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Canada Rejects Populism—Again

Christopher Sands

Canadian voters gave the Conservative Party, led by Stephen Harper, more seats than any other party in the January 23, 2006, federal election. Some in the United States have interpreted this victory as a shift to the right in Canadian politics and possibly even a sign of closer U.S.-Canada relations in advancing continental economic integration and strengthening security cooperation.

Although these interpretations are true to a limited extent, U.S. observers hoping to promote either trend should be cautious. The 2006 election outcome will produce a second consecutive government in Ottawa that cannot command a majority of members of Parliament, and this will translate in the near term into a continuation of the unsettled and uncertain politics of the past year. This makes a misreading of the Canadian voters' message in the 2006 election particularly hazardous, since it could lead to a misreading of the Harper government and compound misjudgments about what is possible in U.S.-Canada relations in 2006 and beyond.

Rather than indicating a break with recent trends, the 2006 election shows the remarkable resilience of one feature of Canadian political culture, an aversion to populist politics. The failure of populist appeals at the national level in Canada is largely due to the influence of Ontario and Quebec. The dislike of populism in Ontario, Quebec, and the rest of Canada, has roots in the colonial period and affects other provinces as well. Harper's victory owes more to anti-populism than to his conservatism or his position on relations with the United States.

Refugees of Mob Rule

Anti-populism in Canada has its origins in the early colonial period. In English Canada, it was a response to the perception of the American Revolution as a triumph of "mob rule" rather than democracy. This negative view of the United States was brought into the colonies that remained part of British North America by the refugees of the American Revolution—so many in number that by 1800, fully half the English-speaking population of British North America had been born in territory that was then part of the United States.

For French Canada, another revolution left its mark: the French Revolution of 1789. By then, French Canada was part of British North America and no longer ruled by France, but it retained much of its character as a French society—including language, civil law,

and the Roman Catholic religion—thanks to the Quebec Act of 1774, one of the “intolerable acts” declaimed by Samuel Adams as a *casus belli* for revolution. The Catholic Church dominated French Canada, particularly in the colony called Quebec, and its bishops feared the spread of the anti-clerical ideas of the Jacobin firebrands in Paris. The attitude discouraged contact with France (which received British support) and fostered a respect for elites and a distrust of mob rule that paralleled that of English Canada.

All of this seems to be ancient history, yet this same anti-populism can be seen at work in the January 23 Canadian federal election.

From its early days as a rejectionist conservative offshoot of the Progressive Conservative Party, headed by then-prime minister Brian Mulroney in 1988, the western-based Reform Party had a clear populist streak. Party policy was made by an internally democratic process, and party members were encouraged to get involved in town meetings and platform debates. This free-wheeling populism always had greater legitimacy in western Canada, where the influences of the United States were viewed more positively (possibly because, by the time these regions were settled, the American Experiment looked more successful than it had in its early years). In the early twentieth century, prairie populism mobilized farmers in both Canada and the United States to demand changes in farm policies and relief after the onset of the Great Depression. But western Canada’s populism was one reason that western Canadian politicians had limited success in national leadership. In Ontario and Quebec, western populism was associated with nascent communism in the red-baiting years of the 1940s and 1950s, and then as nascent “redneck” politics in the Reagan years and afterward.

The growth in the population of western Canada, though still not fairly reflected in the allocation of seats in the House of Commons in Canada’s national parliament, meant that the Reform Party was able to become the official opposition by having more seats than any party other than the Liberals, who formed the government in 1993 and 2000. Yet the consensus among most observers was that the Reform Party was too tainted by the perception of redneck populism, epitomized by over-quoted bigoted comments by individual party members or unpolished Reform Party members of Parliament.

As a result, the party leadership embarked on a remarkable process of rebranding itself. The party changed its name to the Canadian Reform Conservative Alliance Party (after briefly and embarrassingly changing the name to the Canadian Conservative Reform Alliance Party, a gesture meant to attract Progressive Conservatives by placing the reference to the conservative part of the new alliance ahead of the word reform, but which rendered the party’s acronym CCRAP). Rebranding the party was itself a populist exercise, with the party’s grassroots members voting on the new name.

The Canadian Alliance, as it came to be known, did marginally better in the 2003 federal election and again formed the official opposition, but it did not achieve the breakthrough in Ontario that it had hoped for—the Liberals effectively tagged the new party brand as a

cynical attempt to disguise the true face of the party, which was the same angry bunch of rednecks it had been before.

Anti-populism versus Anti-Americanism

The United States played an important, though unwilling role in these debates. One aspect of western populism that was consistent, when it was progressive in the first half of the twentieth century and when it was conservative in the later years of the century, is that western populism was willing to look to the United States for new policy ideas. Progressive populists like Saskatchewan's Tommy Douglas saw value in emulating Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal. Reform populists like Preston Manning saw a strong senate where all states had equal elected representation as a way to address tensions within the Canadian federation. As a result, established elites in Ontario and Quebec cheered as the Liberal Party branded the westerners as suspiciously pro-American and suggested they would try to "Americanize" Canada. It was a slur that effectively tapped the anti-populism in Canadian political culture in the provinces from the Great Lakes east and, time after time, proved decisive.

In the 2006 election, a strange thing happened. The Conservative Party, which had rebranded itself again after a formal merger with what was left of the old Progressive Conservative Party, was led by a smart campaign strategist named Stephen Harper, a western Canadian and keen student of the vilification of populism in eastern Canada. Lacking the personal charisma of conservative leaders like Brian Mulroney or Ronald Reagan, or the fire of conservative leaders like John Diefenbaker or Barry Goldwater, Harper's conservative image was closer to the dull but trustworthy persona of New York governor George Pataki or former Pennsylvania governor Tom Ridge. In American political terms, it was a more Midwestern image, but it was calm and reassuring enough to get Canadians in eastern Canada to take another look at Harper and his party.

At the same time, it was Liberal party leader and Prime Minister Paul Martin who stoked populist fires, attempting to rally the anti-American populism still latent in Ontario to save his government as it reeled under a series of corruption scandals. In 2006, the bigotry card was being played not by the western Canadian, but by the man born in Ontario not far from the U.S. border.

Martin, a life-long member of the Canadian elite, would doubtless reject the argument that his campaign was populist, and in a way, this is true. Anti-American bigotry is more popular with Canadian elites than it is with ordinary Canadians, as most Americans know from experience. Yet what makes this appeal work as a populist message for Martin (it got him elected in 2004) is the political persona of George W. Bush.

Populist Bush and Anti-populist Canadians

U.S. president George W. Bush is a life-long member of the American elite, but he does not act that way. He has an expensive Ivy League education but does not speak articulately. He is wealthy but dresses in casual comfort whenever he has the chance; indeed, he gave hundreds of speeches in his two presidential campaigns in shirt-sleeves,

without a tie. Bush is a born-again Christian and speaks publicly about his faith, whereas contemporary elites affect secularism even when they are privately religious.

Bush's style has been key to his ability to connect with, and lead, the American people. People who meet him on the campaign trail, or saw him at Ground Zero after the September 11 terrorist attacks, see in him a decent, common man. His opponents' various attempts to demonize him notwithstanding, he remains a politician with remarkable, popular appeal.

Yet Bush's populist appeal, so successful in the United States, is a turnoff for many Canadians. They expect a leader to be smarter than them, more polished and articulate (with bonus points for flawless English and French), dressed in expensive but tasteful clothes, and if he or she is all of these things, then a certain dullness is forgivable, even admirable.

So in the recent campaign, Paul Martin, as he had done in the 2004 race, ran a campaign against George W. Bush, attempting to smear Stephen Harper as a Bush in sheep's clothing. Many Canadian voters on January 23 simply did not agree with the comparison. When Harper appeared without a tie, as a regular guy, it did not seem threatening. Harper told voters that he was not secretly planning to send Canadian troops to Iraq (where the conflict is in any case winding down) and would not stint in defending Canadian interests in trade disputes with the United States (naturally, but the reassurance was made necessary by Liberal attacks).

Implications for U.S.-Canada Relations

In this sense, the outcome of the Canadian federal election was not a bold victory for political conservatism or a sign that Canadians had softened their visceral dislike of their populist neighbor, George W. Bush. Canadians were true to the tradition of their own political culture, voting for elite decorum over angry populism.

Harper and the Conservatives will therefore form a government without a majority in Parliament and likewise without a strong mandate for conservative policies. Voters did not endorse Paul Martin's management of U.S.-Canada relations, and polls show a genuine Canadian public sentiment in favor of better relations between the two countries. But President Bush remains stylistically discomfiting for many Canadians, and Harper will be cautious with regard to developing a visibly close relationship with Bush—because it is very likely that Bush will still be the U.S. president when the next Canadian federal election is held, since minority governments rarely survive a full mandate.

It would be better for U.S.-Canada relations if more Canadians could overcome their dislike of Bush's populist style. Doing so would give Harper greater freedom to improve bilateral relations. And after all, it should be reassuring to Canadians in a period of deepening economic integration that political culture differences between Canada and the United States, such as attitudes toward populist politics, persist.

Yet if Canadians would be wiser not to expect U.S. presidents to conform to Canadian preferences rather than those of their own voters, it is just as important for U.S. observers not to expect that Canadian prime ministers will conform to their preferences on ideology or even “public displays of affection” for American leadership. Overcoming our similarities and recognizing our differences will improve U.S.-Canada relations and reduce anti-American bigotry when the Harper government forms in Ottawa, and for years to come.

Christopher Sands is a senior associate in the CSIS Americas Program.