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Same Old Story: Political Cartoons and the Persistence of Right-Wing Populist Narratives in Alberta, Canada, 1974-2012

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ABSTRACT: Over recent decades, some political satire in Alberta, Canada, has drawn on increasingly combative attitudes toward the federal government and the rest of Canada. The populist rhetoric in Alberta media in the late 20th century—and the stark resemblance of tone and content to contemporary political messaging in 2025, including the scapegoating the Trudeaus—highlights the consistency and potentially exceptional nature of Albertan political culture and populism. This paper explores the ways media framing interacts with Albertan political culture over time and has helped shape populist discourse in the province. Utilizing an extensive collection of Alberta-based editorial political cartoons, we tracked the presence of common populist themes over time to explore how populism in Albertan media has been represented and expressed. We argue that there is a relationship between the historical and contemporary presence of populism in Alberta, and that it materializes through blame attribution to the political elite. These findings have implications for the future of alternative, leftist political movements in the province and provide insight into the nature and form of political inertia in Alberta.

KEYWORDS: Alberta; Populism; Editorial Cartoons; Federalism; Media Framing

Introduction

It is a common assumption that Alberta is home to largely homogeneous politics and political culture, with little inclination toward change (Lightbody and Kline, 2016). From the outside, the province is seen as having a consistently conservative political culture, with roots in both historical and contemporary grievances largely antagonistic towards the rest of Canada, and the federal government (Wesley and Wang, 2022). Although both party and electoral results (see for example Epp, 2001; Harrison et al., 2015) have shown some diversification, more recent governments (2019 – present) have capitalized upon antagonism toward Ottawa. Recent assertions by the United Conservative Party (UCP) about the desired "sovereignty" of the province (Government of Alberta, 2022) indicate that for Premier Smith, the province's identity is indeed outlined in the "Firewall Letter" of 2001 (Harper et al., 2001)—a role of senior partnership in federalism (Johnson and Black, 2022)—even though Alberta did not officially join Confederation and become a province until some 40 years after the signing of the British North America Act.

Recent events in the province point to the resilience of western alienation, a blending of populist sentiments, and increasing divisions between federalists and potentially even separatists. Such sentiments are far from new—media portrayals of Eastern Canadian extraction of Western

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wealth are commonly traced back to the Milche Cow cartoon of 1915. The resulting question, therefore, hinges on trying to explain this resilience, and the ways in which the political messaging available to the Albertan public help reinforce and maintain both populist and anti-federal values. To do so, we provide a contextual history of populism in Albertan politics, and then examine the applicability of media framing to explore the intersections between public media and populism.

Utilizing 40 years of political cartoons from two newspapers in Alberta, the Calgary Herald and the Edmonton Sun, we examine populist content over time. Guided by the main research questions—What are the trends of populist attitudes transmitted through the media in Alberta, and what are the mechanisms through which dispositional immobility (i.e., a disposition toward political stagnation [Lightbody and Kline, 2016]) is maintained in a political culture over time? we argue that there is a relationship between the historical and contemporary presence of populism in Alberta, and that it both materializes and reproduces through ongoing blame attribution to the Eastern political elite. We conclude with a discussion on the implications of this framing for political culture in Alberta, including the suppression of alternative, leftist politics in the province in favour of long-standing grievance-based and scapegoating politics.

Alberta Politics and Populism

The 2019 provincial election (re)established conservative leadership under the United Conservative Party (UCP) (Heidenreich, 2019). Later, in 2023, Jason Kenney was replaced as leader by Danielle Smith, who has continued to appeal to social, economic, religious, legal, and political conservatives (McLean and Laxer, 2023). Underlying most of those appeals are strong populist sentiments that draw from long-standing resentments of the federal government and the elites of the Canadian "east" and a strong emphasis on Alberta as an energy power (see, for example, Markusoff, 2025; United Conservative Party, 2025).

Although some of the state-building and federal practices in Canada in the twentieth century reinforced sentiments of Western alienation, marginalization, and an "unfair deal for Alberta," when pressed, it is often difficult for right-wing, populist-leaning Albertans to formalize a consistent set of arguments to support such perspectives. Instead, as Banack (2021) and Cramer (2016) have noted, such positions are commonly grounded in narratives of loss or relative deprivation, even though such deprivation may not actually exist. Recently, these fractures have been expressed through the political engagement and recruitment exercises of Take Back Alberta, an organization that relies heavily upon both spiritual and libertarian dimensions of populism in order to "take back Alberta" from a fringe minority (the words of group leader David Parker) that does not represent the political, nor cultural, will of the majority of the province (Tait, 2023). That perspective is embedded in projected narratives of individualism, self-accountability, religious (rather than political or social) accountability, and the persistence of an conservative regime that is both a-political (insomuch as it seeks to limit broader representative engagement or debate in the public sphere in favour of "common sense politics") and deeply political, as it is fundamentally concerned with the perpetuation of the regime itself (Banack, 2016; Banack, 2021; Wesley and Wang, 2022).

The history of conservative politics within the province has consistently and historically been one of fracture, political maneuvering, and attempts to both consolidate and maintain said divisions (often at the expense of party leadership). At the same time, different populist periods have existed in the province's political history, including those that can be traced back to the agrarian populism of the early twentieth century (McMath, 1995), the almost authoritarian populism of Aberhart in the 1930s (Macaulay, 2023), and the anti-politics of Ralph Klein from the

1990s to the early 2000s (Denis, 1995), Don Getty in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Kiss, 2014), the anti-NDP Jason Kenney, and now the unpredictable yet largely sovereigntist Danielle Smith in recent years (Wesley, 2022).

Attempts to explain Alberta's "conservative" and "anti-socialist" political leanings tend to point to the initial socio-economic conditions of the province, including its so-called homogeneous class composition and quasi-colonial status (Macpherson, 1953, 21; Dacks, 1986, 186-204), its unique inheritance of American agrarian settlers (Wiseman, 1981), and its subsequent religious makeup (Banack, 2016; Clark, 1945; Mann, 1955). Additional factors that are crucial to the province's political history include its economic reliance on specific resources and the economic pressures which such reliance placed upon governments (Richards and Pratt, 1979; Tupper, Pratt, and Urquart, 1992). This economic history has been characterized by significant prosperity and the corresponding ability of conservative governments to spend generously while maintaining relatively low tax rates (Finkel, 1989). Naturally, such spending disappears when energy revenues drop, and the province is also home to an almost 80-year series of booms and busts with the oil and gas industry (Van Assche, et al., 2017).

Working from this context, we seek to unravel the common historical elements of the populist mythos in the province—see, for reference, Barthes' (1972) *Mythologies* where he notes "a feeling of impatience at the sight of the 'naturalness' with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality which, even though it is the one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history" (10)—that defines and maintains both Albertan exceptionalism and its populist elements. Given the general consensus around the broader nature of populism itself in Alberta (that 'it's not that different' from Ontario, for example), what is different, we argue, are the ways in which that mythology has been played out, repeated and replayed to the benefit of the regime—a regime that welcomes and hinges on an apolitical citizenry, but also a broader political agenda of anti-politics and singular opposition (to Ottawa, to the Liberal Party, and to both the leadership and policies of the same.

This line of argument is consistent with Lightbody and Kline's (2016) assessment of 'dispositional immobility' and supported by cultural, institutional, ideological and economic factors that reinforce both the long-standing and proximal arguments found in Western Alienation (of economic and political marginalization within the Canadian Confederation), but also the more distal, historically constructed populist mythologies that continue to permeate the political culture of the province. Despite this increasingly fragmented and complex political landscape, there is remarkable continuity with the long-standing complaints of Western alienation and the sense that Alberta has always had a "bad deal" from Ottawa. Whether traced back to 1915 or even before the province joined Confederation in 1905, such claims and their "naturalness" per Barthes (above) must be produced, reinforced, reiterated and repeated to (now) generations of Albertans. In the next section, we look to media framing to help explain this continuity.

Media Framing

Research on the role of media in politics is both long-standing and wide-ranging. Earlier work identified both agenda-setting and priming effects (where media exposure to an issue or policy question might shift public opinion), to more content focused work that emphasized how media framing can shape not only public opinion about prevalence or importance but also shape public understanding of cause, effect and viable solutions. (Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson, 1997, 222). Media framing, therefore, relates to the process of how a "pattern of news coverage [that] structures and organizes the meaning of the topic over time" (D'Angelo, 2017, 2). Frames can

function as symbolic issue constructions that can be carried by a range of media forms that simplify and organize the combination of facts, opinions and interpretations found within media coverage. Frame *analysis* requires attention of a certain issue to be particularly directed towards "exploring images, stereotypes, metaphors, actors, and messages" (Matthes, 2009, 349), including the caricatures and cartoons that reduce often complex political or social issues to a single image or portrayal.

Political cartoons often "[build] on preexisting negative images that many people already hold about the target of the humour" (Baumgartner, 2008, 737-738), effectively helping to reinforce or potentially amplify those negative frames. In turn, understanding the historical patterns of framing in widely distributed media is one method for understanding how public opinion can be shaped or formed—framing by media emphasizes one or two elements of a broader political dynamic, and tends to reduce complex political dynamics (such as Canadian federalism) to one or two key aspects. Like Greenberg (2008), we wish to explore the ways in which cartoons may function in, and influence, political opinions and attitudes, i.e., "cartoons seize upon and reinforce common sense and thus enable the public to actively classify, organize and interpret in meaningful ways what they see or experience about the world at a given moment" (181). In this project, we sought to extend the literature on media framing and contextualize it within the populist and historical landscape of Albertan politics. Through the analysis of late 20th-century political cartoons, this work is based on the following key research questions: (1) What is the frequency, form and representation of populism in Alberta political cartoons? (2) What are the trends and patterns of populism in Alberta media, and how have these narratives shifted over time? And (3) What does this reveal about Albertan political culture?

Materials and Methods: Analysing Political Cartoons in Alberta

In the Summer of 2023, a small sample (n=500) of political cartoons from two relatively well-distributed papers in Alberta were examined to test for first political and then populist themes and to justify further research. The sample was drawn from the Calgary Herald and the Edmonton Sun. The Herald is a 140-year-old paper that is historically considered mainstream although often with a recognized conservative leaning. From 2009–2015, daily circulation averaged approximately 110,000 papers. The Edmonton Sun is a tabloid-style paper that has been published since 1978, with an average circulation of 39,600 in those same years. Today, it averages approximately 50,000 papers sold per day. Both papers are now owned by PostMedia, and as of 2021, the parent company had the highest print readership (per week) in Canada (PostMedia, 2021). 508 Alberta-based cartoons were coded for political and populist content, which represented the work of 11 artists during election years between 1980 and 2020. This pilot demonstrated that there was indeed substantial populist content (broadly defined) within such media, and there was more to discover through broadening the sample size from available archives.

The cartoons used in this project were collected in the Spring of 2024 from the digital archive (https://digitalcollections.ucalgary.ca) and physical collection at the Glenbow Western Research Centre at the University of Calgary in Calgary, Alberta. This Centre was chosen because it had the most extensive archival collection of Alberta-based political cartoons known to the researchers. Among the cartoons at Glenbow, the following artists were represented in collections of varying sizes: Sid Barron (n=70), Bill Fraser (n=6), Tom Innes (n=1375), Gib Potter (n=250), and Vance Rodewalt (n=455). Of those, only three artists had collections of significant size (>100) and only two collections featured publications from years that were contextually relevant to the scope of modern-day Alberta populism (1960s to present). As such, all available fonds for Tom

Innes (n=1375) and Vance Rodewalt (n=455) were examined for this project. Both artists were published in the Calgary Herald newspaper in Calgary, Alberta. The Innes collection features cartoons from 1963-1983, while Rodewalt's collection features cartoons from 1990-2012. Not all years include comparable rates of publication.[4]

Fonds were accessed from the online collection of the Glenbow using a public account, and the download, review, and publication of the cartoons was completed in accordance with the University of Calgary's copyright policy on digital collections for research purposes. To supplement the data extracted from the online collections, two research assistants examined the remaining physical fonds from Tom Innes and Vance Rodewalt that were available as hard copy at the Glenbow Western Research Centre in Calgary, Alberta. These cartoons were coded on-site, and any that met the inclusion criteria were scanned and uploaded to the online dataset. In total, over 1300 images were coded from 1974 – 1983 (Innes) and 1990-2012 (Rodewalt).

Table 1 – Innes Results for Populist Content

Year	Total Cartoons	Populist Cartoons	Dominant Subject of Populist Cartoons	Count	Percent	Dominant "Type" of Populism	Count	Percent
1963	1	0	-	-	-	-	-	-
1965	1	0	-	-	-	-	-	-
1972	11	0	-	-	-	-	-	-
1973	9	0	-	-	-	-	-	-
1974	137	7	Politics	4	57%	Political	5	71.4%
1975	123	6	Economy	3	50%	Economic	4	66.6%
1976	135	14	Politics	8	57%	Social/Political	7	50%
1977	81	7	Politics	3	42.8%	Political	3	42.8%
1978	2	1	Economy	1	100%	Economic	1	100%
1979	220	37	Politics	30	81%	Political	28	75.6%
1980	212	31	Politics	23	74.1%	Political	22	70.9%
1981	230	25	Politics	12	48%	Economic	12	48%
1982	203	16	Economy	10	62.5%	Economic	11	68.8%
1983	10	2	Politics	1	50%	Political/Social	2	100%
Totals	1375	146						

[4] For example, Innes' total collection, per year, was: 1963 (n=1), 1965 (n=1), 1972 (n=11), 1973 (n=9), 1974 (n=137), 1975 (n=123), 1976 (n=135), 1977 (n=81), 1978 (n=2), 1979 (n=220), 1980 (n=212), 1981 (n=230), 1982 (n=203), and 1983 (n=10). As such, the results from this research should be contextualized within the high volume of archived cartoons from 1974-1977 and 1979-1982. Rodewalt's collection had similar patterns, with low publication rates in some years: 1990 (n=1), 1993 (n=2), 1994 (n=21), 1995 (n=82), 1996 (n=18), 1997 (n=33), 1998 (n=33), 1999 (n=36), 2000 (n=8), 2006 (n=36), 2007 (n=80), 2008 (n=59), 2009 (n=25), 2011 (n=14), and 2012 (n=7).

Table 2 – Rodewalt Results for Populist Coded Content

Year	Total Cartoons	Populist Cartoons	Overt Subject of populist cartoons	Count	Percent	"Type" of Populism	Count	Percent
1990	1	0	-	-	-	-	-	-
1993	2	0	-	-	-	-	-	-
1994	21	9	Politics	9	100%	Political	7	77.7%
1995	82	20	Politics	16	80%	Political	17	85%
1996	18	8	Politics	7	87.5%	Political	8	100%
1997	33	2	Economy	1	50%	Economic	1	50%
1998	33	0	-	-	-	-	-	-
1999	36	4	Politics	3	75%	Political	3	75%
2000	8	3	Politics	2	66.6%	Political	1	33.3%
2006	36	18	Politics	12	66.6%	Political	12	66.6%
2007	80	39	Politics	32	82.1%	Political/Economic	10	25.6%
2008	59	29	Politics	25	86.2%	Political	18	62.1%
2009	25	5	Politics	5	100%	Cultural	3	60%
2011	14	2	Economy	1	50%	Economic	1	100%
2012	7	0	-	-	-	-	-	-
Totals	455	139						

Table 3 – Remaining Artists (Excluded)

Artist	Year	Total Cartoons	Populist Cartoons	Overt Subject of populist cartoons	Count	Percent	"Type" of Populism	Count	Percent
Gib Potter	1923-1981	250	24	Politics	20	83.3%	Political	23	95.8%
Sid Barron	1964-69	70	0	-	-	-	-	-	-
Bill Fraser	n/a	6	0	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Totals	326	24						

Coding

A deductive approach to coding the cartoons was adopted for all phases of the study, where each image was assessed for both presence (dichotomous; yes/no) of specific content, as well as more nominal variables and descriptive data. As can be seen in the tables above, images were coded for the presence of common populist themes (including spiritual, cultural, social, political, etc.). There were 8 types of populism utilized. Those messages were then coded for either opposition to, or representation of, 14 different messaging types, ranging from (as noted below) religion, big government, elites, common sense, rural, agricultural, energy, taxation, carbon, etc.)

In addition to the populist content, images were also coded for more general themes, including: (1) the subject/target of the image itself (7 different codes, including politics, economy, sport, culture, etc.); (2) the ideological messaging or portrayal of the state (including a left-centre-right continuum, social conservatism, environmentalism, and federalism); (3) party politics (with an emphasis on whether/how both provincial and federal parties were framed); (4) overt references to grievances tied to Western Alienation; (5) both positive and negative framing of political leadership (at any level, including international); and (6) the political "message" or tag line for the cartoon. [A full list of codes is available upon request.]

Two coders were used for this project, and periodic tests of intercoder reliability were conducted to ensure congruity between the coders. Three such tests were conducted: a blind test, a sub-section of the Innes dataset, and a sub-section of the Rodewalt dataset. In the blind test sample, 12 random cartoons were coded by both research assistants to gain a better understanding of the codes, their application, and the process of coding political humor. In the intercoder test for Innes, 26 cartoons were coded. Despite the high number of coding variables (28 per cartoon, excluding the open-ended code), the intercoder test showed 87.5% consistency in coding. The intercoder test for Rodewalt yielded similar results after approximately 20% of the dataset (n=9) was examined or discussed between the research assistants.

Our analysis finds that there was a clear spike in both over-all content, and content identified as populist, in the very early 1980s. These years coincide with two key themes: the first "anti-elites" (reflected in content focusing on a number of both political and economic events that brought federal politics into the public eye: (1) the political fortunes (and misfortunes) of Pierre Trudeau; (2) the energy crises and downturns of the 1970s and early 1980s; (3) the repatriation of the Constitution (1982); and the second theme, a corresponding focus upon "common sense" and the common people (of Alberta). These themes continue to resonate in the province today, whether found in the "standing up to Ottawa" or "getting a fair deal" language of the UCP 2019 platform, the similar "common sense plan" for getting Albertans back to work, or the separatist aspirations of the Alberta Prosperity Project and Stay Free Alberta (stayfreealberta.com) (who at the time of writing are collecting signatures for a petition with the question, "Do you agree that the province of Alberta should cease to be a part of Canada to become an independent state?").

The following results are divided into two sections, based on Innes' and Rodewalt's cartoon collections (spanning the years 1974-1983 and 1990-2012, respectively). Despite the temporal differences, the two datasets display similarities and reflect a lack of policy, political and cultural change in Alberta over time. Populist framing appeared frequently in both datasets, particularly after key elections, often with the federal government or key (federal) political leaders as scapegoats. In the next section, we explore each of these datasets in more detail, before discussing the implications of these findings.

Innes: 1974-1983

Although Innes was quite prolific during the 1970s and early 1980s, cartoons that were coded for populist-type commentary were relatively limited throughout much of this period. Of the hundreds of cartoons released, most years saw relatively few with populist content, and in some years, there was either (a) little appetite for his art, or (b) little art produced. That said, there is one immediate dynamic that should be noted—there was a significant increase in the publication rate of his cartoons after 1978 (peaking in 1981/82) and a similar (but not proportional) increase in populist content (see Figure 1.0).

Those years coincided with significant political events in Canada: (1) the loss of the federal election for the Liberals (under Pierre Trudeau) in 1979 to the Progressive Conservatives under Joe Clark; (2) the almost immediate defeat of the Progressive Conservatives in 1980 by the Liberals; and (3) the overwhelming victory of Peter Lougheed in the Alberta provincial election of 1979 (where they almost met their campaign slogan of "79 in '79," winning 74 of 79 seats).

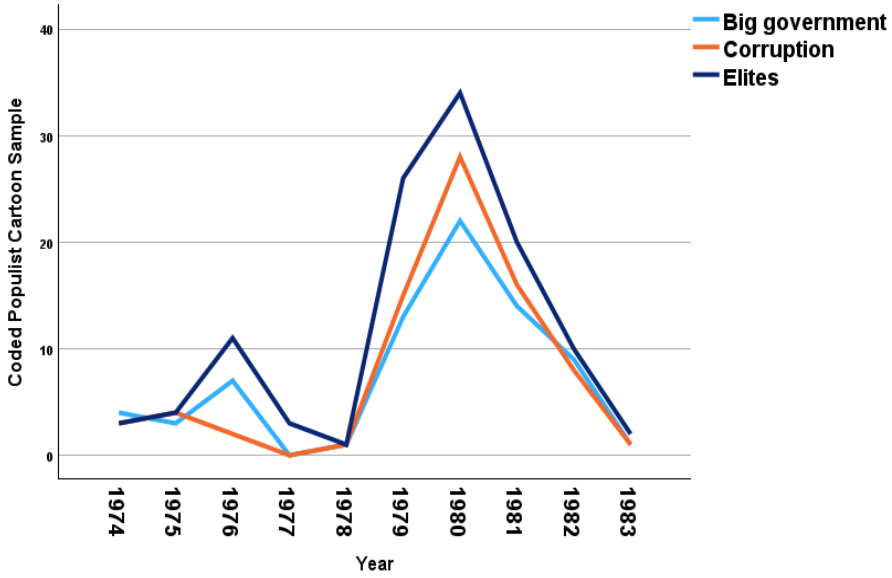
A closer examination of the specific content of these years shows some clear consistency in the messaging or framing of contemporary politics. Specifically, and as might be expected in a province that: (a) has a long history of political antagonism toward the federal government, and (b) has an almost equally long history of trying to take the politics out of the province (see, for example, Epp, 2001; Hallstrom, 2018; 2023). Animosity towards the federal government was sparked in 1980 by the two energy crises of the 1970s (which generated significant revenues for the energy sector, and the province), the collapse of oil prices, and the political (and still present) outcry over the National Energy Policy under Trudeau. That animosity is reflected in the content published by Innes (see Innes, 1980a; 1980b), where the three most dominant themes published during this time were consistent with classic populist sentiments: antagonism against "big" federal governments, corruption within politics, and the disconnect between common people and the elites "in charge" (see Figure 1).

Examples abound for these themes, including a number of historical/literary references (such as an anti-federal/Trudeau play from 1980 upon Dicken's *Oliver Twist* and the memorable "Please sir may I have some more" (M-8000-723)) or even referrals back to the 1915 "Milche Cow" cartoon first published in the Grain Growers Guide. In that case (M-8000-669), Alberta (represented by then-Premier Lougheed) is shown as a farmer milking his cow (labelled oil industry), while Trudeau and an assistant run to "help" carrying an oversized milk pail (oil barrel). Titled "Ottawa wants share in Alberta's Oil Cash Cow" this is a consistent theme where Albertan wealth (then characterized as energy revenues and oil, rather than the agriculture focused content of 1915) is taken both from the province, and its citizens, by a federal government that is politically manipulative (framing Lougheed, for example, as a convenient whipping boy (M-8000-619), extractive (with explicit references to theft (M-8000-720), a minimization of provincial concerns, and an Alberta/Premier that need to stand up to Ottawa, e.g., "Alberta won't sell us any gas" (M-8000-702), and in fact is reliant upon Alberta's resources and economy to maintain the Canadian state (note for example the image of Lougheed, a common hero figure for Innes at this time, paddling to save Canada (and Trudeau) in a canoe even as Trudeau opines that the "Free Ride is Over" (M-8000-727).

Such frames extend beyond Western Alienation and economic grievances — they extend to provincial separatism. In 1980, Innes published a cartoon (M-8000-718) titled "Ottawa not taking Western separatism seriously". In this image, the separatist army (portrayed universally as cowboy hat and boot-wearing, mustached men with a striking similarity to the cartoon figure Yosemite Sam (Warner Brothers Looney Tunes, 1945-1964) declares "IT'S WAR" while a Roman Legionnaire Trudeau muses "It's hysteria" (a trope itself on Trudeau-mania perhaps) while Lougheed (also cowboy-hatted) declares "It's disaffection". This single image simultaneously captures multiple recurring sentiments of the time—the embattled parties of Ottawa and Alberta (both with castles, in this case), the homogeneity, anger and unity of the separatist movement, and perhaps even the framing of Trudeau as adversarial leader (through not just the Roman uniform, but the explicit inclusion of the Crista worn by Trudeau—a mark of both rank and importance in the Roman Empire). In fact, Trudeau is frequently portrayed in the garments of royalty by Innes, and not in a flattering light.

Images reflecting the importance and "naturalness" of common sense are also present in Innes work. For example, an image of Trudeau (the artist) and the "common man" (wearing a "jobless" shirt) shows a discussion of modern art—the subject matter the abstract representation of the economic picture for Canada. While Trudeau beams in pride, the viewer notes "I detest modern art" (1982, M-8000-1118). Similarly, a 1981 (M-8000-853) image of a Member of Parliament (holding a bowl-shaped umbrella) captures cash falling from the sky (into the upward-facing umbrella) while the common citizen (labelled "Tax Payer") is soaked by the deluge falling from the umbrella itself, onto his head. Finally, a 4-frame image from 1980 (M-8000-684) emphasizes Trudeau's focus upon constitutional reform (his response to each question: BNA (British North American Act)) while each frame shows a different policy audience (inflation, joblessness, western grievances) represented by "normal" Canadians. It is also, however, interesting to note that in this image only politicians (Trudeau and Joe Clark) are depicted wearing suits (thus elites) while the policy audiences are notably more blue-collar in attire.

Figure 1: Most Prevalent Populist Themes in the Innes Dataset (1974-1983)



As might also be expected in an analysis of populist content, the antagonism against government, elites and politics was balanced by a corresponding increase in "for the people" sentiment (see Figure 2). The years 1978-82 saw cartoons that emphasized the importance of regular people and how politics and politicians were perhaps unnecessary, and potentially even a liability, to the reality of life at the time (and in particular for Albertans, who had seen the significant affluence generated during the 1970s undone almost overnight as Canada and the province entered a recession in 1980-82).

Figure 2: Frequency of 'Common Sense' and 'Common People' Codes in the Innes Collection (1974-1983)

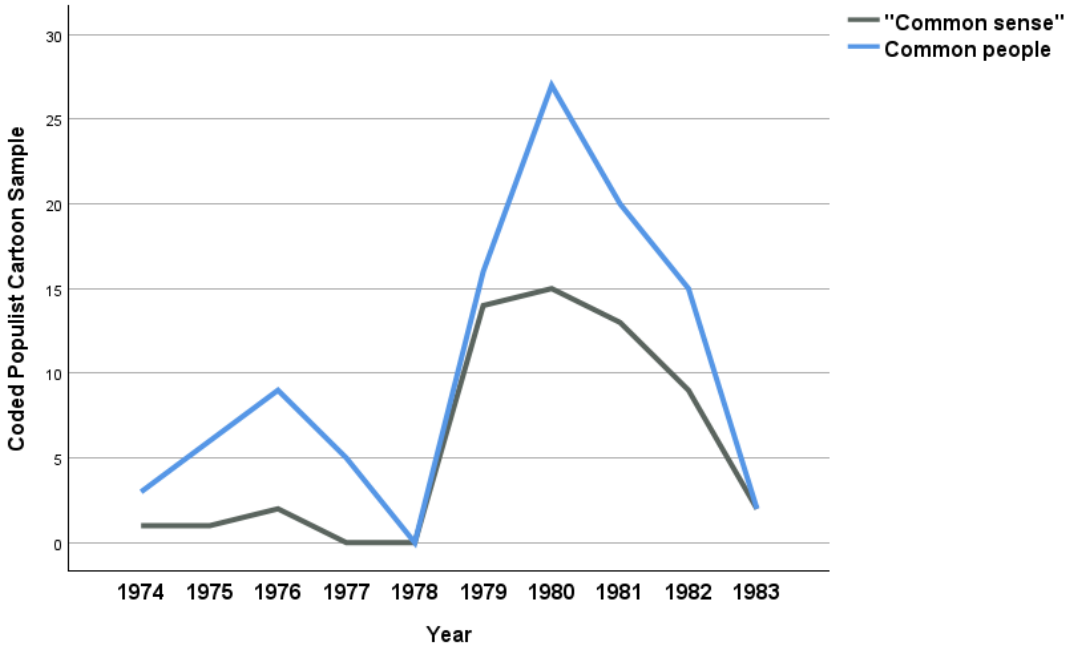
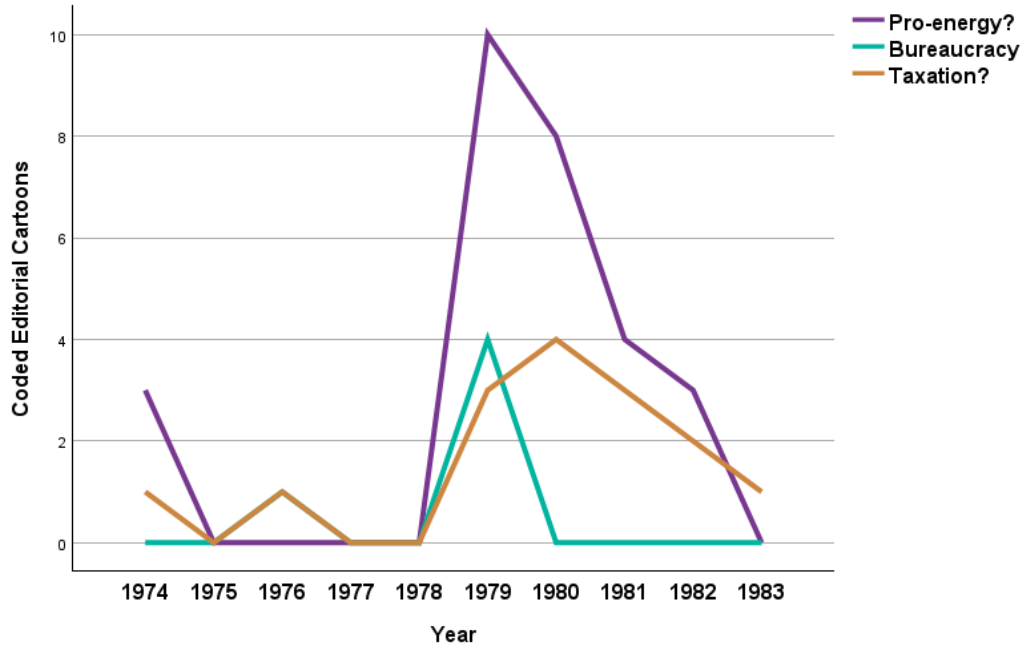


Figure 3: Socio-Economic Themes in the Innes Collection (1978-1982)

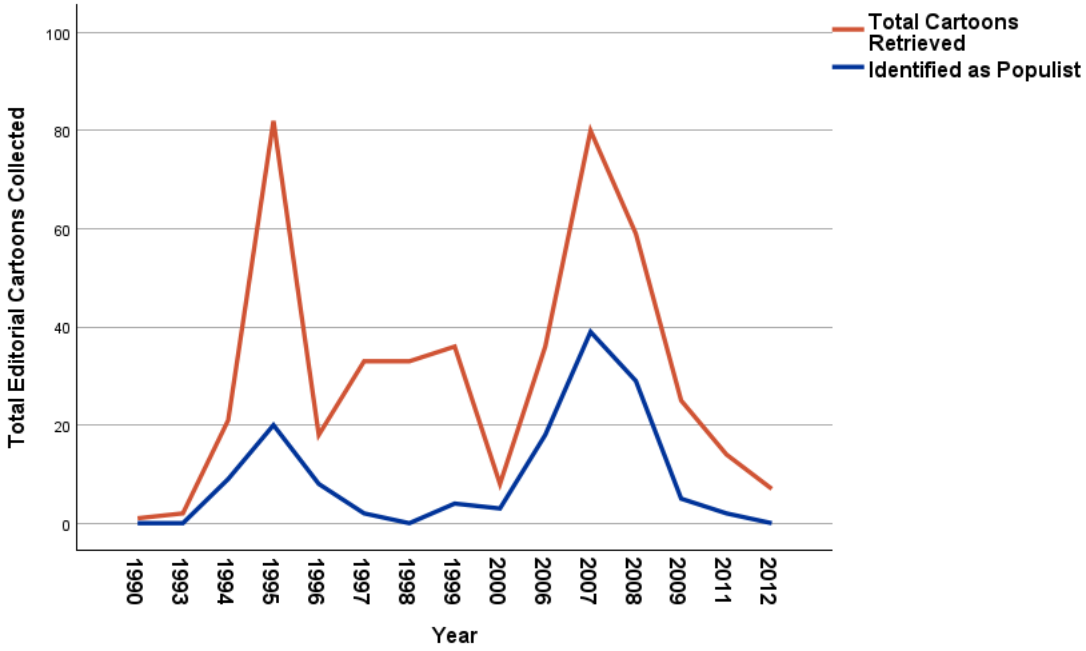


Rodewalt: 1990-2012

Although significantly smaller in volume, the Rodewalt fonds also show some consistency with Innes and the dual 'satirical' and 'framing' role of such editorial cartoons. Specifically, the populist content of his cartoons spikes in alignment with both the election of Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper in 2006, and in the years immediately after the landslide victory of the Federal Liberal Party in 1993 (noting that 1995 saw a number of notable domestic and international

events, including the 1995 Quebec Sovereignty Referendum, the Turbot War, and a visit from American President Bill Clinton). Figure 4 displays the fluctuation of the publication of populist content illustrated by Rodewalt.

Figure 4: Populist vs. Total Editorial Cartoons Collected in the Rodewalt Collection (1990-2012)



Rodewalt's mid-2000s work clearly echoes the dissatisfaction registered by Innes against Trudeau and the federal government, despite a Conservative Government. During the years that Rodewalt was publishing, Harper was only able to secure a minority government (he would not form a majority government until 2011), and he was not quite the level of "celebrity" that is attributed to Trudeau. However, as shown in Figure 4, these years marked not only a strong jump in populist sentiment, but the largest proportions of populist content compared to the total publications in the year.

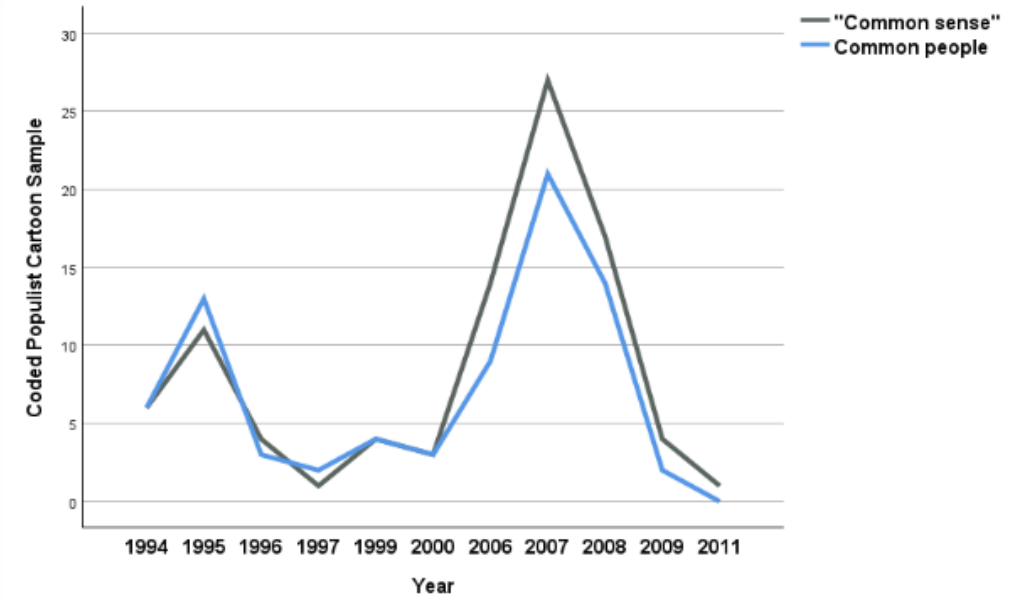
While some of the political details naturally varied between Innes and Rodewalt (in reflection of the political realities and parties of the day), there are consistencies in framing and messaging for the consumer (see Figures 5 and 6). However, there is also a shift in framing that emphasizes, per Barthes, the "naturalness" of political sentiment in the province. For example, in a 2008 image (M-9457-1313), two clients of a bar and grill bemoan the need for elections at all (as it "Ain't like there's a snowball's chance in hell we're gonna vote for some pansy liberal or some commie socialist anyhow!"). Similarly, an image from 2009 (M-9457-1571) makes reference to Alberta's long-standing rat control program (in place since 1950) and the Liberal Party: "They found rats, right here in Alberta!" "LIBERALS" "No – real rats!"

Other content from Rodewalt drives home the importance of common sense and the common people of Alberta. Perhaps made most explicit in 2006, as a clearly urban citizen watches the train labelled "Common Sense" depart the station, 2006 marked a key year for both federal and provincial conservative governments, and included the retirement of Ralph Klein, a robust Albertan economy driven by oil and gas revenues, and the defeat of the federal Liberals by Stephen Harper and the Conservative Party of Canada. This portrayal of an urban Albertan male (in contrast

to the much more common rural/cowboy stereotype in Rodewalt's art) is also found in Rodewalt's images regarding Klein's support for a merger of Reform and Progressive Conservative (PC) parties: Riding in a hybrid vehicle consisting of a truck bed at the rear of a black limousine, the PC member embodies affluence and elitism (cigar, nose in the air, dollar signs on the vehicle) while the rural Reformer rides with a bovine (likely a bull) and rather than a cigar, both chew upon pieces of hay.

Figure 5 – Frequency of 'Big Government,' 'Corruption,' and 'Elites' Codes in the Rodewalt Collection (1994-2008)

Figure 6: Frequency of "Common Sense" and "Common People" Codes in the Rodewalt Collection (1994-2011)



Discussion

In a previous paper (Rolfe et al., 2025) we identified a number of characteristics of Albertan populism that, while not unique, are perhaps exceptional in their substitutability and the vigor and frequency with which they have moved "into rotation" (particularly since 2019). These characteristics have shown clear resonance under the current Premiership of Danielle Smith. Smith, along with her predecessor Jason Kenney, made clear their need to "stand up to Ottawa"; limit the size of provincial government; expand the "sovereignty" of the provincial government through provincial taxation, pension, and policing regimes; double down on the energy production and resource side of the provincial economy; and support and implement increasingly socially conservative positions, including both separatist and anti-immigrant sentiments.

The results of our analysis here demonstrate the other side to this continuity in messaging: a now long-standing and clear, simple, and accessible target for blame. What is important to note here is that there does exist a linkage of perceived, potential, and even real harm between the commonly identified perpetrator of ills upon the Province of Alberta (i.e., often the Canadian Federal Government), but more specifically, the leadership from two generations of same family: the Trudeaus.

In this case, we draw from the legal work of Yeager (2019), who identifies not only a typology of scapegoating but also defines scapegoating as "giving in to an urge to blame a plausibly responsible party when the facts and law are open enough to make doing so lawful" (1757). Specifically, Yeager (2019) refers to "reckonings" in which "accusers seek a reckoning for a wrong they justifiably believe the scapegoat to have unjustifiably gotten away with. Put slightly differently, here scapegoats are being scapegoated for their own acts" (1751). This categorization is particularly apt in the Albertan case, as the scapegoat in question is the (often reviled) Pierre Trudeau who not only rose from electoral loss, but also pursued a national interest that not only contradicted but extracted (and some would say exploited) the energy revenues and capacity of a sub-national unit.

While the anti-Ottawa dynamic of western agricultural and early separatist sentiment can be traced back to the Great Depression, it is well-acknowledged that the Federal Liberal Party from the 1960s was often seen as explicitly anti-Albertan, and disproportionately more so as the province gained wealth from resource extraction. Although charged with pursuing the national, rather than subnational, interest, Pierre Trudeau was also an avowed federalist (but largely in support of the Francophone population in Quebec). His specific brand of federalism extended to a greater promotion of social justice and equity, multi-culturalism, and economic nationalism through a more consolidated federal government—agenda items that continue to raise the ire of "regular Albertans" 60 years later.

Perhaps more importantly, Pierre Trudeau provided a "Rubicon" (in the language of then-Premier Lougheed) in the early 1980s with the patriation of the Constitution Act. While that is a subject far too extensive for this paper (and open to a number of variable interpretations/explanations; see for example, Leeson, 2017), Trudeau's broader tensions with Quebecois nationalism, the National Energy Policy, his formalization of bilingualism (1969) and even the decriminalization of homosexuality, coupled with the formation of a "Kitchen Compromise" for the Constitution Act facilitated by nine provincial governments (excluding Quebec), marked a consolidation of not just where Alberta's primary opposition lay (Ottawa), but, in particular, gave politicians, and Innes, a "who" to blame (Rolfe et al., 2025). Did Trudeau fail to account for, or prioritize, Albertan and other provincial priorities? Most likely, yes. Was it his

intention, or that of the Liberal Party, to ever permit a more asymmetrical form of federal for provinces other than Quebec? No.

Trudeau's model of Canada (and indeed of politics) was grounded in rationality and reason—appeals to emotion, and to nationalist-type politics, were contrary to his very definition of the Canadian national interest. Whether for Quebec, or for Alberta, appeals to nationalist-type sentiments could only be balanced with a unique and rational form of federalism, one that emphasized liberal individualism, but also ran contrary to the on-going demands from the provinces for greater autonomy, Senate reform, and opposition to the Charter (see Leeson, 2017).

With the election of Pierre Trudeau's son, Justin Trudeau, as Prime Minister in 2015, the perception of anti-West sentiments from 'Ottawa' in Alberta reemerged. Justin Trudeau gave Alberta another "who" to blame, and the return to 'anti-Ottawa' and anti-Liberal messaging by the UCP from 2019 onwards (through to the time of writing) reveals the continuity of an Albertan political culture. [Examples from the editorial cartoons also help demonstrate the effectiveness of right-wing populist rhetoric in *reinforcing* that culture over time and creating little room for 'alternative' political projects, especially from the left.] While the two Trudeaus may not have been pursuing the same degree of political vision, there is little doubt that the media framing and "target" was quickly, and easily, transferred between generations—and with that same target, we see the continuation of the same political culture and scapegoats in the province (in some cases even after Trudeau has left political office).

Conclusion

While it cannot be claimed that cartoon content is a driving influence of the political culture or temperature of Alberta, our analysis does bring to light grievances that are historical, familiar, and salient to Albertans. What is important to note is how these messages are disseminated to the public, including the framing of the information and how populism manifests in Alberta media. Both originating from Calgary, Alberta (a particularly urban center), Tom Innes and Vance Rodewalt created depictions of how they understood Alberta politics, both internally and between the federal and provincial governments. The issues and frames present in their work speak to the historical underpinnings and continuity of western alienation, agrarian roots, and conservativism through the lens of populism.

Through our use of media framing and frame analysis, we argue that the cartoonists did not create a mirror that reflected Alberta political culture; rather, their work gave resonance and traction to a narrow and ideological interpretation of political events or relationships that continue to inform the political culture of the province. Many of the challenges outlined by the cartoons and the historical roots are still salient in contemporary Alberta. Platforms dependent on 'putting Alberta first' or 'standing up to Ottawa' keep room open for populist politics, and they allow for new scapegoats to take the place (or continue) the legacy of those before them, thereby reinforcing the same political cycle.

During each of their tenures, Pierre and Justin Trudeau were accessible scapegoats whose political decision-making was demonized as harmful (whether real or perceived) due to the history of regional, political, and economic conflict in Alberta and within Canada. At the time of writing, the Premier of Alberta announced a series of referenda (including a number of questions of immigration) that clearly and openly placed the blame on federal immigration policies and population growth for Alberta's fiscal and revenue challenges (as the province faces another multi-

billion dollar deficit budget), yet somehow managed to omit or forget the "success" of the "Alberta is calling" campaign, or the Premier's own calls for a population of 10 million in 2024.

This work makes a number of contributions to our understanding of contemporary politics and media in Canada, and Alberta specifically. In addition to providing the first and only comprehensive analysis of some of the most widely distributed editorial cartoons in the province over several decades, our analysis' use of media framing as a conceptual tool contributes to a growing literature trying to understand the consistency and resilience of key elements in Albertan politics over the last 100 years. With an emphasis upon explicitly populist content generated over the last 50 years, our analysis shows a "default" or easy return to two core themes: scapegoating political elites (particularly Trudeau and federal governments,) and emphasizing the need and benefits of "common sense" and common people in contemporary politics. When situated within the broader political and policy context of "dispositional immobility", the reductionist functionality of such cartoons become apparent through both Innes and Rodewalt's work (and consistent with contemporary populist-authoritarian political parties) who need to both place blame elsewhere, avoid accountability for previous decisions and policies, and appease or appeal to a broad but diverse range of political opinions on the provincial right.

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