

Pandemic empowered populism

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As of Oct. 1, visitors to Canada no longer have to provide proof of coronavirus vaccination, masks are no longer required on planes or trains with Canadian destinations, and the widely loathed ArriveCAN app, which demanded travellers submit a bunch of personal and seemingly arbitrary information to the government upon entering Canada, has been discontinued.

The government decree announcing these changes removed the last major manifestations of the COVID-19 pandemic in the lives of ordinary Canadians.

The moment invites reflection on the mark the COVID-19 era left on Canadian politics and culture, a legacy that now looks far more significant than many observers initially anticipated. Early press narratives often framed the burdens of the pandemic as something Canadians would simply endure, unquestioning, with gentle good humour, and to the extent anything would be “learned” about the country from the experience, it would be flattering reminders of Canadian co-operativeness, deference to authority and so on.

The tight embrace of such comforting conventional wisdom made what was to follow all the more disorienting.

For at least half a decade now, it’s been fashionable to speculate why Canada has supposedly been “immune” to the sort of right-wing populist politics gaining traction elsewhere. I personally think the most convincing explanations are structural, but in retrospect it now appears a lack of a single, clear rallying issue for Canada’s populists was just as significant.

Here, progressive pundits can claim at least a half-victory: they seem to have been broadly correct in assuming anti-immigration rhetoric would never fully mobilize voters in comfortably multicultural Canada. On the other hand, many of these same voices misjudged the number of Canadians ferociously loyal to individual liberties, an equally fierce reserve of ideological energy that was unleashed upon the imposition of strict COVID-19 safety restrictions.

The rise of the People’s Party of Canada is a good illustration; as a party opposed to “mass immigration,” it won a mere 1.6 per cent of the vote in 2019; rebranding as the country’s leading critics of COVID-19 lockdowns and vaccine mandates, it bounced to five per cent in 2021.

Frustration at mandates and lockdowns similarly spawned the rise of the notorious “Freedom Convoy” that occupied Canada’s capital earlier this year, and made “trucker” part of the nation’s political vocabulary. When Erin O’Toole, the moderate head of the Conservative party — whose leadership was already shaky following his failure to unseat Prime Minister Justin Trudeau — was seen as waffling in his response to the movement, he was dramatically removed by his party, just as the truckers wanted.

From that moment, everyone knew the next party boss would be the vastly more pugilistic Pierre Poilievre, a man who proudly wore his pro-trucker sympathies on his sleeve.

COVID-19 restrictions imposed by the Alberta provincial government led to a similarly successful conservative revolt unseating Alberta's Tory premier Jason Kenney, a man once lauded as the future of the Canadian conservative movement. While Kenney was never a moderate per se, he enjoyed a reputation for pragmatism, and it was this approach he brought to COVID-19.

His downfall, and the stridency of those likely to replace him, proves that his party's philosophical consensus (at least in Western Canada) has moved closer to Barry Goldwater's famous axiom that "extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice."

Canada's COVID-era populists are easily caricatured as crankish, conspiratorial or just self-centred, and undoubtedly plenty are. But the rise of more dogmatic political positions on civil liberties in the country's politics can also be seen as a response to the failure of other Canadian institutions over the past three years to provide a release valve for some of these anxieties.

Canada's courts, for instance, have rejected virtually every major challenge to COVID restrictions — including corporations challenging retail lockdowns, churches challenging bans on in-person services, public-sector unions challenging vaccine mandates for workers, out-of-province visitors challenging travel bans, returning travellers challenging mandatory hotel quarantines and individuals challenging public curfews and limits on social gatherings.

Trudeau resolved the trucker standoff not with negotiation or compromise, but blunt imposition of emergency powers. The press, as mentioned, covered much of the pandemic with a paternalistic, nationalistic tone that maligned the patriotism of doubters.

It was inevitable that a great deal of COVID-19 policy would be second-guessed in retrospect. In Canada, those who dislike the coarser, more polarized tone of their country's politics have clear motivation to begin.

— The Washington Post