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"That Party was Born without a Soul." Re-examining the Populism of the Saskatchewan Party

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Abstract

For the Saskatchewan Party (SKP), identifying with the Western populist tradition was essential to both its creation and initial electoral viability, leading many political commentators to regularly refer to the SKP as a right-wing populist party. Yet scholars have been much more reticent to classify the SKP as an authentically Canadian populist party in the style of the Reform Party of Canada. Part of this disconnect is a result of the SKP's uneven and opportunistic use of populism throughout its history. Indeed, this article argues that the SKP's initial commitment to populism was largely performative, embraced to fend off the challenge of a potential provincial Reform Party. Once the utility of the SKP's performative populism threatened its electoral viability, most of the party's symbolic nods to populism were abandoned. Yet, more recently, the SKP has embraced a new form of populism that merges its pro-business support for the region's oil and gas industry with right-wing policies that are often linked to its rural base. This form of populism, defined as extractive populism, demonstrates that the SKP continues to use populist discourse opportunistically when its right-wing base is threatened.

Résumé

Pour le Parti saskatchewanais (SKP), l'identification à la tradition populiste occidentale était essentielle à la fois à sa création et à sa viabilité électorale initiale, ce qui a conduit de nombreux commentateurs politiques à fréquemment qualifier le SKP de parti populiste de droite. Pourtant, les chercheurs se sont montrés beaucoup plus réticents à classer le SKP comme un parti populiste authentiquement canadien semblable au style du Parti réformiste du Canada. Cette différenciation est en partie le résultat de l'utilisation inégale et opportuniste du populisme par le SKP tout au long de son histoire. En effet, cet article soutient que l'engagement initial du SKP au populisme était largement performatif, adopté pour repousser la compétition d'un éventuel parti réformiste provincial. Une fois que l'utilité du populisme performatif du SKP menaçait sa viabilité électorale, la plupart des clins d'œil du parti au populisme ont été abandonnés. Pourtant, plus récemment,

le SKP a adopté une nouvelle forme de populisme qui fusionne son soutien favorable aux entreprises à l'industrie pétrolière et gazière de la région avec des politiques de droite souvent liées à sa base rurale. Cette forme de populisme, définie comme le populisme extractif, démontre que le SKP continue d'utiliser le discours populiste de manière opportuniste lorsque l'appui de sa base électorale de droite est menacé.

Keywords: populism; extractive populism; Saskatchewan Party; right-wing movements; political economy

Mots clés: populisme; populisme extractif; Parti saskatchewanais; mouvements de droite; économie politique

One of the defining features of political life on the Canadian prairies has been the historical underpinnings and, in some circles, continued presence of democratic populism (Laycock, 1995). That tradition, Laycock argues, has shaped political movements on the prairies on both the Left and Right, and has encompassed romantic ideas of the common people (usually rural farmers and those tied to rural economies) struggling to take political and economic power from urban local, national, and even international elites (1995: 7). It is thus no surprise that many contemporary political parties on the Canadian prairies attempt to lay claim to this rich populist tradition. For the Saskatchewan Party (SKP), identifying with the Western populist tradition was essential to both its creation in 1997 and initial electoral viability, leading political pundits and commentators to regularly refer to the SKP as a right-wing populist creation (Taube, 2012: A9; Eisler, 2022, 189–91; Mandryk, 2000b: A11). Yet scholars have been much more reticent to classify the SKP as an authentically Canadian populist party in the style of the Reform Party of Canada (Blake, 2008; Wishlow, 2001). While we agree that there are good reasons for scholars to question the authenticity of the populism practiced by the SKP, the populist label nevertheless continues to be attached to the party and its leaders. Part of this disconnect is a result of the SKP's uneven and opportunistic use of populism throughout its history.

In this article, we argue that the SKP's initial commitment to populism was largely performative, opportunistically embraced to fend off the challenge of a potential provincial Reform Party. Once the utility of the SKP's performative populism threatened its electoral viability, most of the party's symbolic nods to populism were unceremoniously jettisoned. But if the early SKP rushed to excise populism from its brand in order to broaden its electoral appeal, the party has more recently hurried to embrace a distinctive form of *extractive populism* that more closely aligns with the political, economic, and electoral realities of the province. Recognizing that the SKP is both highly successful and vastly understudied by scholars of provincial politics and new-right politics in Canada, we argue that while the SKP has no real ideological commitment to populism, it has and will deploy it strategically and performatively with varying degrees of intensity based on extant circumstances.

In mapping out this argument, we compare the political discourse of the early SKP's policies and statements with that of the more authentically right-wing populist Reform Party in order to assess the early SKP's relationship to populism. We then turn to the uneven role that populism has played in maintaining and solidifying the SKP's electoral coalition, especially as it moved to embrace a particular

form of extractive populism after 2015. However, to do this, we must first understand how populism is understood in contemporary political theory and how it can explain the SKP's often contradictory and uneven relationship to the concept.

Approaches to Populism

While the study of populism as a political phenomenon has grown rapidly in recent years, there is still open debate over whether populism constitutes an "ideology, a strategy, a discourse or a mode of political performance" (Moffit, 2020: 11). As Moffit explains, the ideational approach views populism as an ideology, with a distinct set of ideas and worldview. However, populism is often thought to be a "thin ideology," needing to import the substance of more robust or "thick ideologies," like conservatism (Reform Party) or socialism (Cooperative Commonwealth Federation [CCF]) to flesh out its worldview (Moffit, 2020: 13). Other scholars view populism as less of an ideology instead interpreting it as a mode of political practice or discourse that can be deployed strategically and performatively (Norris, 2020). This approach sees populism as a gradational concept that can be deployed with varying degrees of intensity or frequency. Importantly, viewing populism as a practice rather than an ideology can help explain why certain Populists lack ideological consistency on issues when politically expedient (Moffit, 2020: 19).

Despite these disagreements, there are nevertheless important points of agreement between these approaches. Most importantly, all agree that a central component of populism is a core claim about the divide between "the people" and the "elite" (Moffit, 2020; Norris, 2020; Laycock, 2005). It is this principal antagonism between a "pure or virtuous people" whose interests have been (or are implied to have been) neglected by an often "corrupt" and "arrogant elite" that animates all variants of populism, whether on the Right or Left of the political spectrum (Mudde, 2004; Dean and Maiguashca, 2020; Brewer, 2016). As Brewer observes, populism always needs an enemy, and in many instances that enemy is thought to be "engaged in a conspiracy to harm the people, to take from them what is rightfully theirs and destroy their way of life" (2016: 252). Populism also invokes what Laycock describes as a generic form of "democratic morality," where existing representative institutions are seen by certain groups to be thwarting the general will of "the people" (2005: 173). It is the sense that popular sovereignty is being thwarted by an unrepresentative and corrupt political elite that has Populists calling for more direct democratic mechanisms such as plebiscites, referendums, and recalls, bypassing elites to restore the general will of the people (Barney and Laycock, 1999).

Who ultimately belongs to the "people" and who belongs to the "elites" within populist discourse can vary widely. Thus, the left-wing populism of the early CCF in Saskatchewan used a class-based lens to identify eastern banks, railroads, and manufacturing interests as the primary elite enemy of the common people—primarily rural farmers and urban industrial workers (Laycock, 2005; McGrane, 2005). In the 1930s, CCF activists addressed these populist ideas by embracing anti-capitalist policies of public ownership of essential economic industries while also calling for the empowerment of industrial labour unions (Lipset, 1968). By the 1950s and 1960s, many of these policies became more moderate, ranging from demands of less foreign control over natural resources and financial assets to the

establishment of retail co-operatives, economic planning, and higher levels of taxation on elite capitalists and their corporations (Young, 1969; Zakuta, 1964; Sinclair, 1973; Smith, 2024). Conversely, right-wing populism emerging from the Reform Party in the late 1980s and early 1990s was based on a regional division between ordinary Western Canadian farmers, workers, and business owners (especially those in extractivist industries) in opposition to a so-called unrepresentative privileged, liberal, and urban political elite hopelessly captured by "special interests" in Ontario and Quebec (Macaulay, 2022). Like the Left, right-wing populists in Canada had very specific messages on the economy but did so in a manner that divorced class inequalities in capitalist economies and instead aligns regional economic interests with those of "the people." In both cases, populism becomes, following Panizza, a powerful "mode of persuasion" to build a larger political narrative expressing the values and morality of everyday people who feel they have been abandoned by the "system" (2005: 8; see also Canovan 1999: 5).

One of the primary reasons why we do not view the SKP as authentically populist is the clear lack of this people/elite divide in early SKP discourse, despite it often adopting many of the outward trappings of right-wing populism associated with the Reform Party. By way of comparison, it is illuminating to revisit the policies and discourse of the Reform Party of Canada, generally accepted as an authentic example of right-wing populism, to see how this people/elite divide informed Reform policy and discourse (Laycock, 2012; Patten, 1996). Laycock argues that "Reform constructed "the people" initially as westerners, shut out of the real halls of power in the federal system" (2012: 49). Similarly, Macaulay describes Reform's "constructed populism" as one where "the West" as a "people" experience injustice at the hands of Eastern liberal political and economic elites (2022: 100). In this case, the "elite" enemy is the Canadian state and the capitalists—often pejoratively defined as "the Laurentian elite"—intimately tied to the federal Liberal party (Cuenco 2022). Reform also argued that the Laurentian elite favoured "special interests" of immigrants, Indigenous peoples, Quebec nationalists, feminists, and LGBTQ advocates over the interests of ordinary working people in Western Canada (Laycock, 2012: 50; Macaulay, 2022: 114). Reform's advocacy for more direct forms of democracy, such as referenda, recalls, and Senate reform were designed to allow the "people" to circumvent elite politicians and central Canadian economic actors, who were captured by special interests, and thereby restore the will of the people (Laycock, 2012: 57; Macaulay, 2022: 101). As Laycock further argues, Reform bolstered this "thin-centred populism" with the nostrums of neoliberalism and the New Right, with the "people" duped into financing an "unfairly redistributive and freedom-denying welfare state" that served only to benefit minority interests (2012: 50). Laycock concludes that it was this overlay of "regionalist, anti-party, anti-state and anti-minority themes" that structured the "Reform Party's articulation of the classic populist "people/power-bloc" (2012: 50). In all respects, the Reform Party conforms to the central features of an archetypical right-wing populist party. How does the SKP fare in comparison?

To begin, there is no doubt that the grassroots, populist creation story of the SKP told by most commentators is useful to the party's near hegemonic control of rural Saskatchewan and the provincial state. Populism affords the SKP a popular legitimacy to be seen as an organic protest movement that grew from the fertile soils

of NDP discontent on the Saskatchewan prairie. Moreover, it allows the SKP to lay claim as a successor to the rich legacy of populism that has characterized the political history of the province and the West more generally. But while useful, it is also far from an accurate picture of the events that led to the creation of the party. Indeed, the SKP did not spring organically from the people, but quite calculatedly from the smoking ruins of the provincial Progressive Conservative (PC) party and the festering divisions within the provincial Liberal party. In July 1997, the "scandal-plagued Progressive Conservative party of Saskatchewan and the hopelessly divided Liberal caucus of Saskatchewan" initiated discussions on the possibility of a merger between the two parties in recognition that only a single right-wing alternative could defeat the Saskatchewan NDP (Mulawka,1997: 10; Krawetz, 2017). While those talks ultimately broke down, they sowed the seeds for the formation of the SKP less than a month later. As a key figure in the merger talks, former PC party leader Bill Boyd explained the rationale for the creation of the new party:

> In Saskatchewan the two opposition parties before, the Liberals and Conservatives, were not in a position to seriously challenge, were not seen individually as the clear alternative. I believe the Saskatchewan Party will be. (Braden, 1997a: A1)

In August of 1997, four Liberal and four PC MLAs formed a new political coalition in the Saskatchewan Legislature. As Wishlow argues:

> Myth would have it that the upstart Saskatchewan party was a political movement born solely at the grassroots–far removed from the seats of power in Regina. The reality, however, was somewhat different. The new party was spawned by a band of eight sitting MLAs who arguably saw the diminishing prospects of achieving power within their respective parties. (2001: 170)

Even though the party had a very unpopulist origin, that did not stop its founding members from attempting to portray themselves as committed Populists. Bill Boyd, in the immediate wake of the creation of the party, opined:

> I want to be a part of a new start for Saskatchewan people…I want to be a part of a populist movement here in Saskatchewan and put forward the kind of principles and values that this party stands for." (Canadian Press, 1997a)

Similarly, interim SKP leader Ken Krawetz also cast the upstart party as a populist creation:

> We established at the beginning that we were going to be a populist party based on traditional, non-socialist attitudes, and that's what we're doing. (Laughlin, 1997)

The need to portray the new party as a grassroots populist expression was borne out of political necessity. Reform Party of Canada members in the province had been actively pushing for the creation of their own provincial party despite national

Reform Party policy that prohibited provincial wings (Parker, 1997: A3). Nevertheless, in August 1997, there were signals that the Reform Party was willing to entertain an expansion into the provinces if a local base was evident. Even Reform Leader Preston Manning appeared to leave the door open to a Saskatchewan-based party when he admitted "If we're ever going to test provincial parties, many would argue Saskatchewan should be the place" (Mandryk, 1997a: A6). Yet such a move would have effectively doomed the entire *raison d'etre* of the SKP—to stand as a single right-wing alternative to the ruling NDP. The SKP needed to convince Reform voters that it was worthy of their support and scuttle any potential challenger. Indeed, despite having the backing of some prominent Saskatchewan Reform Party members, other Reformers immediately questioned the SKP's populist bonafides, suspecting that the eight founding members were more political opportunists than real Populists. Reformers accused the SKP of being a "backroom creation," trying to pass itself off as a Reform-style party without any of commitments to populist principles. Calls came for the eight defecting SKP MLAs to stand in byelections to gain the consent of their constituents for their actions (Braden, 1997c). Reform MP Derek Konrad summed up reform's populist critique of the SKP:

> The Reform party started out with no MPs, just people who were fed up with the status quo and started a political party. In this case you have politicians starting a political party and then looking for people and policies. (Canadian Press, 1997b: A1)

More bluntly, one Reform supporter described the SKP as "Rosemary's baby," adding, "that party was born without a soul" (Morris, 1997: C8). There was tremendous—almost existential—pressure on the fledgling SKP to win the support of wayward Reformers and derail any attempts to create a competing provincial party. It was obvious that the SKP had to reflect some of Reform's policies and principles to persuade rank and file Reformers to back this new party. This messaging was the key objective of the SKP in the intervening months after its creation. In October 1997, SKP MLAs participated in a Reform Party meeting in Saskatoon on the question of whether to form a provincial wing of the party. Once again, the SKP tried to bolster their populist credentials. SKP MLA June Draude commented that she relished the opportunity to tell Reformers about the "grassroots nature of her party." Draude further tried to establish the populist roots of the SKP by arguing that Reformers that joined the party would have "ownership" over the party's direction and policy process (Braden, 1997b: A10). In November 1997 at the SKP's founding convention, the eight founding MLAs made a key concession to Reform critics, promising to resign their seats if half of eligible voters in their constituencies signed a recall petition. While SKP delegates at the convention were reluctant to adopt voter recall, SKP MLAs Bob Bjornerud and Bill Boyd urged delegates to "think carefully before rejecting a prominent part of Reform Party policy. It's an important part of whether this party succeeds or fails" (Wyatt, 1997b: A3). Both recognized that addressing a key sticking point of Reform critics was crucial to the success, if not the continued viability of the SKP. In addition to this concession on voter recall, the SKP also adopted other Reform-style direct democracy mechanisms like fixed election dates, free votes for SKP MLAs, and binding referenda on

questions like the public funding of abortions and banning video lottery terminals (Wyatt, 1997b: A3). The SKP also adopted a constitution very much influenced by the Reform Party, including democratic processes that would bind the leader and MLAs to the resolutions and motions passed by the party assembly (Wyatt, 1997a: D7). In the wake of the founding convention, political columnist Murray Mandryk believed that the SKP had adopted enough Reform-style policies to head-off the possibility of a provincial competitor:

> The great success of the Saskatchewan Party this weekend is its policies eliminate any need and probably much of the desire for the Reform Party (the party that won eight of 14 Saskatchewan federal seats last election) to get into provincial politics (Mandryk, 1997b: A4).

As if to further appease Reformers, the SKP elected former Saskatchewan Reform Party MP Elwin Hermanson as its leader in April 1998. Yet, if the SKP had adopted many of the populist baubles of the Reform Party to head off the threat of a provincial challenger, it curiously refused to adopt the animating force behind the Reform Party's populism and populism in general: the people/elite divide.

Building the SKP: Provincial Populism at a Crossroads

Despite Hermanson's assurances that the newly-minted SKP was a "free enterprise based populist political movement," the people/elite antagonism at the centre of populist movements was strangely absent in early SKP platforms and public statements (Hermanson, cited in Wishlow, 2001: 186). The people/elite divide was the defining principle of the Reform Party that viewed Western Canadians as a largely undifferentiated "people" that had long been unrepresented and neglected by political elites in central Canada. It was this "thin" populist worldview that drove much of Reform's policies and attitudes towards the federal government in the 1990s. However, the SKP never attempted to construct a similar divide between the people and elites despite having numerous opportunities.

Hermanson took over the reins of the new party just as Saskatchewan farmers were being battered by an international trade war that precipitated an agricultural income crisis in the province (Cheater, 1998: A3; Eisler 2022). With a federal government led by the Jean Chretien Liberals that many Westerners viewed as indifferent to the plight of prairie farmers, and in the run-up to the 1999 provincial election with a long-entrenched social democratic party in power in Saskatchewan, it seemed an opportune moment to mimic the populist rhetoric of the Reform Party. Yet, that strategy failed to materialize. While Hermanson was quick to accuse Premier Romanow of not adequately defending Saskatchewan farmers' interests in Ottawa, there was no intent to frame either Romanow or Chretien as "elites" or question the legitimacy of their authority to govern. While both leaders were often described by Hermanson as "out of touch" and "ignorant" of the realities facing farmers, this hardly rises to the level of populist rhetoric used by the Reform Party nor—as we will see—the types of populist vitriol that were later deployed by SKP Premiers Brad Wall and Scott Moe (Braden, 1999: A3; Walter, 1999: A1; Mandryk, 2000a: A4). Rather than

thunder against the enemy elite as Reform might have, Hermanson proposed sending a "united front," of himself, Romanow, and Liberal leader Jim Melenchuck to pressure Ottawa (Gatehouse, 1999: A7). While this may have been a play to make Hermanson appear more statesperson-like, it certainly cannot be described as a populist opposition to the NDP or the federal Liberals. One need only compare Hermanson's united stance in 1999 to Premier Scott Moe's 2023 populist theatrics towards the current federal Liberal government to see the disparity.

The fact is that the early SKP never really attempted to construct a popular/elite divide with the provincial NDP or the federal Liberals akin to what we would expect of an authentic populist movement or party. Indeed, despite the well-worn political efficacy of Ottawa-bashing on the populist Right, it is surprising that the SKP rarely makes mention of the federal government in its 1999 and 2003 election platforms. Indeed, the federal Liberals are mentioned only a handful of times in the 1999 platform and only once in the 2003 platform, with neither platform containing a distinct plank on provincial-federal relations (Saskatchewan Party, 1999; Saskatchewan Party, 2003).

The 1999 provincial election witnessed the SKP establish itself as a true challenger for government, winning the popular vote and collecting twenty-five seats in the fifty-eight-seat Legislature. Despite these positive results, the SKP failed to breakthrough in Regina and Saskatoon, raising the question of whether a rural-based party could win enough urban constituencies to form a government. The problem of how to win in the cities consumed the SKP in intervening years. At the SKP's 2000 convention, Hermanson acknowledged that "urban areas were the only area of growth as the party held every rural seat in Saskatchewan" (Blake, 2008: 171). SKP MLA Don McMorris stated that the party had to approach issues "from a more urban basis," adding that "some people perceive us strictly as a farm party and maybe we have to deal with some of the issues a little bit differently" (Blake, 2008: 172). Party pollster Andrew Turcotte told delegates that they must "change the tactics they used to tap into rural anger," to change a public perception that the party is intolerant, extremist, and driven by "simplistic ideology" (Parker, 2000: A10). If being viewed as an agrarian-based right-wing populist party helped the SKP solidify itself and its rural support at the beginning, it was now increasingly viewed as a hindrance to breaking through in the urban ridings of Saskatchewan.

As the party tried to soften its harder ideological edges, it also began to jettison the trappings of populism it had accrued to appease Reform voters. By the time of the 2003 election, voter recall, what had once been described by the SKP as "the ultimate tool of accountability," had been quietly dropped from the platform, as had any mention of referenda (Saskatchewan Party, 1999: 19; Parker, 2001: A3). Despite these efforts to moderate the party, the promised breakthrough into the cities did not materialize in the subsequent election. In the post-election analysis, the consensus was that the SKP had snatched defeat from the jaws of victory by failing to offer the public a firm commitment on the question of privatization of the province's crown corporations (Parker, 2003: A1). While Hermanson ultimately suffered the consequences of the party's failure to win in the cities, the vexing problem of how to win over urban voters continued to plague the SKP as it moved to rebrand the party under its new leader, Brad Wall.

The move to moderate and broaden the party's base was one of the main appeals of Brad Wall's candidacy for leader. In 2005, Wall initiated a policy review, calling

for party members to "stretch" and make the party "more appealing to Liberals and other voters uncomfortable with the Saskatchewan Party (Wood, 1997: A1). One way to demonstrate this moderation was to remove any pretext to right-wing populism from the party's platform and policy priorities. Gone was the equivocation on crown corporations, talk of de-insuring abortions via referendum, or opposition to affirmative action in favour of policies meant to demonstrate the SKP's concern for urban issues and urban votes (Blake, 2008: 175). While fixed election dates and the promise of some free votes for MLAs survived the policy review in 2005, only the promise of fixed election dates made it into the 2007 election platform (Wood, 2005, Saskatchewan Party, 2007). In the space of three election cycles, virtually all populist mechanisms of democratic accountability were jettisoned by the SKP. Moreover, even the internal accountability mechanisms inspired by Reform politics were increasingly manipulated and stage-managed to ensure controversial policy resolutions brought by the membership did not undermine the party's attempts to appear more moderate (Mandryk, 2002: A16; Mandryk, 2005: A12). Similarly, Wall made no attempt to construct a populist narrative that pitted "the people" versus eastern or provincial "elites" in the 2007 election. As Blake concludes, Wall's SKP was "not a movement nor was it grassroots," it had become a classical brokerage party in a two-party system similar to other Canadian parties when it won government in 2007 (2008: 176; on brokerage parties, Carty and Cross, 2010).

From the above, we argue that the early SKP had only a tenuous commitment to populism, using the trappings of populism—such as democratic mechanisms of accountability—performatively to fend off the challenge of a provincial Reform Party. Once those populist trappings no longer served any electoral purpose, they were quickly jettisoned by party leadership. This history demonstrates that such mechanisms were in no way understood by the SKP as part of a wider ideological understanding that views these types of democratic reforms as essential pieces to bypass the unrepresentative power of elites. Uncoupled from the popular/elite antagonism that animates populism, such mechanisms of democratic accountability were easily scrapped without fundamentally undermining the worldview of the SKP. Rather, for the SKP, populism was a "performative and discursive" strategy deployed with varying degrees of intensity (Moffit, 2020: 24). As we will see, it took the 2015 election of a new federal Liberal government led by Justin Trudeau to create the conditions necessary for the restoration of a performative populism by the SKP leadership.

Saskatchewan Political Economy and the Rise of Extractive Populism

When the SKP came to power in 2007, they hewed closely to the same neoliberal resource development policies that had been introduced by the Romanow and Calvert NDP governments (Smith, 2018; Conway and Conway, 2015). Yet despite the similarities in tax and resource policies between the SKP and the NDP during this period, as resource prices surged in the first term of their government, the SKP claimed that this newfound economic prosperity was the direct result of freeing resource companies from the fiscal and regulatory constraints of the past (Enoch, 2011). In other words, the economic health of the extractive industries and the economic health of the province were intimately tied to the SKP. Under the leadership of Brad Wall, the SKP became one of the biggest boosters for the

province's oil and gas industry, with Alberta and Saskatchewan oil companies often being the biggest financial contributors to the party (Anderson and Fletcher, 2016).

Eaton and Enoch argue that the increased reliance on oil and gas for the province's (and the SKP's) fiscal health created the political conditions for the SKP to embrace a distinctive style of populism that Shane Gunster has described as "extractive populism" (2021: 39; Gunster, 2019). Extractive populism contains all of the hallmarks of populism identified above. It constructs a "pure" people—workers in the extractive industries (oil, gas, coal, minerals) who are largely responsible for the economic prosperity of the province, and indeed, the country writ large. It sets up the popular/elite antagonism by advancing the idea that a small, but highly vocal and powerful constellation of liberal, urban, and environmentally conscious political forces in central Canada seek to undermine and even end the extractive economy in Western Canada via punishing environmental regulations. Lastly, extractive populism seeks to mobilize "ordinary Canadians" in defence of the extractive economy against the sinister forces that threaten it (Gunster, Neubauer, Bermingham, and Massie, 2021). While the SKP is not the originator of this style of populism—it has been carefully cultivated in the communications and public relations strategies of the North American oil industry for the past two decades—it has nevertheless found it exceedingly useful as a populist discourse to mobilize supporters and denigrate political enemies (Gunster and Saurette, 2014; Eaton and Enoch, 2021). The use of extractive populism has allowed the SKP to frame support for the oil and gas industry as akin to a loyalty test, with those deemed insufficiently supportive or overly critical of the industry accused of failing to stand up for the province's interests (Enoch and Korpan, 2021). And in so doing, as Kiely has identified with right-wing populist movements elsewhere, the SKP has constructed a form of nativism that also aligns "with a commitment to economic neoliberalism" (2020: 408). Interestingly, this conflation of the interests of the oil industry with that of the province is a central aspect of what MacCauley observes in the early Reform Party's "constructed populism" that presents the oil industry as "the disguised face of a victimized "West" preyed on by an Eastern establishment" (2022: 97). Once again, elements of the Reform Party's populism prove useful to the SKP when circumstances merit.

We can see the construction of this populist antagonism between the "us" of the Western Canadian extractive economy and the "them" of eastern, urban liberal elite/environmentalists on display in both Brad Wall and Scott Moe's public speeches and statements. In a 2016 speech to Calgary's Petroleum Club, then–Premier Wall warned of the "existential threat to this [oil and gas] industry that is so important in my province," citing an "ever-growing matrix of activists" that champion carbon taxes and divestment from the oil and gas industry. "We are in the middle of a battle and, frankly, we haven't been winning very many battles," Wall said. "When I say "we," I mean this sector and the resource importance of Western Canada." Similarly, Wall accused the federal Liberals of operating like a "crime family" doling out "ransom notes," in its attempts to establish a national carbon pricing plan that would "kneecap" the Saskatchewan economy (Mandryk, 2017: A7; Fraser, 2017: A3).

Premier Scott Moe has perhaps been even more aggressive in his construction of the extractive populist narrative than his predecessor. In a series of pro-resource

and anticarbon tax rallies that took place throughout the province in 2019, Moe presented his party as the authentic voice of a "silent majority" of ordinarily apolitical citizens roused into action due to the attacks on the province's extractive industries by eastern Liberals and urban NDPers:

> In a sprawling speech that attacked not only the carbon tax but also pipeline delays and federal environmental regulations, Mr. Moe made sure to drive home the point that any threat to western Canada's oil industry was equally an attack on the national economy, as jobs and revenue from Saskatchewan's resource sector would fail to flow to the rest of the country. Mr. Moe then pivoted to those he held ultimately responsible for this unprecedented attack on the industry, calling the carbon tax a "Justin Trudeau, Ralph Goodale, Liberal Party of Canada, job-killing, soul-sucking, unconstitutional, supported by the Saskatchewan NDP carbon tax!" (Eaton and Enoch, 2021: 39)

Moe has also been even more apocalyptic in his charge that the Trudeau government harbours a nefarious agenda to kill Saskatchewan's resource sector. Citing a Natural Resources Canada request to study how electrification could replace fossil fuels in the country, Moe's X (Twitter) account raged:

> There's their real agenda: the federal government is going to study the complete elimination of our oil and gas industry. What kind of government studies wiping out one of the nation's most important industries & killing tens of thousands of Canadian jobs? (Moe, 2019)

The worldview that underlies extractive populism has increasingly been invoked to justify the pursuit of policies designed to maximize Saskatchewan's autonomy and sovereignty vis-a-vis the federal government. The government's Saskatchewan First Act, as well as its plan to create its own provincial tax agency, should be seen as efforts to try and escape any federally imposed constraints (whether fiscal or environmental) on its extractive industries. Indeed, Finance Minister Harpauer admitted as much when she rationalized the creation of the Saskatchewan Revenue Agency based on the imagined future actions of the federal government: "I'll be honest, I don't trust future decisions by our federal government and how they will penalize our industries in our province" (Salloum, 2023). Similarly, Dale Richardson, former director of digital operations to the premier, argues that "elites and experts" are missing the populist message underneath the premier's push for more autonomy. "When the premier says "…this government will take steps to protect Saskatchewan's families, businesses and jobs from destructive federal policies." This is what the white paper is really and truly about" (Richardson, 2022: A5).

While we have not seen commitments to restore policies of direct democracy under Scott Moe that one would expect from an authentic populist party, Moe's extractive populism cannot be accused of being *merely* performative. In fact, it increasingly underwrites policies that are sure to invoke future constitutional legal challenges. In this sense, Scott Moe's extractive populism—while surely professional public relations—has gone further and informed more concrete forms of populist policy than any other leader of the SKP.

All of this raises the question of why the SKP initially retreated from right-wing populism, only to more fully embrace it years later after having been in power for over a decade? As we have argued, while the fledgling SKP initially needed the trappings of right-wing populism to deflect the challenge of a rival provincial Reform Party, it unceremoniously dropped it when the party became the only Conservative challenger to the NDP. Moreover, as it became apparent that the only route to power was through the cities and the urban vote, many of the vestiges of its early performative populism were also jettisoned. Whether this was because of a fear that urban voters would recoil from what they imagined to be an agrarian-based form of populism, or because the mechanisms of populism made it much more difficult to moderate party members' influence on policy reform, the fact is that populism was seen as an electoral loser by the party. So much so that by 2007, Brad Wall's SKP was effectively gutted of any significant populist content. Furthermore, with the federal election of Stephen Harper's Conservative Party a year before the SKP's historic 2007 election victory, the time-honoured political tools of Western alienation and populism were less available to Brad Wall's SKP. Indeed, Wall often went out of his way to *not* pick fights with a federal government he perceived as ideologically aligned with his own. Of course, this calculus changes drastically with the election of the federal Liberals in 2015.

Since 2007, the SKP had the good fortune to preside over an economy that had been buoyed by rising commodity prices—particularly, oil and potash. However, the world collapse in oil prices in late 2014 had taken the sheen off the so-called "Sask-a-boom," forcing the once resource revenue–flush Saskatchewan government to entertain unpopular economic decisions (Eaton, 2017). But unlike the years 2007–2014, 2015 witnessed the election of a federal Liberal government headed by an urban centred and environmentally conscious leader in Justin Trudeau. Shortly after the election, the federal Liberal government adopted a carbon pricing scheme, which, despite occurring alongside federal commitments to expand Canada's pipeline infrastructure, was opposed by Saskatchewan from the moment negotiations began with the premiers in 2016 (Macneil, 2020: 356). Whatever the nuance of the Liberal government's own relationship to the oil and gas sector, here was a federal Liberal leader from urban Quebec whose name still resonated with the much-hated National Energy Program of the 1980s. For the SKP, Trudeau was threatening to re-impose regulatory constraints on a now struggling Saskatchewan economy via carbon pricing and more robust environmental regulations. The SKP's populist moment had returned. But if the SKP had been wary of being associated with a more agrarian style of populism that would alienate urban voters, *extractive populism*—with its emphasis on provincial economic prosperity as inextricably tied to the interests of the oil and gas industry rather than the farm—offered a brand of populism much more suitable to the political economy and electoral demographics of the province. As Rassmussen observes, the SKP's association between economic prosperity and the resource economy has been particularly effective at winning over suburban voters who are "keenly aware of how the resource economy fuels the province and the economic prospects for them and their families" (2021: 227).

Once extractive populism demonstrated its potential as a viable electoral strategy, it was embraced by the SKP. For the SKP, populism has always been a vehicle of convenience, picked up and cast off as political circumstances dictate. However, we must

also consider how the promotion of extractive populist discourse by the SKP may have encouraged the adoption of an almost conspiratorial populist understanding of other issues by a certain segment of the electorate. As Enoch argues, "the emphasis on powerful elites bent on the destruction of people's economic livelihoods combined with a kind of energy nationalism that mobilizes people to defend "their resources" against attacks by envious or hostile outsiders lends itself not only to conspiratorial thinking but also to uglier forms of nativism" (2022). Indeed, we have seen this populist suspicion of elites and expertise manifest itself in the province over issues like COVID as well as in the distrust of teachers and other educational professionals in regard to gender policies in the classroom. Even if the SKP initially adopted this populist discourse performatively and opportunistically, it cannot ultimately control how this framing may be appropriated and repurposed by certain elements of the electorate. Indeed, the rise of the openly far-right conspiratorial Saskatchewan United Party (SUP) may be explained as an unintended consequence of the SKP's mobilization of extractive populist discourse (Mandryk, 2024: A5). As recent polls demonstrate, the polarization caused by these issues have put strains on the ability of the SKP to hold together the rural/urban coalition that brought it to power in 2007 (Salloum, 2024: A1). While the SKP has masterfully deployed a performative populism to gain and maintain power in the past, it remains to be seen if it may also be the source of its future undoing.

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