Right-wing Populism, Conservative Governance and Multiculturalism in Canada

David Laycock and Steven Weldon

Department of Political Science
Simon Fraser University
Burnaby, British Columbia
Canada

for presentation in ECPR Joint Sessions Workshop

The influence of radical right populist parties on policy-making in Europe

29 April 2017
1. Introducing the question

During the fall 2015 Canadian federal election campaign, Prime Minister Stephen Harper surprised observers by announcing, one month before the election, that his Conservative government would not permit Muslim women to wear the niqab during their citizenship ceremonies. This move and the government’s announcement of a ‘barbaric practices hotline’ gave the Conservatives a temporary boost in the polls, \(^1\) but was not enough to win the election. The new Liberal government cancelled the Conservative initiative to ban niqab use in citizenship ceremonies. So perhaps we should just see PM Harper’s niqab ban as a cynical political ploy, and forget it?

In this paper we argue that exploring this calculated campaign move can enhance our understanding of populism in Canada, but not because it revealed a core ideological commitment among populist conservatives in Canada. Harper’s attack on the niqab did play dangerously with an increasing Islamophobia in Canada. And it did make indirect contact with a once-prominent anti non-white immigrant theme in 1980s and ‘90s Canadian right-populist discourses. However, as right populists came closer to power, other ideological concerns drove their efforts to re-fashion Canadian multiculturalism.

Unlike right-populist politics in much of Europe and the USA (Akkerman2012, Norris and Inglehart 2016, Edsall 2017), anti-immigrant and anti-visible minority themes were not central to populist conservatism in Canada after the right-populist Reform Party of Canada re-branded itself as the Canadian Alliance party. Such themes became even more marginal following the Canadian Alliance party merger with the Progressive Conservative Party of Canada, which created the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC) in 2004. And despite the survival of populist anti-statism and populist plebiscitarianism in the new party (Laycock 2012), populist nativism is unlikely to set the agenda for the CPC in the foreseeable future.\(^2\) Having worked hard after 2004 to include immigrant communities in its electoral coalition, and benefitting from a substantial visible minority vote in its 2008 and 2011 electoral victories, the CPC can’t afford to ‘do a Trump’ and let its vocal nativist minority\(^3\) set its agenda and define its public appeal.
This paper demonstrates that while some contents and concepts of Canadian right-wing populism have migrated northward from the USA, circumstances unique to Canada have required populist conservatism to approach multiculturalism in ways that set it apart from right-wing populisms in the rest of the western world. The Conservative Party’s populism was more strategic about developing a politics of exclusion, because its principal goal was not excluding visible minorities, but degrading the welfare state.

If advancing this central goal seemed to require the targeting of Muslims on occasion, the Conservative Party did so. But encouraging nativism was a rather desperate electoral tactic, not a basic ideological rationale for such action. Nonetheless, the Conservative party’s use of this wedge politics tactic does pose questions about a fragility in Canadian multiculturalism often overlooked by Canadian and foreign commentators. By addressing these questions, we can more easily make sense of both populist conservatism and multiculturalism in Canada.

Following some initial comments on the nature of populism’s encounters with multiculturalism, we characterize Canadian multiculturalism in broad conceptual and policy terms. We look at Canadian attitudes towards immigration and multiculturalism, and consider how significant attitudinal opposition to both provides a basis for its manipulation by partisan and other forces. We’ll then attempt to understand recent right-populist objections to egalitarian aspects of Canadian multiculturalism.

Our aim is to answer one question and explore another. First, in both ideological and policy terms, what is distinctive about the recent right-wing populist version of Canadian multiculturalism? Second, what is the prospect for nativist promotion of openly anti-immigration, anti-multicultural policies within conservative populism in Canada?

To the first question, we’ll argue that the Conservative Party’s efforts to push Canada off one of its key normative commitments to multiculturalism is part of a broader CPC agenda of undermining key elements of Canadian citizens’ and governments’ commitments to the welfare state. The common normative denominator here is a liberal
egalitarian conception of equality that North American conservatism has targeted with special urgency since 1978, albeit often indirectly through campaigns for tax cuts, deregulation of the state/market interface, and social welfare ‘entitlement reform’.

In strategic terms, the CPC has worked to increase the range of ‘wedge politics’ issues and to develop an asymmetrical political polarization that favours a party that has best learned to exploit political vulnerabilities within Canada’s extended experience with multiculturalism. Later in the paper, a brief analysis of 2015 Canadian Election Study data allows us to explore the openings for a more American and European version of populist conservatism’s reaction to multiculturalism.

Our argument requires conceptual clarification of the relationships between populism, multiculturalism and equality. This allows us to see how the Canadian experience with multiculturalism incorporates two distinct liberal ideas of equality that lead in different directions, with contrasting political implications and applications. These ideas align reasonably closely with Canadian left and right-wing populisms’ distinctive positions on equality, expressed in a century long battle over the development of a complex federal welfare state in Canada (and the USA). The genius of recent right-populism in Canada has been to advance its central agenda by exploiting the ambiguity regarding equality inside Canadian multiculturalism.

II. Populism, Multiculturalism and Equality

1. defining populism in multicultural societies

Cas Mudde and Cristobal Kaltewasser’s operational and minimalist definition of populist ideology focuses on its positing of a basic social division between ‘the people’ and ‘elites’, its attribution of moral purity to the people, and corruption to the elite, and its view that politics ought to express the general will of the people. (Mudde and Kaltewasser 2012, 8) Explaining how we disagree with some aspects of their approach to populism is an efficient way to raise issues of importance for the study of populist parties’ dealings with multiculturalism.
i. Mudde and Kaltewasser’s focus on the moral thrust of populist politics tends to analytically exclude strategic aspects of these politics from analysis of populist ideology. Doing so overlooks the intertwining of political strategy and invocation of “the people” in all populisms. Examining the strategic dimension of populist politics helps us to understand modern right-populist adoption of plebiscitarian agenda-setting and discursive exclusion of selected groups from ‘the people’, which gained new prominence in Donald Trump’s campaign for the American presidency. In Canada over the past 30 years, right-populist reaction to multiculturalism has evolved in a complex interplay of ideological and strategic political dimensions.

ii. Mudde and Kaltewasser draw a valuable distinction between exclusive and inclusive populisms’ drawing of boundaries between “the people” and “the elite”. (Mudde and Kaltewasser 2013). This distinction moves us analytically and empirically beyond a Eurocentric framing of all populism as extremely nativist and anti-immigrant, and acknowledges left-populism as a politically relevant species of populism. The politics of inclusion and exclusion are central to debates over multiculturalism and immigration, so focusing on the dynamics of exclusion and inclusion builds a valuable bridge between studying populism and appreciating its navigation of any particular multicultural environment. But Mudde and Kaltewasser’s application of this distinction inclines them to overlook the clues to be found in leader, party and movement discourse that populist politics is often effective – on both the left and the right – because its appeals blur the line between inclusion and exclusion in complex ways.

iii. This complex blurring occurs within and across what Mudde and Kaltewasser identify as the mutually constituting material, political and symbolic dimensions of populist discourse and governing practice. (Ibid) As we show later, the Canadian case illustrates that exclusion can be informal rather than simply formal and/or obvious, and can turn on how key concepts like equality and popular sovereignty are utilized in constructing social and political antagonisms. The Canadian case also shows how exclusion can be a by-product of a strategically deployed plebiscitarian leadership style.
iv. For Mudde and Kaltewasser, three core concepts are ‘necessary and sufficient conditions of populist ideology’: “the pure people, the corrupt elite and the general will.” This means that “actors or parties that employ only an anti-elitist rhetoric should not be categorized as populist.” (Ibid, 2013, 151) But populist appeals are decisive for a left-wing or right-wing party’s appeal beyond its true believers, not just to this small portion of the electorate. In Michael Freeden’s approach to ideology analysis, distinguishing between strategically rhetorical claims and ideological core concepts is part of determining how a logic of ideological structuring ties them together. (Freeden 1996, ch. 3). By focussing so much on core concepts while constraining the study of populism to ‘pure cases’, Mudde and Kaltewasser deprive us of important analytical traction on much populist activity in modern parties, such as Canada’s Conservative party.

Mudde and Kaltewasser draw on Freeden to contend that populisms are ‘thin ideologies’ that must rely on a more comprehensive ideology for basic ideological moorings, and many concepts and policies (2013). But this implies that no populism can constitute its ideological core with just these 3 core concepts. Part of its core must be imported from the more comprehensive ideology on which it relies. Nor should we expect that any populism can be so unresponsive to the changing orientations of its larger ideological partner(s) that it must retain some variant of each of these 3 core concepts, as core concepts, no matter what the political competition throws at them. The point, then, is that any particular populism will have a more complex ideological core than Mudde and Kaltewasser propose.

Donald Trump’s appeal, for example, obviously has something to do with populism. His attack on a ‘corrupt elite’ is clear enough; however, his appeal has no central commitment to the idea of a ‘pure people’ or its General Will. Versions of these ideas are indirectly invoked at less significant levels in Trump’s appeal, but other ideas – a golden age of middle-class, white America, or America as a declining society under attack by anti-Christian forces – are more important. Trying to stuff all of his appeals and ideas into three conceptual holders to salvage a claim that Trump’s populism is consequential to his campaign or presidency doesn’t seem the best analytical path here.
This general point extends to our Canadian case. The dominant ideological orientation of the Conservative party of Canada is a conservative neo-liberalism. But when he engineered the creation of the CPC in 2003, Stephen Harper understood that gaining power would require keeping some of the populist ideological content and appeal of its predecessor, the Reform Party. And he learned quickly that a frontal attack on the version of multiculturalism imbedded by federal and provincial governments since 1971 would doom his party to perpetual opposition party status.

The USA, the UK and Australia offer other examples of conservative parties blending populism with their conservatism to stay competitive in single member plurality electoral systems. In Canada, this has resulted in an electorally competitive Conservative party with a uniquely hybrid conservative-populist ideological core. The concepts of “the pure people, the corrupt elite and the general will” have been modified within the core, or downgraded to less central roles in Conservative ideology, in the service of a Hayekian and social conservative-inspired long game of undermining the welfare state. To achieve this, incorporating a reconstituted understanding of multiculturalism into the core concept of ‘the people’ has been essential to Conservative party success. As we will see, this involved a complex combination of ‘inclusive’ and ‘exclusive’ populist appeals.

2. Multiculturalism
The Canadian variant of multiculturalism has a distinctive history and combination of objectives, policies, constitutional commitments and foundations in public opinion.

a. Canada as a ‘settler nation’
Like the USA, Canada has been a ‘settler nation’ since the 17th century. Unlike the USA, Canada had ‘two founding peoples” from Europe. Long experience working out co-habitational arrangements between a majority and minority settler culture gave Canada a major head start in moving towards an officially multicultural society in the 1970s.
Until the 1960s, almost all of the non-British and non-American immigration to Canada was European. The first wave of non-European immigration came from the Caribbean and South Asia in the 1960s. 60,000 Vietnamese ‘boat people’ came to Canada in 1979-80, and almost 170,000 from Hong Kong between 1988 and 1993. Since 1981, over 50% of immigrants to Canada have been from Asia, principally China, India and the Philippines. In 2011, 21% of Canada’s population was foreign-born, compared to 13% in Germany and the USA. The proportion of households in 2011 with English mother tongues in English Canada’s two largest cities was under 50%, though English predominates in many but not all suburbs. Other large Canadian cities have notably fewer recent immigrants, but in most over 20% of residents’ primary language is not English or French. Demographically, urban Canada is unmistakably multicultural.

The federal government’s two refugee programs work well for successful applicants, but waiting lists are long and many applicants are unsuccessful. With the notable exception of over 40,000 Syrian refugees arriving since fall 2015, refugees have made up a small percentage of immigrants. In a normal year 5% of Canadian immigrants are refugees; in 2016 it was around 10%, less than 1/3 of recent European levels.

Over the past 20 years, but especially under Conservative governments since 2006, the needs of the Canadian economy have dominated Canadian immigration policy. Under the Harper government, priority was given to applicants willing to invest at least $350,000 CAN (just under € 250,000) to applicants with a working language of English or French, and to those filling skills shortages in the Canadian labour market.

Canada’s refugee/non-refugee immigration mix is markedly different than in most of Europe. Canada’s focus on admitting selected ‘economic immigrants’ with substantial personal resources has meant that the costs associated with ‘multicultural integration’ over the past decade have been proportionately lower than a mix dominated by low income, poorly educated and linguistically or otherwise disadvantaged refugees. Large suburban immigrant enclaves with high levels of unemployment are rare in Canada.
b. Multiculturalism since 1971

i. objectives and policy anchors

Canada’s “multicultural integration” approach to multiculturalism blends government programs that consciously develop respect for immigrant cultures with programs that integrate immigrants socially, economically and politically. (Banting, 2014, 67-68).

Banting argues that Canadian governments take ‘civic integration’ seriously, focusing on “active integration of immigrants into the economic, social, and political mainstream; a “muscular” defence of liberal democratic principles, insistence that newcomers acquire the language of the host country and learn about its history, norms, and institutions; and the introduction of written citizenship tests.” (Banting, 2014, 67-68).

However, Banting also shows that respect for diversity and civic integration in Canada has involved a careful mix of programs, with voluntary as well as mandatory policy instruments. Canada’s “full incorporation regime” includes programs regulating immigrant admission and settlement, free and accessible language instruction, as well as “diversity policies, anti-discrimination provisions, labour market regulations, the education and health care systems, and regulations governing naturalization.” (Ibid, 68)

Efforts at developing respect for diversity extend to the public school system, which stresses the multicultural fact and its normative foundations. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s mandate requires it to reflect Canada’s “multicultural and multiracial nature”. The national police force exempts members from official dress codes for religious reasons that are related to cultural minorities. Affirmative action programs in federal and provincial public sector hiring enhance “employment equity” for immigrants who have become permanent residents or citizens. (Banting 2014, 71-72) And the federal and provincial governments fund programs for Canadian civil society organizations to provide counseling to newcomers. (Ibid, 73)

Canadian government spending on immigrant integration is primarily on voluntary instruments. As in much of Europe, immigrants to Canada are offered free language training, job search and training and other integration services. But unlike most
European governments, the Canadian government does not make access to social benefits or continued residency depend on immigrant use of the integration services. Canadian federal and provincial governments have explicitly celebrated diversity since 1971, as “part of a state-led redefinition of national identity … to build an identity more reflective of Canada’s cultural complexity.” (Ibid, 74) No European nation has taken in such a large proportion of immigrants relative to population. This effort to re-define Canadian national identity has reduced cultural barriers that may prevent immigrants from developing a strong sense of belonging. Recent research on immigrants’ attitudes towards their adopted Canadian community shows that they are very positive compared to those of immigrants to Europe and the USA. (Wright and Bloemraad, 2012).

ii. Constitutional anchors of multiculturalism and equality
The re-definition of Canadian national identity since the late 1960s includes key constitutional changes in 1981 introduced by the Liberal government of Pierre Trudeau. Most obviously, section 27 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms states that the whole Charter “shall be interpreted in a manner consistent with the preservation and enhancement of the multicultural heritage of Canadians.” Less obvious, but more important, the Charter’s equality commitments in section 15 have important implications for policy design affecting ethnic minorities in Canada. Section 15(1) lays down a baseline commitment to equality under the law. It protects all citizens against discrimination “based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.” But s. 15(1) is an abstract protective device. It neither mandates nor sanctions particular types of government intervention into the market economy or other aspects of civil society where discrimination might occur. It supports a minimalist or formal conception of multicultural equality in the Charter.

The Charter’s Section 15(2) presents a more demanding normative justification for state measures to mitigate a wide range of social inequalities. S. 15(2) clarified that s. 15(1) “does not preclude any law, program or activity that has as its object the amelioration of conditions of disadvantaged individuals or groups including those that are
disadvantaged because of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.”

Canadian courts have interpreted s. 15(2) to mean that affirmative action hiring and other measures aimed at overcoming group-based disadvantages, in the workplace and larger socio-political arena, are consistent with the constitutionally sanctioned core understanding of Canadian equality. And they have made it clear that included among the groups assisted by this constitutional provision are women, LGBT individuals, the elderly, and the disabled, as well as ethnic minorities, including recent immigrants claiming refugee status. (Hurley 2007)

Since the late 1980s, right-populists and conservatives in Canada have seen the Courts’ interpretation of equality as a massive obstacle to implementation of their anti-statist and/or anti-egalitarian agendas, and as an attack on the traditional family and Christian values. Most of the ideological firepower for this critique, including its invocation of ‘states’ rights’ arguments and themes from the American ‘culture war’ over women’s rights and gay rights, came from the conservative movement in the USA (Laycock, 2005; Farney, 2012). To counter the liberal egalitarian view of equality as justifying substantial state intervention, the Reform Party and leading lights in the later Conservative party of Canada followed American conservatives in proposing ‘equality under the law’, with no ‘special rights’ for specific groups, and no warrant for state intervention in labour markets or other redistribution of resources and opportunities. (Laycock 2001 and 2005) There should thus be no surprise that during its tenure in federal government from 2006-2015, the Conservative party of Canada attempted to re-cast multiculturalism based on a formal equality rather than an expansive, state-intervention-validating conception of substantive equality.

c. public opinion towards multiculturalism, immigration and refugees

Drawing on available research in 2010, Will Kymlicka argued that Canadians view immigrants and demographic diversity as key parts of their identity. Compared to every other Western democracy, Canadians are more likely to say that immigration is beneficial … and more likely
to support multiculturalism and to view it as a source of pride. ... Compared to other countries, ... naturalized immigrants are more likely to participate in the political process as voters, party members or even candidates for political office. (Kymlicka, 2010, 7-9)

Two recent surveys complicate this picture. An August 2016 survey on attitudes towards immigration by Ipsos-Reid questioned 16,040 residents in 24 countries. 44% of Canadian respondents said immigration was causing their country to change in ways they didn’t like, much like German (44%), Spanish (41%) and Swedish (41%) respondents but well below those in most other European countries. When asked whether immigration has had a positive impact on their country, Canadians led most Europeans by quite a margin, and were very slightly ahead of UK and US residents. However, the proportion of those who agreed that immigration has had a positive impact was still only 36%.15 In September 2016, the Angus Reid Institute found that while 68% of Canadians believed that “minorities should do more to fit in with mainstream Canadian society,” 67% said they were satisfied with the way newcomers were integrating into their own communities. (Angus Reid Institute, 2016)

Charles Breton’s recent analysis of Canadian attitudes towards immigration and ethnic minorities argued that Canadians are not fundamentally onside with their governments’ multicultural policies. His analysis of 2011 data found that: 74% disagreed (47% strongly) that “ethnic minorities should be given government assistance to preserve their customs and traditions,”60% wanted immigration to be more difficult, and 48% saw “all those different cultures” as a threat to Canadian values. In marked contrast, 83% of respondents supported giving “ethnic minorities … the same political rights as the Canadian people”. (Breton, 2015, 367-69). And an analysis of 2011 Canadian Election Study data by Dietlind Stolle and her colleagues revealed that “when confronted with concrete policies and real benefits, the average Canadian seems to be relatively hesitant to support financial grants [to ethnic organizations], but more willing to make public space available [to these groups]” (Stolle et al 2016, 344-45)

This all suggests that “Canadians … definitely do not support a basic tenet of multiculturalism: government financially supporting ethnic minorities.”(368) Even if
Canadian national identity does not have what Breton calls “the exclusionary potential of many of its European counterparts” (376), Canadian multiculturalism has less public support than is often assumed, and this can be exploited by politicians.

III. Right-populism and multiculturalism in national politics since 1986.

a. The Reform Party of Canada
The Reform Party of Canada was created in 1986. It attracted western regionalists, anti-statists, free marketeers, direct democracy enthusiasts, opponents of a strong federal government, and social conservatives. In 1992 Reform was the only party to oppose the Charlottetown constitutional reform package, designed to accommodate Quebec’s concerns about the preservation of its distinctive community in a national referendum. The Reform party led a successful campaign against what it called a back room deal among self-serving politicians and ‘special interests’, and emerged as the leading populist, anti-old party political force. It broke into the federal party system in the 1993 federal election, taking 52 seats in Parliament and becoming the only substantial opposition party left in English Canada. 51 of its 52 seats came from Canada’s four western provinces. (Laycock 2001; Flanagan, 1995)

The Reform party’s right-wing critique of taxes, fiscal deficits, state intervention and the welfare state all had an impact on public discussion, and helped to push the Liberal government towards welfare state retrenchment and austerity measures. Successful right-wing provincial parties and English Canadian media support for fiscal conservatism and tax cuts complemented Reform party efforts to steer public policy to the right. The Reform party’s anti-statism prevented it from being attracted by or offering a version of the ‘welfare chauvinism’ of European right-populist parties.

The Reform party’s limited western regional appeal led to a re-branding in 2000 as the Canadian Conservative and Reform Alliance party. Shortly after Stephen Harper became the Alliance party leader in 2003, he engineered a merger of the Progressive Conservative party to form the Conservative party of Canada. Harper’s ideological
bearings were mostly Hayekian, but as an evangelical Christian, he also appealed to the party’s social conservatives. From 2006-15 his party formed two minority governments and one majority government by appearing to be more centrist than its activists.

The Reform Party and multiculturalism

Like the new right elsewhere, Canada’s Reform party opposed expansion of equality rights under the banner of ‘no special rights for special interests’ and opposition to elite power. This opposition was undertaken against the backdrop of constitutional reform that had legitimized state intervention on behalf of women and ethnic minority groups. Reform’s opposition to constitutionalized minority rights for ethnic minorities occasionally erupted in politically awkward opposition to immigration or visible minorities. More frequently, it was expressed as a demand for ‘private multiculturalism’ and abolition of federal programs that support multiculturalism. In the 1993 election campaign, the Reform party proposed leaving “[i]ndividuals and groups free to preserve their cultural heritage using their own resources.” Federal politicians, bureaucrats and ethnic community leaders supportive of state expenditures to promote multicultural integration, ethnic cultural development and public respect for ethnic diversity were portrayed by the Reform Party as ‘elites’ insisting on ‘special rights’ not enjoyed by ordinary Canadians. (Laycock 2001).

Official Reform Party opposition to governments’ efforts to build multiculturalism was not openly nativist. Multiculturalism had been woven into the Canadian welfare state through conscious federal and provincial government program design since the late 1960s. The 1982 Charter had, in effect, constitutionalized the normative basis of this interweaving, legitimizing what Hayekian conservatives, social conservatives and right-wing populists saw as an ominous pattern of egalitarian overreach by the post-war state.

Reform party leaders wanted to de-legitimize and then eliminate this overreach, not just with regard to ethnic minorities but across all aspects of social and economic redistribution. Their political challenge was to oppose and undermine a demanding conception of multicultural equality while not appearing to reject equality or
multiculturalism per se.

b. The Conservative government, right-populism and a redefined multiculturalism

1. the political calculus

When Stephen Harper’s Conservative party won the 2006 federal election, it seemed that he had imposed a substantial ideological change on his party in order to win support from a centrist electorate in an SMP electoral system. Earlier Reform and Canadian Alliance proposals for radical tax cuts, program cuts, transformation of state structures and promotion of direct democracy had been replaced, in the 2006 election manifesto and campaign, with a series of incremental policy changes. And it initially seemed that the Conservatives had stepped into line with the “pan-Canadian consensus” on multiculturalism. (Pennings and Van Pelt 2006).

This story of ideological transformation misses the careful calculation regarding multiculturalism involved in taking the new party to power. Harper and his key advisors understood that acquiring and maintaining power required a new strategy with regard to the numerous ethnic minority group voters in Canada’s major cities in Ontario and Quebec. These cities had been electoral wastelands for the CPC’s Reform and Canadian Alliance party predecessors between 1988 and 2004. So the party quickly muffled its activists’ open disdain for multiculturalism, and began recruiting numerous visible minority candidates for upcoming elections. This was ‘real politic’ strategy rather than substantial ideological transformation, and it involved a careful re-calibration of the Reform party’s exclusionary conceptualization of ‘the people.’

The Conservative party still had to assure its old Reform Party voters and activists that their concerns about visible minority immigration and multiculturalism would not be ignored. So speaking to party faithful about changes to Liberal government policy on immigration and multiculturalism had to somehow provide these assurances without alienating existing visible minority immigrant communities.

Balancing this new, ethnic minority-friendly image with assurances to the party’s non-
immigrant base was a big challenge. This was aided by Stephen Harper’s adoption of a plebiscitarian model of relations between party members, MPs and the party leader. In this model, the leader exercises overwhelming power over his party members, activists and MPs, despite all of their prior endorsements of grassroots democracy. This is close to Weber’s account of plebiscitarian leadership and representation. (Green 2010) Opportunities for member influence on the party’s direction are replaced by “direct, unmediated, and one-way communication … from the center to the members/supporters.” (Katz and Mair 2009, 761).

Harper’s plebiscitarian populism was a good fit with the Conservative approach to multiculturalism. Party members and activists were tightly scripted from the Prime Minister’s office, which exercised an obsessive degree of message control over MPs, Cabinet and all government officials, including diplomats. (Martin, 2010; Harris, 2015; Bourie, 2015) Plebiscitarian leadership messaging framed political conflict in terms of populist antinomies of ‘the people’ (or “hard-working taxpayers”) and “special interests”. This invocation of the classic populist antagonism between the people and elites occurred not just in the frequent email fundraising messages to party donors, and in many speeches by the Prime Minister to party faithful. It also appeared in numerous government press releases and even in the Budget speeches and Speeches from the Throne presented to Parliament between 2006 and 2015. (Laycock 2012).

To expand its voter base enough to gain and hold power, the party needed to do more than claim to represent ‘the people’; it also needed to keep the boundaries of this category discursively ambiguous. Harper’s old Reform party supporters needed evidence that they were the ‘real people’, and ethnic minority voters needed to believe that they were valued by the new Conservative party.

The old Reform party base was very loyal to Harper and the Conservative party (Gidengil et al 2012), so expanding the Conservative electorate to include ethnic minority voters became the top priority. This involved Prime Ministerial and multicultural Minister attendance at ethnic group events, symbolic apologies for pre-WWII federal government acts of racial discrimination, and a campaign – using a revised citizenship
guide - to encourage recent immigrants to accept true “Canadian values.”

The politics of continual wedge issue creation strengthens plebiscitarian leadership, with the leader fighting for the people against its enemies. On matters of immigration and multiculturalism, the Conservative government created these wedges by discursively constructing ‘good immigrants’ and ‘un-Canadian’ immigrants, which appealed in different ways to both the party’s base and its new visible minority supporters.

2. multiculturalism and immigration: balancing right-populism and a ‘minimum winning coalition’

With Jason Kenney as Minister of Citizenship and Immigration (2008-2013), and then Minister for Multiculturalism (2013-15), the Harper government attempted to re-define the Canadian model of multiculturalism. Its messaging regularly attributed a self-reliant anti-statism and conservative social values to Canadian immigrants. As Kenney quipped in 2010, “these new Canadians … are the personification of Margaret Thatcher’s aspirational class. They’re all about a massive work ethic.”

The Conservative government made it clear that ‘good immigrants’ would embrace Canada’s historical values, including affection for the British monarch (Abu-Laban, 2014), and work hard to integrate themselves into the Canadian mainstream. This was presented with a conservative twist in the Conservative government’s revised citizenship guide as “celebrating our different cultural traditions, but not at the expense of sharing common Canadian traditions.” (Citizenship Guide 2012)

A subtle but far more revealing aspect of the new guide was the striking absence of any reference to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. This sent a clear signal to old Reform party activists that a Conservative Canada would steer clear of equality rights supportive of gender and sexual identity, and affirmative action for ethnic minority citizens. Such rights and their policy extensions had been strenuously opposed by Reform party activists and intellectuals, following the American Republican party’s militantly opposition to similar rights and policies. By intentionally ignoring the core constitutional foundation
of ethnic minority rights in Canada, the Conservative Party steered new citizens away from associating their Canadian-ness, and Canadian multiculturalism, with an egalitarian ethos and activist state.  

The citizenship guide’s emphasis on ‘social cohesion’ and ‘real’ Canadian values was an indirect nod to Reform party voters’ concerns about multiculturalism. It reassured them that on the Conservative party watch, Canada would not be taken over by foreign languages and cultures. In effect, Kenny and other Conservatives were saying that the values and lifestyles of the Canadian majority would be re-established as the unquestionably dominant norm, even if the level of visible minority immigration did not decline, and even if a superficial acceptance of cultural diversity was retained.

In its overhaul of immigration policy, the Conservative government placed more emphasis on ‘economic immigrants’, eliminated ‘family class’ immigrants, shifted refugee re-settlement costs to private agencies or the UN High Commission for Refugees, and denied landed refugee applicants government-financed health care coverage. This demonstrated that good immigrants would not need to rely on the state for social services.

The Conservative government practiced symbolic multicultural politics very shrewdly. It offered formal government apologies for past Canadian government injustices to the Chinese and South Asian communities, which had substantial symbolic value to these large immigrant communities even with a tiny outlay of government funds. The Prime Minister and Minister Kenney appeared at countless ethnic minority group events that seemed to offer partisan advantage, while dramatically under-spending established program funding for events designed to “promote intercultural understanding, respect for democratic values or civic memory and pride.” The government gave minor cabinet posts to several visible minority MPs, and its backbench included numerous Chinese-Canadian and Indo-Canadian MPs from ‘ethnic’ ridings. Though it had a smaller proportion of visible minority candidates than the Liberal party in the 2015 election, at 13% the Conservative Party was tied with the social democratic NDP.
constituencies where visible minority citizens made up more than 50% of residents, the Conservatives presented 25 visible minority candidates, highest among the parties. (Griffiths 2015b)

3. equality and ‘exclusive’ populism
By the standards of European right-populism, as well as the earlier Reform Party of Canada, such incorporation of ethnic minority citizens into party and Parliament is very unusual. When combined with its massive ethnic outreach efforts, the Conservatives appear to count as the only case of Mudde and Kaltewasser’s ‘inclusive populism’ among right-wing populisms in the contemporary West.

But inclusion is not just a matter of bringing group representatives inside the party tent. Inclusion and exclusion in populist (and other) parties occur along several different dimensions of policy, ideology and candidate selection, which combine to position a party along a continuum. To illustrate, consider three dimensions, all involving particular kinds of equality: 1) equality of national and religious access; 2) equality of effective civic integration and 3) equality of socio-economic advantage. These dimensions point to a range of party policy relevant to immigration and multicultural integration experience.

1) Equality of immigration access? Can anyone enter the country, and pursue permanent resident or full citizenship status as easily as all others? Or is it harder, legally or in practice, for some foreigners to successfully immigrate? The Conservative government overhauled immigration legislation to distinguish between ‘safe’ and ‘not safe’ national sources of immigrants, with over 40 countries on the latter list. The government also made it harder to enter Canada as a permanent resident, requiring proof of employment before admission to Canada. (Muerrens, 2015)25

In the 2015 election campaign, the Conservative Party contended that only ‘persecuted minority’ Syrian refugees should be brought to Canada. As one commentator said, “Harperspeak is to earnestly proclaim that he gives refugee preference to “the most needy” minorities. To most Canadians that sounds reasonable. To Muslims from
countries where they are the majority, they know it’s meant to exclude them. To Harper’s Christian fundamentalist base, it is code for “people like us.” (Sears, 2015)

2) **Equality of effective civic integration?**
The most obvious aspect of civic integration is incorporation of immigrants from ethnic minorities into electoral politics, through party nominations as candidates. Less obviously, civic integration involves access to processes of social and political life. Here one asks, are any groups prevented from using, or made to feel uncomfortable when using, these processes? The example that stands out here, to be discussed later, is the Conservative party and government’s treatment of Muslim Canadians and prospective Muslim immigrants as the dangerous, anti-woman, un-integratable ‘other.’

3) **Equality of socio-economic advantage?**
Finally, if immigration programs give priority to those who are well-educated, or can invest large sums of money in the host country economy, or to those who are fluent in the host nation’s official languages, they are effectively biased against those with low or modest incomes, lower education or job market skills, and language skills. If a small proportion of immigrants are refugees, and the government deprives some refugees of health care coverage, the bias in favor of well-off immigrants increases. Core Conservative party voters may then be less likely to see immigrants as expensive wards of an undesirable welfare state. While this may keep the ‘minimum winning coalition’ involving visible minority immigrants (Flanagan 2011) intact for the party, it reduces the level of effective multicultural inclusiveness in populist conservatism.

These assessments are not precise or comprehensive. But they suggest how the party’s orientation to equality and civic integration was intended to marginalize the welfare state, and help us to understand the degree of multicultural inclusion intended by this conservative populist party.

Denying health care to refugee claimants is a telling example of how right-populist exclusion works to undermine multicultural equality because it served two, complementary purposes. First, it assured the party base that the government would not
spend their tax dollars on undeserving asylum seekers. Second, it sent a signal to recent and potential immigrants that the Conservative government suspected that refugee applicants do not deserve social services unless they ran a gruelling gauntlet. Here we find a hint of welfare chauvinism, but just a hint, because the Conservative government reduced funding for many social services for ‘real’ Canadians as well.

Exclusion was also strongly communicated in 2015 with the Conservative’s “Zero Tolerance for Barbaric Cultural Practices Act.” This legislation was named to “cultivate the belief that Muslim immigrants are a threat to Canada.” (Lenard, 2015) Much other Conservative government policy conveyed a sense of who was included in and would benefit from a multicultural Canada. The Office of Religious Freedom was established in 2011 by Stephen Harper and led by the Dean of a small evangelical Christian college. This was intended to placate evangelical Christians, but also to gain support from minority groups of Canadian Muslims while marginalizing the larger Sunni and Shiite groups by painting them as friendly to terrorism.

The Conservative party has linked Muslims to terrorism since it took office in 2006. (Abu-Laban, 2014) It stepped up this rhetorical campaign once it won a majority government, and treated this as a frequent theme in the 2015 election campaign. Data from the 2015 Canadian Election Study suggested that this tactic was relatively successful. Respondents who believed the government should suspend citizens’ rights in order to “crack down on terrorism” were disproportionately those who disliked or really disliked Muslims in Canada, and who supported a lower level of immigration.

Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to see Conservative party efforts to promote exclusion based on ethnicity or religion as the central feature of its discursive structuring of the people and its enemies. The primary boundary of exclusion in Canadian right-populist conservatism was created by detaching the idea of substantive equality, requiring significant state intervention within a moderately generous welfare state, from the dominant narrative about multiculturalism and diversity. This is rarely a part of right populism in Europe, where “welfare chauvinism” attracts many working class and lower income voters. (Schumacher and van Kersbergen, 2016)
The Conservative party’s 2011 election victory appeared to rely on a major increase in big city visible minority community support for Conservative candidates, with 31% of racial minority voters supporting the Conservatives, versus 9% support within this category for the Canadian Alliance in 2000. (Bricker and Ibbitson, 2011) In 2011, long-time party campaign architect Tom Flanagan argued that ethnic minorities in English Canada had replaced Quebec voters as a necessary part of the Conservative party’s ‘minimum winning coalition’. (Flanagan, 2011) It is hard to imagine a strategist for Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen or Geert Wilders making similar recommendations.

4. the balancing act fails
Before 2015, increasing signs of Conservative government hostility towards Muslim Canadians were overshadowed by the government’s many efforts to bring Asian-Canadian communities within the Conservative voter pool. On the eve of the 2015 federal election it even seemed that Conservative support in these communities might help them to remain in power.34

In 2011 Conservative legislation had banned niqabs during citizenship ceremonies. In June 2015, just before the election campaign, the Conservatives promised legislation to override a March 2015 Federal Court declaration that the ban on niqabs was unconstitutional. But even having its Indo-Canadian Minister of Multiculturalism defend the government’s actions35 could not disguise their exclusionary right-populist character.

After trailing in the polls through an extended election campaign, Conservative strategists decided that they needed to create a power-saving electoral wedge between themselves and the three English-Canadian opposition parties, by rallying Canadians against Muslims threatening Canadian values. So they revived the issue of the niqab ban and established a “Barbaric Cultural Practices Hotline”.36 The Prime Minister deployed ‘dog-whistle politics’37 in a leader’s debate by referring to ‘old stock’ Canadians, whom he claimed were receiving lower quality health care than that received by ‘bogus refugee claimants’ before his government had declared pending claimants ineligible for medical care.38 As one commentator observed, the Conservatives
“introduced new themes built on ethnic and religious distrust, fear and divisiveness, and … stoked anti-immigrant sentiments and religious intolerance.” (Saunders, 2015)

Doing this ended badly for the Conservative Party. To be fair, the Conservative decision to play wedge politics with multiculturalism was not the only reason that the Conservative party lost to Justin Trudeau’s Liberal Party. 39 Harper’s Conservatives had governed for 10 years, offended Canadian democracy in unprecedented ways (Harris 2014), and run a poor campaign, in contrast to a near-perfect Liberal party campaign (Pammett and LeDuc 2016, Jeffrey 2016).

5. conservative equality, right-populism and multiculturalism

The Conservative party’s campaign use of the niqab issue demonstrated that blending right-populism with multiculturalism had become too large a challenge for it to handle. Enhancing the CPC’s electoral chances had, over a decade, required very clever strategy and non-trivial ideological compromises with the Hayekian core of Stephen Harper’s political understanding and commitments. (Boessenkool and Speer, 2015) 40 By 2015 the Conservative party had increased its ethnic community support while transforming immigration and changing the tenor of multiculturalism. The party accomplished each of these in ways that disassociated multiculturalism from its previously strong links with the welfare state and equality rights agendas. The Conservative government’s refusal to mention the equality rights of special relevance to members of ethnic minorities that were constitutionalized in Charter of Rights and Freedoms is of particular interest in this respect.

However, by giving priority to thinly veiled racism in their practice of electoral wedge politics, the Conservatives showed that they were desperate to win at all costs. Charles Taylor, a well known Canadian philosopher, was commissioner in a 2008 Quebec inquiry on ‘reasonable accommodation of minorities. After the PM had described the niqab as ‘anti-woman’, Taylor accused the Prime Minister of “playing along with an unfortunate tendency, an Islamophobic tendency, in North America [which is] a direct danger to our security and terrible for our society.” 41 Even conservative commentators
contended that denying Muslim women the right to dress as they wish when taking a citizenship oath was an unacceptable trampling of both religious freedom and the Canadian norm of cultural tolerance.  

Both the niqab debate and the public debate over refugee eligibility for medical care featured the Prime Minister driving a wedge between ‘real Canadians’ and ‘the other,’ to animate anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiment among voters. Such politically desperate discursive re-casting of the people and its enemies contradicted his government’s 10 year campaign to show that they really did support multiculturalism.

How did this fit with the Conservative party’s right-populism? While it was not directly linked to its main ideological objectives, the Muslim-demonizing strategy was based on an electorally motivated populist majoritarianism. Public opinion research commissioned by the PMO had revealed the electoral upside of calling niqab-wearing Muslim women ‘un-Canadian’ (Beeby, 2015). It was also based on what the party leadership knew about its ‘base’: since Reform party days, the party base had been considerably less accepting of visible minority immigration to Canada than supporters of other English Canadian parties. The gap was illustrated in the 2015 Canadian Election Study survey, which showed that 55% of Conservative voters supported a ban on Muslim women covering their faces in public, as compared to 34% of Liberal voters.

Shortly before the election, Harper was so pleased with what his pollsters told him about the public’s response to his niqab ban that he proposed a ban on niqab use by all federal civil servants. But this good Canadian/un-Canadian division was widely seen as an indication that the Conservatives would not know where or how to stop in their efforts to exploit intolerance. A seasoned political consultant opined that

“Stephen Harper is ... a garden-variety right-wing populist ... with distinctly Canadian features. By processing anger and prejudice through the filter of Canadian values, he has created a more acceptable face of populism. Donald Trump would attack veiled Muslim women as terrorists in disguise, Harper’s code is that we need to ensure that they observe Canadian values.” (Sears 2015)
In Canadian Conservative Party hands, plebiscitarian populist leadership involved centrally scripted appeals to various ethnic communities and privileged representation to those on the desired side of various discursive and ideological divides. Unlike right-populists in Europe, Canada’s right-populists have successfully recruited members and candidates from visible minority groups, and avoided a simple ‘immigrant/real citizen’ dichotomy. But as we have seen, Conservative party success owed much to superficial ‘political inclusion’ tactics that disguised its rejection of the ‘social citizenship’ interwoven in Canada’s distinctive form of multiculturalism.

When the right-populist appeal was on track, the boundary of exclusion was determined by groups’ support for or antagonism towards the welfare state. Support for the welfare state made a group a “special interest,” which in turn performed discursive functions of exclusion and conflict structuring. This was foundational for Canadian right populism, and until the last election campaign it was the primary determinant of Conservative party strategy towards immigration and multiculturalism.

Since the 2015 election, Justin Trudeau’s Liberal government has returned to a liberal egalitarian foundation for multiculturalism based on the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. This shift from the Harper government’s attempt to undermine such egalitarianism included a symbolically striking standard of inclusion in Trudeau’s first cabinet. It had gender parity, a First Nations female lawyer as Minister of Justice, a decorated Sikh military veteran as Minister of Defence, and a first-generation Afghani-Canadian woman as Minister for Democratic Institutions. With the first cabinet shuffle, a naturalized Somali refugee became Canada’s Minister of Immigration.

IV. Canadian attitudes towards multiculturalism and the welfare state and the prospects for nativist populist conservatism

How successful was the Conservatives’ attempt to detach the welfare state from multiculturalism? We can look more closely at this with data from the 2015 Canadian Election Study, which asked a series of questions on attitudes toward minorities and support for the welfare state. The short answer is that the Conservatives appear not to have been very successful.
Looking at the figure below, which shows data from the 2015 Canadian Election Study, we see that welfare state support tracks closely with attitudes toward immigrants. Those in favor of welfare state expansion are also more positively oriented toward immigrants. Moreover, support for the welfare state and immigration remain high across Canada—more than 75% of respondents indicated that income inequality is a big problem in Canada, and just over 75% believed that more should be done to reduce the income gap in Canada. Of this 75%, 50% supported the current level of immigration, while 32% thought more immigrants should be accepted.\(^4\)

![Attitudes toward Welfare State and Support for Immigrants in Canada](image)

The lack of welfare chauvinism in Canada is also evident in the controversy over the niqab. As the figure below shows, although a strong majority of Canadians supported banning Muslim women from wearing the niqab, those who favor expanding the welfare state nonetheless are less likely to support banning Muslim women from wearing the niqab in public. Respondents who want to reduce the welfare state are nearly 50% more likely to support the ban than those who want to expand it.

Interestingly, however, those who want to maintain the welfare state have a different pattern in terms of their attitudes toward immigration generally and banning the niqab. For banning the niqab, their attitudes are similar to those who want to reduce the welfare state. For immigration generally, this group is closer to those who want to expand the
More research needs to be done here, but on the face of it there is little evidence that the right-populist campaign to sever multiculturalism from the welfare state in Canada has been a success. It is possible that the efforts of Stephen Harper and the Conservative Party will pay dividends in future elections, especially if the Conservatives continue to push this narrative. There are clearly some within the party who would like to bring immigration even more to the forefront, especially Muslim immigration. The longer Donald Trump is President, the more emboldened previously marginal Canadian conservatives will be to use populist politics to achieve nativist objectives. We also do not yet know how much of the Harper government’s policy legacy on both multicultural integration and federal support for the welfare state will be altered by the Trudeau Liberal government. So it is too soon to tell how much the Conservative government succeeded in altering the policy and program infrastructure of Canadian multiculturalism, even if they have not succeeded at a larger ideological redefinition of multiculturalism motivated by opposition to the welfare state.
Notes


2 This is true for a host of reasons, most of which are well explained by Ambrose and Mudde (2015).

3 https://www.pressprogress.ca/kellie_leitch_campaign_manager_jason_kenney_weakened_immigration_controls

http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/wherry-leitch-values-1.3746846

4 In the aftermath of the Brexit vote in the UK, Freeden distanced himself from this analysis, suggesting that the lack of conceptual cohesion and issue reaction-driven character of right-wing populism in Europe renders its local variants emaciated, not just conceptually and structurally ‘thin’. (Freeden 2017)

5 https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-010-x/2011001/c-g/c-g01-eng.cfm

6 http://www.statcan.gc.ca/tables-tableaux/sum-som/l01/cst01/demo12c-eng.htm

7 http://www.statcan.gc.ca/tables-tableaux/sum-som/l01/cst01/demo12f-eng.htm

8 http://www.statcan.gc.ca/tables-tableaux/sum-som/l01/cst01/demo12b-eng.htm

9 One for external applicants, the other for arrivals who claim persecution in their homeland as a reason for remaining in Canada.


10 This mix appear to be broadly supported in Canada. In a 2016 survey with a sample of over 3000, 79% of respondents believed that Canada’s immigration and refugee policies “should give priority to Canada’s own economic and workforce needs,” rather than to “people in crisis abroad.”(Angus Reid Institute, 2016)

11 See IMF Staff Discussion note “The Refugee Surge in Europe: Economic Challenges (International Monetary Fund, January 2016).


14 As interpreted by the courts after 1985, the Charter has supported minority language educational rights and growing demands for financial compensation, land and self-government by Canada’s Aboriginal communities.

15 http://www.poltex.org/sites/poltex.org/files/plateformes/can1993r_plt_blue_sheet_e n_12072011_125204.pdf, pp. 6-7. The Reform Party supported ‘the principle that individuals or groups are free to preserve their cultural heritage using their own resources’ [Reform party Blue Sheet, 1996-7, 25], while the Canadian Alliance Party Policy Declaration stated that ‘multiculturalism is a personal choice and should not be publicly funded.’ [Canadian Alliance, Policy Declaration, 2000, # 38.]
Stephen Harper told an audience of American conservatives in 1997 that ‘the first fact’ they needed to know about Canada was that it is “a Northern European welfare state in the worst sense of the term, and very proud of it.”

For Reform, Canadian Alliance and Conservative Party federal election platforms 1988-2006, see http://www.poltext.org/


http://policyoptions.irpp.org/2015/10/16/immigration-after-the-conservative-transformation/

http://www.thestar.com/opinion/commentary/2015/10/05/stephen-harpers-dog-whistle-populist-politics.html


See Abu-Laban (2014) and Griffith (2015a)


Haroon Siddiqui, “Stephen Harper’s real agenda on religious freedom, Toronto Star, 24/02/2013,

http://www.thestar.com/opinion/editorialopinion/2013/02/24/stephen_harpers_real_agenda_on_religious_freedom_siddiqui.html


CES 2015 Post Election Survey data, cross tabulation of agreement with “The government should be able to crack down on suspected terrorists, even if that means interfering with the rights of ordinary people” (pes11_48b) with answers to (1) “How do you feel about Muslims living in Canada?” (pes11_21) and (2) “Do you think Canada should admit more immigrants, fewer immigrants, or about the same as now?” (pes11_28)


The poll itself can be viewed at http://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/200/301/pwgsc-tpsgc/por-eff/privy_council/2015/047-14-e/tables.htm For a critical assessment of the poll, see http://www.environicsinstitute.org/research-digest/research-commentary/do-canadians-really-have-a-problem-with-the-niqab

Data compiled by Charles LeBreton.


Canadian Election Study, Post Election Survey:
• pes11_32 Is income inequality a big problem in Canada?
• pes11_41 How much do you think should be done to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor in Canada?
• pes11_28< Do you think Canada should admit more immigrants, fewer immigrants, or about the same as now?
References


