

Neoliberal Populism in Ontario: Premier Doug Ford's Strategic Politics

Populismo neoliberal en Ontario: políticas estratégicas del *premier* Doug Ford

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ABSTRACT

The 2018 election of Premier Doug Ford and the Progressive Conservative (PC) government ushered in a new era of neoliberal populism in Ontario, Canada. Ford's election platform, titled a "Plan for the People," resonated with the business elite who supported his free-market reforms but also with middle-class and blue-collar workers living in suburban and northern areas of the province. The article examines how Ford positioned his rivals as "out of touch" members of the political and cultural urban elite, responsible for a spiralling deficit that would economically burden hard-working people. Unlike many other right-wing populist leaders, who have relied on xenophobic or anti-immigrant narratives, we argue that Ford's populist stance is demagogic and pragmatic. This enabled him to pivot and shift his political strategy to amass support from a diverse range of economic, racial, ethnic, and religious groups, including new immigrants. We draw on newspaper articles, public documents and reports, as well as thirteen interviews with politicians, teachers and civil servants.

The article highlights how Ford's government operated to weaken democratic institutions through measures such as "strong mayor powers," invoking the notwithstanding clause, as well as undermining the public sector. We trace how Ford's populism undermined public education through overt and subtle measures that weaken school boards and unions while advancing privatization. We show how Ford bypassed intermediaries, in this case, school boards and teachers' unions, and appealed directly to "the parents" through the media and employed clientelist strategies such as cash transfers under the guise of "parental choice" to hollow out public education. The analysis demonstrates how Ontario stands out as a unique case study for examining neoliberal populism in Canada and North America.

Key words: neoliberal populism, education, conservative government, right-wing politics, Ontario.

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RESUMEN

En 2018, la elección del *premier* Doug Ford y el gobierno del Partido Conservador Progresista (PCP) inauguró una nueva era de populismo neoliberal en Ontario, Canadá. La plataforma de elección de Ford, denominada “Plan para el pueblo”, tuvo eco en la elite de los negocios que apoyó sus reformas al libre mercado y también entre la clase media y los trabajadores de cuello azul que viven en las áreas suburbanas y del norte de la provincia. El artículo examina cómo Ford posicionó a sus rivales como miembros “fuera de toque” de la elite urbana política y cultural, responsable del déficit en espiral que se convertiría en una pesada carga económica para la clase trabajadora. Al contrario de muchos otros líderes populistas de derecha que se han apoyado en discursos xenófobos o antiinmigrantes, sostenemos que la propuesta populista de Ford es demagógica y pragmática. Esto le permitió cambiar su estrategia política para conseguir el apoyo de un diverso rango de grupos económicos, raciales, étnicos y religiosos, incluidos nuevos inmigrantes. Nos basamos en artículos periodísticos, documentos públicos y reportes, así como en trece entrevistas con políticos, profesores y servidores públicos. El artículo se enfoca sobre la manera en que el gobierno de Ford ha actuado para debilitar las instituciones democráticas mediante medidas como “fortalecer los poderes principales” al invocar la cláusula derogatoria, así como debilitar al sector público. Mostramos cómo el populismo de Ford ha dañado la educación pública mediante el establecimiento o la supresión de medidas que perjudiquen a la administración de las escuelas y a los sindicatos, mientras avanza la privatización. Demostramos cómo Ford ignoró a los intermediarios, en este caso, las administraciones escolares y los sindicatos de maestros, y se dirigió directamente a “los padres” a través de los medios y empleó estrategias clientelares como las transferencias de efectivo a guisa de “elección de los padres” para socavar la educación pública. El análisis demuestra cómo Ontario constituye un estudio de caso único para examinar el populismo neoliberal en Canadá y Norteamérica.

Palabras clave: populismo neoliberal, educación, gobierno conservador, política derechista, Ontario.

INTRODUCTION

In 2018, Doug (Douglas) Robert Ford Jr. won a majority government in Ontario, brandishing a neoliberal populist agenda that promised to “open Ontario for business,” while threatening to undermine already weakened social services. His brand of neoliberal populism defeated the Liberal government that had held power for the previous fifteen years from 2003–2018. Ford galvanized popular support through a political rhetoric that appealed to the business elite but also the “everyday people,” specifically middle-class and blue-collar workers (Thomas, 2020; Ford and Ford, 2016). His political slogan to slash corrupt government and “cut taxes” resonated with wealthy

conservatives as well as working people from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds who had become disaffected with opposition parties. Their dissatisfaction was spurred on by Ford, who depicted opposition parties as “out of touch,” left-leaning political elites responsible for inflating the provincial deficit which, he claimed, would hurt Ontarians for years to come (Budd, 2020). Yet, while claiming to support the working people of Ontario, he undermined workers’ rights and introduced widespread austerity measures.

Ford’s unique brand of neoliberal populism distinguishes itself from the rest of the country but also from the typical right-wing populist discourses that rely on xenophobic or anti-immigrant rhetoric. The emergence of the concept neoliberal populism is often associated with Latin American politics, specifically, with Presidents Alberto Fujimori of Peru, Carlos Menem in Argentina and Brazilian President Fernando Collor de Mello, who adopted populist tactics to support drastic neoliberal market reforms (Weyland, 1999). In North America, Premier Ford, when first elected, was often described as “the Trump of the North.” Yet, his brand of neoliberal populism departs from the extreme ideological positions adopted by many right-wing leaders. He did not adopt an anti-immigrant stance, nor the commitment to traditional family values, associated with typical neoliberal populists. While Ford was known for uttering homophobic comments, such as in 2014, when he described the pride parade as “middle-aged men with pot bellies running down the street buck naked,” he was also the first Progressive Conservative (PC) premier to march in the 2019 North York gay pride parade, (albeit not the main Toronto parade, supposedly because the uniformed police were banned from the parade, but more likely because he risked vocal opposition from center and left-leaning voters living downtown) (*CBC News*, 2019). In fact, Ford has been described as rewriting the conservative playbook on LGBTQ+ rights (Alozzi, 2019). Moreover, during COVID, Ford emerged as a strategic pragmatic leader who acquiesced to scientific experts and imposed lockdowns which were among the longest in North America (Levinson-King, 2021). Yet, comparatively little research on subnational levels of power has examined the distinctiveness of Premier Ford’s politics (Erl, 2021; Forde, 2022).

Most research on neoliberalism and its intersection with populism tends to analyze national politics, with comparatively less research on subnational levels (Brenner and Theodore, 2003). Moreover, at the subnational level, most research on Canada has tended to focus on Western populist parties, with few studies examining Ontario’s distinctive brand of neoliberal populism (Budd, 2020; Gill, 2021; Thomas, 2020). This paper highlights the uniqueness of Ontario’s conservatism by tracing Ford’s rise to power, how he reversed his image during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to his second-term majority victory in June 2022. Following a broad overview of his distinctive

brand of populism, we pay particular attention to his restructuring of public education. Education is used as a poignant case to illustrate how he deploys his strategic populist strategies. We show how he galvanized public support by claiming to provide “choice” to parents, while underfunding and undermining key public educational institutions.

To develop our analysis, we draw primarily on an examination of newspaper articles, government documents, and reports by non-governmental organizations. In addition, we conducted interviews with thirteen individuals including: members of the Ontario provincial parliament, teachers, government workers, and senior administrators in health care and education. The interviews occurred by video conference and were approximately 60 to 90 minutes in duration. The recordings were transcribed, analyzed, and used to better understand and provide more in-depth context to our findings, particularly in the areas of health care and education.

UNDERSTANDING POPULISM AND ONTARIO'S DISTINCTIVENESS

Ontario presents a unique case study that complicates the typical narratives surrounding populism in Canada. The term “populism” has become a normative yet ambiguous term with various meanings and connotations. While many use the term to describe leaders who claim to represent “the people” and criticize “the elite,” Mudde’s ideational approach provides a more nuanced theoretical analysis (Mudde, 2007; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). According to Mudde (2007), populism should be studied as a “thin-centred ideology” that divides society into two antagonist groups, “the pure people” versus the “corrupt elite.” As a “thin-centered ideology,” it lacks a substantive ideological basis and is attached to preexisting “thick” mainstream ideologies such as nationalism, liberalism and conservatism. As a result, populism can co-exist with a myriad of other concepts or comprehensive ideologies, thereby, allowing for the construction of the “general will,” or *volonté générale* of the people, to take on different forms. Erl (2021) draws on the concept of “thin ideologies” to distinguish between populism in the federal People’s Party of Canada (PPC) and the form of populism, known as Ford Nation, which gained popularity during Rob Ford’s tenure as Mayor of Toronto and was adopted by his brother Doug Ford. He documents how Ford Nation drew support from working-class suburbanites as well as new immigrants in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton area. While the PPC blends a libertarian and anti-immigrant rhetoric, by contrast, Ford Nation promotes a neoliberal politics that draws on geographic cleavages between urban and suburban voters (Erl, 2021; Silver et al., 2020).

Brubaker's (2019) conceptualization of populism as a two-dimensional category builds upon Mudde's (2007) analysis by emphasizing how populist leaders create both vertical and horizontal oppositions. Vertically, they differentiate "we the people" from the "elite," who are portrayed as "sitting on top" of the hierarchy. Horizontally, they establish an "insider" versus "outsider" dichotomy that is used to further distance "elites" as "outsiders." This is used to create a category of "we the people" who are envisioned as a "discursively constructed and bounded community distinct from the oppositional economic, political or cultural elite" (Brubaker, 2019: 11). Brubaker offers a more nuanced approach that enables "the elite" to be defined through different special interests and lines of opposition. This allows Brubaker to define "the elite" in economic terms but also along other dimensions that may, but not necessarily always, resort to xenophobic nationalism. Brubaker's (2019) approach allows for an understanding of populism that does not require a fixed populist ideology, making it useful for analyzing Premier Doug Ford's pragmatic approach that enables him to shift position while maintaining popular support. Silver, Taylor and Calderón-Figueroa (2020) draw on Brubaker's insights to illustrate how the Ford brother's political strategy horizontally divided insiders and outsiders on the basis of suburban versus urban divisions, rather than ethnicity or income. Furthermore, Erl, Forest and Mederios show that while many "populist movements are racist, racial animus is not a defining characteristic of populism" (2022: 9). Brubaker's approach expands our understanding of how populists operate and construct their rhetoric, without relying on a codified doctrine.

To better comprehend Premier Doug Ford's populism, we also draw on Müller's method, which suggests that being critical of elites "is a necessary but not a sufficient condition . . . in order to qualify as a populist" (2016: 20). Müller argues that populists are also anti-pluralist, and therefore fundamentally anti-democratic. He characterized populism by three main elements that include: "attempts to hijack the state apparatus, corruption and "mass clientelism" (trading material benefits or bureaucratic favors for political support by citizens who become the populists' "clients"), and efforts systematically to suppress civil society" (2016: 4). By utilizing this framework, we demonstrate how Premier Ford, while claiming to represent the will of Ontarians, has undermined democratic institutions by invoking the notwithstanding clause, increasing strong mayor powers, and weakening civil society institutions. Additionally, we concentrate on the education sector to show how these measures work in practice, specifically through Premier Ford's attacks on school boards and unions. Müller's (2016) approach facilitates a more in-depth analysis of how populist leaders like Premier Ford operate not only using oppositional discourses that pit "we the people" against "the elite," but also by enacting anti-democratic policies.

In Canada, studies of populism have tended to focus on federal parties or western provinces with comparatively little analysis of populism in other parts of the country (Budd, 2020; Albo and Evans, 2019). The unique political and cultural dynamics in the West have given rise to a particular brand of populism which stems from a perceived sense of detachment from the rest of Canada (Albo and Evans, 2019; Sorensen, 2019). Western right-wing populism, particularly within the prairie provinces, is said to be rooted in an expressed alienation and sense of detachment from the rest of Canada. From the perspective of western provinces, the industrial and cultural priorities of Ontario and Quebec are perceived as driving federal decision making (Bratt et al., 2023). Populist leaders have relied on this divisive notion of “western alienation” to pit the West against the rest of Canada (Albo and Evans, 2019). The strong sentiments of alienation and resentment towards the rest of the country that characterize western provinces, but also Quebec, never took hold in Ontario. Rather Premier Doug Ford’s populism revolves around an antiestablishment, neoliberal agenda that largely targets opposition parties within the province, depicting them as “out-of-touch,” “downtown elites,” blamed for heavily taxing hard-working people while driving up the provincial debt (Gill, 2021).

Ford’s populist political strategy is rooted in the neoliberal policies of the “Common Sense Revolution” introduced by Premier Mike Harris when he was elected in 1995. Although some describe Harris as a populist, most academic literature refers to him as a neoliberal politician responsible for moving the Progressive Conservative party to the right and laying the groundwork for the future rise of neoliberal populism in Ontario (Kipfer and Saberi, 2014; Albo and Evans, 2019). As Morgan (2018) notes, “Harris never dedicated his 90s brand of austerity to the common people.” Prior to Harris, Ontario’s conservatives were informed by a Red Tory centralist politics that supported investments in welfare policies while maintaining fiscal conservatism. Known as the “PC’s Big Blue Machine,” this approach to politics dominated Ontario from 1943 to 1985 (Albo and Evans, 2019). Harris, however, entrenched a neoliberal politics characterized by a strong commitment to free trade, privatization, and market liberalism. He embraced the political and cultural discourse popularized under Thatcher and Reagan in the 1980s that denounced state responsibility and demonized those on welfare as lazy cheats defrauding the system. This rhetoric was used to legitimize the most severe forms of austerity cuts ever proposed in the province. He slashed provincial transfer payments and downloaded responsibility for social welfare, public housing, and transit to cities (Keil, 2002). The sweeping cuts to social programs reverberated across the province for years to come. In 2002, he abruptly announced his retirement, paving the way for a Liberal win in 2003 that lasted until 2018 when Premier Ford was elected (Albo and Evans, 2019).

FORD NATION

Premier Ford's neoliberal populism took shape during his time as a city councillor in Toronto between 2010 and 2014, during which his brother, Rob Ford, served as mayor. A decade earlier, Mayor Rob Ford entered politics in 2000 and served three terms as a city councillor. Mayor Ford would emerge as a controversial figure who made international headlines in 2013 after being videotaped while smoking crack cocaine and acknowledging an addiction problem. The two brothers grew up Etobicoke, in an affluent suburb of Toronto. In the run for Mayor, Rob Ford promised to "stop the gravy train" at City Hall; a slogan that entrenched a divide between Ford's base of support in the suburbs and the city center political "elites" (Doolittle, 2014; Kipfer and Saberi, 2014). While Kipfer and Saberi claim that the Ford brothers "brought a deeply racialized form of authoritarian populism to Toronto City Hall," albeit one that they claim had not been fully congealed (2014: 134), others argue that their politics was embraced by a range of ethnicities, cultures, and religions (Silver et al., 2020). As Kiss, Perrella and Spicer point out, "in stark contrast with much of what is discussed about populism, our results show Ford's brand of populism drew much support among visible minorities and immigrants, rather than being a product of racism or anti-immigrant sentiments" (2020: 1040). They point to how Ford exemplifies how a "thin centered" populism need not be rooted in xenophobic or racist narratives (Kiss et al., 2020).

While Rob Ford may have been on the frontlines as Mayor, Doug Ford's central role in engineering a populist politics rooted in Ford Nation cannot be overstated. Their biographic account appearing in their book, *Ford Nation* (2016), details the story of a homegrown populism rooted in the Ford family and masterminded by Doug. Doug recounts how, in 1995, he registered his dad as a provincial candidate in the Etobicoke-Humber riding, announced it to him after the fact and convinced him it was his civic duty to let his name stand for the nomination (2016: 47-49). Doug and Rob depict how they "worked every opportunity" from Ford Fest, an annual barbecue originally held in their family's backyard, to the TV and radio show, *Ford Nation*, to promote and manufacture their populist message. While it only aired on TV once, *Ford Nation* morphed into five radio episodes. The series was designed to boost the brothers' popularity by portraying them as accessible to "the people"; they took calls from the public in an effort to demonstrate their connection and concern for issues facing the everyday common person. Ford Nation emerged as a moniker used to propel popular support for the brothers' elections. As described in their article, Silver, Taylor and Calderón-Figueroa posit that "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" (2020: 16). In describing his support among new Canadians, Doug Ford explained "I'll tell you how Ford Nation was created: They [new Canadians] came to this country, they couldn't get hold of any NDP or Liberal leaders, but they got hold of the Mayor of Toronto (the late Rob Ford) and the Premier. . . . We showed up to their doors, we return their calls," (Benzie, 2021). Ford Nation can be understood as the "thin-centred ideology" (Mudde, 2007) that was successfully used to mobilize support from diverse economic, ethnic, immigrant and religious voters while positioning opposition parties as "out of touch" with "the general will" of the people (Budd, 2020). Unexpectedly, in 2014, Mayor Rob Ford withdrew from the Toronto election after a diagnosis of cancer; Doug Ford replaced him in a run for mayor. He lost to Mayor John Tory, who won 40 percent of the popular vote; Ford trailed with almost 34 percent of the vote. In January of 2018, Doug Ford announced his candidacy for the Ontario Progressive Conservative leadership, merely four days after then leader Patrick Brown stepped down following sexual allegation charges. Ford won the party leadership on March 10, 2018. This set the stage for his run for premier of Ontario (Luccisano and Maurutto, 2022).

A POLITICIAN "FOR THE PEOPLE"

In the race for premier of Ontario, Ford's election platform, a "Plan for the People," resonated not only with the business elite who supported his free-market reforms, but also with middle-class and blue-collar workers living in the suburbs and northern regions of the province. In developing his popular appeal, Doug Ford mobilized the political marketing strategy that made Ford Nation popular at the city level and deployed it to garner support across the province. During his campaign, he positioned himself as a "regular guy" who would represent the "real" hardworking people who were struggling in a new post-industrial economy (McDowell, 2021; Lewsen, 2020). He adopted a folksy communication style that made him relatable and likeable. He promised to lessen government regulations and cut business taxes in order to stimulate the economy and jobs. To appeal to working class voters, he vowed to reduce the cost of liquor and introduce cheap "buck-a-beer" to be sold across the province. He pledged to decrease personal taxes and eliminate them altogether for those making less than \$30,000 a year (Lewsen, 2020).

Ford's main attack was against his political rivals, whom he framed as downtown cultural and libertarian "urban elites" who were "out of touch" with the ordinary people. This geographic divide between the urban elites and ordinary people (those residing in the suburbs and northern regions of the province) played a key

role in his victory (Budd, 2020). It allowed him to galvanize support across class lines and from a complex mix of religious, ethnic, and racial groups, as well as new immigrants. Ford specifically avoided the xenophobic, racist, and anti-immigrant claims often made by right-wing populist leaders. When accused of xenophobia, he responded by claiming, "I have been pro-immigration from day one. . . . All you have to do is come to a 'Ford Fest' and you'll see the support from people around the world" (Benzie, 2021). Ford has been described as shrewdly placing "racial politics on the back burner" to avoid jeopardizing his support base (Oliver, 2018). His populism is devoid of the extreme ideological rhetoric characteristic of other right-wing populist leaders (Budd, 2020; Erl, 2021). Ford's distinctiveness lies in his pragmatic demagoguery rather than his ideological messaging; he is a businessman ready to exploit issues in order to appeal to the "everyday ordinary voter." His approach exemplifies how populism can operate as a "thin-centered" ideology with appeals to represent the "general will of the people" while not necessarily attaching to xenophobic ideologies. Ford's populism operates along what Brubaker defines as horizontal and vertical axes in a manner that casts political opposition parties as "urban cultural elites" and "outsiders" who would run the province into increased debt while ignoring "the real" concerns facing "real people" living in the suburban and northern regions of the province (Silver et al., 2020). This political strategy allowed him to effectively end fifteen years of successive Liberal government in the province. In June 2018, Ford won 40 percent of the popular vote, and 76 of the 124 seats in Ontario's legislature, securing him a majority government (Powers, 2022).

After his election, Ford quickly embarked on an antiestablishment policy direction that operated to undermine the democratic administrative system. His policy approach aligns with Müller's (2016) characterization of populism, which identifies anti-pluralism and anti-democratic tendencies as essential features of this political ideology. Indeed, one of Ford's first acts as premier was the restructuring of the municipal council in Toronto. In July 2018, in the middle of an ongoing municipal election campaign, Ford cut the number of electoral wards from 47 to 25, forcing a redrawing of electoral polling districts. According to Erl, Forest and Medeiros, the consolidation of Toronto's electoral districts "shrunk the representation of its left-leaning population in favour of Ford's more conservative suburban supporters" (2022: 9). The forced amalgamation was largely perceived as a maneuver to undermine local representation.

He subsequently launched his business blueprint, the Making Ontario Open for Business Act, which declared that "Ontario is open for business" (Thomas, 2020). The neoliberal business plan professed to secure Ontario's competitiveness and protect jobs, yet it weakened employment standards, cut benefits for workers, and increased precarious employment. The 2018 act also reversed many of the employment

gains included in the previous Liberal governments' Employment Standards Act of 2018. Notably, Ford terminated the proposed increase of the minimum wage to \$15 per hour claiming that businesses could not afford it; the minimum wage remained frozen at \$14 per hour until 2020. He also repealed the equal pay for equal work provision, and reduced employee compensation by eliminating two sick days, among other reductions. According to Thomas, the legislation increased "the spread of precarious employment and exacerbated already-growing income inequality" (2020: 146).

In 2018, he went after the Liberal federal government and provincial opposition parties, admonishing them for imposing expensive environmental bills to control greenhouse gas emissions. He delivered on his campaign promise to fight the federal Liberal government's carbon pricing plan, and eliminate the cap-and-trade program introduced under the former provincial Liberal government. The cap-and-trade program was implemented in Ontario in 2017 to conform with the federal government's Greenhouse Gas Pollution Pricing Act (GGPPA). The goal of the GGPPA was to increase the price on gasoline and natural gas to make Canadians aware of their consumption habits. While Ford claimed the tax was too costly and would hurt families, in actual fact, the program included a direct annual rebate that effectively increased money to families (Forde, 2022). To further undermine federal policy, Ford launched several failed court challenges, and, in 2019, he introduced the Federal Carbon Tax Transparency Act (*CBC News*, 2020). Commonly referred to as the anti-carbon tax sticker campaign, the act mandated that privately owned gas establishments post stickers on their fuel-pumps, with the slogan "the federal carbon tax will cost you." Failing to post the stickers could incur a daily fine of up to \$1,000 for individuals and \$10,000 for corporations (Forde, 2022: 347). One year later, the Ontario Superior Court struck down the act as unconstitutional, stating that "a government cannot legislate a requirement that private retailers post stickers" to advance its political agenda (*CBC News*, 2020). According to Forde (2022), the measures were a manipulative populist propaganda campaign used by the premier against the federal government, at a \$30 million cost to the Ontario public. Ford's "axe the tax" sloganeering was described by Cohn as "money well spent for personal branding even if it's going down the drain" (Cohn, 2019).

Ford's neoliberal conservatism is further demonstrated by his implementation of some of the most extensive austerity measures since the Harris era. This involved cutting funding for day-care subsidies, education, healthcare, libraries, child protection agencies, and programs for autistic children. He reduced legal aid funding by 30 percent, forcing community clinics that serviced impoverished and marginalized populations to close. Ford then cut the proposed three percent increase to social security by 1.5 percent, an amount that fell below the rate of inflation in the

province. He canceled Ontario's Basic Income Pilot program, a poverty reduction initiative started under the Liberal government. While the province was grappling with a housing crisis, he removed rent control. He also blocked harm reduction programs that were designed to deal with Ontario's growing overdose problem. Moreover, he reduced funding for universities along with student aid and imposed severe cuts to education (Armstrong, 2018; Beattie, 2018; Monsebraaten and Ferguson, 2018). The extreme cuts to public programs disproportionately impacted poor and marginalized populations living in the province.

In 2019, Ford proposed a series of measures aimed at restructuring Ontario's health system, including the dissolution of the 14 regional health agencies known as the LHINS (local health integration networks), replacing them with five oversight bodies. The LHINS were responsible for channelling funding from the Ministry of Health to a range of local health services including hospitals, community health centers, long-term care homes and other institutional health providers. When developed, the LHINS were specifically dispersed across the province to ensure regional access and local input into health care decision-making. Ford depicted the LHINS as representing a "very expensive oversight third body intermediary that increased administration" (Crawley, 2019a). Ford also proposed a 27 percent budget reduction that would consolidate the 35 regional public health boards into ten oversight bodies (Shelley, 2022). These public health boards were responsible for a range of issues including: chronic diseases, food safety, immunizations, infectious diseases, substance abuse, and school health. They typically included a mix of local politicians, community leaders and medical professionals appointed by local councils who were often vocal about government inaction and ineffective responses to health crises facing the province. Despite Ford's framing of the changes as part of the modernization of public health, some experts such as Shelley (2022), argue that it was double-speak for dismantling public services. According to a former public health board member, "Ford wants to get rid of the public boards because they give him grief. When the province introduces stupid medical policies, the boards oppose it" (Interview #6, September 3, 2022). Although the proposed changes were temporarily halted due to the COVID-19 pandemic, talks are ongoing to reintroduce the measures. Critics of the plan argue that the amalgamation of health care agencies and the consolidation of public health boards will have a detrimental effect on the delivery of health care services and weaken local input into health care decision-making.

In response to the broad austerity measures, protests erupted across the province delivering a blow to Ford's approval ratings. The Ontario Health Coalition mounted rallies against the proposed People's Health Care Act (O'Neil, 2019). In the education sector, students, teachers, and parents mounted a series of rallies to protest cuts.

Post-secondary students filled the streets expressing dissent against the termination of the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP). On May 1, 2019, the day known as International Worker's Day, labor groups called for a general strike against Ford with demonstrations organized in 26 cities across the province (*Kawarthanow*, 2019). Others launched protests against the undermining of climate change provisions. By the end of 2019, Ford's approval ratings had plummeted; a mere 20 percent of voters continued to view Ford favorably (Grenier, 2021). Then COVID-19 hit.

COVID-19, LOCKDOWNS AND FORD'S PRAGMATIC APPROACH

With the COVID-19 pandemic, Ford quickly shifted gears, toning down his neoliberal and brash public persona. He presented himself as a professional statesman who listened to medical experts and took serious steps to lock down the province and curb the spread of the pandemic. Over the successive waves of the pandemic, he imposed the longest continuous lockdown in the world on Toronto. Ford regularly appeared on television wearing a mask in public while expressing his concern for all those affected. He championed frontline workers whom he claimed were risking their lives. When medical reports indicated that marginalized communities, especially those living in low-income and racialized neighborhoods located in suburban areas of major cities, had higher rates of COVID-19 infection, he took action by providing additional resources and establishing mobile vaccine clinics in the identified hotspots (Crawley, 2021). During the pandemic, in October 2021, he reversed his wage freeze and increased the minimum wage to \$14.35, with an additional increase to \$15 in January 2022, the year of his second election. He continuously expressed his concern for working families and regularly spoke of how "I gotta protect anyone who is not working, they have mortgages to pay, rent to pay" (Fawcett, 2020). This distinguished him from other populist leaders in Canada and internationally. During the pandemic, when other leaders dismissed scientific evidence and downplayed the importance of the pandemic, he imposed strict lockdowns despite growing opposition from segments of the business class. In an attempt to relate to Ontarians who were feeling divided over the government's pandemic strategy, Ford acknowledged his own daughter's public opposition to these measures. He strategically expressed empathy for those experiencing family pandemic polarization, while holding steadfast to his government's masking and vaccine mandates (Crawley, 2022). He adopted a pragmatic approach that was devoid of the ideological anti-science rhetoric espoused by other Canadian premiers such as Jason Kenny of Alberta and Scott Moe in Saskatchewan.

His populist appeal bounced back to a record high of 74 percent by May 2020 (Druzin, 2020). His measured response and support for social assistance during the pandemic occurred alongside more subtle neoliberal policies that often occurred under the radar or received minimal exposure in the press. In many ways, the pandemic operated as a screen that masked more in-depth cuts to social supports. He quietly started to undermine the power of school boards and laid the ground for future privatization of online learning. As the number of deaths were growing in long-term care homes, he further dismantled public health care across the province. Yet, he skillfully created the appearance of a politician deeply concerned with the welfare of the people. To further his appeal among his constituents, he announced that if elected a second term, he would increase the minimum wage to \$15.50 (DeClerq, 2022).

WEAKENING DEMOCRACY AND CENTRALIZING THE PREMIER'S POWER

In the lead up to the 2022 election, Ford further sought to erode democratic process by invoking Section 33 of Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms notwithstanding to curb political opposition. The notwithstanding clause allows provinces, territories, and the federal government to temporarily override or derogate from sections of the charter. Once invoked, the legislation protects provinces from judicial review, allowing them to enact policies that would, otherwise, contravene the charter. Ford initially introduced an act in 2021 to restrict third-party ad spending but the act was struck down by the Ontario courts for unconstitutionally violating freedom of expression during election. He responded by introducing the Protecting Elections and Defending Democracy Act, which invoked the notwithstanding clause, allowing the government to impose strict restrictions on third-party election financing during the lead up to the 2022 elections. In an interview, Professor McDougall described this as an unconstitutional “nuclear option” that undermined free speech by limiting the expression of unions and other groups critical of Ford’s government (McKenzie-Sutter, 2021). In the June 2022, Ford won a second majority election with 41 percent of the popular vote and 83 of the 124 seats of the seats. The second place New Democratic Party won a mere 31 seats (Paez, 2022).

In 2022, he again invoked the notwithstanding clause to preemptively remove educational assistants’ rights to strike. Bill 28, Keeping Students in Class Act, used the notwithstanding clause to enforce back-to-work legislation and limit salary increases. The act set fines of up to \$4,000 per day for individuals and \$500,000 for unions that disobeyed the order (King, 2022). The bill backfired as some unions that had

supported Ford's election, particularly those in construction, threatened to pull their support. In response, Ford revoked the legislation.

Ford's antiestablishment position and degrading of democratic institutions is further illustrated through his laws boosting strong mayor powers. In 2022, Ford passed the Strong Mayors, Building Homes Act, and the Better Municipal Governance Act, which increased the powers of mayors in the largest cities of Ottawa and Toronto. Mayors in those cities could "bring forward or veto matters relating to certain prescribed provincial priorities" (Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 2022). Although the "prescribed" priorities have yet to be determined, the act provides mayors with new regulatory oversight over council bylaw decisions. The Better Municipal Governance Act reduced the required support to pass bylaws to a mere one-third of city council. According to Zach and Horak (2022), the act "rolls back almost 400 years of democratic development premised on checks and balances between executive and legislative authority—all in the name of a narrow property development agenda masquerading as a housing affordability plan."

HOLLOWING OUT EDUCATION THROUGH MODERNIZING THE CLASSROOM

The following further elaborates on Ford's strategic use of overt and subtle measures to undermine public education. Ford's government deliberately hollowed out the province's public education system through fiscal austerity measures and underspending. In Canada, education is under provincial jurisdiction. He created a crisis in education that could only be solved through so-called modernization of the classroom, which opened the door to creeping privatization. He treated school trustees, school boards and teachers' unions as adversaries. One of Ford's signature moves was to bypass educational bodies, such as school boards and unions, and appeal directly to "the people," specifically parents. Connecting directly with the people and bypassing intermediaries, is a well-known populist strategy (Mazzoleni and Bracciale, 2018). Additionally, the government employed populist and clientelist strategies to advance the neo-liberalization of education.

Once in office, the Ford government worked quickly to put its mark on reconfiguring public education. It immediately cancelled the elementary school sex-ed curriculum that was brought in by the outgoing Liberal government and reduced its curriculum commitments on reconciliation. The government brought in a plan called Education that Works for You—Modernizing Classrooms (Office of the Premier, 2019), which created openings for the privatization of education. The plan included fiscal austerity measures and underspending that weakened the educational sector

and at the same time helped to reinforce the Ford government's myth about an educational crisis that needed to be fixed. Among the more controversial elements of the plan was a new requirement that students take four online courses at the secondary school level, a proposal that would transfer part of students' education from the classroom to the internet (Office of the Premier, 2019). Another part of the plan involved the increase of high school class sizes from an average of 22 to 28 students. Since this is an average size, some schools would find themselves with up to 35 students per class. The net effect of these reforms would be a reduction in the number of teachers. Then education minister, Lisa Thompson, justified the changes by claiming that, "bigger class sizes make students more resilient," and that students are currently "lacking coping skills and they're lacking resiliency" (Powers, 2019). These changes were to occur alongside a \$1 billion cut to the \$24 billion education budget (Paul, 2018). In Toronto alone, in 2019–2020 the Toronto District School Board's budget was cut by \$67.9 million, with a loss of 300 jobs, reduced resources and programs (King, 2022).

In response, protests erupted across the province. Teachers' unions, teachers, parents, and students opposed the increased class sizes and other reforms. High school students organized a province-wide walkout on April 4, 2019. More than 100,000 students took to the streets. Two days later, on April 6, about 10,000 parents, teachers and students protested at Queens Park (Chen, 2019). The protests sent a message and Premier Ford was temporarily compelled to hold off on some of the changes. In fact, the government retracted the proposal for four mandatory online high school courses, changing it to only two optional online courses.

The move to online learning was one reflection of Ford's larger plan to commercialize education through eLearning (*Press Progress*, 2021). Online courses were to be administered by Ontario's public television networks, TVO in English and TFO in French, referred to as the Independent Learning Centre (ILC). According to Annie Kidder, the executive director of People for Education, the move was designed to remove online learning from school boards (*Press Progress*, 2021). Effectively, classroom teachers were to be replaced with ILC, and "there's no real teacher learning or limit on class sizes with the ILC currently" (Bocking, 2022; *Press Progress*, 2021). The plan was to commercialize education and offer e-learning courses under a "global development strategy" to Ontario's private schools as well as internationally as a revenue generator (Bocking, 2022). The commercialization of education raises questions related to accountability. Ontario school boards are governed by an elected board of trustees for a four-year term. School boards are accountable to the public whereas the ILC is not.

BYPASSING INTERMEDIARIES AND APPEALING TO PARENTS

During the 2018 election campaign, Ford vowed to enact a Parent Bill of Rights that would empower parents by providing them with direct input into educational planning. Following the election, then education minister, Lisa Thompson, announced the creation of a Public Interest Committee that would advise on all educational matters. She professed that the committee would ensure, “unprecedented parental consultation into Ontario’s curriculum” (Office of the Premier, 2018). She launched a province-wide consultation process and issued a press release that read “Ontario’s Government for the People Respecting Parents by Holding Unprecedented Consultation into Education Reform” (Office of the Premier, 2018). Some 7,036 public submissions were received by the government, a process that cost approximately \$1 million, but the results were never officially released (DeClerq, 2020; *Press Progress*, 2019). In time, a leaked document entitled, “Class Size Consultation Document” reported that 70 percent of people who were consulted opposed Ford’s plan to raise class sizes (DeClerq, 2020). Despite the government’s posturing about empowering parents through the Parent Bill of Rights and public consultations, both initiatives fell by the wayside. Since then, there has been no other widespread parental consultation. Yet, as described below, the government is continually signalling that parent voice and parent’s concerns are driving their educational policy choices.

In line with his strategy of appealing directly to parents, Ford adopted a new style of direct messaging through media, a strategy that bypassed and undermined institutional consultation and prior information sharing with school boards, teachers’ unions, and other educational administrative bodies. When secondary school teachers launched rotating strikes in 2020, after failed bargaining negotiations, Ford’s government skillfully issued media messages stating their concern for parents. The education minister, Stephen Lecce, was often heard making statements like “parents need to know,” “I want to reassure parents,” “parents have little tolerance for,” and “we are listening.”

A press release was issued entitled “Government Stands with Parents and Kids During Union-Led Strike Actions in Schools” (Office of the Premier, 2020). Parents were positioned as the victims of teachers’ job actions, and the government represented itself, discursively and monetarily, as an ally representing the needs of parents at the negotiation table. It also announced financial compensation of up to \$60 to support parents during school closures associated with labor disruptions (Martin-Robbins, 2020). This cash transfer was an effective populist clientelist strategy that aimed to buy political favor by reinforcing divisions: the government and parents versus greedy unionized teachers.

With its strategic use of media to control the message, the Ford government bypassed, weakened, and undermined teachers unions, school boards and school board trustees, whose purpose was to reinforce and defend good quality public education. One teacher, a 25-year veteran from Waterloo region, stated in an interview, “Rather than showing up at the negotiation table with unions, the minister of education was negotiating in the media, so having a cable package came in handy” (Interview #3, August 15, 2022). Unions and teachers often heard about the latest government proposals at the same time as the public, through news outlets. A Toronto School Board trustee was similarly frustrated by the minister of education’s preference to communicate not only labor issues, but all school policy matters related to the pandemic, via the media. The trustee expressed that “as elected school board trustees, we felt this was a move to cut us out, to weaken our roles and our positions” (Interview #10, September 20, 2022).

POPULIST EDUCATIONAL CASH TRANSFERS TO PARENTS

During the pandemic and into the fall of 2022, the Ford government began a trend of shifting funds from public education to individual parents. In a tweet, Education Minister Lecce said “safety and parental choice will guide the way forward” for the post-pandemic education system (Reeve, 2020). Cash transfers for education seemed to be the go-to strategy for the Ford government. This can be seen in two other types of educational initiatives that shifted learning from the classroom to the private sector. In the first one, launched in the spring of 2022, the Ministry of Education released the Ontario Learning Recovery Action Plan for Students to facilitate “learning catch-up” in language and math. The 72 school boards in the province were enlisted to announce and distribute government funds for this initiative. These tutoring supports shifted learning from the classroom to the private tutor and were dependent on parents to navigate the program and the transportation. The second pandemic recovery learning plan, called the Plan to Catch Up, was announced during the provincial budget of August 2022. The amount of \$365 million was earmarked for the program. Parents could apply for direct financial support of \$200 (or \$250 for children with special needs) for tutoring costs or to purchase resources to supplement student learning (Rushowy, 2022). While schools boards continued to face budget cuts, the government introduced a series of populist cash transfers to parents (Tranjan, 2023), purportedly to assist with education support, however, we argue that it was a move to increase privatization of public education.

Creeping privatization characterized by a slow and steady dismantling of public education is evidenced in the strategies used by Ford to ostensibly remediate issues

in public education. Under the direct education payments policy of 2022, parents were being told that they have “free choice” to determine how to supplement their children’s education. However, the monies available under these direct education payment initiatives were minimal (Bocking, 2022). Nevertheless, the impact, in terms of creeping privatization, is significant. In an interview, a provincial politician stated, “By accepting these direct transfers, Ontarians are participating in, and literally buying into the privatization of education” (Interview #12, September 26, 2022). Similarly, the Ontario Teachers’ Federation (OTF) argued that the provincial cash transfers “could be a means to gradually overcome the historic unpopularity of public subsidies for private education in Ontario (Bocking, 2022). Additionally, the direct education payments policy shifts to parents the responsibility for learning, by tasking them with finding tutors for their children.

UNDERFUNDING AND WEAKENING OF PUBLIC-SCHOOL BOARDS

The fiscal austerity measures to school boards were extensive and severely impacted the quality of education in Ontario. Political economist and senior researcher with the Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives, Ricardo Tranjan, calculates that school boards should have received total funding of “\$27 billion in 2021–22 to maintain real per-student funding at 2017–18 levels. Instead, they received \$25.4 billion, or \$1.6 billion less, in today’s dollars” (2022). Moreover, the Ontario Financial Accountability Office reported that during COVID-19, the Ford government deliberately underspent approximately \$900 million. While funds were earmarked in the budget to support education in areas such as programming, staffing, school repairs, HVAC and AC installations, the government choose to undercut spending (Thompson, 2022). The withholding of money, as president of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation, Karen Littlewood, points out, occurred while the school system was “understaffed and facing a growing, multi-billion-dollar repair backlog” (Thompson, 2022). These financial figures tell the story of a public institution that was being starved and weakened at all levels of operation from staffing, programming, and infrastructure to bolster the appearance of an educational sector in financial crisis.

In keeping with their playbook, the minister of education continued his attempt to promote the optics of “concern for parental voice” and “student achievement” by introducing a new bill Better Schools and Student Outcome Act, 2023. It provides the government with wide-ranging new legislative powers¹ over school boards to

¹ The Better Schools and Student Outcomes Act, 2023 includes the following: increasing accountability and transparency of school boards across the province; putting in place reforms to establish standardized

micro-manage them and sell-off school property, while they are being underfunded. Paul (2023) argues that a more accurate naming of the bill should be the Further Reduction of School Boards' Ability to Function Act. Based on Tranjan's (2023) calculation and taking inflation into account, "school boards will receive, on average, \$1,200 less per student in the 2023–24 school year than what they received in 2018–19." The Ford government's consistent and sustained fiscal austerity, and the stripping of school boards' powers, is undermining and hollowing out public education.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we outlined how Premier Ford's unique neoliberal populist appeal departs from the more ideological perspectives espoused by other right-wing leaders. Doug's Ford's support was bolstered by attacking his political rivals whom he depicted as the "out of touch" political and cultural urban elite that bloated government expenditures. Rather than holding steadfast to ideological right-wing perspectives, Ford espouses a demagogic pragmatic stance that allowed him to cultivate a wide and diverse base of support including people from different ethnic and racial backgrounds as well as new immigrants. In part, he built on the work he did with his brother Rob to advance the appeal of Ford Nation across the province. As a pragmatic politician, when met with significant resistance, Ford's strategy has been to step back, pivot and re-launch. Reversing the mandatory four online high school courses to two optional courses is one example. His pragmatism also allowed him to shift his persona and approach during the pandemic. He imposed strict lockdowns, mandated masks and supported vaccinations while professing his concern for families struggling to make ends meet. This helped to soften his approach and raise his popularity, while dodging questions about the hollowing out of public services. This brand of pragmatic populism was a contributing factor to securing a second majority government in the June 2022 provincial elections. It is also important to note that voter turnout fell to a record low of 43 percent (Paez, 2022).

As a neoliberal populist, Ford used his legislative powers to weaken democratic processes. As described in the article, the invoking of the notwithstanding clause to limit third party election financing in 2021, the preemptive use of the notwithstanding clause to prevent a strike by CUPE workers, and the passing of strong mayor power are all significant examples of how the Ford government has used its power to

processes and expectations for boards of trustees, directors of education and supervisory officers; maximizing capital assets of boards to build schools faster and utilize school capacity; strengthening teacher training and oversight and improving disciplinary processes; and creating opportunities for greater parental involvement.

undermine democratic processes. From the outset in 2018, the Ford government stated that the preceding Liberal government was responsible for overspending and causing a spiraling \$15 billion provincial deficit.² He drew on the rhetoric to legitimate the implementation of fiscal austerity measures in education and health, the freezing of minimum wage and capping public sector increases at one percent. While the claim of a \$15 billion budget deficit was exaggerated (Crawley, 2019b), it became the foil used to push for a slow but gradual turn towards privatization and the hollowing out of public institutions. For example, Ford's government strategically underfunded and undermined institutions, such as the LHINS, public health boards and school boards, that challenged his neoliberal policy measures.

In the article, we draw particular attention to how the Ford government has advanced the neoliberalization of education. The Ford government was effective in spinning a fiscal crisis in education that he, in part, created by shifting monies out of the sector in order to legitimize creeping privatization. To achieve its ends, the government drew on well-known populist strategies and bypassed intermediaries, including school boards and teachers' unions, and worked through the media to appeal directly to the people, in this case the parents. It also commandeered clientelist strategies through populist educational cash transfers and parental choice to justify diverting critical resources away from public institutions and toward direct payments to citizens. The strategies adopted to restructure public education are emblematic of Ford's broader neoliberal populist tactics, which are hollowing out our democratic institutions and weakening democratic processes both at the provincial and the municipal level.

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² In 2019 the Ontario Public Accounts had published a different version of the financial situation and the Ontario deficit was at \$7.4 billion (Crawley, 2019b). Similarly, in 2021–2022 the government had projected a deficit of \$13.5 billion but finished with a surplus of 2.1 billion (CBC News, 2022).

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