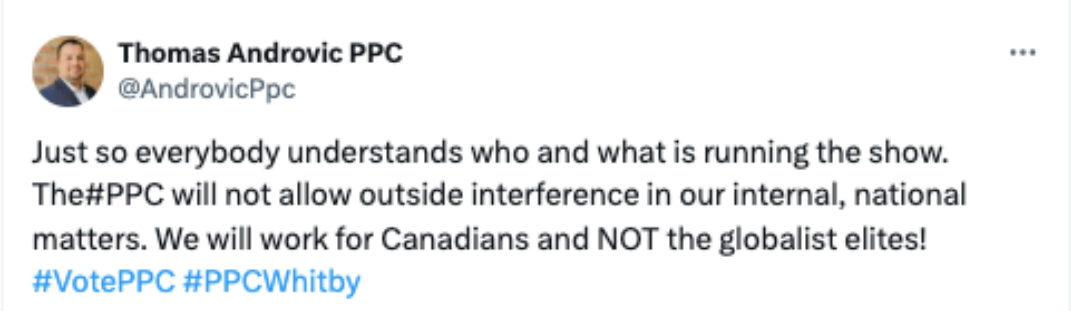

Figure 7. Thomas Androvic (tweet) – September 17, 2021

[47] If the posts referred to "the elite" in Canada as working with "globalist elites," tweets were coded twice as anti-elitist and non-political anti-elitist, to recognize this double intention of targeting both political and non-political elites as working together. Otherwise, they were only coded once as "non-political anti-elitist."

I distinguished these "globalist elites" from international political figures (included in the anti-elitism coding) by considering only those statements that referred to these "elites" without providing any specifics, or international organizations such as the World Economic Forum (WEF), the United Nations (UN) and the World Health Organization (WHO).

Finally, the use of both people-centric and popular sovereignty rhetoric was relatively rare, with a mean of 1.68% and 0.34% respectively and a median of 0%. In particular, rhetoric focusing on popular sovereignty is the least common of all populist dimensions considered by the coding scheme. The standard deviation of 1.18% and a maximum of 6.38% indicate that this theme is infrequently used, with most candidates not employing it at all. When used, either people-centric or popular sovereignty rhetoric, PPC candidates focused their posts on claiming to represent "the people" and being a grassroot movement. Some posts, as Figure 8 shows, claimed the PPC as the only party "truly representing" Canadians, while also demanding "the people's" return to power, including denying "the elite" access to power. Posts of this nature depict the PPC as a "people's movement" or "revolution," that seeks the destruction of the establishment.

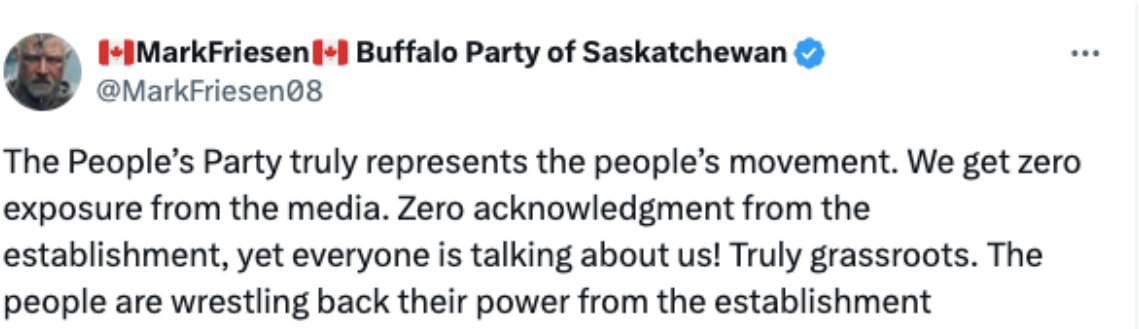

Figure 8. Mark Friesen (tweet) – September 12, 2021

In my interview with a PPC campaign coordinator, I observe similar results. When asked to describe the PPC platform and its rhetoric, the respondent characterized it as populist and primarily focused on appealing to and listening to "the people." Additionally,

the rhetoric aims to criticize large government and emphasize the conflict between "the people" and "the elite." In essence, the PPC's platform centers on limiting the power of "the elite" by advocating for and acting upon the common views of the people. As the respondent explained, the PPC party is willing to do whatever is best for the people, and to do so, adopts a platform that is described as a mix of libertarianism, traditionalism, and nationalism. According to the respondent, the PPC emphasizes that, unlike other mainstream parties, decisions must be made by Canadians, rather than what the party describes as globalists or Canadian elites. Furthermore, according to the respondent, the PPC sees itself as the vanguard of the common sense, a disruptive force that aims to challenge Canadian mainstream politics and political parties.

Turning to the second half of the dataset, I find that among CPC candidates, that on average, 4.43% of posts shared by CPC candidates were coded as populist. With a median of 0.95%, the data do not reflect any considerable outliers, indicating that that the adoption of populist rhetoric was generally very low across the dataset. In terms of frequence, this means that, on average, PPC candidates shared 4 populist posts between August 15 and September 20, 2021. In contrast with the use of populism by PPC candidates, the standard deviation (8.69%) is higher, showing less consistency and considerable variability.

Table 6. Populist Twitter Posts (CPC Candidates)

	Mean	Median	Std Dev	Min	Max
Populist	4.43	0.95	8.69	0.00	50.00
Anti-Elitist	4.22	0.00	8.74	0.00	50.00
Non-political Anti-Elitist	0.21	0.00	0.77	0.00	3.85
People Centric	0.04	0.00	0.21	0.00	1.29
Popular Sovereignty	0.33	0.00	2.35	0.00	18.18

As was the case among PPC candidates, anti-elitist rhetoric is the most prevalent dimension, with a mean of 4.22% and a maximum value of 50%. Importantly, the median of 0% shows that despite its prevalent use, compared to other populist dimensions, most CPC candidates did not significantly adopt anti-elitist populist rhetoric. When they did engage in anti-elitist rhetoric, however, CPC candidates' posts were of a different nature than that of the PPC. While PPC candidates who employed populist rhetoric mainly engaged in name-calling and anti-elitism centered around alt-right phrases and conspiracy theories, CPC candidates' populist rhetoric focused on "the elite's" (the Liberal Party, the government and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau) self-interest, corruption, and detachment from "the people." Figure 9, for example, describes the Liberal Party's priorities as putting "the party" over "the people."

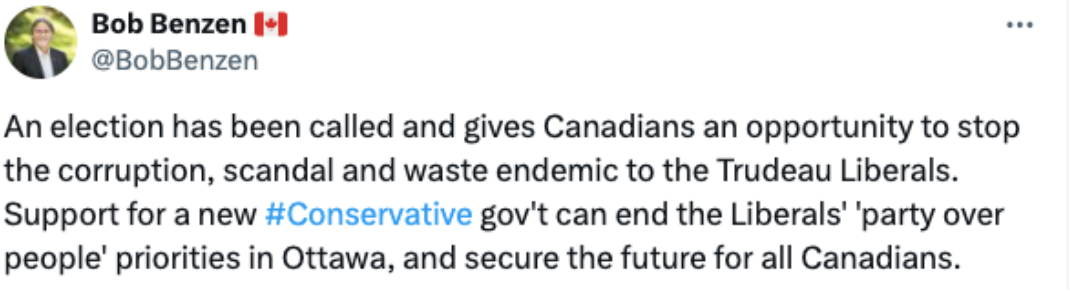

Figure 9. Bob Benzen (tweet) – August 15, 2021

Other anti-elitist tweets (see Figure 10) also accused the Liberals and the government of using their position to defend and support "special interests," including party insiders, friends of the Prime Minister, and corporate elites. These tweets often highlighted perceived corruption and favouritism, suggesting that government actions were driven by personal gain rather than the public good. Such rhetoric painted a picture of a government

disconnected from the everyday concerns of ordinary citizens, prioritizing the interests of a privileged few over the needs of "the people."

Figure 10. Candice Bergen (tweet) – August 18, 2021

Other tweets, for example, (see Figure 11) focused on the timing of the election, which Prime Minister Justin Trudeau called earlier in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic[48]. The criticism of the election timing focuses on portraying the Prime Minister and his government as prioritizing their own political interests over the welfare of the public. This aligns with the anti-elitist populist dimension by depicting the ruling "elite" as self-serving, detached from "the people," and acting against the common good. Recall that in the coding scheme, a central element of anti-elitist populism is to highlight the disconnect between the elites and ordinary citizens.

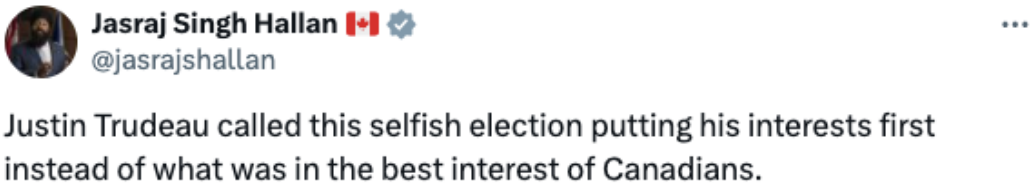

Figure 11. Jasraj Singh Hallan (tweet) – September 3, 2021

[48] In coding criticisms of the election as "anti-elitist populism," this study is not providing a normative evaluation of the election or its critics. The coding scheme only considers the communication styled used by politicians to share a particular message, regardless of the content of this message, and populism is not used as normative label for politics. Tweets that criticized the election but did not fit the coding scheme, were not coded as populist.

The use of non-political anti-elitism was very rare among CPC candidates, with a mean of just 0.21% and a median of 0%, indicating that almost no candidates employed this specific form of rhetoric. Notably, while both CPC and PPC candidates have a median of 0%, the standard deviation and maximum value are significantly lower for CPC candidates. The use of both people-centric and popular sovereignty rhetoric was even more infrequent. People-centric rhetoric, in particular, was exceedingly rare, with an average of 0.04% and a median of 0%. The standard deviation of 0.21% and a maximum of 1.29% suggest this type of rhetoric was almost never used by CPC candidates, making it the least used dimension of populism.

While this study primarily focuses on the use of populist rhetoric among CPC and PPC candidates during the 2021 federal election, the data collected reveal that a substantial portion of candidates' communication on Twitter does not engage with populist themes. Given that non-populist posts constitute the majority of candidates' communication, I briefly explore these posts, providing an overview of their content and style. The reasoning for including these posts is twofold. First, it provides essential context, highlighting what is typical in campaign discourse and underscoring how populist rhetoric deviates from the norm. The difficulty in defining and recognizing populism, especially in contemporary politics where "populism" is regularly used as a normative evaluation of politics, requires to appropriately categorize those instances when rhetoric is populist, as well as when it is not. Second, this broader, albeit brief, overview aims at providing a more comprehensive analysis, by considering how candidates primarily sought to connect with voters and communicate policy in Twitter during the 2021 federal election.

As the Canadian literature describes (e.g. Giasson, Le Bar and Dubois 2019; Marland, Giasson and Small 2014), the majority of posts shared during the 2021 federal election focused on campaign efforts, as well as way to discuss parties' policy priorities and platform. Numerous candidates, for instance, actively shared details and announcements regarding campaign events, such as fundraisers, meets and greets, and public rallies. These posts (see Figure 12) rarely contained anything other than logistical specifics such as dates, times, and locations. At times, these posts also included calls to action, encouraging followers to attend events, volunteer, or spread the word.

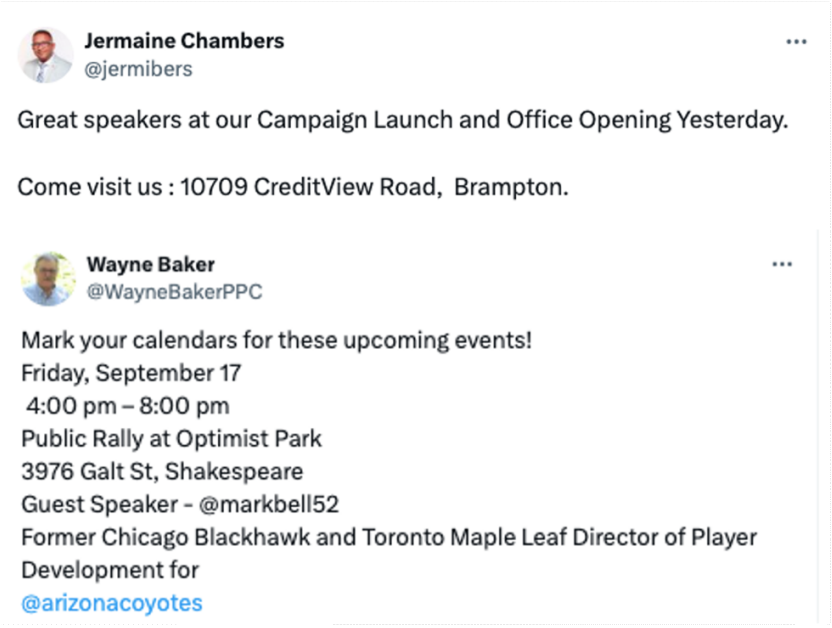

Figure 12. Campaign Events (tweet)

Posts of these nature also allowed candidates to share updates with their followers on door-knocking and canvassing efforts (see Figure 13). Candidates often used tweets to share their experiences and interactions with voters and supporters, while providing behind-the-scenes glimpses of campaign activities. Much like posts about campaign events, these posts rarely contained details unrelated to campaign logistics, and regularly contained photographs and videos (not coded for this study).

Figure 13. Canvassing and campaign signs (tweet)

Outside of posts focused on campaign activities or events, candidates frequently posted about their or their party's policy platform and priorities. These posts often included links to documents, videos, or infographics that provided policy insights. While not specifically quantified in this study, it is worth noting that CPC candidates often shared similar descriptions, infographics, and hashtags in their policy-related posts, suggesting these materials were likely provided by the party. Additionally, candidates used these tweets to critique the policies of their opponents, highlighting perceived weaknesses or presenting their own proposals more favourably (see Figure 14). Depending on how these critiques were framed, some were categorized as populist, though not consistently.

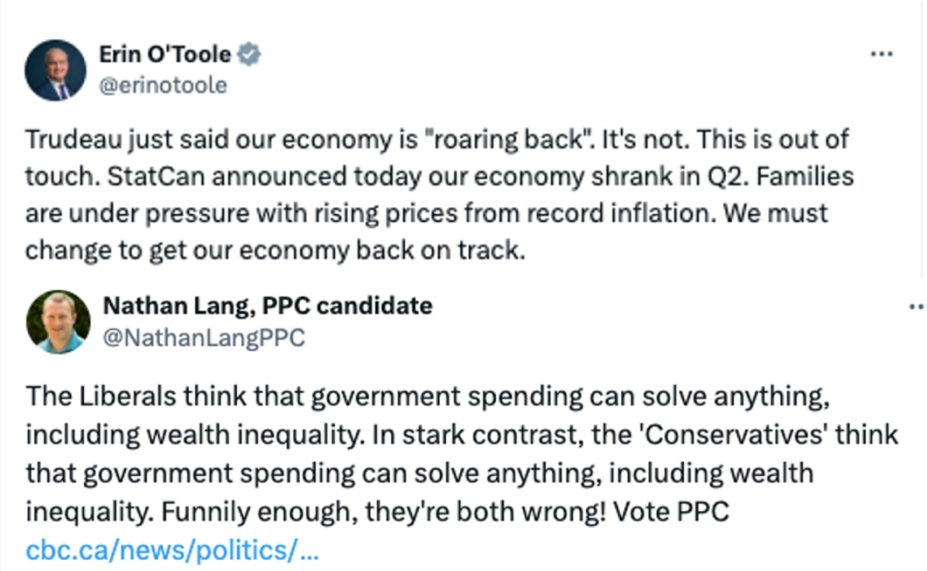

Figure 14. Attacking opponents (tweet)

An interesting characteristic of the posts shared by CPC candidates was the presence of incumbents within the party. Incumbents frequently used Twitter to update constituents on local developments, activities, and events within their electoral riding, ranging from news about natural disasters to access to social services (see Figure 15 below). Notably, these posts generally refrained from conventional campaign messaging. In fact, in several cases, CPC incumbents' Twitter activity throughout the 2021 federal election made no mention of their campaign at all.

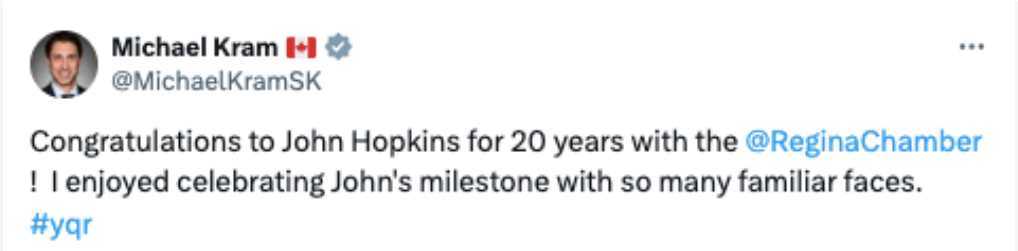

Figure 15. Incumbent candidate (tweet)

Returning to my first research question – how populist were PPC local constituency campaigns? – I briefly summarize the results. The coding of Twitter posts from 60 CPC and 60 PPC candidates during the 2021 federal election (n =7,505) shows that the overall

use of populism was low, moderate at best, with a mean of 6%. These findings align with previous research in Canadian populism, which indicate that populism in Canadian politics has a low prevalence relative to other democracies (see for instance Ambrose and Mudde 2015; Medeiros 2021). That is, the data show that while a number of candidates utilized populist rhetoric, this was not a dominant feature of political communication strategies, regardless of party. By itself, this is an interesting finding. As discussed earlier, the 2021 election was uncharacteristically polarized – a Postmedia-Leger poll, for instance, found that seven out of 10 Canadians, believed the 2021 elections had been more divisive and confrontational than previous ones (Tumilty 2021). This contentious environment, partly the results of the COVID pandemic, could have created a distorted perception of the extent to which populism was used. Yet, the data suggest that even when candidates employed populist rhetoric, this was far from the most common form of communication. In terms of my first research question, coded tweets suggest the use of populist rhetoric by PPC candidates in their local constituency campaigns on Twitter was low. Nevertheless, when comparing the use of populism between PPC and CPC candidates, it is also worth noting that PPC candidates engaged more extensively and more consistently with populist rhetoric. This difference is also statistically significant when conducting a Mann-Whitney U Test (U =1313.500, Z =-2.634, p-value = 0.008).

In testing my first hypothesis, I also find supporting evidence that, when considering the dimensions of populism, anti-elitist rhetoric is by far the most prominent type for both PPC and CPC candidates. Other dimensions of populism like non-political anti-elitism, people-centric rhetoric, and popular sovereignty are considerably less common, particularly among CPC candidates. This is also in line with the literature (see

Laycock and Weldon 2019; Farney and Rayside 2013; Laycock 2012), which argues that, historically, populism in Canada has been characterized for creating a vertical division between "the elite," the establishment, and "the people." Notably, while this is one of the first comparisons of campaign rhetoric between PPC and CPC candidates, the differences found in anti-elitist rhetoric are also in line with previous findings. For the PPC, anti-elitism centred around name-calling and the accusation that politicians and public officials are failing to represent, and even protect, "the people" and their interests. PPC's messaging also took a similar shape as the Reform's rhetoric, which emphasized "the elite's" preference for special interest groups and its neglect of "the people's" needs and demands. Even when considering its regional focus in asserting a separatist West, the Reform's rhetoric was fundamentally anti-elitist. Although I make no direct comparisons between 2021 and previous elections, the data suggest that for the CPC, this study's empirical findings suggest the party's use of anti-elitist rhetoric has largely retained the previously observed vertical divide, where messages appeal to voters who feel alienated from "the elite" and the establishment (Laycock and Weldon 2019).

The focus now shifts to this study's second research question to examine whether the populist rhetoric employed by PPC candidates in their local campaigns during the 2021 federal election resulted in a contagion effect in the rhetoric of CPC candidates in those same districts. As discussed earlier, results from coding all 120 candidates' posts (N = 7,505) show both PPC and CPC candidates adopted populist rhetoric at varying degrees when posting on Twitter. This observation is encouraging for the early expectation in this study (Hypothesis 2), despite the relatively low use of populist rhetoric, that a populist contagion may have occurred at the local level, wherein the level of populist rhetoric of

PPC candidates influenced CPC candidates in the same electoral district. In the following analysis, I include the percentages of populist rhetoric for the PPC candidate in a district as the independent variable, and the percentage of populist rhetoric for the CPC candidate in the same district as the dependent variable in a multivariate regression. To test for Hypothesis 3, I also control for the PPC vote share in each riding, to understand whether CPC candidates in districts where the PPC performed better exhibit higher levels of populist rhetoric. Finally, as mentioned earlier, I expand on the empirical results through findings from the limited number of interviews included in this study.

To explore the dynamics of populist contagion in local campaigns, I begin with a bivariate analysis between the extent of populist rhetoric employed by PPC and CPC candidates. This initial analysis aims to establish whether there is a significant correlation between the levels of populist rhetoric used by PPC and CPC candidates within the same electoral districts, without accounting for alternative explanations. The results of this initial bivariate analysis show a Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.361, with a *p-value* of 0.005. This correlation reflects a positive, but moderate relationship[49].

Table 7. Bivariate Analysis: Populist Rhetoric

		PPC populist rhetoric	**CCP populist rhetoric**
Use of populist rhetoric by PPC candidates	Pearson Correlation	1	**.361**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		**0.005****
	N	60	60
Use of populist rhetoric by CPC candidates	Pearson Correlation	**.361**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	**0.005****	
	N	60	60

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

[49] A Pearson coefficient between ±0.31 and ±0.70 is considered a moderate correlation (Haan and Godley 2013, 163).

This positive, even if moderate relationship, lends support to the expectation that the use of populist rhetoric by PPC candidates influenced the rhetoric of their CPC counterparts in the same district. In other words, the bivariate correlation shows that as a PPC candidate increased their use of populist rhetoric, its CPC counterpart (in the same electoral district) tended to do the same to a moderate extent. To further tease out whether the CPC candidates adapted to PPC candidates in an accommodative strategy, I conduct an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression analysis.

As discussed in the methodology chapter, to account for alternative explanations, I include several control variables in the OLS regression: the 2021 PPC vote share in the electoral district, whether the district is rural, voter turnout in the district, the district median income, the gender of the CPC candidate, whether it was a CPC stronghold, and the number of PPC tweets. Table 8 presents the descriptive statistics for the control variables included in the study. Approximately 23% of the districts included in the sample are rural, while voter turnout averages 64.55%, which is slightly higher than the overall turnout (62.1%) in the 2021 federal election (Elections Canada 2021). In terms of income, there is considerable variability with a mean district-median-income of $43,286.67 and a range from $33,600.00 to $61,200.00. The gender distribution of CPC candidates shows that 35% are women (65% men), a proportion that is in line with the overall percentage of women (33%) who ran as Conservative candidates in the 2021 federal election. About 52% of the districts are classified as being a contested district for the CPC, meaning that 48% of included ridings were CPC strongholds. Finally, as discussed earlier, the number of tweets by PPC candidates varies widely, ranging from 3 to 667 tweets.

Table 8. Descriptive Statistics Final Dataset

	N	Mean or Proportion	Std Dev	Min	Max
Variables					
2021 PPC Vote Share	60	6.57	3.41	2.20	21.60
Rural/Urban District (Rural)	60	23%	0.427	0	1
Voter Turnout	60	64.55	5.29	48.00	75.0
District Median Income	60	43,286.67	4,928.83	33,600.00	61,200.00
Gender of CPC Candidate (Male)	60	65%	0.481	0	1
Competitive District (CPC)	60	52%	0.504	0	1
Number of PPC tweets	4,449	75.00	42.00	3.00	667.00

As Table 9 shows, the regression analysis provides compelling support for Hypothesis 2. The significant and positive coefficient (B = 0.483, *p-value* = 0.003) indicates that for each 1% increase in the percentage of populist tweets by PPC candidates, there is a corresponding 0.483% increase in populist tweets by CPC candidates. In terms of Hypothesis 3, – the expectation that CPC candidates in districts where the PPC performed better in terms of electoral support would demonstrate higher levels of populist rhetoric – the regression results also support this hypothesis, with a strong and statistically positive relationship between the 2021 PPC vote share and CPC populist rhetoric (B = 0.817, *p-value* = 0.043)[50]. Importantly, the regression shows that the correlation found in the bivariate analysis holds when accounting for a variety of district factors that are also likely to influence the use of populist rhetoric (i.e., lower district income, apathy as

[50] As a robustness check, I ran an additional model where I substituted the 2021 PPC voter share variable with the 2019 vote share variable. All other control variables remain the same. While the CPC inferred the extent to which the PPC could be a threat, in a prediction of how the party would perform in 2021, the CPC also had the 2019 vote share. In this model, I find that correlation between CPC candidates' use of populist rhetoric is positively related with PPC candidates' use of populist rhetoric (B = 0.490, *p-value* = 0.001). I similarly find a strong and statistically positive relationship between the 2019 PPC vote share and CPC populist rhetoric (B = 3.595, *p-value* = 0.046).

captured by turnout, etc.). Most control variables, including the rural/urban district, voter turnout, gender of the CPC candidate, competitiveness of the district, and the number of PPC tweets, do not show significant effects on the level of populism in CPC tweets.

Table 9. OLS Regression Populist Contagion

	B	Std. Error
Intercept	.570	7.678
R-square	.325	
Adjusted R-square	.220	
N	120	

	B	Std. E	t	Sig.
Explanatory Variable				
% of PPC populist tweets	**.483**	.140	3.132	**0.003*** **
Control Variables				
2021 PPC Vote Share	**.817**	.393	3.132	**0.043** **
Rural/Urban District	-1.881	2.842	-.662	.511
Voter Turnout	.236	.221	1.070	.290
District Median Income	.000	.000	-1.982	.053
Gender of CPC Candidate	1.673	2.293	.729	.469
Competitive District (CPC)	-.963	2.571	-.375	.710
Number of PPC tweets	-.007	.010	-.658	.514

Significant at $p \leq 0.10$, 0.05**, 0.01***

The positive relationship between PPC and CPC levels of populism, in the same electoral district, point to evidence of a contagion effect. To put it another way, the positive and statistically significant correlation suggests that there was a communicative shift toward more populist rhetoric among CPC candidates, as PPC candidates in the same districts increasingly adopted populist rhetoric. The inclusion of control variables — representing both populist supply-side factors (such as the gender of the CPC candidate

and the number of PPC tweets) and demand-side factors (such as an electoral district's median income, voter turnout, and rural status) — reinforces the argument that CPC candidates' adoption of populist rhetoric was likely a response to the perceived threat posed by PPC candidates.

The empirical results also reflect some of the interview findings. The respondent, a PPC campaign coordinator for three campaigns, described the 2021 federal election as critical and distinct from previous ones. Having served in the 2019 election as well, the respondent believed that the 2021 election had demonstrated the PPC's growth and its potential to seriously disrupt politics. When asked about the overall impact of the PPC on the 2021 federal election, the respondent acknowledged disappointment at not gaining a seat but emphasized the party's "influence outside of the House of Commons." This influence, according to the respondent, was disproportionate and reflected their "leadership" on issues that mainstream parties were unwilling to address. In particular, the respondent believed the 2021 election had shown the PPC was a proactive party, while the CPC was reactive, as it tried to "correct" course on those things it had neglected but voters cared about. The respondent also pointed to the subsequent election of Pierre Poilievre as leader and his rhetoric as evidence that the Conservatives had felt the need to react after the 2021 election. In their respondent's view, one of the key strategies under Poilievre, after elected party leader, is to be populist-like. This, according to the respondent, is highly in response to the disappointments of the 2019 and 2021 elections, as well as feeling threatened by the PPC, and represent a noticeable change in the rhetoric of the CPC, even if these changes are not based on fundamental principles. Additionally, the respondent

referred to Poilievre's recent "makeover"[51] as partly an attempt to resemble the "cool" image of PPC leader Maxime Bernier.

The interview also revealed two caveats. First, the respondent argued that votes for the PPC in the 2021 federal election were not exclusively "siphoned away" from the CPC. Instead, the respondent argued, the PPC had successfully attracted a significant number of disaffected voters from across the political spectrum, including Liberal, Green, and "old-school" NDP voters[52]. Nevertheless, the respondent acknowledged that within the PPC, the prevailing view was that most voters had come from former CPC supporters, although this varied across ridings. Second, while the respondent believed the CPC had reacted to the PPC, during the 2021 election, the CPC had also viewed the PPC as an "annoyance" that could be ignored. This perception, the respondent believed, resulted partly from the lack of media coverage. As campaign coordinator, for instance, the respondent found that in certain areas, potential voters were not always aware of the PPC platform or even that there was a right-wing alternative to the CPC.

The latter caveat, however, lends support for H3. This study's empirical results suggest that the populist contagion effect was tied to the perception that the PPC was successful and capable of attracting the CPC electorate. This is important because it shows that the mere presence of a niche, populist party will not necessarily result in a contagion

[51] For reference, Pierre Poilievre's "image revamp" has been widely discussed by the media. According to *CBC News,* "[a] Conservative insider and lobbyist said Poilievre and his team are clearly making a concerted effort to present a more casual, laid-back image to voters who may be leery of him" (Tasker 2023; see also Copps 2023).

[52] Of interest, when talking with *Brunswick News* during the 2021, Jennifer Byrne (former Conservative campaign manager and chief of staff to Prime Minister Stephen Harper) said she believed 75% of PPC voters were former CPC voters. The percentage was "her best guess" based on she was hearing on the ground, polls, and "her gut" (Huras 2023).

effect. In fact, my findings present significant variance – not all CPC candidates used populist rhetoric, regardless of whether their PPC counterparts did – and the bivariate correlation is moderate. The interview, as discussed above, also shows that in the experience of the respondent, as PPC campaign coordinator of multiple campaigns, the level of awareness among the electorate varied and with it the perception that the CPC had reacted. These findings also contribute to the current debate on whether a niche party challenger must be successful, prior to a mainstream party employing accommodative strategies, or appear to be a significant threat. Specifically, the results support the argument (see Harmel and Svasand 1997; Schumacher and Van Kersbergen 2016) that a niche party must be perceived as a threat but does not need to be successful in earning seats or forming a government.

While this finding contradicts previous studies suggesting that mainstream parties do not react to niche parties prior to their success (see Roodujin et al. 2014; Bayerlein 2021), there is a possible explanation for this discrepancy. Rather than necessarily indicating a theoretical flaw, the contradictory results may be emphasizing the importance of contextual factors. Comparative studies have shown (see Schwörer 2021; Rodi 2019) that the choice of mainstream parties to adopt accommodative strategies varies significantly from country to country, even when institutional circumstances are similar. Therefore, while the emergence of new populist parties may have limited influence in Western European multi-party systems (thus, mainstream parties may not react prior to electoral success), the introduction of a new party in the Canadian system represents a more consequential change. As discussed in the literature review, third parties in Canada have historically been successful in transforming the political landscape and disrupting the party

system and its agenda (Laycock 2002, 150; Cochrane 2010, 591). This historical precedent suggests that Canadian mainstream parties may be more sensitive and responsive to the threats posed by emergent political parties, explaining why CPC candidates might have chosen accommodative strategies in reaction to PPC candidates during the 2021 election.

Another possible explanation for the strong correlation between the PPC's performance in the 2021 election and the choice of CPC candidates to employ accommodative strategies could be that intra-party conflicts within the CPC. Tensions within the CPC were evident in the varying responses to key policy issues, such as environmental policies and carbon pricing. O'Toole's embrace of a carbon tax, for instance, met significant resistance from more social conservative elements within the party (Toronto Star 2021a). For some, these fractures were reminiscent of the challenges faced by the conservative movement in the early 2000s (Lethbridge 2021), and ultimately led to the ousting of Erin O'Toole as leader (Walsh 2022). These internal divisions not only created a unique set of circumstances during the 2021 election, but likely heightened the internal perception that the CPC was weak and may have contributed to the perception that the PPC was a significant risk. Furthermore, it may have exacerbated the "undisciplined" (quoting from Robbins-Kanter 2022) responses of CPC local campaigns to the PPC's local campaigns. The lack of a unified strategy and clear leadership could have caused CPC candidates to adopt a variety of accommodative tactics in their local campaigns in an attempt to retain voters who would have otherwise been drawn to the PPC's more populist rhetoric.

Overall, the findings of this study broadly support the work of other studies in populist contagion which similarly suggest that mainstream parties (such as the CPC) adopt

accommodative strategies to close the distance with niche parties (such as the PPC) (Bayerlein 2021; Bale 2003; Rodi 2019; Schwörer 2021; Järviniemi 2022). It also provides support for neo-Downsian approaches to party behaviour that argue both ideology and issue ownership play a role in how parties react to competitors (Meguid 2005). Since the establishment of the CPC, the party has consistently been the sole conservative option at the federal level (in English-speaking Canada) and had not been challenged by other right-wing competitors. As Farney and Rayside (2013, 45) argue, "the CPC has become adept at integrating populist appeals with conservatism in a way that, rather than seeming radical and challenging (as the Reform Party often did), seems commonsensical and moderate to enough Canadians to form a government." Consequently, the PPC's attempt, both in 2019 and 2021, to "own" conservative issues and even populist rhetoric, was likely perceived as a threat.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

In conducting this study, I sought to understand how populist PPC local constituency campaigns were in the 2021 federal election and whether this populism could have triggered a populist contagion effect among CPC campaigns in the same districts. To measure the proportion of populist rhetoric used by PPC and CPC candidates on social media, I applied a coding scheme to an original dataset of 7,505 Twitter posts. I then included the results in a multi-variate regression. In support of H1, I find that when PPC and CPC candidates used populist rhetoric, they primarily adopted anti-elitist rhetoric in their local campaigns. Nevertheless, I also find evidence that, overall, both PPC and CPC candidates use of populist rhetoric was relatively low overall, and that CPC candidates, in particular, regularly posted about campaign logistics and their constituencies. In support of H2, I find that, even when controlling for alternative factors, there is a strong and positive correlation between the extent of populist rhetoric used by CPC and PPC candidates in local campaigns, indicative of a populist contagion effect. Specifically, I find that as a PPC candidate's use of populist rhetoric increased, so too did the CPC candidate's use of populist rhetoric in the same electoral district. Finally, I find that CPC candidates utilized more populist rhetoric in districts where the PPC performed better electorally, in support of H3. Overall, this study's results suggest there is compelling evidence that, in the electoral ridings analyzed in this study, CPC candidates felt threatened by PPC candidates, and in response, adopted accommodative strategies, by shifting toward more populist rhetoric.

Nonetheless, these results need to be interpreted with some caution. As discussed in the methodology chapter, the study was limited in time and resources and was unable to

include all 338 electoral ridings. Beyond the modest size of the sample, the selection process may have introduced a number of limitations. The study's purposeful selection process resulted in an overrepresentation of Ontario and Western Canada, creating a geographical imbalance that could affect the generalizability of the findings. Unfortunately, only one riding from the Atlantic region (Nova Scotia) met the necessary inclusion criteria. Another limitation, in terms of how electoral ridings were selected, was the need for both candidates to have a Twitter account with available posts from the 2021 federal election, which could have skewed the selection towards a certain type of candidate and benefitted those who utilized social media. To illustrate, the median of the PPC's vote share in this study is 1% higher than the median of the original population (5%). In other words, the selection process, while producing a varied population of cases, may have favoured ridings where the PPC performed better. Similarly, reliance on Twitter data from the specific timeframe of the 2021 federal election might not have captured the full range of posts shared by candidates that could have, nevertheless, contributed to a populist contagion. Candidates may have also deleted or hid posts shared during their campaigns, after the election ended.

It is also important to bear in mind the limitations related to the coding of Twitter posts, particularly the absence of inter-coder reliability, which could affect the reproducibility of the results. In particular, I adopted a conservative approach when coding to avoid over-counting proportion of populist posts, which may have led to an underestimation of the actual extent of populist rhetoric. Additionally, social media, especially in the context of political campaigns, heavily relies on other forms of media such as memes, short videos, and pictures. As the coding scheme is limited to text, a portion of

campaign communications may not have been fully captured, leading to a potentially distortion of the proportion of posts considered to be populist in either direction.

Finally, as with most empirical research, it is important to note that causality cannot be inferred from positive correlations. The positive correlation between the use of populism by PPC and CPC candidates can be interpreted as evidence of populist contagion, but it might also point to other phenomena not captured in the regression. For instance, given the contentious context of the 2021 federal election, candidates across all political parties may have similarly adopted populist rhetoric. Alternatively, internal factions within the CPC, which later led to fractures, could have been pushing for more populist campaigns even before the emergence of the PPC, thereby weakening the party's impact. After all, PPC founder Maxime Bernier is a former Conservative minister. Additionally, while I attempted to incorporate qualitative findings to better understand campaign decision-making, these were significantly limited by practical considerations, including time and resources.

Despite these limitations, the findings of this study offer valuable insights that have significant implications for our understanding of populist rhetoric in Canadian politics, and overall, of populist contagion. The adoption of accommodative strategies by CPC candidates, in response to the populist rhetoric of their PPC counterparts in the same local riding, underscores how mainstream parties may shift their strategies in response to niche party pressures, and highlights the importance of party behaviour in the context of an election. Additionally, the methodological contribution of this study, by using social media as the source of data and local campaigns as the units of analysis, provides new evidence of the circumstances under which populist contagion can occur. Moreover, the 2021 Canadian federal election illustrates that metrics such as vote share and seats gained may

not fully capture the impact of an election. The populist contagion effect observed between PPC and CPC candidates demonstrates that electoral contests require more comprehensive assessments.

The results of this study also emphasize the important role of niche parties. Despite their smaller size and limited electoral success, populist contagion shows that niche parties may influence mainstream political parties, thereby shaping elections and party behaviour. This is particularly relevant in the context of Canada's SMP electoral system, which tends to disadvantage smaller parties in terms of their ability to win seats in the House of Commons. Although the influence that can result from a populist contagion effect is very limited – it cannot address the issues and distortions of representation that result from SMP electoral systems – it nonetheless shows that niche parties have the ability to drive rhetorical and strategic changes in larger parties. This clearly suggests that the role of niche parties, regardless of their lack of electoral success, should not be underestimated.

This study's findings also contribute to the broader debate on how we understand populism and the extent of its influence. This study provides a case study of how the conceptualization of populism as a communication style is well-suited to analyze the rhetoric political campaigns. Focused on the "form," rather than the "content," this approach allows us to consider candidates' messaging and choice of words, particularly in bringing forth the representation of "the people" and creating a vertical divide. Similarly, this study explores how populist rhetoric can permeate mainstream political discourse, even when populist parties fail to elect members to the legislature. While it is not within the scope of this study to provide a normative evaluation of populism, rhetorical or programmatic, past research suggests it can challenge democratic structures and even

contribute to democratic backsliding (see for instance, Akkerman 2003; Sharon 2018; Revelli 2019; Urbinati 2019). Many of these concerns tend to be directly linked to the implementation of populist policies, which as Taggart (2002) and Urbinati (2019) argue, risks liberal democratic structures, such as the separation of powers and the "horizontal guarantee" of constitutionalism. The divisive nature of populist rhetoric, of populism as a communication style, however, should not be minimized. Furthermore, while mainstream parties may not go as far as to change their policy platforms, their willingness to embrace a populist veneer to maintain electoral support should raise important concerns – adopting "soft populist" themes has the potential to obscure democratic choices by misleading voters with a populist campaign that does not intend to implement populist policies, and by using language that dangerously reduces complex issues into simple two-sided affairs.

These implications also raise important questions and point to promising areas of future research. In terms of this study's research questions, addressing the limitations could enhance the generalizability of findings, especially regarding the spread of populist rhetoric during the 2021 federal election. Increasing the sample size to cover all 338 ridings and conducting more interviews with key figures would strengthen this study's findings. Using different, more sophisticated methodologies could similarly offer more detailed results. Future studies, for instance, should consider incorporating cross-time analyses, similar to those carried out in Western European case studies (see Rooduijn et al. 2014; Abou-Chadi 2014; Van Spanje 2010), to identify if there any significant differences in rhetoric prior and after the emergence of the PPC. Further research should also investigate to what degree populism was used in the 2021 federal elections by all political parties (at least in national campaigns) thereby including the possibility of left-wing populism. While the results of

this study suggest that PPC candidates had a higher proportion of populist rhetoric in their Twitter posts, even if still low, these findings are isolated. A study of this kind would provide needed perspective into exactly how unique the PPC is, relative to the rest of the party system.

Similarly, previous research on populism as a communication style has underscored the significance of local and context-specific factors in defining "the elite" and "the people." Even in this study alone, findings show that while both CPC and PPC candidates used anti-elitist populist rhetoric in varying degrees, the style and language differed widely. Therefore, a more systematic study of populism in Canadian politics is crucial. Coding schemes often use Western European politics as a reference to understand populist rhetoric. However, while these schemes are useful, they may focus on aspects that do not necessarily apply to Canadian politics, such as an emphasis on anti-immigrant and natalist attitudes, while neglecting the unique aspects of Canadian populism, including its expressions of anti-elitist and regionalist populist rhetoric. Developing a Canadian-focused coding scheme would greatly benefit future research to more accurately identify when political actors in Canada employ populist rhetoric.

More broadly, future studies should continue to investigate the influence of niche populist parties on mainstream political parties and the impact of electoral dynamics. Four specific areas of research warrant particular attention. First, future studies should further examine how populist contagion manifests among left-wing parties. Previous studies indicate that mainstream left-wing parties are less likely to adopt accommodative strategies when confronted with niche parties (see Bayerlein, 2021, for example). The Canadian context offers an intriguing case, especially with the emergence of the CCF, and later the

NDP (with its earliest platforms), and the Green Party. Second, studies on contagion should address whether smaller populist parties, such as the Maverick Party in the case of Canada, and independent candidates who use populist rhetoric, could also influence mainstream party candidates in closely contested federal or provincial races.

Third, research on populist contagion should examine whether mainstream parties undergo fundamental shifts in their party rhetoric, as a result of populist contagion, or reconfigure themselves after elections. For instance, shortly after the 2021 election, *The Globe and Mail* obtained emails that showed the newly elected interim leader Candice Bergen advocated against asking the 2022 Freedom Convoy to leave, and then publicly expressed sympathy for the protesters' grievances. In the House of Commons, Bergen even described the protesters as "passionate, patriotic and peaceful." Several Conservative MPs would later do the same (Walsh 2022). The Freedom Convoy, which brought thousands of demonstrators to occupy downtown Ottawa, centred around populist and anti-government ideals, such as dissolving government and implementing a "people's committee" alongside the Governor General and the Senate, as well as conspiracy theories, including the loss of Canadian sovereignty to "globalist elites" (Toronto Star 2022).

Additionally, future studies should determine whether political parties that used accommodative strategies in previous elections, either successfully or not, are more likely to utilize them again. In the context of Canada, such studies could also contribute to our understanding of how each party level (local, central, and in office) influence the national party platform, by considering whether the adoption of accommodative strategies in local campaigns have an effect on the national party's rhetoric in the long-term. Similarly, studies should investigate whether elected candidates who adopted accommodative strategies in

their campaigns retain the same levels of populist rhetoric after elected to office. Finally, future research would benefit from assessing the effect of populist contagion on the electorate's perception to understand whether it contributes to polarization and if it shapes voter behaviour and attitudes over time.

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APPENDIX A

List of Candidates (Sample)

Province	Electoral District	PPC Candidate	CPC Candidate
AB	Banff--Airdrie	Nadine Wellwood	Blake Richards
AB	Battle River--Crowfoot	Dennis Trepanier	Damien Kurek
AB	Bow River	Jonathan Bridges	Martin Shields
AB	Calgary Forest Lawn	Dwayne Holub	Jasraj Singh Hallan
AB	Calgary Heritage	Bailey Bedard	Bob Benzen
AB	Calgary Nose Hill	Kyle Scott	Michelle Rempel Garner
AB	Edmonton Riverbend	Jennifer Peace	Matt Jeneroux
AB	Edmonton West	Brent Kinzel	Kelly McCauley
AB	Fort McMurray--Cold Lake	Shawn McDonald	Laila Goodridge
AB	Medicine Hat--Cardston--Warner	Brodie Heidinger	Glen Motz
AB	Peace River--Westlock	Darryl Boisson	Arnold Viersen
AB	Red Deer--Mountain View	Kelly Lorencz	Earl Dreeshen
AB	Sturgeon River--Parkland	Murray MacKinnon	Dane Lloyd
BC	Chilliwack--Hope	Rob Bogunovic	Mark Strahl
BC	Coquitlam--Port Coquitlam	Kimberly Brundell	Katerina Anastasiadis
BC	Cowichan--Malahat--Langford	Mark Hecht	Alana DeLong
BC	Kelowna--Lake Country	Brian Rogers	Tracy Gray
BC	Kootenay--Columbia	Sarah Bennett	Rob Morrison
BC	Mission--Matsqui--Fraser Canyon	Tyler Niles	Brad Vis
BC	Pitt Meadows--Maple Ridge	Julius Hoffmann	Marc Dalton
BC	Prince George--Peace River--Northern Rockies	Ryan Dyck	Bob Zimmer
BC	Saanich--Gulf Islands	David Hilderman	David Busch
BC	South Okanagan--West Kootenay	Sean Taylor	Helena Konanz
BC	Steveston--Richmond East	Jennifer Singh	Kenny Chiu
BC	Vancouver East	Karin Litzcke	Mauro Francis
BC	Victoria	John Randal Phipps	Hannah Hodson
MB	Kildonan--St. Paul	Sean Howe	Raquel Dancho
MB	Portage--Lisgar	Solomon Wiebe	Candice Bergen
MB	Saint Boniface--Saint Vital	Jane MacDiarmid	Shola Agboola
NS	Halifax West	Julie Scott	Eleanor Humphries

APPENDIX A (continued)

List of Candidates

Province	Electoral District	PPC Candidate	CPC Candidate
ON	Barrie--Innisfil	Corrado Brancato	John Brassard
ON	Bay of Quinte	Janine LeClerc	Ryan Williams
ON	Brampton East	Manjeet Singh	Naval Bajaj
ON	Brampton West	Rahul Samuel Zia	Jermaine Chambers
ON	Burlington	Michael Bator	Emily Brown
ON	Durham	Patricia Conlin	Erin O'Toole
ON	Essex	Beth Charron-Rowberry	Chris Lewis
ON	Huron--Bruce	Jack Stecho	Ben Lobb
ON	Kanata--Carleton	Scott Miller	Jennifer McAndrew
ON	Lambton--Kent--Middlesex	Kevin Mitchell	Lianne Rood
ON	Nepean	Jay Nera	Matt Triemstra
ON	Niagara Falls	Peter Taras	Tony Baldinelli
ON	Niagara West	Shaunalee Derkson	Dean Allison
ON	Northumberland--Peterborough South	Nathan Lang	Philip Lawrence
ON	Oakville	JD Meaney	Kerry Colborne
ON	Ottawa Centre	Regina Watteel	Carol Clemenhagen
ON	Perth--Wellington	Wayne Baker	John Nater
ON	Peterborough--Kawartha	Paul Lawton	Michelle Ferreri
ON	Sarnia--Lambton	Brian Everaert	Marilyn Gladu
ON	Simcoe North	Stephen Makk	Adam Chambers
ON	Simcoe--Grey	Adam Minatel	Terry Dowdall
ON	St. Catharines	Rebecca Hahn	Krystina Waler
ON	Sudbury	Colette Andréa Methé	Ian Symington
ON	Thornhill	Samuel Greenfield	Melissa Lantsman
ON	Waterloo	Patrick Doucette	Meghan Shannon
ON	Wellington--Halton Hills	Syl Carle	Michael Chong
ON	Whitby	Thomas Androvic	Maleeha Shahid
SK	Cypress Hills--Grasslands	Charles Reginald Hislop	Jeremy Patzer
SK	Regina--Wascana	Mario Milanovski	Michael Kram
SK	Saskatoon--Grasswood	Mark Friesen	Kevin Waugh

APPENDIX B

Semi-structure Interview Questions

1. Can you describe your role within the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC)/ the People's Party of Canada (PPC) during the 2021 federal election campaign?

2. How would you characterize the ideological positioning of the CPC/PPC during the 2021 election?

3. What was the campaign's perception of the CPC's/PPC's platform and ideology?

4. During the election, was it ever necessary to change the campaign strategies to respond to other parties' campaigns? If so, what made it necessary?

5. (If not their first campaign) Was the 2021 federal an "abnormal" election, compared to others? If so, why?

6. Can you reflect on the overall impact of the CPC/PPC on the 2021 election? Do you believe the presence of the CPC/PPC affected the outcome of your campaign in any significant way?

7. Were there any internal discussion or debates regarding the CPC/PPC specifically? If so, why?

8. What are your thoughts on the phenomenon of "contagion effect"? Do you believe political parties in Canada sometimes adopt each other's policies or discourse to stay competitive?