



# Populism in the City: the Case of Ford Nation

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## Abstract

Populism is often viewed as a national-level phenomenon that pits a declining periphery against a cosmopolitan, economically successful metropolis. Our analysis of Rob Ford's 2010 campaign and mayoralty in Toronto reveals the potential for the emergence of populist politics within the metropolis. To comprehend his appeal, principally within the city's ethnically diverse postwar peripheral areas, we apply Brubaker's conceptualization of populism as a discursive repertoire. Drawing on qualitative information and analysis of survey research, we first describe how Ford constructed electorally salient protagonists and antagonists. Second, we discuss how his emergence was enabled by institutional, economic, and demographic change. Finally, we explain Ford's appeal to a diverse electorate in terms of the sincerity and coherence of his performance as the collective representation of suburban grievance. We conclude by arguing that populism may emerge in metropolitan settings with strong, spatially manifest internal social, economic, and cultural divisions.

**Keywords** Populism · Urban politics · City-suburb conflict · Performance

As a new wave of transatlantic populist politics has forcefully emerged, scholars have devoted themselves to understanding its characteristics, causes, and consequences (Brubaker 2017b; Fieschi and Heywood 2004; Inglehart and Norris 2017; Judis 2016; Kaltwasser, Taggart, Espejo, & Ostiguy 2017; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Müller 2016; Taggart 2000), often drawing on a rich older literature on the topic (Canovan 1981; Germani 1978; Ionescu and Gellner 1969). Recent populisms have primarily emerged in national politics and around

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nationalist (and sometimes civilizational) themes (Brubaker 2017a). Accordingly, research has concentrated on this jurisdictional level. Cities in particular, and spatial context more generally, sometimes figure prominently in this endeavor. Researchers note that populist voters in national elections often live outside of economically vibrant, ethnically diverse cosmopolitan metropolitan areas and in declining post-industrial communities (Florida 2017b; Ivaldi and Gombin 2015; Rodríguez-Pose 2018). This urban–non-urban, or metropolis–periphery, divide is recognized as a dominant political cleavage within nation-states (Scala and Johnson 2017) and is sometimes even posited as a fundamental cause of populist surges “everywhere” (Auerswald 2016; Goodhart 2017). In these national-level analyses, the very cosmopolitanism and diversity that has made many cities the focal points of the new creative economy have also made them ripe for non-metropolitan backlash. Themes of urban disorder, crime, corruption, and decadent urbane cosmopolitan elites are common populist tropes (Brubaker 2017b), even as cities are held up as counterweights to, or perhaps the dialectical mirror image of, nationalist populism (Florida 2017a; Katz and Nowak 2017).

In parallel, the urban concentration of international migrants has sparked emergent inter-group conflicts *within* cities whose discourse emphasizes civilizational conflict between Muslim migrants and a transnational value set: secularized Christian liberalism. Brubaker (2017a) identifies this “civilizationist” populist mode with the Dutch Pim Fortuyn movement and contrasts it with illiberal populist movements of nationalist protection in the USA, France, and Germany.

We identify a different scenario, one in which populism revolves neither around ethno-racial identities nor urban vs. rural mores and conditions, but rather emerges from place-based antagonism within metropolitan contexts. To do so, we examine Rob Ford’s rise to power in Toronto. Populist antagonism during Ford’s candidacy and 2010–2014 tenure as mayor emerged from a division between the downtown core and postwar suburbs, both of which are contained within the single municipality of Toronto. The inclusion of both environments within a single jurisdiction distinguishes Toronto from most large American cities, where prewar and postwar areas are compartmentalized and, as a result, urban–suburban conflict unfolds between rather than within municipalities (Dreier et al. 2014; Rusk 2013).

Ford’s surprising success in a multicultural city with a progressive reputation provoked considerable puzzlement and has been likened to the success of national-level right-populists, including Donald Trump and Silvio Berlusconi (e.g., Sax 2017). While this comparison may be instructive, it fails to do full justice to how populist themes were elaborated in Toronto’s city politics. For example, whereas most current national populisms cohere around anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim fears—indeed, Judis (2016) and Müller (2016) define right-populism as anti-pluralist and nativist—anecdote and survey data reveal that recent non-European and non-Christian immigrants were substantial components of Ford’s coalition (EkosPolitics 2010). As discussed in detail below, Ford’s populist discourse aligned with progressive liberalism in that it deemphasized ethno-racial difference. At the same time, it was socially conservative in that it was hostile to gay rights and feminism, and fiscally conservative in its drive for low taxes.

Ford’s brand of populism is rare and, as such, provides ample material for a “deviant case analysis” (George and Bennett 2005)—an extreme version of a phenomenon that brings its contours into relief. While interesting and important, this analysis has broader value, both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, it illustrates the power of a discursive approach to the study of populism, by showing how the populist repertoire may be adapted in unusual contexts while retaining its core features. Practically, it suggests alternative conditions under which the populist style may gain salience in local politics even within cosmopolitan, socially diverse, and economically vibrant Global North metropolises.

We develop our analysis in three steps. After first reviewing the literature on the populist repertoire, we discuss how this repertoire was articulated in Toronto. The third section outlines the institutional and structural transformations that created an opening for the populist style to gain traction in Toronto. Finally, we show how Rob Ford seized this opportunity, highlighting (following Garrido 2017) his ability to create a coherent, collectively recognized political persona defined by sincere, unaffected concern for “ordinary” people. Throughout, we draw on qualitative evidence, as well as survey data collected by the 2014 Toronto Election Study (McGregor et al. 2014). We conclude with some reflections upon how our analysis extends key insights from urban political economy, and what the Toronto case may reveal about the potential for populist politics to emerge in other urban settings.

## Literature Review: Toward an Understanding of Populism in the City

While populism’s recent upsurge has sparked a corresponding expansion of scholarly interest in the topic, the meaning, causes, and consequences of the phenomenon have been discussed for many decades (for reviews see, e.g., da Silva and Brito Vieira 2018; Kaltwasser et al. 2017). While the details of these debates need not be rehearsed here, we conclude that commentators have struggled to arrive at a fundamental definition of populism. Earlier scholars sought to define populism in terms of its substantive content, that is, as a package of policy goals or ideological commitments. The result was a catalog of populisms, each rooted in a distinct national-historical context and mobilized toward different objectives. Ionescu and Gellner (1969), and also Canovan (1981), eschewed a unified definition, concluding that populism defies characterization. Protean and context-dependent, populism lacks a programmatic or ideological core beyond the notion that “populism worships the people” (Ionescu and Gellner 1969: 4). Subsequent work has shifted instead toward the analysis of populism as a performative logic or style of political engagement that can be mobilized toward multiple substantive objectives and hitched to diverse ideological projects (Laclau 2005; da Silva and Brito Vieira 2018; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Jansen 2016; Brubaker 2017; Ostiguy 2017). While these approaches differ in their particularities, they all emphasize features such as anti-elitism, a reference to the people, and a simple and direct style (see Canovan 1999).

Disparate characterizations of populism are bundled with distinct propositions regarding its causes and origins (for a review, see Hawkins et al. 2017). These issues typically follow social-scientific fault lines, with some emphasizing material and institutional conditions (e.g., Inglehart and Norris 2017), others stressing symbolic and performative factors (e.g., Alexander 2010; Binder 2018; Joosse 2018; Garrido 2017; Coleman 2016), and still others tracing the origins of populism to contradictions or paradoxes internal to democracy itself (da Silva and Vieira 2018). Recent contributions have taken a multi-dimensional approach (Brubaker 2017b; Ostiguy 2017; Gidron and Bonikowski 2014). These explanations for the emergence of populist movements aim to account for how multiple causes are articulated in different contexts.

We build upon this tradition extending it to a specifically urban context. To do so, we take Brubaker’s (2017) “Why Populism?” as a starting point. We argue that Brubaker’s model of the populist logic (discussed in more detail below) provides a valuable opportunity to test the transposability of a synthetic explanation to a context for which it was not explicitly designed: the internal politics of the city. Although we take Brubaker’s model as

our basis, others are referenced where appropriate. Our analytical strategy is to use the case of Toronto's Rob Ford to probe this argument. We move from a description of the logic of Ford's urban populism to an account of the preconditions of its emergence, emphasizing the confluence of institutional, cultural, economic, and demographic transformations. We follow authors who suggest that these factors only explain the background situation and that to understand why particular populist leaders succeed, it is necessary to examine the particularities of their political performance (Alexander 2010; Garrido 2017; Binder 2018; Joosse 2018)—especially the ways in which they build an intense emotional connection with their supporters. While these issues have been central in many recent studies, especially of Donald Trump's performance of authenticity (Coleman 2016; Joosse 2018), we take our cue from Garrido's (2017) study of Joseph Estrada, who became mayor of Manila with substantial support from the city's poor despite a record of malfeasance and strong opposition from traditional elites. While we again refer to other sources where appropriate, Garrido's study stands out in focusing on the emergence of a populist candidate in an urban setting. The contrast with Estrada proves especially illuminating in that it allows us to examine the applicability of Garrido's model (discussed in more detail below) to a very different urban context—a diverse and ostensibly wealthy city in the Global North.

## Performing the Populist Repertoire in Ford Nation

As noted, most studies of populism are at the national level. Such analyses tend to deem cities counter-movements to and targets of populist forces, which tend to be concentrated in rural areas and declining post-industrial regions. Yet the internal politics of the metropolis are not immune to populist insurgency. Left-populist mayors such as Estrada in Manila (Garrido 2017), Mockus in Bogotá (Gilbert 2015), and López-Obrador in Mexico City (Savarino 2006) emerged as representatives of the urban poor who gained a form of political incorporation through the leader's personality. These examples are complicated, however, by their close integration with national politics. Developing countries tend to be politically and economically centralized in one or a few large cities, establishing strong linkages between local and national politics. Mayors draw extensively on tropes from national politics and move back and forth between the two levels. Such examples are restricted neither to the left nor to the Global South. Anti-immigrant politician Pim Fortuyn moved from Rotterdam city politics to Dutch national politics (Brubaker 2017a; Pels 2003). More recently, right-populist national parties in Austria, Spain, and Italy have fielded successful mayoral candidates in major cities, while also competing at the national level (Paxton 2017).

The case of Toronto's Rob Ford differs, however, because his successful 2010 campaign did not represent the local transposition of national debates or partisan conflicts. While there is evidence that this may be changing (Graves 2018; Medeiros 2018), Canada stands out in exhibiting little populism in national politics (Adams 2018; Heath 2017; Polèse 2017). Moreover, Toronto's elections are officially nonpartisan and mayoral candidates have historically assembled cross-partisan electoral coalitions. In his decade as a ward councilor before running for mayor, Rob Ford was an erratic and iconoclastic figure who was frequently on the losing side of council votes. He claimed to personally respond to every phone call, visited social housing residents in their homes, and demonstrated fiscal probity by refusing to spend his allocated office budget.

First elected as a ward councilor in 2000, Ford was a consistent opponent of center-left mayor David Miller (2003–2010), who presided over rising city spending. While popular for much of his two terms, Miller's support waned in 2009 as light rail transit projects fell behind schedule and disrupted car traffic and as council appeared unresponsive to residents and businesses demanding tax relief following the 2008 economic shock. Miller announced that he would not run for a third term in September 2009 after a 5-week strike by the city's garbage collectors, which culminated in what was broadly seen as a capitulation to labor demands (Fanelli 2016: ch. 4). It was in this context of reduced confidence in the public sector that Rob Ford entered the race to succeed Miller in March 2010. Prior to the election, columnist Haroon Siddiqui (2010) wrote that "This mayoral election ... has become a referendum on David Miller. He is not on the ballot but a vote for Ford is a vote against Miller"—and his perceived policy failures.

Though Rob Ford was identified as a back-to-basics fiscal conservative, he does not fit common contemporary right-populist tropes: nativist anti-immigration sentiment, Christian nationalism, and the moral superiority of the rural "heartland." (In any event, immigration policy is under national, not local, jurisdiction.) Rather, Ford energized an intra-metropolitan coalition comprising not only blue-collar whites but also Arab Muslims, South Asian Hindus, Caribbean evangelicals, and other non-white recent immigrant groups. Ford also won with substantial support from upper-status postwar suburban neighborhoods located outside the city's historic core—largely white, high-income, Protestant areas that traditionally support conservative candidates (Doering et al. forthcoming). Indeed, the apparent ethnic diversity of Ford's coalition aligns him with Judis's (2016: 15) definition of *left*-populism, a characterization that sits poorly with his social conservatism—for example, his longstanding refusal to attend Toronto's Gay Pride parade—and his fiscal conservatism.

In 2010, Rob Ford rallied this economically and ethnically diverse coalition around a message of "respect for taxpayers" and criticism of a "downtown elite" portrayed as out of touch with and insulated from the concerns of suburban communities. Although Ford's support in upper-status suburban neighborhoods would later collapse as his indiscretions became known—with conflict of interest inquiries escalating to a video of him smoking crack cocaine with local gang members—it remained strong among the city's more marginalized inner suburbs (Kane 2013). These areas voted overwhelmingly for Rob's brother Doug in the 2014 mayoral election after Rob withdrew from the mayoral race following the diagnosis of an aggressive cancer. After his death in 2016, hundreds lined up to view Rob Ford's casket during a 2-day public visitation; a remembrance website received over 10,000 comments (The Ford Family 2016).

This brief sketch defines our first problem: what characterizes the populist impulse Ford embodies? Rather than characterize Ford's populism through a set of specific policies, ideology, or values, the literature on the "populist style" provides a more fruitful direction, one that highlights populism as a logic (da Silva and Brito Vieira 2018) that may encompass many substantive political projects. This is a wide-ranging literature with a rich tradition, but Brubaker's recent "Why Populism" (2017b) provides a valuable synthesis and distillation. Central is that populism is a stylistic repertoire with its own logic: "a limited though historically evolving set of relatively standardized elements that are well known to, and available to be drawn on by, political actors" (Brubaker 2017b, p. 361). This populist repertoire provides a general template that nevertheless leaves room for—and in fact requires—local elaboration and specification. Politicians perform this elaboration themselves as they articulate populist themes in ways that link to their political projects, whether

democratic or antidemocratic, left or right. The analytical task is to reconstruct these linkages in the service of better understanding the nature of the populist script, both as it evolves into new variants and connects seemingly disparate circumstances.

As Brubaker stresses, crucial to the generic populist repertoire is its ability to organize the world along two dimensions (see also Ostiguy 2017). A vertical dimension contrasts “elites” against “the people,” sometimes adding another layer below in which groups beneath “the people”—“parasites,” “lumpen,” “welfare queens,” and the like—receive special benefits from “elites,” who care more about them than “the people” (see also Gest 2016, p. ch. 7). The horizontal dimension pits “insiders” against “outsiders” (along an urban-rural cleavage, see also Cramer 2016). This populist cocktail becomes especially potent when vertical and horizontal are conjoined. In this configuration, elites are both “above” and “outside” (“rootless cosmopolitans” are a classic trope), aligned with the “parasites” against the “good people.” da Silva and Brito Vieira (2018) add that these dynamics emerge within democratic polities where the distance between the promises of inclusion and the reality of exclusion is salient, generating conditions ripe not so much for hatred and enmity of distant, disconnected “others,” but resentment toward members of, or residents in, one’s own polity.

Ford’s rhetoric arrayed the elite and the marginal, the insider and the outsider, across metropolitan space. *Vertically*, it placed a group of “downtown elites”—private sector “fat cats” in the legal and financial services sectors, unionized city employees, and cultural tastemakers—above suburban “ordinary people.” In *Ford Nation* (Ford and Ford 2016), published after his brother’s death, Doug Ford frequently contrasts the downtown with the suburbs, identifying the latter with a “silent majority” in conflict with a distant elite:

The media and the establishment and the elites were saying one thing about us, but the public—the silent majority, as we called it—were saying something else. (160–161)

Ford Nation is not about political parties, conservative or liberal allegiances, personal beliefs, or whether someone is wealthy or not. Ford Nation is about standing up to the political elite; the same old, same old; wasting money; and unaccountable and unreachable leadership. (271)

By this narrative, the downtown elites that controlled the city’s major economic and cultural institutions monopolized a city planning apparatus that directed investment to the core rather than surrounding postwar suburban areas. The bloated city government is portrayed as a parasite, its disrespect for taxpayers exemplified by public sector union leaders “riding the gravy train” while shielding their members from the harsh realities of the post-industrial economy to which “ordinary people”—blue-collar workers, recent immigrants, and public housing residents—were exposed. As Doug Ford put it, “We’re going to target ‘jobs for life’ whenever we can, because nobody should have a job for life” (Rider 2011). A vocal Ford supporter used more colorful language to describe the situation:

Toronto’s parasites, namely the “jobs-for-life” blackmail-artists good-for-nothing expect-high-pay-for-minimal-menial-output Public Sector Unions, paraded around pretending that the majority of Torontonians in voting in Rob Ford as Mayor, didn’t have a clear expectation that he would bring these Unions back to reality. (Anonymous 2011)

*Horizontally*, insiders and outsiders were defined less in terms of ethnicity or income than by urban vs. suburban cultural mores. On the outside, conflated with downtown elites and parasitic public unions, were urbanists dedicated to collective consumption (Castells 1977):

walking, cycling, dense and diverse streetscapes, an animated public realm, as well as cultural and social experimentation in the form of avant-garde arts, non-traditional family arrangements, and secularity. In this construction, “downtown elites” were in the city but not of it—more comfortable hobnobbing with their counterparts in downtown New York, San Francisco, and London than visiting Toronto’s suburban neighborhoods.

Brought “in” were a diverse array of suburban neighborhoods: blue-collar, immigrant, and traditional middle- to upper-status residential zones, in which life centers around domestic space, traditional family models, and private mobility in cars (see Walks 2015). The Ford campaign labeled this suburban anti-elite coalition “Ford Nation,” redirecting the theme of national belonging to a suburban political consciousness (Towhey and Schneller 2015, ch. 7).

We can fill out this schematic account of how Ford adapted elements of the populist repertoire by examining how he specified the repertoire in the five additional directions Brubaker identifies:

- *Antagonistic re-politicization*, in which populists seek to assert democratic political control over arenas of life dominated by elites. In Ford’s rendition, this meant taking transit policy back from “experts,” who distrust an unruly and ignorant suburban public and want their decisions exempt from politics. Ford pushed in this direction by arranging the dismissal of the transit commission’s general manager and railing against expert-authorized light rail plans as disrespecting drivers. He instead asserted that “subways subways subways!” would clear the streets for cars. Derision from planners and academics—and their insistence on depoliticizing transit planning—only strengthened his position.
- *Majoritarianism*, in which populists assert the will and rights of a majority over a minority deemed as threatening. In Ford’s version, this meant attacking public sector unions for wasting taxpayer resources on perks enjoyed only by them. Ford’s valorization of the suburbs also deployed majoritarian themes, depicting a numerical and geographic majority (the suburbs) dominated by a minority (the downtown core).
- *Anti-institutionalism*, in which populists assert a desire for direct connection with “the people.” Rob Ford adapted this theme by hosting (during his mayoralty) a call-in radio show with Doug. While unprecedented for a Toronto mayor, it enabled the Fords to speak directly with “the people,” free from what they viewed as the distortions of an antagonistic, elite-dominated media. Also, as ward councilor and mayor, the Ford family hosted Ford Fest annually—a backyard barbeque attended by thousands at which the Fords would interact directly with their supporters (Micallef 2016, pp. 27–31, 119–122).
- *Protectionism*, in which populists present themselves as defenders of the people from external threats. Ford developed this theme in several directions. Economically, he promised to reduce the cost of driving imposed by downtown-centric policies and cut wasteful property taxes harming suburban homeowners. With respect to security, Ford opposed “hug-a-thug” social programs and advocated increased police hiring—even as he was being investigated and police leaders denied needing additional resources. Culturally, Ford would protect a suburban way of life against creeping urbanism by, for example, trumpeting that “the war on the car is over” when canceling suburban surface light rail projects, opposing on-street bike lanes, and refusing to participate in Toronto’s Gay Pride parade.
- *Mannerism, rhetoric, and physical comportment*, in which populists adopt a “low” style of the common folk (see also Ostiguy 2017). Ford cultivated this dimension in numerous ways, including much publicized struggles to control his weight, celebrating his predilection for unhealthy food, his use of simple language, and his personal familiarity with life in

Toronto's dilapidated social housing projects (Filion 2011, p. 466). While ethnic and racist slurs were part of his vocabulary (Wang 2016), they were quickly assimilated to the "real talk" of the common person. Indeed, videos showing Ford violating conventional norms of polite, discreet, moderate "establishment" society only confirmed his image as an unvarnished and unscripted straight-shooter.

## Conditions of the Emergence of the Populist Style in Toronto

So far we have surveyed the main directions in which Ford elaborated the populist repertoire in the Toronto context. This analysis provides evidence for considering Ford's mayoralty together with other recent populisms, not primarily in sharing ideological or policy commitments, but in appealing to similar tropes and logics, specified for the urban setting. While this characterization helps define Ford's populism, it does not explain its emergence. This section examines the institutional and structural transformations that enabled Ford's populism. To do so, we again adapt ideas from Brubaker (2017b, p. 361) by pointing to local instances of two trends: the crisis of institutional mediation generated in large part by Toronto's 1997 amalgamation and the movement toward protectionism induced by rapid economic and demographic change.

**The Crisis of Institutional Mediation** Brubaker (2017b, p. 361; see also Milofsky and Harris 2017) highlights several processes that have provoked distrust in traditional forms of institutional mediation, increasing the appeal of claims to direct connection between leaders and publics. Ford's emergence and success must be understood against a highly disruptive institutional change: the 1997 provincial government-imposed amalgamation of the former city of Toronto with five adjacent suburban municipalities. Amalgamation intensified the crisis of intermediation in three ways. First, it replaced familiar small-scale local government institutions with a large and remote council and bureaucracy that would not easily earn the trust of disparate publics. Second, amalgamated institutions brought amalgamated politics; previously inter-municipal core-suburb conflicts would now play out in a single venue. Today's "megacity" contains both prewar urban core and postwar suburban physical environments, the former centered on the former city of Toronto, on which are overlaid distinct political identities and attitudes. At the outset, anti-amalgamation mobilization differed in the old core city and its suburbs, the former focusing on identity and protecting civic amenities, the latter on sustaining property-related services and low taxes (Boudreau 1999; Horak 1998, pp. 24–28; Redway 2014, p. ch. 8). Core residents experienced amalgamation as an extension of the old city's identity over a wider area; for suburbanites, it was a loss of autonomy, experienced by many as a form of colonization (Joy and Vogel 2015; see also Kotler 2004 [1969]). Reflecting these divisions, the new city was plunged into an ongoing identity crisis (Patterson and Silver 2015) marked by recurrent feelings of disrespect and resentment among residents and representatives of the former municipalities. Third, even as the city experienced rapid population growth, amalgamation posed major challenges of bureaucratic integration and policy harmonization that shifted agenda-setting power to administrators and experts. Land-use and transportation planning was a particularly complex file. Ford's predecessor, the core-based center-left mayor David Miller, endorsed the expert consensus on a transit plan—"TransitCity"—that featured large-scale expansion of surface light rail across the postwar suburban zone.

Ford's campaign and mayoralty responded to and exploited the crisis of intermediation generated by amalgamation. He could do so because Toronto's mayoralty is the least mediated political office in Canada, directly elected by the largest electorate in the nation—some 1.8 million eligible voters in a city of 2.7 million residents. While Ford's father had served as a provincial Conservative Party backbench legislator for one term during the 1990s, his municipal career developed outside of the party apparatus. His campaign was predominantly funded by small donations and owed little to partisan machinery. As mentioned, Ford used several channels to communicate directly with supporters before and after his election: telephone town halls, a weekly radio call-in show, YouTube videos, the Ford Fest barbecue, and delivering on his promise to personally return every telephone call to his office.

Ford's policy proposals and rhetoric spurned the recommendations of policy elites inside and outside the city bureaucracy. When Ford canceled TransitCity after his victory, he singled out experts with special disdain: "We know what the expert panel is going to say, it is just a bunch of hogwash...I listen to the people out here, not a handpicked, biased panel" (Peat 2012). A local magazine captured the sense of exasperation from the city's "expert" planning community, blasting in a headline: "normally conciliatory transit expert...takes aim at Rob Ford" (Spencer Davis 2012). Toronto's amalgamation heightened the crisis of mediation by simultaneously raising the stature of experts and creating a new political office capable of directly incorporating the desires of a mostly suburban aggrieved majority against them. More proximately, the 2009 garbage strike and rising tax burdens during an economic recession undermined the credibility of incumbent municipal politicians and administrators. Ford's election promised to wrest control of the city from these policy elites.

**Toward Protectionism** Ostiguy (2017) suggests that populist mobilization entails a dialogical process of "identity creation" in which leader and people mutually construct politically salient antagonisms. As Brubaker notes, national-level right-wing populists tend to emerge in response to three threats: immigration, economics, and culture. Immigration creates an opportunity for nativist defense of "real" citizens. Economic changes—e.g., rising inequality, global trade liberalization, post-industrial restructuring, post-Fordism, and welfare-state rollback—create opportunities to defend the "little people" against harsh economic conditions. Cultural changes—e.g., multiculturalism, political correctness, and the cultural elevation of ethnic and sexual minorities—create an opportunity to defend culturally stigmatized traditional values. Each can be articulated as a liberal elite project from which ordinary people require protection.

Ford's rhetoric was tailored to the local valences of these transformations. The city of Toronto has experienced a massive influx of immigrants over the past three decades—indeed, its population is now more than 50% foreign-born and non-white. Most have settled in the municipality's inner postwar suburban ring, aligning the question of belonging—who is and is not a "real" Torontonian—with the city's core-suburban socio-spatial cleavage. Ford did not frame transnational immigrants as an external threat; indeed, they formed the heart of his coalition. As his brother put it:

Rob was more popular in the various ethnic communities around Toronto than any politician I can think of. They loved him because with Rob they actually had someone to call and speak to. All of a sudden, these new Canadians—many of whom had come from countries where the political scene is rotten with corruption—had a voice in local affairs. (Ford and Ford 206:116)

A campaign strategist would later attribute immigrants' affection not only to his accessibility but also to his social conservatism: "We knew his base. Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, and others, many of them recent immigrants, most of them socially conservative" (Towhey and Schneller 2015, p. 38).

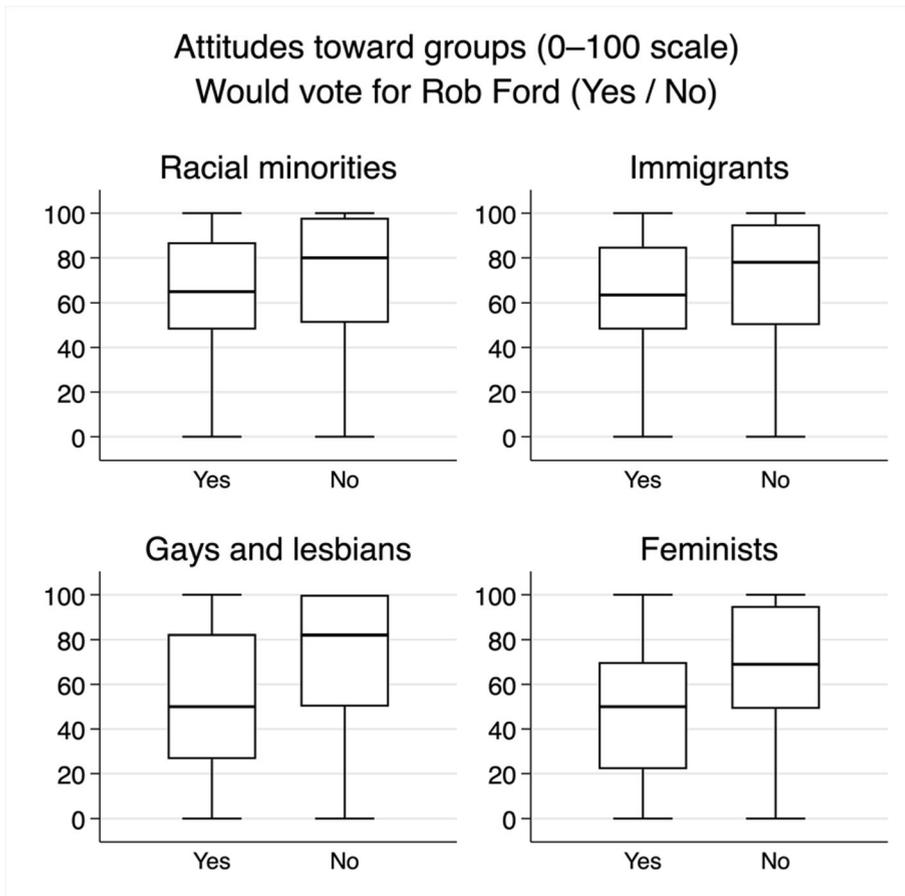
The long-term economic decline of the suburban zone relative to the gentrifying core (Hulchanski 2010; MacDonnell et al. 2004) sharpened the spatial articulation of socio-economic status at the same time that amalgamation consolidated the two zones into a single political unit. While the city as a whole lost half of its manufacturing employment between 1983 and 2013 (117,000 jobs), banking and financial services employment increased by 78,000 workers, mostly in the downtown core (City of Toronto 2014, pp. 21, 23). The decline of secure skilled employment in the manufacturing sector in favor of low-skilled precarious service jobs has fueled marginalization and anxiety, especially in the suburbs (Lewchuck et al. 2015). These processes sharpened the sense that if Toronto had "intruders," they were the rising "creative class" of young professionals, invading the central city as part of a new wave of urbanist aspiration buoyed by a new economy that prized arts, design, and culture. This incursion left struggling blue-collar and immigrant communities with a sense of impending danger, not from foreign nationals but from better-off gentrifiers. One voter—a part-indigenous social housing resident—explained why Ford had her support by arguing that former mayor David Miller's "tower renewal" program, an initiative to renovate the city's crumbling privately owned rental housing complexes, was a Trojan Horse for gentrification:

if I could show you some city documents from the recent [rental apartment] tower renewal [program] ...It's a softener for the gentrification that's coming in. I just wish people would say, "Guess what, guys? You're being gentrified"...I wish someone had the balls to tell me that. I think Ford would. (Grant 2010)

Similarly, Ford's campaign stood out in its indifference toward what had become an otherwise uncontested pillar of city policy, arts grants, whose beneficiaries were predominantly located in the old core. "Mr. Ford spent much of the debate [about arts policy] staring at the ceiling of the room. He seemed to be praying for guidance or perhaps to be anywhere but there. He hammered his main point with repetition: the city was broke and had other priorities. He said roads need to be fixed" (Gilmour 2010). Thus, economic restructuring produced an impulse toward protectionism, but because of the form this restructuring took, the characters in the populist drama—the intruders and those to be saved—differed from their national-level counterparts.

These economic and demographic changes intersected with cultural changes, generating new place-based identities that, in turn, motivated a distinctive form of protectionism. Multiculturalism is a relatively settled question in the Canadian context and so inspired less concern than elsewhere. In line with this, we find that ethno-racial protectionism did not seem to animate Ford's supporters in the 2014 Toronto Election Study. While his supporters rated "racial minorities" and immigrants somewhat lower than others, there is little difference between supporters and non-supporters of Ford, nor is there a clear spatial pattern in the responses. (See Figs. 1 and 2.) Indeed, about 57% of Ford supporters and non-Ford supporters alike agree or strongly agree that "more should be done to protect the rights of racial minorities."

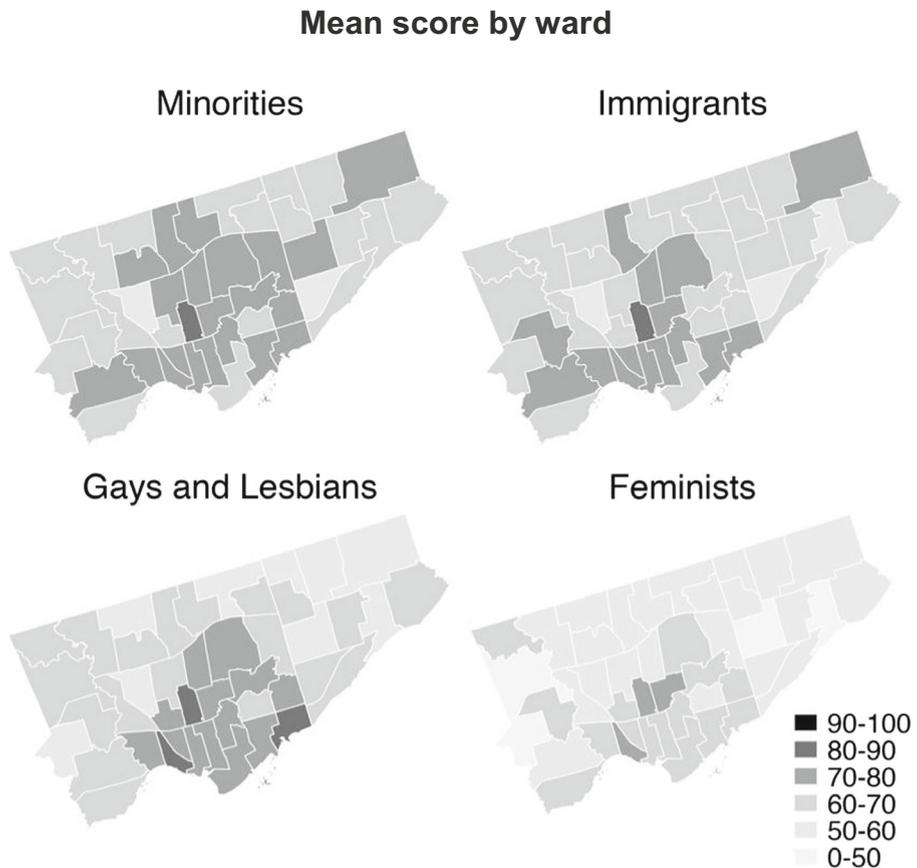
However, changing norms around religion, family, gender, and sexuality played a much larger role. Ford supporters held the LGBTQ community in much lower regard than immigrants and non-whites and rated feminists lowest of all. There is also a clear spatial divide in



**Fig. 1** Attitudes toward groups in the 2014 Toronto election. Differences in attitudes between Ford and non-Ford supporters in the 2014 Toronto Election Survey are assessed. As no survey was conducted in the 2010 election that brought Rob Ford to office, we must instead examine the later election in which first Rob Ford, as the incumbent, and then his brother Doug, contested the mayoralty. While Ford and non-Ford supporters were both largely favorable to racial minorities and immigrants, Ford supporters were considerably less favorable to gays and lesbians and feminists. (Source: McGregor et al. 2014, variables: CPS13, CPS22A–D)

attitudes between core and suburban wards. These changes were focalized in the downtown core. Many downtown neighborhoods have large majorities of avowedly secular residents, sizable concentrations of non-traditional household arrangements, and free-thinking artists and “artsy” types. The downtown is home to the Gay Village and to numerous university professors who proudly and forcefully advocate for feminism and LGBTQ rights. Ford’s supporters could present themselves as defending traditional religious and family values against secularism and feminism imposed from above. The concentration of secular and feminist attitudes in the downtown core further amplified the sense that defenses against them must be directed against not only individuals but also the places they inhabit.

This entire demographic-economic-cultural complex came to a symbolic head when one of Ford’s staunchest supporters, Don Cherry, gave a speech at Ford’s swearing-in ceremony. Host of TV sports commentary program “Hockey Night in Canada”—a symbol of working-class



**Fig. 2** Map of attitudes toward groups in the 2014 Toronto election, by ward. On average, surveyed residents in core-area wards were more favorable to gays and lesbians and feminists than those in suburban wards. The core-suburb favorability gap is smaller for racial minorities and immigrants. Source: McGregor et al. (2014), variables CPS13, CPS22A–D

Canadian identity—Cherry placed the chain of office over Ford’s shoulders in a bright pink suit. In his speech, Cherry linked transportation behavior to political identity: “I’m wearing pinko for all the pinkos out there that ride bicycles and everything....” He went on to make a further association to cultural identity. “I was made fun of ’cause I go to church” (Kupferman 2010). This example indicates that the movement toward protectionism is not so much driven by anti-immigration per se, but pits a physically and culturally *mobile* group (the downtown “creative class”) against another *fixed* to a place and/or tradition (suburbanites with traditional values). Thus, structural transformations in the city’s demographics, economy, and culture created an opportunity space for populism, which Ford was happy to occupy.

### Why Did Ford’s Populism Succeed?

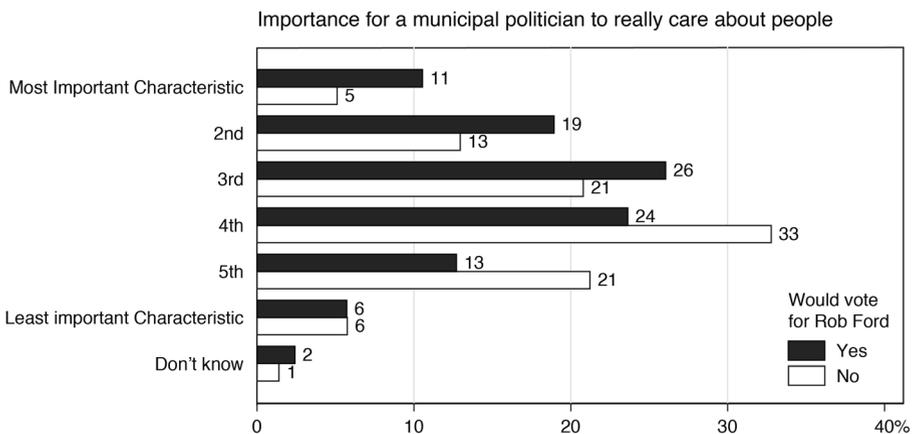
The discussion thus far has sought to characterize Ford’s suburban populist style and to highlight structural transformations that gave it space to emerge. But *why* did it take hold? To answer this question, we follow Garrido (2017) and examine conditions of successful

performance of the populist script, while acknowledging related work that has elaborated how the performance of politics can establish intimate, direct connections between “authentic” leaders and “the people” (Alexander 2010; Pels 2003; Coleman 2016).

Garrido’s study of Joseph Estrada in Manila shows some striking similarities to Ford, despite very different urban contexts. Most salient is the central puzzle Garrido identifies: Estrada, like Ford, saw initial support from upper-status voters quickly fade once in office, even as it remained strong among the city’s marginalized communities. Arguably, neither Estrada nor Ford “delivered the goods” (Elliott 2014). The city budget did increase at a slower rate under Ford than under his predecessor, but it did not decline in absolute terms. A “core services review” promised to reveal gross government waste, but instead showed that most services were run efficiently. While the light rail scheme was canceled, no credible plan to fund Ford’s promised subway network emerged. By contrast, the platform of Olivia Chow, Ford’s left-wing competitor in the 2014 election, promised direct material benefits to the city’s marginalized and poor residents (Addario and Polley 2014). Yet Ford’s supporters remained committed to Doug Ford over Chow even after Rob Ford left the race (Laschinger and Stevens 2016, pp. 136–137). The Fords—millionaire heirs to a successful printing business and long active in Ontario politics—had become a symbol of the aggrieved and authentic suburban common people. Much as Garrido reports in the Estrada case, supporters gave Ford credit for directly helping them despite little demonstrable evidence. How was this possible?

As Garrido notes, sincerity is key, and understanding its production helps to distinguish successful from unsuccessful efforts to speak in the name of “the people.” Estrada—despite his wealth, fame, and corruption—was perceived as a sincere friend to the poor. Likewise, Ford’s sincerity was an article of faith for his supporters, who were more likely to look for a mayor who “really cares about people.” (See Fig. 3). As Don Cherry stated at Ford’s inauguration: “Rob’s honest. He’s truthful... He’s no phony” (Kupferman 2010; see also Weinreb 2015).

Sincerity is achieved via performance. In the case of populist performance, successful sincerity negates a stigma (Garrido 2017, pp. 656–657): it elevates and valorizes qualities perceived by elites as “low.” If Estrada negated the stigma of the Manila slum, Ford negated the stigma of the marginalized Toronto working class and immigrant suburb. And finally, a successful performance must not be contrived but coherent, a “natural” outgrowth of the



**Fig. 3** Attitudes toward politicians in the 2014 Toronto election. Ford supporters rated the importance of municipal politicians to “really care about people” more highly than non-Ford supporters. Source: McGregor et al. (2014), variables CPS13, CPS7D

populist's character rather than a "face" put on to earn votes and taken off in smoky backrooms.

To understand how Ford was able to successfully create the impression of sincerity, we can pursue three central processes identified by Garrido. First, populism is not simply a quality of the populist leader, but emerges through a relationship with supporters. It is not enough to read the populist script, one must enact it together with the audience, drawing them into its drama. Ford actively built up his connection with his supporters. Ford was famous for returning his constituents' calls personally, a reputation that was highlighted by news stories after his death. A resident of suburban electoral district York South-Weston interviewed by the *Toronto Star* remembered calling the mayor's office suggesting that cabs have snow tires for the winter, to which he not only received a response but effective ensuing actions: "He said that was a good idea, and then low and behold the next winter they had snow tires" (Levinson King 2016). Events like Ford Fest, moreover, created venues where Ford's supporters themselves could become characters and co-participants in the drama of Rob Ford. A former staffer would later write about his campaign launch:

But as he spoke, I watched the crowd. I'd never seen anything like it at a political event before. Every conceivable age. Every imaginable skin colour. People in wheel chairs and with canes. People in track suits and Hugo Boss. ... The size and jubilation of the crowd took me by surprise. I talked with many of them, including an elderly black woman who's spent two and a half hours riding buses from the farthest reaches of Scarborough, on the opposite side of the city, to get to this event, because she "wouldn't miss it for the world!" Ford had a magical, incomprehensible relationship with these people. It was palpable. It was how I imagined a church revival might be. It was ... populism, I guess. (Towhey and Schneller 2015, p. 29)

Second, populist sincerity arises through a coherent performance rather than tactically staged events perceived as strategically targeting votes (Alexander 2010). Each part of the populist's character must align with the other. In the case of Ford, videos showing him in various states of inebriation, anger, and indiscretion only served to solidify the impression that none of this was a show. Journalist Nicholas Köhler recounts:

On another occasion, his organizers invited a photojournalist and me to a campaign event at an uptown Toronto Chinese buffet, where we documented Ford, who sometimes described himself as "three hundred pounds of fun," loading his plate with roast beef and mashed potatoes. When I asked one of Ford's handlers, Nick Kouvalis, why he was content to have Ford chronicled as he ate, where another candidate might have found it unflattering, he gestured at the crowd. "Look at his supporters. They're *all* overweight," he said. This method of creating identification worked; as one voter told me, "When you insult him, you insult us." (Köhler 2016)

The coherence of Ford's performance, in which his personal indiscretions and foibles aligned with his public persona, deepened the feeling that his relationship with the city's suburban communities was sincere. As a campaign strategist put it: "... we should let Rob be Rob. People knew he put his foot in his mouth. People didn't care. Those who did—who thought Ford was a fat, uneducated redneck from the boondocks—were never going to vote for him anyway" (Towhey and Schneller 2015, p. 38). This was his true self; he did not want to "improve" ordinary people from on high. Instead, he was demanding they be recognized and respected as they are, rather than as cultural and political elites wished them to be.

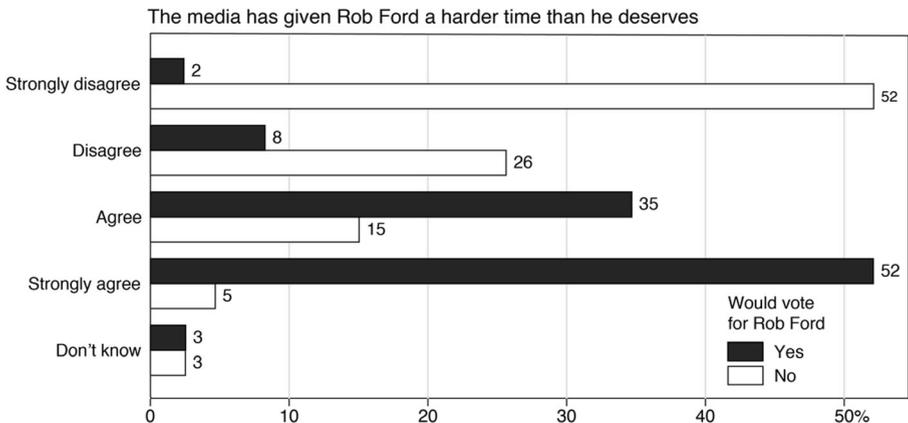
Finally, a populist performance succeeds when it transforms the candidate/leader into a collective representation (see also Alexander 2010). As a collective object, he/she becomes more than him/herself and achieves a durable identity, an objective fact that comes to embody what it means to position oneself against the establishment and for the people. Achieving this status makes it very difficult for another politician to occupy the populist space, since doing so requires dislodging more than a specific individual but the entire symbolic complex with which he or she has become intertwined.

Ford’s transformation into a collective representation was one of the most remarkable results of his mayoralty. The most potent symbol of this transformation was the common invocation of “Ford Nation.” In this construction, Ford’s supporters became part of a collective project, defending their “nation” against enemies and appropriating potent populist themes of nationalist belonging. Ford Nation became a reality as its symbols circulated on social media and late-night television, such as *Jimmy Kimmel Live*. A pro-Ford letter to the editor captures Ford’s transformation into a collective symbol of an “average” lifestyle that is traditional, domestically oriented, and automobilist:

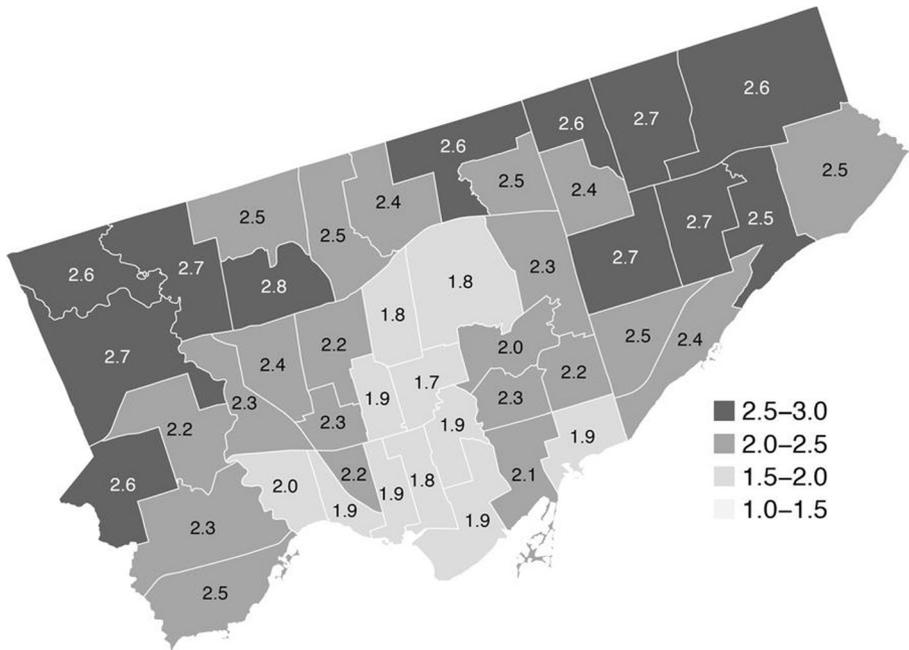
We don’t want to be a “world-class” city. We want a city that is safe for our wives and children, one where we can get to work easily and inexpensively. We don’t like opera or classical music and can’t afford to attend a \$100 performance. We want low taxes so we can continue to live in our bungalows and to have efficient household services like clean water and trash pickup. We want to send our children to good public schools. ... Mr. Ford represents this for us. He does stupid things from time to time, but our family and friends forgive us our sins. (Qtd. in Levine 2014, p. 337)

Indeed, “Rob Ford” had different meanings in the suburban and core social milieux, the spatial separation of which facilitated their independent reproduction. The distance between Ford and non-Ford supporters, attitudinally and spatially, is exemplified by different collective opinions about his treatment by the media. Ford supporters and suburbanites believed that the media gave him a “harder time than he deserved” by a wide margin (see Figs. 4 and 5).

In the core, most people considered Ford a buffoon bringing shame on Toronto’s reputation as a progressive and moderate emergent world city. Yet in the suburban zone, Ford became



**Fig. 4** Attitudes toward media treatment of Rob Ford in the 2014 Toronto election. Ford supporters were considerably more likely to strongly agree with the proposition that Rob Ford was treated unfairly by the mainstream media. Source: McGregor et al. (2014), variables CPS13, CPS47B



**Fig. 5** Map of mean scores by ward, “The media has given Rob Ford a harder time than he deserves.” Compared to core-area residents, suburbanites more strongly agreed with the proposition that Rob Ford was treated unfairly by the mainstream media. Source: McGregor et al. (2014), variables CPS13, CPS47B

something of a “folk hero” and Ford Nation a potent political identity, not only in the 2010 election, but even today (Towhey and Schneller 2015, p. 50). Ford Nation became a social fact, in which the Fords became a symbolic vehicle for seeing oneself and one’s experience incorporated into the polity’s self-understanding—for better or worse.

The fact that Ford’s appeal transferred directly to his brother Doug following his withdrawal from the 2014 mayoral race, and indeed after his death, suggests that Ford Nation had acquired a trans-personal character. Indeed, after his unsuccessful run for mayor of Toronto in 2014, Doug became leader of the provincial Conservative party and premier of Ontario in the June 2018 provincial election. This extension and elevation of Ford Nation is a complex and difficult topic requiring a study in its own right. There is widespread agreement, however, that Doug Ford’s provincial run maintained the ethnically diverse Toronto coalition his brother had built and joined it with a largely white rural population that had become alienated from the previous Liberal government in power since 2003 (Taylor 2018). Ford did so while maintaining the fundamental components of his brother’s message at the municipal level: avoidance of nativist appeals, suspicion of Toronto’s progressive “downtown elite,” and the invocation of “respect” for a silent majority of taxpayers. Strikingly, internal Toronto politics has remained at the center of Ford’s agenda even in this new role, as one of his first major initiatives involved a controversial direct intervention into the city’s 2018 municipal election: cutting the number of city wards in half in the name of efficiency and direct intermediation of politicians and people. Continuing another theme from Rob Ford’s mayoralty, Doug Ford’s government is currently studying the unilateral provincial takeover of the city’s subway system. Precisely how this transposition of Ford’s urban populism to the provincial level will unfold, and whether it will durably satisfy the non-metropolitan base grafted onto Toronto’s Ford Nation, remain open questions.

## Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, we examined the phenomenon of the populist logic in urban contexts. Rather than work from the premise that cities are progressive counterweights to nationalist right-populism, or that populism automatically organizes around the defense of the nation or the normative culture from external threats, we outline conditions under which populist candidates may emerge within ethno-racially diverse metropolitan areas. Using the case of Rob Ford in Toronto, we demonstrate how Ford's populism elaborated key themes in the general populist repertoire, identified transformations that opened the opportunity for populism to emerge, and pointed to processes in the reception of Ford's populist performance that made it successful.

While interesting in itself, the significance of the analysis goes beyond Ford and Toronto. Theoretically, extending the work of Brubaker, Garrido, and others, it highlights the importance of understanding populism as a discursive style with its own logic, one that depends on performative coherence more than it does on any particular policy objective or ideological precept. Thus, while Rob Ford's obsession with transit policy and his support from immigrant communities may diverge from the policy programs and constituencies of nationalist and civilizationist populists, the performative logic that guided his candidacy and mayoralty was a clear translation of the populist logic to the local setting—the candidate as the authentic embodiment of the popular will against a self-interested elite.

The analysis also provides a perspective on urban political conflict that complements the urban political economy literature's focus on structuring logics of capitalist urbanization (Harvey 1985; Logan and Molotch 2007) and the intersection of class and race in the context of metropolitan economic and racial transformations (Colburn and Adler 2005; Sassen 2000; Savitch and Kantor 2002; Stone 1989). Spatially articulated social and economic change, coupled with the institutional disruption of amalgamation, were the structural preconditions for populism's emergence in Toronto insofar as they were the foundations of antagonistic place-based identities.

The Toronto case provides an intriguing parallel to Swanstrom's (1985) analysis of Dennis Kucinich's brief mayoralty in 1970s Cleveland, which he portrays as a left-populist insurgency in the context of the city's wrenching deindustrialization. Both Kucinich and Ford constructed electoral coalitions defined by antagonism to elites, inchoate proposals to channel benefits to the left-behind neighborhoods, and a confrontational rhetorical style. Yet while Kucinich's objective was to expand the city government's capacity to resist pro-growth interests, Ford's was to reduce government intervention in the economy and people's lives. This demonstrates populism's compatibility, as a stylistic repertoire, with policy agendas on the left and right.

An important implication of this analysis is that other cities may become ripe for populist insurgencies. If Ford's emergence seems inevitable after the fact, it was just as unthinkable beforehand in a city celebrated for its social liberalism, ostensible multicultural harmony, and competent administration. (Indeed, the actor Peter Ustinov once characterized Toronto as "New York run by the Swiss.") The confluence of institutional and structural transformations that opened a space for Ford may be rare. Few North American local governments comprise both prewar urban and postwar suburban built environments and associated lifestyles—a fusion that occurred through the provincially imposed amalgamation in 1997. Indeed, the crisis of institutional intermediation generated by amalgamation facilitated his emergence by fueling both core and suburban grievances. Compartmentalizing lifestyles into separate municipal jurisdictions, as is the case in many North American metropolitan areas, may serve as a prophylactic to such intra-municipal political conflict. For example, progressive coalitions dominate central cities such as Vancouver, San Francisco, Seattle, and Boston, with suburban counter-forces operating

in separate jurisdictions. Other factors may render Toronto distinct. Populist insurgencies may also be facilitated by Toronto's electoral rules, which feature low barriers to candidate entry (Taylor and McEleney 2017). Unlike in, for example, Chicago, where organized political parties select candidates in primary elections, Toronto's elections are officially nonpartisan and candidates need only make a nominal deposit to appear on the ballot. Finally, the diverse coalition Ford built between blue-collar whites and non-white immigrants may be hard to imagine in American cities, where local politics coheres around racial cleavages.

Setting aside these idiosyncrasies, we may expect new political coalitions to potentially arise in cities experiencing growing intra-metropolitan social and economic divisions. For example, in Montreal, Valérie Plante was recently elected mayor on a broad urbanist agenda that cut across the city's traditionally fundamental linguistic-cultural cleavage between French and English residents. This ascendant urbanism could in turn become a target for new anti-urbanist coalitions. Similarly, as a city such as Los Angeles that for many years lacked a strong downtown core begins to acquire one, new axes of contention may appear. If urban inequality becomes sufficiently pronounced even in cities currently dominated by progressive elites, historically antagonistic groups may find common cause if their leaders successfully frame their concerns in relation to "downtown elites." As Keil and Hamel (2015, p. 350) note, "the experiences of suburban shrinkage and poverty, post-suburban in-betweenness, and increasing diversity have now become major subjects of suburban governance." To the extent that these agendas electorally collide with those of metropolitan cores, conflict may intensify. Similarly broad and deep transformations of the bases of urban politics have appeared before (Clark 1996), and they may appear again. The case of Toronto reminds us of this possibility by expanding our understanding of what right-populism in the Global North can be—metropolitan, multicultural, and inclusive—and suggests some tools for understanding it.

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## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Ethical Approval** This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

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