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The Trucker Convoys (2019-2022)**

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The Trucker Convoys (2019-2022)

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Interpreting the ideological and political nature of the February 2022 trucker convoy poses a challenge. As the protests came only a year after those that rocked the Capitol in January 2021, a parallel was quickly drawn between the two events, and concerns were raised that a similar kind of protest could occur in Canada. This research note essentially concentrates on the political cleavages that have occurred in Canada since 2015 and that provide insight on the trucker convoy's political origins. This paper has three objectives:

- 1) We will first see why it is important to examine the February 2022 trucker convoy in relation to a series of protests that began in 2018 in Western Canada against the federal government's environmental measures and energy policies.
- 2) We will then return to the larger context that led to the protests by providing a snapshot of how the Canadian right has evolved since the last federal elections (in 2019 and 2021), highlighting political cleavages that have existed since the 2015 federal election but that intensified in 2019 and 2021.
- 3) Finally, we will discuss the very nature of the protests and the convoy, which have been described as products of the far right¹ and populism. We will then pursue a few avenues to understand the nature of the convoy.

1) The pre-pandemic oil sands protests 2018–2020

The February 2022 trucker convoy represented a response to the pandemic, specifically the health measures put in place by the federal and provincial governments. When the convoy arrived in Ottawa, a parallel was quickly drawn with the January 2021 events in the US Capitol. However, the parallel between the two uprisings obscures (a) the political context that existed prior to the pandemic, which we will cover in further depth, and (b) the fact that similar trucker convoys have been organized since late 2018.

- December 16, 2018: A convoy of around 600 trucks snaked through Grand Prairie, Alberta. According to the participants, the convoy was drawing attention to the challenges faced by truckers in the energy industry. One protester stated, "It's finally really good to

¹"L'extrême-droite au volant du convoi des camionneurs?" *Le Journal de Montréal*, February 11, 2022, <https://www.journaldemontreal.com/2022/02/11/lextrême-droite-au-volant-du-convoi-des-camionneurs-1>.

see everybody starting to see the trickle-down effect in a country that got a large part of its economy from natural resources. Everyone is affected, from the top down.”²

- December 19, 2018: A trucker convoy estimated to be 22 kilometres long drove along the highway leading to Edmonton’s airport and Nisku, where a number of companies working in the energy sector are located.³

- December 22, 2018: A convoy of over 400 trucks was organized in Estevan, Saskatchewan. The participants were protesting the Trudeau government’s energy sector policies (carbon tax and slow pipeline construction), equalization, and the UN Global Compact for Migration.⁴

- January 5, 2019: Canadian supporters of the “Yellow Vest” movement protested at the Alberta legislature and other locations with varying demands: “These were positioned as ‘yellow vest’ protests and, while small in numbers (e.g., 60 in Toronto, 120 in Edmonton, ‘dozens’ in Fort McMurray), the messaging was consistent with a focus on the UN Global Compact for Migration, carbon tax opposition, and a general anti-Trudeau stance.”⁵

- February 19, 2019: Calling itself “United We Roll,” a trucker convoy was formed in Alberta. A group of around 170 trucks departed from Red Deer and drove to Ottawa over the course of a week. The organizers wanted to spread the message that “Pipelines need to be built. Bill C-69 and 48 are obviously a problem. And (so is), the carbon tax.”⁶

- June 2019: In the United States, there was also the Timber Unity rally, a convoy of truckers in Salem, Oregon, protesting the Democrats’ proposed environmental policies.⁷ The protesters came together from a number of sectors (truckers, farmers and forestry workers) at Salem’s Capitol to oppose the Democrats’ environmental policies to limit GHG emissions causing climate change. A convoy was also formed in February 2020.⁸

² Brian Zinchuk, “‘We’ve got nothing to lose’: Inside Grande Prairie’s truck convoy supporting oil and gas,” *Alaska Highway News*, December 19, 2018, <https://www.alaskahighwaynews.ca/bc-news/weve-got-nothing-to-lose-inside-grande-prairies-truck-convoy-supporting-oil-and-gas-3502190>.

³ Karen Bartko, “Nisku truck convoy and pro-pipeline rally ‘way bigger than expected’: organizer,” *Global News*, December 19, 2018.

⁴ Brian Zinchuk and David Willberg, “Our winter of discontent: Estevan truck convoy protest attracts 427 units, 15 kilometres long,” *SaskToday.ca*, December 22, 2018, <https://www.sasktoday.ca/south/local-news/our-winter-of-discontent-estevan-truck-convoy-protest-attracts-427-units-15-kilometres-long-4128059>.

⁵ Brooks de Cillia and Patrick McCurdy, “No Surrender. No Challenge. No Protest Paradigm: A Content Analysis of the Canadian News Media Coverage of the ‘Yellow Vest Movement’ and the ‘United We Roll Convoy,’” *The Canadian Review of Sociology*, 57, 4, 2002, p. 659.

⁶ Taylor Blewett, “United We Roll protest: Truck convoy ends Hill rally, gears up for Day 2,” *Ottawa Citizen*, February 20, 2020, <https://ottawacitizen.com/news/local-news/united-we-roll-protest-what-to-expect-downtown-this-week/>.

⁷ David Davis, “Log trucks arriving in Salem for demonstration creating traffic backups,” *Statesman Journal*, June 27, 2019, <https://www.statesmanjournal.com/story/news/2019/06/27/log-trucks-arriving-salem-demonstration-creating-traffic-backups/1583244001/>.

⁸ Whitney Woodworth, David Davis and Connor Radnovich, “Timber Unity returns to Salem: 1,000-truck convoy, rally target carbon cap-and-trade bill,” *Salem Statesman Journal*, February 6, 2020, <https://www.statesmanjournal.com/story/news/2020/02/06/timber-unity-returns-cap-and-trade-protest-salem-traffic/4668677002/>

The February 2022 trucker convoy thus came in the wake of similar convoys supporting the idea that measures such as the carbon tax and bills C-48 and C-69⁹ were disproportionately affecting Alberta's energy sector. They also strongly denounced the lack of new pipelines.

The ideological nature of these protests was also a subject of debate. It is possible to draw a certain parallel between the "United We Roll" movement and that of the Yellow Vests (*Gilets jaunes*) in France (2018) insofar as carbon tax issues triggered both protests. Although the issues are not the same (we will return to the regional aspect), the idea behind them remains that climate-related policies are being imposed and are detrimental to the interests of a certain class of the population.¹⁰ However, some people have criticized the United We Roll movement as extremist for its xenophobic rhetoric, especially in the case of Yellow Vests Canada, whose tone was more identitarian in denouncing immigration, globalization, and the liberal government.¹¹

In sum, numerous warning shots were fired but were not taken seriously, particularly in the case of the February 2019 convoy that represented a sort of prelude to what might happen, despite nothing yet being set in motion.

2) The ideological evolution of the Canadian right

The protests have been described in various ways. Many have insisted on the importance of radicalization and even disinformation from the protesters and other political actors for understanding what happened.¹² For a clear idea of the nature of the event, one has to look back prior to the pandemic to understand the ideological and political context in which the trucker convoy developed, which is part of a larger backdrop extending beyond the pandemic.

Here I refer to some analyses from my book *Droitisation et populisme* on the post-Harper (post-2015) evolution of the Canadian right and the upsurge in new political cleavages that, over the last three elections, have revived the East/West divide.¹³ The victory of Justin Trudeau's Liberal Party of Canada in 2015 brought new directions in environmental policy that created great resistance, especially the introduction of a carbon tax. The environmental policies and delays in (and cancellation of) pipeline construction also contributed to the new political dynamic in which some groups and political parties opposed all forms of carbon taxation. In this context we saw a rise of western alienation starting in 2019.

This idea that the federal government treats the West unfairly is nothing new and has always been somewhat present in the political space of the West, particularly Alberta. It became, however,

⁹C-48 (2019) is an act to more strictly regulate crude oil transport along British Columbia's north coast while C-69 modified the Impact Assessment Act and the Canadian Energy Regulator Act.

¹⁰"Face à la flambée des prix du carburant, assistera-t-on au retour des gilets jaunes?", *L'Express*, October 16, 2021, https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/societe/face-a-la-flambee-des-prix-du-carburant-assistera-t-on-au-retour-des-gilets-jaunes_2160611.html.

¹¹Eliza beth Hames, "Don't dismiss them as 'crackpots': Who are Canada's yellow vest protesters?", *CBC News*, January 11, 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/yellow-vests-canada-alberta-1.4974721>.

¹²Pierre Saint-Arnaud, "Le juge Richard Wagner s'inquiète de la stabilité de nos institutions," *La Presse*, June 9, 2022, <https://www.lapresse.ca/actualites/national/2022-06-09/le-juge-richard-wagner-s-inquiete-de-la-stabilite-de-nos-institutions.php>.

¹³Frédéric Boily, *Droitisation et populisme, Canada-Québec-États-Unis*, Quebec City, Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 2020.

less of an issue when Stephen Harper was in power. The 2015 election of the Liberal Party of Canada and a policy program heavily oriented toward environmental policies saw its progressive return, especially in Alberta where regional dissatisfaction is stronger than elsewhere in the Prairies.¹⁴ This dissatisfaction also translated to strong conservative support among Western Canada's electorate in 2019.¹⁵

Yet, the "return" of regionalism has led some intellectuals and political actors to want the region to retreat politically (autonomism and separatism). The proponents of this view believe that any change in power is permanently blocked by the "Laurentian Elite" who live in the centre of the country along the Toronto-Montreal corridor. Some have concluded that the western provinces need to be protected against the liberal "assault" on the energy sector with its environmental policies, in addition to the equalization-related concerns that led to a referendum (October 2021). This opposition to Liberal climate policies is not limited to marginalized groups; it also broadly exists in the Albertan political space, especially among the Liberal government's opposition.¹⁶ It should be remembered that other Conservative provincial governments have unsuccessfully contested the constitutionality of the carbon tax in the Supreme Court (March 2021). Finally, this political agitation arose while the energy sector was undergoing major changes due to the decline in oil prices, especially since 2015. Economic anxiety was therefore high from 2016 onwards, with 45% of Albertans concerned for their financial future, the highest rate in Canada.¹⁷

The Wexit movement emerged in this context of economic and regional dissatisfaction. Now known as the Maverick Party, it garnered low electoral scores in 2021. This should not, however, be interpreted as a sign that regionalist dissatisfaction is waning, especially since a portion of the dissatisfied electorate's vote was taken up by Maxime Bernier's People's Party of Canada, which achieved greater electoral success in Western Canada, pulling in 7.4% of the vote in Alberta, 7.6% in Manitoba, 6.6% in Saskatchewan, and 4.9% in British Columbia.

When the pandemic broke out in March 2020, the situation was already conducive to dissent, and economic dissatisfaction and criticism of the health measures could converge, as both were seen as imposed by Liberal elites wanting to control individual liberty and halt the region's economic development. The pandemic acted as an "ideological accelerant" in a political climate where significant criticism of the federal and even provincial governments already existed.

Over the pandemic's waves, the climate became more heated in a number of Canadian provinces such as Alberta and Saskatchewan. Initially, the vast majority of the western world's population, including Canada, accepted the necessity of government-implemented health measures; in the face of an unfamiliar event, the burden of decision-making was suspended and became the

¹⁴Evelyn Brie and Félix Mathieu, *Un pays divisé. Identité, fédéralisme et régionalisme au Canada*. Quebec City, Les Presses de l'Université Laval, p. 135.

¹⁵Frédéric Boily and Timothy vanDen Brink, "Le retour du régionalisme en Alberta et dans l'Ouest," *Études canadiennes/Canadian Studies*, no. 92, June 2022, p. 1-24.

¹⁶Timothy vanDen Brink and Frédéric Boily, "Retour sur le populisme en Alberta. La campagne électorale de 2019," *Les droites provinciales en évolution. 2015-2020. Conservatisme, populisme et radicalisme*, Ed. Frédéric Boily, Quebec City, Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 2021, p. 83-103.

¹⁷Angus Reid, February 23, 2016, <http://angusreid.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/2016.02.23-Fed-Issues.pdf>.

responsibility of governments.¹⁸ Later, loud COVID-19 protest movements made themselves heard and the early acceptance progressively made room for an increasingly large turnaround, affecting a larger part of the population.¹⁹

The health measures implemented to fight COVID-19 therefore brought new momentum to movements already opposed to federal government policies. Conspiracy theorists also multiplied, with the pandemic as a rallying point.²⁰ The protests in turn became platforms uniting individuals with differing objectives but who converge on their shared opposition of health policies implemented by the federal government.

3. Nature of the protests and explanatory factors

It is difficult to describe the ideological nature of the trucker convoy. Should the movement be viewed as an attempt to overthrow the Canadian government by appealing to the Governor General? Or as a radical far-right movement willing to use violence to achieve its aims? Or strictly as a loud, strong protest against mandatory vaccine passports for truckers crossing the Canada-United States border and an expression of the population's profound pandemic fatigue?

The initial demand was narrow—the elimination of mandates to cross borders—but then widened, as is common, as recriminations were added to the cause. This type of movement eventually amalgamates a set of concerns of different types because “dans la rue, on ne marche pas comme un seul homme” [in the streets, you walk as more than just one man].²¹

Nonetheless, we believe that one way of presenting the facts is to describe the convoy through the concept of populism. The populist wave of the 2010s must be understood in three major spheres: economic, cultural, and political.²² The first consists of the economic difficulties that began with the 2008 financial crisis and created fertile ground for the rise of movements like the Tea Party in the United States. As we have mentioned, some parts of Canada were subjected to economic hardships from 2015 onwards, providing impetus for populist discourse. Cultural factors include issues essentially revolving around immigration, which is perceived as “massive.” Immigration is viewed as a factor that weakens host societies and threatens the cultural integrity of their language, culture, and religion. A part of the host populations oppose the arrival of immigrants, creating a cultural backlash. When seen this way, immigration is not a source of enrichment but rather a source of social destabilization for those with a fear of invasion or “the great replacement.” Finally, political factors refer to various elements, particularly loss of confidence in the political system and in the political parties who are no longer seen as effective instruments for defending voters' interests. Since 1945, this strong trend has arisen in western democracies

¹⁸Jean-Claude Kaufman, *C'est fatigant, la liberté...*, Paris Éditions de l'Observatoire, 2021.

¹⁹A survey by EKOS (December 2, 2020) demonstrated that people in the four western provinces were more likely to refuse to wear a mask (13% in Saskatchewan vs. 5% in Quebec) and that vaccine hesitancy was higher in Alberta than in Quebec. “Pandemic, Polarization, and Expectations for Government,” *EKOS Politics*, December 2, 2020. <https://www.ekospolitics.com/index.php/2020/12/pandemic-polarization-and-expectations-for-government/>.

²⁰Martin Geoffroy, Frédéric Boily, and Frédérick Na deau, “Typologie des discours conspirationnistes au Québec pendant la pandémie,” CEFIR, CEGEP Edouard-Montpetit, January 2022. p. 48.

²¹*Dictionnaire des mouvements sociaux*, Eds. Olivier Fillieule, Lilan Mathieu, and Cécile Péchu, Paris, Sciences Po Les Presses, 2009, p. 343.

²²Gilles Ivaldi. *De Le Pen à Trump : le défi populiste*, Brussels, Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2019, p.16-17.

undergoing major transformations due to various causes (influx of refugees, terrorism, financial and environmental crises) that have put enormous pressure on current representative systems.²³

To avoid generalizing, we can identify two types of populism: protest populism and identity populism. The protest form of populism involves discourse denouncing the elite who are believed to not listen to the people and to impose constraints on them for the sole benefit of themselves, without taking the people's will into consideration.²⁴ In this type of discourse, political leaders are accused of implementing policies that run counter to the interests of ordinary people, as the elite think only of serving their own interests and quenching their insatiable thirst for power and control.

The other form of populism, national or identity populism, targets immigrants who are seen as alien to the “true” people, defined by ethnocultural characteristics like language, culture, or even religion. This type of populism can be found in European movements like the National Front, now known as the National Rally. This populism strongly opposes immigration, perceived to be flooding European societies, and translates to anti-migration policies and even a policy for immigrants to “go home.”

In the case of the February 22 protests, the protest form of populism—criticizing the elite for not listening to the people, the populism of ordinary citizens and workers—appeared to be dominant. This was apparent in some politicians' support for the truckers, who presented the truckers as representatives of the people on the bottom expressing their dissatisfaction with the politics of the elites at the top, as did Maxime Bernier, who criticized the health policies of all levels of government as tyrannical during his 2021 electoral campaign.²⁵

It is also important to keep in mind that the people protesting and revolting are not necessarily from the poorest social groups. Rather, they are the people who expect to receive a certain due in a given context and are disappointed in what they actually receive, which can be referred to as relative deprivation.²⁶ It is therefore not the absolute difference between the two that is important, but the difference between what people expect from political players and what they receive. In the context of Western Canada, with a real increase in unemployment and growing economic hardship, many people feel that they are not receiving their fair share from the federal government. They see themselves as not just contributors, but contributors who are being prevented from properly carrying out their work through barriers to Albertan and Saskatchewan energy sector operations.

Using this framework that presents all of the protests as a period of oppositional populist expression—brought together by “the uniting slogan”²⁷ of liberty—it seems possible to identify three major types of protesters.

²³Pierre Martin, *Crise mondiale et systèmes partisans*, Paris, Les Presses de Sciences Po, 2018, p. 13.

²⁴Gilles Ivaldi, *De Le Pen à Trump : le défi populiste*, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

²⁵Louis Gagné, “Maxime Bernier fera campagne contre la ‘tyrannie’ sanitaire,” *Radio-Canada*, August 20, 2021, <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/1818100/maxime-bernier-chef-parti-populaire-canada-candidat-retour-normale-tyrannie-sanitaire>.

²⁶*Dictionnaire des mouvements sociaux*, *op. cit.*, p. 242-243.

²⁷Jean-Claude Kaufman, *C'est fatigant, la liberté...*, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

- 1) For some, the trucker convoy symbolized something of a turning point. From this perspective, the protests were a period of cultural and generational revolution, similar to Woodstock, as expressed by a resident of Valleyview in northern Alberta.²⁸ It is also important to consider the many individuals and families who attended the protests not to reverse the constitutional order of Canada, as prescribed by the Memorandum of Understanding that called for the end of the health measures to fight COVID-19 and denounced supposed human rights violations, but to express their dissatisfaction with the health policies.
- 2) For other protesters, their impetus preceded the pandemic and was driven by regionalism and exacerbated by policies affecting the energy sector. In this respect, it is important to not confuse regionalism with the far right. The Maverick Party advocates autonomist policies and aspires to separatism, but its policies could not be termed extremist.²⁹ The Party does not advocate violence, instead following the separatist legacy of the early 1980s. Tamara Lich, who left the Maverick Party and was one of the figureheads of the convoy, belongs to this regionalist movement. In 2020, she stated that the outcome of the federal election was not decided by western voters, and that due to different “lifestyles,” what worked in the East didn’t work in the West (firearms, for example). She added that the system was broken and that either constitutional reform or independence was needed.³⁰ Lastly, she brought up Liberal government bills that are widely criticized by the Western Canadian right (and sometimes even beyond the right).
- 3) Some protesters were motivated by the far right and conspiracy theorists. This nebulous, identity-based far right condemns “communism,” the UN Global Compact for Migration signed in Marrakesh, and “illegal immigration.” They also combine conspiracy theory rhetoric with discourse on the defence of liberty, which is supposedly threatened by liberticidal politicians. Organizer Patrick King belongs to this movement, as do those who brandished confederate flags. As sociologist and director of CEFIR Martin Geoffroy states, the protests were also a social arena for conspiracy theorists to both be heard and find elective affinities.³¹ A real hint of identity populism can be observed within this group.

²⁸“What would ever cause my level-headed wife to seriously consider loading our four young children into a van for a spontaneous 4,000-kilometre road trip from northern Alberta? Her answer made me rethink the significance of this protest: ‘This is Woodstock,’ she said.” Nathan Steinke, “Opinion: Truckers’ convoy the Woodstock of our time,” *Edmonton Journal*, January 28, 2022, <https://edmontonjournal.com/opinion/columnists/opinion-truckers-convoy-the-woodstock-of-our-time>.

²⁹The party had a change of leadership when founder Peter Downing was replaced by current party leader Jay Hill. The Maverick Party made it to the polls and their program made little mention of immigration. The party’s stances are essentially based around defending the region, meaning Alberta. The party can, however, be described as radical; western discontent with Ottawa is widespread but not to the point of sharing the Maverick Party’s objective of separatism.

³⁰Blair Crawford, “Who is the Freedom Convoy’s Tamara Lich — the ‘spark that lit the fire,’” *Vancouver Sun*, February 4, 2022, <https://vancouversun.com/news/local-news/who-is-tamara-lich-the-spark-that-lit-the-fire/wcm/166d4824-d440-4710-ade8-5b84c2203f88>.

³¹Maëlane Loaëc, “Canada : qui sont ces camionneurs du ‘Convoi de la Liberté’ qui assiègent Ottawa?” *TF1 info*, February 8, 2022, <https://www.tf1info.fr/societe/canada-qui-participe-au-convoi-de-la-liberte-qui-assiege-ottawa-2210300.html>.

The boundaries between the three groups are porous; conspiracy theorists can be found everywhere, and militant regionalists can share anti-immigration rhetoric. It is, however, important to conceptually differentiate them to avoid lumping together all the different people who walked with the truckers in cities across the country, much like it is important to not automatically group far-right militants with those defending a western regionalist and autonomist agenda. They do, however, converge on the opinion that Canada's political system is no longer working and is harming ordinary citizens, while the elite promote policies that are detrimental to certain regions (prior to the pandemic) and all citizens (during the pandemic). From this perspective, the pandemic provided a point of convergence that made it possible for complaints and recriminations to be heard.

In this research note, we have developed the idea that the trucker convoys are not solely an effect of the pandemic. They are also the product of policies, particularly environmental policies, that were implemented by the federal government prior to March 2020 and the difficult context in some Canadian provinces, like Alberta, that have been affected by the economic slowdown of 2015 on. Despite strong election results in the West, the conservatives were unable to return to power in 2019 and 2021. Their inability to be re-elected led a minority of citizens to believe that the situation was deadlocked and the only way to be heard would be to move the battle from the House of Commons to Wellington Street, and, in the case of certain actors, to turn to radicalism.

In any event, we need qualitative studies³² to provide a clearer idea of the protesters' motivations for a more detailed portrait of the issues at play. Although we could not predict exactly what would happen, we could nonetheless anticipate, following the 2019 and 2021 elections, that Canada has been fractured and that our political parties are no longer necessarily able to play their traditional role as vehicles of social and regional demands in a context of mistrust in the political elite, hence the appeal of other avenues.

³²Frédéric-Guillaume Dufour, *Entrepeuple et élite, le populisme de droite*, Montreal, Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2021, p. 39.