

## **Performing Populism Poorly: An Analysis of Kellie Leitch's Failed 2017 Conservative Leadership Campaign**

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### **Abstract:**

A new wave of populist leaders, parties and movements have emerged across established Western democracies. These leaders have received considerable support while challenging the socio-political status quo at both national and global levels of governance. While largely a spectator to the rise of some of the more notable populist leaders, Canada has not been immune to the current global populist zeitgeist. Notably, the campaign of 2017 Conservative Leadership Candidate Kellie Leitch relied heavily on a populist discourse and policy agenda. Leitch's campaign was ultimately unsuccessful, as her rhetoric and policies were widely condemned among members of her own party and the Canadian public. My paper considers why Leitch's populist campaign failed to resonate with and appeal to Conservatives. Using Moffitt's (2016) theoretical framework that conceptualizes populism as a distinct political style that is performed, embodied, and enacted across different political and cultural contexts, I argue that the failure of Leitch's campaign is due largely to her inability to convincingly perform core tenants of a populist style of politics. I analyze how the language, imagery, symbolism and behaviour used by Leitch in her campaign failed to position her as a leader of "the people" who stands in opposition to the political establishment and status quo. Additionally, I will show how Leitch's performance failed to convincingly portray a perception of crisis or institutional breakdown necessary to justify the adoption of unconventional and extreme populist policies. My paper will contribute to the growing literature on populism both internationally and in Canada.

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The 2017 Conservative Party of Canada leadership election was notable on a number of fronts. First and foremost, the leadership race marked the first time the party had selected a new leader since Stephen Harper was elected on a first ballot majority in 2004. The imprint of Harper's tenure on the Party beginning with its founding in 2004 and his subsequent leadership over the course of 4 federal elections is indelible. For the Conservative Party, the leadership election in 2017 marked not only the selection of a new leader but also a potentially defining shift in the ideological and policy directions assumed by the party under Harper. The election was also notable in regard to the number of candidates that entered the race. The leadership process included a total of 17 candidates, a number that was eventually whittled down to 13 by the time the leadership vote was held on May 27, 2017. This large field of contenders produced a wide spectrum of candidates in terms of ideological leanings and policy agendas. The field of candidates included many long-serving Conservative MPs, many of which representing the various different ideological factions and wings of the Conservative party. By far the most unconventional and newsworthy candidate was Canadian businessman and media personality, Kevin O'Leary. Declaring his candidacy approximately 2 month after the race had official begun, O'Leary proved to be a popular candidate, leading many public opinion polls prior to withdrawing from the race on April 27, 2017 and throwing his support behind Quebec MP Maxime Bernier. O'Leary's unorthodox candidacy led many public commenters to draw parallels to the successful campaign of recently elected U.S President, Donald Trump. However, O'Leary himself actively sought to distance himself from those comparisons, denouncing supposed similarities to Donald Trump while taking progressive policy positions that deviate from those assumed by Trump before and after his campaign.

Despite Kevin O'Leary's brief foray into politics, it was actually another (somewhat unexpected) leadership candidate who most resembled Trump's populist brand of right-wing politics. The campaign of Conservative MP, Kellie Leitch mirrored many of the rhetorical and discursive strategies deployed by Donald Trump and promoted a policy agenda containing similar types of xenophobic and populist proposals. Leitch's campaign was widely condemned within the media as well as by fellow candidates and members of the Conservative Party. Leitch's divisive rhetoric and policies were denounced as disingenuous dog whistle politics antithetical to Canada's collective identify and embrace of multiculturalism. Ultimately, the unpopularity of Leitch's campaign led to a decisive loss on election night, where she received less than 8 percent of the votes cast and was eliminated in the 9<sup>th</sup> round of voting, placing 5<sup>th</sup> in the race.

Leitch's failed leadership campaign marks a rare instance of populism in federal Canadian politics. While populism has been a recurrent feature in electoral politics in other parts of the world, particularly in the United States (U.S), Europe and Latin America, Canada has limited experience with populist leaders in national-level politics. Canada's experiences with populism is similar to that of the U.S, where a relatively stable party system and large-brokerage style parties have kept populism at bay at the national level of politics. Furthermore, Canada's self-stylized image as a multicultural mosaic defined by an embrace of cultural and ethnic difference has discouraged the type of openly divisive, exclusionary politics championed by recent populists in other Western counties.

While many public commenters have dismissed Leitch's campaign as an example of the incompatibility of extreme right wing populism within the cultural and political context of Canada, no effort has been made to understand Leitch's campaign through the lens of populist theory. My paper takes up this challenge. Using Moffitt's (2016) theoretical framework that conceptualizes populism as a distinct political style that is performed, embodied, and enacted across different political and cultural contexts, I argue that the failure of Leitch's campaign is due largely to her inability to convincingly perform core tenants of a populist style of politics. More specifically, Leitch failed to position herself in proximity to the 'people', failed to deviate from acceptable standards of political behaviour and failed to perform a sense of crisis and institutional breakdown consistent with the success of past Canadian populists.

To begin, I will briefly review theory and literature on populism. This review will serve as the foundation for introducing my own preferred theoretical framework conceptualizing populism as a political style. I will then proceed to provide an overview of the history of populism in Canada and its relative absence within contemporary federal politics. From this point, I will segue into a more detailed discussion of Kellie Leitch's 2017 Conservative Leadership Campaign, before offering an analysis of her performance as a populist leader. I will then conclude with a brief discussion of my findings

### Theoretical Approaches to Populism

Populist leaders and parties have a long history and recurring presence within U.S, European and Latin American electoral politics. This presence has often been met with derision and anxiety, as populism has been viewed as a threat to established liberal democracies. In one of the first scholarly works published on populism in 1969, Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner described populism as a "spectre" haunting the world. This rejection of populism as a primordial and undemocratic political phenomenon is echoed by many contemporary opponents of populist leaders. The reaction from scholars has been more measured, albeit with many continuing to view populism and its champions as outside the boundaries of democratic politics. The emergence of populist leaders, parties and movements across the globe since the 1980s has been described by scholars as an explosion (Judis, 2016), a zeitgeist (Mudde, 2004), and a surge (Mudde, 2016). Many of these descriptions implicate populism as a pathology infecting Western liberal democracies. However, the long history of populist leaders in various parts of the world and the nature of populist demands reveals populism to be less a pathology of democratic politics and more of an internal feature of it (see Canovan, 1999). Furthermore, the continued popularity and influence of populist leaders and parties in countries such as France (Rydgren, 2008), the Netherlands (Vossen, 2010), Austria (Plasser and Ulram, 2003), Venezuela (Hawkins, 2003), the U.K (Inglehart and Norris, 2016) and the U.S (Oliver and Rahn, 2016) demonstrates that populism – while ideological unpalatable for many – has developed into a mainstay feature of electoral politics across the globe.

While the global rise of populism has provoked intense interest from political scientists from different sub-disciplinary backgrounds and geographic areas of specialization, populism remains an inherently fractured concept. There is little theoretical consensus among scholars who study populism on *what* populism is and how it should be studied. Taggart (2000) describes populism as a “slippery concept” and warns intrepid researchers venturing into populism research that the “search for the perfect fit of populism is both illusionary and unsatisfying and will not lead to a happy ending.” (2) Ultimately, the ability to come up with a generalizable conceptualization of populism encounters two main issues: conceptual stretching and conceptual travelling (Mudde, 2004). If one turns to empirical cases to move up the ladder of generalization to construct a catchall definition of populism, they are left with convoluted and contradictory definition of populism. This is due to the “chameleonic” nature of populism, wherein it takes on qualities and nuances of the social, cultural, historical and political context in which it develops. Alternatively, if one tries to start at the conceptual level and move downwards to empirical application, they end up with a definition of populism where no cases can possibly meet every composite feature (Taggart, 2000, 6-7).

While populism remains an elusive concept to define, many scholars have made promising progress toward approaches that offer both a comprehensive theoretical definition of populism and a framework for studying its varied empirical manifestations. In general, there are 4 main approaches to theorizing and studying populism that have emerged since the 1990s: as a political logic; as an ideology; as a strategic approach; and as a type of political performance. There is considerable overlap and many similarities between each of these approaches. All 4 approaches to populism centralize an antagonistic divide between the people and the elites as the defining feature of populism, and highlight the culturally-contingent nature of populist enactments across different contexts. However, each approach carries with it distinctions in terms of how it understands the ontological character of populism and what elements of political life should be brought under analysis when studying it. While an exhaustive survey of the differences and debates between these approaches is well outside the scope of this paper, I will briefly survey each approach prior to unpacking my own preferred conceptualization of populism as a political style.

### *Populism as a Political Logic/Discourse*

One of the most influential approaches promoted to study populism is as a political logic. This approach was developed and offered by the late Argentinian political theorist, Ernesto Laclau in his book *On Populist Reason* (2005). Laclau conceives of populism as distinct type of logic that ontologically restructures political space between two antagonistic groups: the pure people and the corrupt elite. This restructuration of political space emerges at a point of institutional failure, whereby the demands of various social groups are no longer satisfied by the political system. This failure leads to the formation of a new political frontier, whereby the demands of previously disparate sociopolitical groupings become linked within what Laclau terms as a “chain of equivalence”. The newly linked demands become articulated through empty signifiers that express the collective plight of the people against the system and the established

political elite. The crux of the political logic approach is its emphasis on populism as not an ontic movement or phenomenon, but rather as a logic that brings into being political subjects and antagonistic relations that did not previously exist through processes of naming and discursive enactments.

### *Populism as an Ideology*

Another popular approach to the study of populism is the ideological approach. Most widely associated with the work of Cas Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, the ideological approach defines populism as:

“an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde, 2004, 543).

This definition positions populism as a “thin-centred” ideology, suggesting that populism offers a truncated, moralistic worldview that becomes combined with other thicker political ideologies like communism, conservatism, socialism, nationalism etc. (544). In this conceptualization of populism, these thicker ideologies become attached to the thin, adaptable moral framework of populism whereby more substantive socio-political concerns and grievances become expressed through the antagonistic moral framework of the pure people vs. the corrupt elite. Ultimately, the articulation of populism will vary between the ideological disposition of specific leaders, parties and movements and will assume discursive qualities corresponding to particular social and cultural environments.

### *Populism as a Political Strategy*

In contradistinction to the political logic and political ideology approach discussed above, other scholars, particularly those studying populist leaders in Latin America, have instead preferred to conceptualize and study populism as a type of political strategy. This approach to populism shifts attention away from the social content and ideological character of populism to a focus on how populism is enacted in political practice (Jansen, 2011). In other words, these approaches focus on the nature of political mobilization and organization that populists use to strategically pursue power and garner popular support. Those studying populism from this theoretical vantage point focus on the ways in which charismatic political actors use populist strategies to mobilize different social groups against established rule in order to win power (Weyland, 2001). The focus of this approach is on understanding how populist organizations and leaders manage state-society relations to mobilize disaffected groups. Thus, while the relationship between populists and the people remains a key focus, attention is not paid to shared values or ideologies between these two groups, but the ways in which particular leaders, parties

and movements mobilize social groups in the pursuit of power vis-à-vis a populist mode of political organization.

### *Populism as a Political Style*

The approach that I will deploy to analyze the 2015 Conservative Leadership campaign of Kellie Leitch is what has been termed as the political style approach. As a more recently developed approach, the conceptualization of populism as a political style borrows from and resembles many aspects of the approaches discussed previously while offering a distinct, innovative and modular framework that can be applied across a wide array of contexts. The political style approach has received fullest articulation in the work of Benjamin Moffitt (2016), who offers the following definition of populism: “A political style that features an appeal to ‘the people’ versus ‘the elite’, ‘bad manners’ and the performance of crisis, breakdown or threat.” (45) This definition of populism rests on theories of performativity, whereby populism is one of many styles of politics that different actors perform within a heavily mediated political environment. The general concept of political style in this theorization of populism refers to the “repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performance made to audiences that are used to create and navigate the fields of power that comprise the political, stretching from the domain of government through to everyday life.” (28-29) This definition implies many of the same ontic components of populism suggested by the political logic approach, but takes these a step further to focus on the ways in which political subjectivities and relations are established through symbols and visual performances in addition to the use of signifiers and other discursive enactments. As such, rather than focus on the ontological content of populism in the form of organization or ideology, the political style approach emphasizes the processes by which populists seek to reconstitute political relations between the pure people and a maligned elite.

The political style approach provides researchers a number of advantages when studying populism. Firstly, conceiving of populism as a distinct style of politics allows for an understanding of the various empirical manifestations of populism around the globe. As a style of politics, populism can be practiced across different contexts and by actors grounded in various ideologies. While the definition stated above provides a general definition of populism and some common components of performances of populism, it recognizes that the particular contours of any given populist performance is contingent on the specific social and cultural norms of a particular society. Further, positioning populism as a political style helps to overcome labelling issues that emerge when determining who is and who is not a populist. Instead, conceiving of populism as a political style offers a gradational approach, whereby political actors can be more or less populist at different times. This explains how even non-populist political actors can at times deploy populist styles of politics. In offering a gradational approach, Moffitt argues that populism can be understood as existing on a political spectrum with populism on one pole and technocratic political styles as existing on the other. This diametric positioning is similar to the work of other scholars who position populism as an alternative to technocracy and liberalism (Arditi, 2007; Mudde, 2004). Moffitt’s work acknowledges that the differences between populism and technocracy do not exist merely in the content of agendas and policies, but also in how

politicians present themselves. Populists ultimately represent an alternative to the managerial, scientific, normative behaviour of those practicing a business-as-usual, technocratic style of politics.

Positioning populism as a style of politics that is performed also recognizes the changing nature of contemporary politics. As Moffit notes, the increasing mediatisation of contemporary life has fundamentally restructured how politics is practiced and engaged with by both politicians and citizens. The ubiquity of various different types of media technologies and their growing role in politics has led politics to become increasingly 'stylised' whereby visual style and performance become central to political experience (39). In order to achieve success, politicians must make themselves visible and appealing by performing and projecting themselves through different media channels. This integration of media logics within politics lends itself to populists, whose deviation from accepted norms and standards of political behaviour coheres neatly within evolving dimensions of political life centred upon dramatization, polarization, personalization and the prioritisation of conflict (76-77). Further, while past approaches have emphasized discourse and textual enactments of populism, the political style approach acknowledges the visual components of politics and the ways in which politicians seek to connect with supporters via embodied performances.

### Theoretical Framework: Deploying the Political Style Approach

Approaching populism as a political style entails studying three interrelated features of political performance: appeals to 'the People' versus 'the Elite'; 'the performance of bad manners'; and performing crisis, breakdown or threat. These three common features emerge out of an inductive analysis of the academic literature since the 1990s, whereby 28 cases of leaders commonly accepted as examples of populism were analyzed (42). Ultimately, this is a minimal definition of populism rather than an ideal-type. The three features ultimately serve as a baseline for the types of performances we can characterize as populist. The definition also is not meant to suggest that any one feature can be determined in isolation as populist, but rather that they represent individual pillars that when enacted concurrently constitute a populist performance (43). The performance of these three features will also vary considerably between different contexts. The task for a researcher using this framework is to understand how these three features become enacted and embodied through political performance so as to be appealing to audiences in a particular social and cultural context.

Similar to other theoretical frameworks, the political style approach to populism centres the antagonistic division of the people against the elite as a central essence of populism. Similar to the political logic approach, the study of populism as political performance focused on how the people are rendered present by populists (Laclau, 2006; Arditì, 2007). As such, 'the people' are not a pre-existing social group that populists draw upon, but rather a constituency that populists render present through their political performance. In populist performance, the people are rendered present by a leader who is able to present themselves as being intimately close to

the people and capable of speaking on their behalf. While many writers on populism emphasize a direct link between populist leaders and the people, in practice appeals to the people are mediated through representation whereby a “virtual image” of the idealized people and popular will is constructed through performance (102). In constructing the people, populists rely on symbolic displays and the deployment of signifiers that bring to the fore an imagined community comprised of a homogenous idealized people. These performances of the people rest on complex appeals to cultural symbols and discourses connected to nationalism, race, gender and ethnicity. The performance of the people as an in-group also entails the construction of a maligned elite who are outside the boundaries of ‘the people’ and out of touch with the popular will. Often, the construction of the elite will be accompanied by the construction of an identifiable Other, typically those outside the state or the idealized community who are a threat to the people. Importantly, populism connects these dangerous Others to the elite, often by portraying the elite as aiding the Other at the expense of the people. In sum, the populist style rests in part on performative appeals to a puritanical people against an established elite and an identifiable out-group whose identity and presence is threatening to the people.

The second pillar within the populist style of politics, is what Moffitt terms as ‘bad manners’. This element of populist performance arises out of the need for populists to paradoxically be both ordinary and extraordinary to appeal to the people. Populists must be of the people and beyond the people simultaneously. To demonstrate their ordinariness, populists regularly deploy bad manners as part of their political performance in the form of a disregard for political correctness, the use of slang, swearing and various other forms of unusual or colourful behaviour (44). These behaviours deviate from acceptable standards of behaviour for politicians and help to construct a leader as being one of the people and outside the political establishment. Populists balance these performance of ordinariness with performances of extraordinariness by demonstrating their strength, vitality and health. These performances of extraordinariness are essential to demonstrating that the populist leader has the strength and capacity capable of solving the problems of the people and reinstating common sense as the hegemonic epistemology of politics. Ultimately, the performance of bad manners is a critical component to counterbalancing the performance of extraordinariness and helps populists maintain a close proximity to the people.

The third and final pillar of populist performance is the performance of crisis, breakdown or threat. As most scholars who have studied populism demonstrate, populist leaders actively draw upon moments of institutional, political, cultural or social crisis to garner support and pursue power (Taggart, 2000; Laclau, 2005). The bulk of the literature situates crisis as external to populism, as either something that populists seize upon or as a trigger that mobilizes a populist response. However, the political performance approach argues that rather than being external to populism, crisis is an internal feature of populism. In other words, populists make crisis visible through their performances. As Moffitt puts it, populists look to spectacularize some type of institutional failure by sensationalizing it, linking it to other issues and failures, and calling for immediate decisive action that only the populist leader is capable of. Ultimately, the convincing performance of crisis is a necessary element for the success of a populist performance as it

functions to simplify political space between the people and the elite and create the perception that there is a need for the types of simple common sense solutions offered by populists.

Again, while this theoretical triad does not encapsulate every possible empirical aspect of a given case of populism, it provides a useful baseline framework for deductive interpretation. In conceptualizing populism as a type of performance, Moffitt's framework centres individual leaders as the key performers of populism. Using this framework, I offer an analysis of Kellie Leitch's populist performance in the 2017 Conservative Party of Canada leadership election. In deconstructing Leitch's performance, I demonstrate that Leitch failed to adequately perform core tenants of the populist style.

### Populism in Canada

Highly visible displays of populism have proven to be a rare feature in Canadian politics, particularly at the national level of politics. However, a closer look at the historical genesis of both left and right-wing parties in Canada reveals that populism has and continues to play an important – if not largely ignored – role in contemporary federal party politics in Canada. Populism in Canada emerged most clearly in the Western provinces during the interwar period. Dissatisfied with the policies of the Ontario-based Liberal-Conservative coalition government, a well-organized agrarian-based populist movement sprung up across the Prairie provinces (Laycock, 2005; Conway, 1978). This movement coalesced into a number of different political parties who contested national policies at both the provincial and federal level of politics. The Alberta Social Credit Party governed Alberta from 1935 to 1968. Social Credit offered a populist alternative to the brokerage politics of the Ontario-based Conservative and Liberal Party, basing their appeal to supporters on an opposition to the centralising tendencies of the federal government and the creation of a federally-administered welfare state (Laycock, 2005, 176). However, the legacy of the interwar agrarian populist movement was most faithfully upheld by the left-wing party, The Co-Operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF). Finding support most strongly in Saskatchewan, British Columbia and Manitoba, the CCF and their successor the New Democratic Party (NDP) have had a major influence on the trajectory of federal politics in Canada, leading to the development of a relatively strong and stable welfare state and the legitimisation of socialist policies and programs (Laycock, 2005, 177).

While populism played a formative role in shaping the development of both left and right-wing parties, recent iterations of populism have been overwhelmingly associated with right-wing parties. The establishment of the Reform Party in 1987 is the most prominent example of recent Canadian populism in the academic literature. Led by Preston Manning, the Reform Party capitalized on a growing sense of Western alienation and dissatisfaction with the Progressive Conservative Party to offer a populist challenge to the status quo in federal politics. Manning and the Reform Party's brand of politics sought to organize the common people against a coalition of government and business elites associated with the creation and management of the Canadian welfare state (Patten, 1996). Manning also took aim at "special interests" and minority groups profiting and benefiting from the welfare state at the expense of the common people

defined discursively as hard working, tax-paying Canadians (Patten, 1996, 109). This divide between the common people and the hard-working elites was combined with libertarian policy proposal designed to shrink the welfare state, oppose Quebec sovereignty, challenge multiculturalism, strengthen the jurisdiction of provinces and introduce greater direct democracy measures into political institutions (Laycock, 2005, 180).

While Manning and the Reform Party achieved moderate electoral success from 1987 until 2000, the party was subsequently united with the Conservative Alliance Party to become the Canadian Alliance, who eventually merged with the Progressive Conservative Party in 2003 to form the modern day Conservative Party of Canada. The uniting of right-wing parties at the federal level of politics ultimately served to temper the expression of right-wing populism in Canada. Over the reign of Stephen Harper, The Conservative Party evolved into a brokerage political party that sought to consolidate support across a wide cross-section of Canadian society as oppose to mobilize supporters from a narrow constituency base. However, while on the surface there appears to be a dissipation of right-wing populism in Canada, many scholars have demonstrated, in line with a gradated approach, that populism continued to rear its head within the Harper government. Scholars have demonstrated various types of populism that have been used by Harper over the course of his Government including market populism (Sawer and Laycock, 2009), penal populism (Kelly and Puddister, 2017) and libertarian populism (Ramp and Harrison, 2012). All of these varieties of populism noted in Stephen Harper's government highlight the periodic epistemological appeals to "common sense" in an effort to garner support for particular policies or governing approaches that circumvent bureaucratic or political oversight.

While the Harper government's periodic incursions into populist politics appears to be an emerging site of academic inquiry, a more pressing question for political commentators and academics in the post-Trump era is whether the types of extreme right-wing populism observed in other parts of the world could flourish in Canada. Public opinion research and founder of the Toronto-based Environic's Institute, Michael Adams (2017) has offered the most comprehensive response to this question thus far. In his book, *Could it Happen Here?: Canada in the Age of Trump and Brexit*, Adams explores whether or not the types of circumstances conducive to the rise of populism observed elsewhere in the world are present in Canada. Relying on a large and diverse range of public opinion studies, Adams notes that while Canada is not immune to the global political and technological shifts that have given rise to populism in Europe and the U.S, many of the conditions linked to support for populism are non-existent in Canada. The book's analysis shows that while economic and social inequality are a growing issue in Canada and that racial animosity exists toward immigrants and other minorities, Canadians as a whole remain committed to immigration and multicultural accommodation, support the redistribution of wealth to combat rising inequality, trusts elite and expert authority, and hold positive views toward government institutions. The findings presented in the book suggest that while Canada shows some similarities to other countries who have experienced the rise of xenophobic, nativist populist leaders, overall there are some clear limitations in terms of public opinion and values that likely prohibit the national success of right-wing populism in Canada. Other scholars have noted similar structural limitations to the prospects for a highly successful populist party or actor

to emerge, including the absence of electoral incentives to deviate from the social and political consensus on the importance of immigration and trade (Loewen, 2017), the structure and processes of leadership selection processes (Cross, 2017), and the geopolitical restraints on unwanted and illegal migration (Schacher, 2017). While these restraints I have noted are far from exhaustive, they lay bare the reality that there exists a host of very strong contextual and structural limitations that make the rise of extremist right-wing populism in Canada very unlikely.

However, evaluating the prospects of populism in Canada purely on the basis of public attitudes and institutions alone ignores the possibility of a strong, charismatic leader emerging that is capable of mobilizing a populist movement. Further, recent iterations of populism, particularly in the U.S, reveal that attitudes and values can change rapidly in relation to the emergence of particular leaders and movements. Drawing lessons from other parts of the world shows that populists are adept at repurposing collective norms and narratives toward new ends (Thompson, 2017). Thus, while it might seem reasonable to expect that continued support for political institutions and multiculturalism will insulate Canada from populism, counter-narratives, xenophobia and racial tensions do exist in Canada and may in fact be susceptible to populist mobilization. More acutely, evaluating the likelihood of a populist movement in Canada on the basis of social values alone pays attention to only one piece of the populism puzzle by ignoring the role of a strong, populist leader capable of mobilizing the masses.

### The Curious Case of Kellie Leitch

While it appears that right-wing populism faces significant barriers to enactment in Canada, this is far from an absolute certainty. The leadership campaign of Conservative MP Kellie Leitch appears to demonstrate both the opportunities for populism in Canada and its unlikelihood. On the surface, Leitch appears to be a highly unlikely practitioner of the populist political style. Prior to entering federal politics in 2010, Leitch worked as an orthopaedic pediatric surgeon and also taught at the University of Western Ontario. While she had a long-time involvement with the Conservative Party of Canada, Leitch did not run for office until 2010. Leitch successfully won the conservative nomination for the riding of Simcoe-Gray county and would later go on to win her seat in the 2011 general election. Leitch's education and professional background made her a highly reputable and promising member of the Conservative Party. Under the Harper government, Leitch would serve as the Minister for Labour and the Minister for the Status of Women up until the defeat of the government in 2015.

The 2015 federal election marked a turning point for Leitch in her political career and public image. In an effort to capitalize on public opinion polls showing support for the banning of religious head-coverings during citizenship ceremonies, Leitch and Conservative Immigration Minister, Chris Alexander jointly presented a proposal for the creation of a barbaric cultural practices tipline. The tipline would encourage members of the Canadian public to report individuals who they suspected may be engaged in violent cultural practices such as forced marriage, sexual slavery and honour-killings. This proposal was widely ridiculed and dismissed

as a thinly veiled attempt to capitalize on anti-Muslim racism. Leitch would later tearfully recant the proposal in a television interview, stating that despite her concern for the wellbeing of women and children if given a second opportunity she would not have offered her voice and support for the proposal.

Despite this about face, Leitch double downed on her hardline stances against cultural accommodation in her leadership campaign. As the first candidate entering the leadership race, there was little initial indication that Leitch would revisit the exclusionary, divisive politics she espoused during the federal election. This changed in early September when Leitch sent out an email survey to her supporters asking their opinions on whether immigrants should be screened for “anti-Canadian values”. This proposal sparked intense media attention for Leitch’s campaign, who shortly after released a statement supporting the introduction of direct, face-to-face screening procedures and a test for immigrants for anti-Canadian values. This proposal mirrored similar promises made by then U.S Presidential candidate Donald Trump to ban immigration from predominantly Muslim countries. For Leitch, the values test proposal marked the beginning of a highly populist campaign replete with policy proposals and rhetoric that targeted elites and dangerous others in defense of a homogenous Canadian people. Leitch cast the existing Liberal government along with her rivals as out-of-touch elites, who were weak and ineffective while offering policy proposals that included the elimination of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, the legalization of the possession and use of pepper spray and mace to protect women from assault, cracking down on anti-pipeline protests, and the introduction of citizen-initiated referendum. How did Leitch try to sell these proposals through her political performance? What exactly were the symbolic and discursive contours of this populist performance? How might we evaluate the strength of this performance through the lens of populist theory and comparisons with populists in other parts of the world?

### Methodology and Data

One of the key challenges in conducting this study almost a year after the leadership vote has concluded is collecting a comprehensive and systematic collection of campaign material. Many of the material relevant to this study such as campaign websites, emails to supporters and print-based campaign literature are simply unavailable. While this is a limitation it is not a fatal impediment to my study. Many of the key campaign communications are still publicly available in the form of YouTube videos, Facebook posts, television interviews and tweets. This current iteration of the paper relies solely on English-language written campaign communications and videos posted on Kellie Leitch’s official Facebook page. In total I have analyzed 57 Facebook posts and 25 videos. The focus on visual campaign communications is critical to the conceptualization of populism as a political style, whereby the embodied, symbolic and discursive aspects of political performance are brought under analysis. While I intend to expand the range of sources as I develop this paper further, in the interests of having findings to present, I have chosen to limit the scope of my data collection for the time being.

In my analysis, I employ an interpretivist methodology that focuses on the key tenants of political performance specified by Moffitt: the ‘People’ versus the ‘Elite’; bad manners; and crisis, breakdown and threat. To observe these in the campaign texts I have gathered, I began with a broad coding of aspects of my visual and textual sources into each of the three theoretical categories. Upon doing so, I re-analyzed the data to unpack the aspects of textual, symbolic, visual and embodied performance that connect the enactment of each of the three pillars of the populist style. By keeping flexibility in my approach, I am not looking for specific enactments of the populist style in the mould of other populists or a theoretical ideal type per se, but rather deducing aspects of Leitch’s performance that fit the general banner of each of the three pillars.

## Analysis

### *The People vs. The Elite: The Ambiguity of Canadian Values and The Absence of the People*

The defining feature of Leitch’s campaign was the much maligned introduction of a test for new immigrants on their possession of and commitment to Canadian values. The defining values of Canadian identity as identified by Leitch are hard work, generosity, freedom, tolerance, and equality. This nexus of values draws connections to core values of liberal democracy, as well as moral values normally associated with the protestant work ethic. Within her discourse, Leitch positions these values as historically situated, as rooted in the flourishing of early Canadian settler society. However, she decouples these values from euro-Canadian settlement, emphasizing that these values apply equal to all immigrating groups:

“Whether you were born in Canada, you came to Canada sometime ago, or even this week; It doesn’t matter when you came or where you came from.” (Campaign Launch Speech).

Much has been made of the ambiguity surrounding what Leitch means when referring to these values. The attempt to define “the people” through an ambiguous set of moral signifiers is a common strategy used by populists to unite a wide number of disparate social groups together. As Ardiiti (2007) notes, ambiguity in defining who fits within the category of the people allows populists to render present a broad social collective without ever drawing firm boundaries of whose identities can fit under the banner of ‘the people’. In this way, defining Canadian identity using ambiguous, flexible values provides avenues for a variety of groups to imagine themselves as part of “the people” and see Leitch as speaking on their behalf.

While there is ambiguity as to who “the people” are within Leitch’s discourse and performance, the other side of the dichotomy, “the elites”, is far more clear. Leitch identifies the elites as “the mainstream media, the Ottawa bubble and even some conservatives” (Campaign Launch Speech). This framing of the political establishment as comprised of politicians, political insiders and media members out-of-touch and out-of-tune with the public will is fairly consistent with the discourse of populists’ from other parts of the world. More germane to her campaign, the dichotomy between the people who subscribe to an ambiguous set of Canadian values and elites who are out of touch or unwilling to listen to the people provided a built in defense for her campaign against accusations of racism and islamophobia. For Leitch, criticisms of her definition

of Canadian identity become the musings of an out-of-touch elite, as she made clear during her convention speech when she proclaimed: “We have no identity Justin Trudeau? You and your elite friends are wrong!”

While the discursive contours of her construction of the people and the elite fits the mould of other international examples of populism, Leitch’s performance of populism does not clearly establish a connection between herself and the people she is claiming to speak for. This is evident in Leitch’s epistemological contradiction of drawing on both common-sense and elite knowledge to justify her campaign policies. Leitch’s populist performance also falls short in establishing a sense of “virtual immediacy” between herself and the people.

While Canadian populists in the past have seen success by framing their policies as supported by “common sense” and in line with the opinion of the general public, Leitch is inconsistent in her evocation of common sense. On the one hand, Leitch strategically uses performances of connecting with the people when framing her proposal for the Canadian values test. For example, rather than merely introducing her proposal in a straightforward press-release or official announcement, Leitch introduced her values test in an email survey to her campaign followers. This not only helped to generate media attention, but also served as a way to link her proposals to the public will. By introducing her proposal within a consultation with her supporters, Leitch performativity linked her values test with the public will. Her official announcement of the values test that followed made sure to link her proposal to a mandate from the Canadian public:

“Over the last several months I’ve been traveling the country, speaking to Canadians who are members of the public and those who are not. Everywhere I go, I hear the same message: Canadians are proud of their identity and shared values. No matter where I’ve been, I’ve heard the same thing: Canadians want a leader that will protect and promote our shared values. This is the direction that I’ve received from Canadians.” (Campaign Launch Speech)

The framing of common sense also provides an avenue to insulate her proposals from criticism from those that might view her proposals as unfairly targeting ethnic minorities:

“I’m confident that the majority of Canadians agree, a discussion of our Canadian values is not racist, xenophobic or anti-immigrant; it’s just common sense.” (Campaign Launch Speech)

However, while Leitch links her values test to the public will, shrouding the proposal as “common sense” and supported by the majority of Canadians, other aspects of her performance deviate from epistemological appeals to the public will. While initially framing her values screening proposal as common sense and supported by the majority of Canadians, as her campaign progressed she began to justify her proposal using elite sources of knowledge. For example, during her first debate performance, Kellie Leitch justified her values test proposal using the work of McMaster University Sociologist, Vic Satzewich, holding up a copy of his book, *Points of Entry: How Canada’s Immigration Officers Decide Who Gets In*. This integration of appeals to public opinion with elite knowledge conflicts with the populist style. In incorporating appeals to elite knowledge in her political performance, Leitch obscures her connection with the people and undermines her image as a champion of the public will.

While an epistemological disconnect emerges between Leitch and the public will over the course of her campaign, one of the key features undermining Leitch's populist performance is the absence of "the people" within the imagery and symbolism used by her campaign. With the exception of her campaign launch and convention speech, the videos and imagery offered by her campaign fail to render visible the people. The settings for Leitch's campaign rarely include visual representations of the people or locations that establish a connection to the proverbial "heartland" (Taggart, 2000) where the people reside. Instead, her campaign videos take place in locations that exude the very connection to elitism that Leitch is rallying against. Her most famous campaign imagery is comprised of videos released on her Facebook page where she presented her core campaign promises. While much has been made of Leitch's awkward and wooden delivery during these videos, more importantly the setting of these videos undermines her presentation as a populist. All of these videos take place in a dimly lit, wood-paneled office, in front of a large desk and Canadian flag. This setting conveys a status of elitism as oppose to an imagery of ordinariness that populists must perform in order to establish a connection with the people. Other examples of her campaign imagery also serve to undermine her populist credentials. For instance, while positioning her campaign as an organized insurrection against "the Ottawa bubble", Leitch frequently stages her campaign videos on Parliament Hill. Rather than symbolizing an outsider status so many populists have traded in, this staging creates the perception of Leitch as a political insider. As Moffitt (2016) notes, while many analyses of populism focus on the direct relationship between populists and their followers, supporters rarely establish a direct connection with politics leaders. Instead the bond between populists and the people are developed through mediated images that create a "virtual immediacy" that locates the leader as part of or near the people. Leitch's campaign communications and imagery rarely demonstrate Leitch's connection to the people. Instead Leitch seeks to appeal to the people through images that reinforce her own elitism and membership within the political establishment.

### *Bad Manners: The Well-Behaved Populist*

One of the critical tasks for populists in order to establish a connection to the people is by positioning themselves as an outsider within the political establishment and being one with the people. Moffitt notes that populists are forced to balance 2 contradictory attributes: being of the people on one hand, while demonstrating themselves as extraordinary leaders capable of taking on the political establishment on the other (Moffitt, 2016, 57). In other words, populists must balance the competing traits of ordinariness and extraordinariness in order to successfully perform the populist style.

While almost all politicians seek to demonstrate a degree of ordinariness in their background, populists take this performance to an extreme in an effort to exaggerate their proximity to the people in contrast to their opponents. In order to interpret the self-presentation of ordinariness in Leitch's campaign, we can deploy Moffitt concept of bad manners referring to deliberate behaviour that contravenes accepted standards of behaviour for how one should act in the political realm. In studying Leitch's campaign performance, there are frequent rhetorical barbs thrown at the supposed political correctness of her opponents and media elites. For

example, in a video stating her opposition to Motion 103, a non-binding motion that called on the Government of Canada to condemn Islamophobia, Leitch states her opposition to the motion on the grounds that it represents an institutionalization of political correctness at the expense of free speech. Another example of Leitch's performative opposition to political correctness, is one of her campaign fundraising efforts conducted under the banner "Revenge of the Comment Section." This fundraising initiative saw Leitch rally her supporters maligned by the mainstream press as angry Internet commenters. Leitch appears to be actively stoking those engaging with politically incorrect speech to support her campaign while positioning herself within their ranks.

However, while making proclamations against political correctness, nowhere in Leitch's political performance does she herself engage in any form of political incorrectness. Leitch altogether avoids the use of slang, curse words or slurs commonly deployed by populists to demonstrate their ordinariness. Instead, Leitch's language, composure and style of dress all remain fairly technocratic and adhere to accepted standards of political behaviour. Thus, it would appear that while condemning political correctness in her discourse, Leitch fails to engage in performative acts that would see her engage in the very type of political incorrectness she is calling for.

While the performance of ordinariness through bad manners is a critical component of the populist style, populists must also demonstrate their extraordinariness as well. Populism as a performative style requires a leader capable of elevating themselves above the people as someone capable of fixing their problems and taking on the political establishment. Populists do this by various symbolic and embodied performances that seek to demonstrate the unity and strength of the people through their own physical health and strength. In Leitch's campaign performance, strength is performed largely in relation to her positions on illegal immigration, natural resource development and reforming self-defence laws. In her videos promoting these policy positions, Leitch maintains a masculine demeanor through her embodied performance, maintaining a firm, upright posture while delivering her policy proposals with a stern, emotionless delivery. The masculinity of Leitch's performance is heightened by the use of closed-off, zoomed in camera angles centred on her face that emphasize the seriousness, resolute, zero-tolerance positions Leitch is proposing. Leitch's performance of masculine traits helps to demonstrate her proposals for tough, decisive actions against those contravening Canada's laws and policies.

While masculine traits are evident in Leitch's performance, the literature on populism has shown that female populists are required to balance the masculine traits of strength and virility with feminine qualities such as the demonstrate of caring, empathy and maternalism (Moffitt, 2015, 66; Meret, 2015). While Leitch has aspects of her personal and professional history as a pediatric surgeon that could be integrated into her performance to introduce her feminine qualities, these are completely absent from her campaign performance. Instead, Leitch's performance is offered in the mold of the classic populist strongman. In light of the literature on gender and populism, the absence of clear performances of gendered traits seems to work against Leitch's enactment of the populist style.

### *Crisis: Gendering the Threat of Immigration and the Absence of Economic Crises*

Despite the absence of embodiments of femininity in Leitch's performance, the core of Leitch's deployment of the populist style rests on a highly gendered performance of crisis. The performance of crisis is a key dimension of the populist style, helping consolidate populist's definition of 'the people' through the construction of some type of immediate threat, while also providing an objective rationale for the types of sweeping institutional reforms proposed by populists. Moffitt states that for a convincing performance of crisis, populists must "spectacularise" some type of institutional failure to create the perception of the existence of some type of social, political or cultural crisis (121). Within Leitch's performance, the key institutional failure that she identifies is the inability of the immigration system to adequately screen and vet immigrants. According to Leitch, the absence of face-to-face interviews with new immigrants leads to individuals who hold values and opinions antithetical to Canadian values and mores. Thus, rather than being a security threat to commit acts of terrorism that threaten the public safety of Canadians, immigrants are a cultural threat, possessing values that undermine the freedom and tolerance that characterizes Canadian society.

While Leitch frames her performance of crisis in largely in terms of cultural values, she links the cultural threat posed by immigrants to physical safety through a gendering of her performance. Leitch's discussion of her values test is promoted as a recognition that "men and women are equal" and as a signal to newcomers that "violence and misogyny" will not be tolerated (Campaign Launch Speech). The linkage between Leitch's proposed values test and the safety of women is further emphasized in Leitch's performance in a Facebook video she released congratulating Malala Yousafzai on her honorary Canadian citizenship. Leitch uses the video as a reminder for Canadians that "we have to make the choices to ensure that we live in freedom and tolerance." Leitch commends Yousafzai while highlighting the vulnerability of women and girls in other societies that do not share the same cultural values as Canada. The use of gendered threats offers a bridge for Leitch to link the crisis of immigration to a more general sense of crisis and threat facing women. One of Leitch's other most notable proposals, was the proposal to legalize pepper spray and mace as a way for women to protect themselves against would be attackers. While framing her proposal as a "sensible solution" to the widespread issue of violence against women, Leitch highlights the inadequacies of the Canadian criminal code to protect women, stating "women should not be forced by the law to be victims of violence." Leitch heightens the sense of crisis around violence against women by citing statistics Canada reports that outline the proportion of women who experience physical or sexual violence in their lifetime. This discursive linkage between other cultures, violence against women and immigration is evocative of the populist style of politics which seeks to link various types of institutional failings together to perpetuate a sense of immediate crisis.

While Leitch's gendered discourse allows for the linking of unfiltered immigration and violence against women, she fails to draw broader connections to the other components of her platform. For instance, her economic policies offer many of the same bread and butter conservative policies developed over the Harper era. Absent in any of her performances is a linking of the crises of immigration with economics. This strategy has proven successful for

populists in other parts of the world and in past iterations of populism in Canada. In the past, right-wing populists have based much of their appeals to hard-work taxpaying Canadians, whose hard-earned money becomes misused by politicians to fund welfare services and multicultural projects. The failure to link the sense of crisis she is conveying to economics ultimately works against the performance of a more general sense of crisis that would lend support for the simple and direct policies she is advocating. As Laylock (2005) notes, past iterations of right wing populists incorporate a sense of economic inequality and crises within their performance

“Right-populism in the Reform, Alliance, and some provincial Progressive Conservative and Liberal parties, identifies the people in much more local and recognisable terms: they are ordinary, hard-working Canadians who have financed an unfairly redistributive and freedom-denying regulatory welfare state. The people have not benefited from these social programmes and regulations, because they are hard-working and law-abiding, because they have been over-taxed, and because they are not members of the special interests.” (199)

The failure to offer a populist performance in support of her economic policies appears to ignore a tried and true strategy that has proven useful for past right-wing politicians who have deployed the populist style.

### Discussion and Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that over the course of her 2016 Conservative Party of Canada leadership campaign, Kellie Leitch failed to perform core tenants of the populist style of politics. In particular, Leitch failed to position herself as advocate for ‘the people’ by delivering performances that demonstrate her ordinariness and outsider status, as well as by relying on epistemological appeals to elite sources of knowledge. Leitch’s performance as a populist also loses resonance in her inability to practice behaviour contravening established norms of behaviour in the political sphere. Finally, in performing crisis in her campaign, Leitch fails to extend the scope of institutional breakdown to the sphere of economics, offering a populist performance that does not incorporate strategies that have proven successful for Canadian populists in the past.

In critiquing Leitch’s performance, I am not implying that many of the structural factors limiting the likelihood of right-wing populism in Canada do not matter or that Leitch’s failure stems solely from the inadequacy of her performance of the populist style. In general, I agree with the analyses that the overall resiliency of public values supporting multiculturalism, economic-focused immigration and trust in public institutions limits the types of populism observed in other parts of the world (Adams, 2017). However, what these analyses ignore is that populism does not emerge organically out of public disaffection, but rather, populism is created, exaggerated and mobilized by individual political leaders. It is quite clear that Leitch failed to offer a performance on par with populists in other parts of the world.

As I develop this paper further, I would like to delve into more detail comparisons between Leitch's performance and past examples of populism. As Moffitt (2016) and others have shown, the contours of a populist performance are contingent on the social and cultural norms of the society in which it unfurls. It is clear from an analysis of Kellie Leitch's performance of crisis that it deviates from the previous enactments of populism performed by such Canadian populists as Preston Manning, Stephen Harper, Doug Ford and Mike Harris. Thus, while we might not expect the emergence of a populist in the mould of Geert Wilders, Donald Trump or Marine Le Pen, this does not exclude the possibility of a right-wing populist altogether. Rather, what Canada may be waiting for, is a populist leader able to connect with the social and cultural values of Canadians. From the analysis above, it is clear that Kellie Leitch was not that populist. Further, there is the somewhat confounding role of gender in Kellie Leitch's performance that I am not quite sure how to unravel. On the one hand, Leitch refrains from outward displays of femininity preferring instead to project a masculine image, while at the same time offering a highly gendered performance of crisis. Any feedback or insight into how I might work through these observations further is greatly appreciated.

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