Perspectives

A Canadian Journal of Political Economy and Social Democracy

No. 5 – Winter 2026
Special Issue

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Editorial — From the Ashes?
Winter 2026 Special Issue

Simon Black & Clement Nocos

This special issue of *Perspectives Journal* comes in the wake of the New Democratic Party of Canada's worst federal electoral performance in its history and amidst a leadership race to replace former party-leader Jagmeet Singh. It also follows the NDP's release of its own 2025 election post-mortem, the *Review and Renewal Process Final Report*.

As difficult as it may be, any analysis of the recent electoral fortunes of the federal NDP must attempt to parse factors unique to a particular election from longer term dynamics—both internal and external—impacting the viability of the party, from those that characterize the impasse of social democratic politics globally. Is Canadian social democracy at such a crossroads, between global Third Way trends and a socialist revival demonstrated by electoral gains in Latin America and New York City? While not an easy task, collectively the contributions to this special issue attempt to do just this.

Kicking us off, **Luke Savage** diagnoses what went wrong in the 2025 election, one shaped by "extraordinary conditions and singular developments," including the threat to Canadian sovereignty posed by Donald Trump, the replacement of the unpopular Justin Trudeau with Mark Carney as Prime Minister, and the cost-of-living crisis. Savage argues that New Democratic

Party renewal cannot be reduced to a "rebranding exercise" and breaking the logjam of two-party politics requires a "creative populist strategy" rooted in both "the engaged participation of a mass membership and the kind of bold, left-wing program that is impossible for the Liberals to appropriate or co-opt."

Bryan Evans and **Matt Fodor** situate the current state of the federal NDP within the long historical trajectory of social democracy in Canada and Western Europe, including its relative acceptance of many of the tenets of neoliberalism in the late 1980s and 1990s, and subsequent loosening of ties with working-classes and organized labour. As Evans and Foder write, "the 2008 Global Financial Crisis should have been an opportunity for social democracy to re-connect with its wavering working-class and trade union constituents." Yet it is a populist, ultra-nationalist, and increasingly authoritarian right-wing politics that has been the main beneficiary of neoliberal capitalism's legitimation crisis, as social democratic parties failed to respond to the 2008 crisis with transformative politics, and in many cases around the world, advanced brutal austerity. Evans and Foder call for a radical, explicitly anti-neoliberal refoundation of social democracy, but are sober about the challenges from capital to any such agenda, the type of political formation necessary to overcome them and the necessity of transforming and democratizing the state so that it has the capacity to implement radical social democratic policies.

Even still, in the NDP's own communications strategy leading up to, and during, the 2025 federal campaign, Canadians could not be blamed for confusion of the party's policy gains and goals, given attempts to provide clarity on the 2022 Parliamentary Supply-and-Confidence Agreement. **Dónal Gill** and **Ryan Mohtajolfazl** provide an empirical analysis of NDP leader Jagmeet Singh's social media posts in the confoundingly negative tone towards

the SACA that the party signed on to as a junior parliamentary partner. According to Gill and Mohtajolfazl, "In emphasizing conflict and embedding a narrative in which parliamentary co-operation is pursued with reluctance and difficulty, the party lost credibility as a legible alternative."

As Thomas Piketty and his collaborators have demonstrated through empirical study, the traditional class-based alignment of politics in western democracies has broken down. In the mid-20th century, lower-income and less educated voters largely supported left-wing parties, while wealthier and more educated groups leaned right. This pattern has fractured. **Matthew Polacko**, **Peter Graefe** and **Simon Kiss** explore the working-class vote in Canada, observing that while the NDP has never won a plurality of working-class votes, it has historically done better with the working-class than with the wealthier, educated, professional classes. Yet, working-class support for the party has weakened in recent elections and collapsed in 2025. Polacko, Graefe and Kiss argue that to reverse this trend, the NDP should aim at combating alienation and disaffection among working class voters, "with stronger economic populist appeals and an economic strategy that promises direct material gains for workers." But this approach is not without contradictions, as the authors identify "potential flashpoints" between these suggestions and the need to also rebuild support among routine non-manual workers and professionals who have moved to the Liberal Party.

As Goran Therborn wrote *in Dissent* at the turn of the century, "Social democracy has always been a national project, usually with a veneer of internationalist rhetoric and transnational sympathy, but never drifting far from the 'national interest.'" Nevertheless, leaders of 20th century social democracy, such as Sweden's Olaf Palme, Jamaica's Michael Manley, or the NDP's

own Ed Broadbent, envisioned a democratic socialist internationalism that extended beyond mere rhetorical support for equality among the world's peoples and nations, and for democratizing international institutions, such as the United Nations.

However, as some the largest social democratic parties in Western Europe today, including the UK's Labour Party and Germany's Social Democrats, stand complicit in Israel's genocidal violence in Gaza, even rhetorical support for such an internationalism is no longer a guaranteed feature of contemporary social democratic politics. It is against this backdrop, that **Jennifer Pedersen** outlines the case for the revitalization of a pragmatic progressive internationalism. Unlike the UK Labour Party or German SDP, the federal NDP has been the "conscience of parliament" on questions of Palestine and international human rights more generally. As Pedersen makes clear, without official party status, the NDP will struggle to remain relevant on issues of foreign policy, but with the Carney Liberals attempts to appease the Trump administration by ramping up military spending, flirting with the idea of a Golden Dome, and otherwise bending a knee to the US in matters of global affairs, the NDP's defence of peace, cooperation and international solidarity is needed now more than ever.

Brock University Labour Studies professor **Larry Savage** provides a sober assessment of the NDP's relationship, both past and present, with organized labour. Savage argues that there never was a "golden age" of party-union relations, and despite the labour movement's central role in the founding of the party, the NDP's links to unions were never as organizationally strong as labour or social democratic parties in Western Europe. Still, unions have continually played an important role in the internal life of the party and in mobilizing resources in elections. For a var-

iety of reasons, Savage argues, "the party can no longer credibly be described as the political arm of the labour movement," but that does not mean he sees no future for organized labour in the NDP. For Savage, both the party and the labour movement must respond to right-wing populist appeals to working-class voters, unionized and non-union, "with alternative vision and understanding of the economy that directly addresses their material interests in ways that unite workers through shared class interests."

Lastly, *Perspectives Journal* editor-in-chief **Clement Nocos** and editorial committee member **David McGrane** suggest to NDP leadership candidates to look to history on how to make future transformative change. Originally published online in October 2025, Nocos & McGrane point to the Broadbent Institute case study, *One Hundred Years of Progressive Influence: Social Democracy in Canada*, on how to use power and politics to continue social democracy's imprint on Canadian society. They implore leadership candidates, "to demonstrate how they would counterbalance the Americanization of Canadian politics with the weight of the working-class behind them."

The NDP will surely rebound from the disastrous results of the 2025 election. However, whether social democracy can once again become a transformative force in Canadian politics is an open question. Furthermore, one should not equate the fate of a social democratic party with the fate of social democratic ideas and the institutions that ground them. As poll after poll shows, despite the ups and downs of NDP fortunes, policy ideas such as wealth taxes and public programs such as Medicare maintain popular support among most Canadians.

We collectively face climate chaos, soaring wealth and income inequality, inter-imperial rivalries, and the emergence of a US imperialism—while no less bellicose and violent than in the past

—that no longer clings to the fig leaf of liberal humanitarianism or seeks to uphold some imagined rules-based order. And capitalism, as ever, remains a crisis prone and fundamentally undemocratic way of organizing our economy. As socialists we know that the politics of the centre is no match for the challenges that face humanity. We do, it seems, face a choice between socialism or barbarism. And yet, experiments in rejuvenating left-wing social democracy in the Global North, which have taken the form of movements to reform and radicalize existing center-left parties or the creation of new political formations to the left of these parties, have a decidedly mixed track record. And from the varied experiences of Syriza in Greece, to Podemos in Spain, to Corbynism 1.0 in the Labour Party and 2.0 with Zarah Sultana in 'Your Party,' to the Bernie Sanders-Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez wing of the Democrats in the United States, to La France Insoumise in France and Die Linke in Germany, it is difficult to draw any generalizations, never mind something as concrete as a political formula for the revitalization of the democratic left in Canada. While there is always room for mutual learning and knowledge sharing across borders, projects for such revitalization will necessarily be context-specific and must grapple with the particularities of national political cultures, party systems, social movement-party relations, histories of struggle, and so on.

But while we must acknowledge the limits and failures of the old working-class parties, the NDP has much to gain by looking backward while moving forward. The socialist strategists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries set out to build large-scale, class-based movements. They sought to build parties that were not simply class-focused, but class-rooted. As many of this issue's contributors might agree, it is not enough to say the NDP must return to a focus on winning working-class votes; it must play a role in the making of a working-class, in all its diversity, with the

capacity to organize across difference, defends its interests in the streets, in the workplace, and in parliament, and transform the state. In other words, as Evans and Fodor urge, the party must play a role in class formation.

As critics of the NDP's "professionalization" have argued, a party of the left cannot simply be a party like the Liberals or Conservatives, but with a left-wing platform. Just as early social democratic parties did not seek to structure and organize themselves along the lines of existing liberal and conservative parties, the NDP must fundamentally be a different kind of party; one that is deeply engaged in a grassroots community organizing, political education and class formation; not leaving this vital work to organized labour and social movements alone. Yes, modern politics demands a modern party with the capacity to fundraise, communicate effectively, conduct research and polling, and build strong field organization come election time. But, if the party is to become a vehicle for radical social transformation, and not simply moderate reform, it must not just move closer to labour and social movements but become a movement itself. We hope this special issue makes a small contribution to rethinking and revitalizing the social democratic/democratic socialist project in Canada.

2025 Federal Election Assessments and Observations

Luke Savage

Introduction

Canada's 2025 federal election delivered a painful result for the New Democratic Party. Entering the campaign with 24 seats, the NDP ultimately won just 7 and lost Official Party status in the House of Commons for the first time since 1993. What accounts for this outcome and could it have been avoided? How does it compare to other electoral ebbs throughout the party's history? What are the NDP's prospects, and to what extent does the 2025 result risk consolidating a US-style duopoly between Conservative and Liberal parties for Canadian federal politics in the longer term? With these and other related questions in mind, this essay will offer a broad assessment of the 2025 federal election and its aftermath, and several more general observations about the NDP. As the party conducts its leadership race and debates the path forward, my modest aim for this assessment is to engage some of the key issues and questions raised by the 2025 NDP campaign, beginning with a broad survey of the election itself.

Assessing the 2025 Campaign

The 2025 federal election was, in many ways, one shaped by extraordinary developments and singular conditions: an unexpected continental trade war, open threats of annexation from a US president, the sudden exit of an unpopular Prime Minister, and his replacement by a former central banker. Any reasonable assessment of the NDP campaign itself should thus begin by acknowledging the exceptional circumstances in which it took place – circumstances the party and its leadership could neither have predicted nor done anything to control.

The previous fall, most strategists and observers expected a campaign fought along the related axes of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's unpopularity and the soaring cost of living. Despite sagging approval ratings and mounting pressure from within his own caucus, towards the end of 2024 Trudeau looked determined to lead the Liberals in the next election and was poised to be an ideal foil for both the NDP and the Conservatives.

Instead, a whirlwind of events quickly upended the political dynamic and produced a more volatile electoral landscape; a fact attested by frenzied swings in polling that saw the Liberals recover, the Tories' commanding lead evaporate, and the NDP slide from its competitive position in the high teens to single digits in a matter of weeks following Donald Trump's second presidential inauguration in January 2025.

Here, the psychological impact on the electorate of Trump's trade war and 51st state rhetoric was considerable. In moments of national emergency or times of war, political scientists have observed that the resulting rally 'round the flag effect often redounds to the benefit of incumbent governments. Trump's vic-

tory and its aftermath seem to have had exactly that effect. In turn, an election once destined to be a referendum on the record of an unpopular Liberal government abruptly became a very different beast. Had Trudeau remained, it's doubtful the Liberals could have recovered to the same extent. But, thanks to his replacement by the managerial Mark Carney as leader of the Liberal Party by March 2025, they were exceptionally well positioned to exploit the new dynamic.

These unique circumstances pose some obvious challenges for any postmortem. If the campaign, after all, was one defined by novel conditions that will never be repeated, to what extent can wider lessons be drawn? When it comes to the NDP's performance during the writ period itself, I am mostly content to leave any detailed autopsy of individual campaign maneuvers to others. Nonetheless, the party clearly waited longer than it should have before pivoting to the rejigged narrative it adopted in the election's final weeks, dropping its leader's 'I'm running for prime minister' messaging less than a month ahead of election day.[1]

Having planned to run a leader-centric campaign framed as a two-way race between Jagmeet Singh and Conservative Party leader Pierre Poilievre, it was visibly slow to change course (a charge that might also be levelled at the Conservatives). The transition from "we're running to win" to "elect more New Democrats" in the final weeks was never going to be easy. But, had the party adapted more quickly to the new dynamic, before the campaign period, it is possible more of the electoral fallout could have been contained.

Under different circumstances, and with the Trump factor removed, the NDP's original strategy would likely have fared better and delivered more seats. Among other things, its platform

included several ambitious policies aimed at addressing the cost-of-living crisis (notably a cap on grocery prices and a program of national rent control) and Singh proved quite effective in the election's two debates. Absent the Trump factor, or faced with Trudeau instead of Carney, both would undoubtedly have found a warmer reception from Canadian voters.

Much has since been made of Tory victories in former NDP strongholds like Windsor West and London Fanshawe, and the supposed loss of working-class support for the NDP to the Conservatives. But despite periodic media discourse to the contrary, the decisive factor in the NDP's collapse — evident in these seats and many others — was its considerable bleeding of support to the Liberals. To this point, data published by Ipsos Reid suggests that, while five percent of 2021 NDP voters switched to the Conservatives, nearly four times that number (19 percent) switched to the Liberals.[2] Even in seats that swung to the former, this often had major implications.

Relatedly, it is worth considering whether the NDP's 2022 Parliamentary Confidence and Supply Agreement with the Trudeau government played a role in the subsequent migration of votes to other parties, particularly the Liberals. Some eight months before the election (and before the termination of the Agreement in September 2024), David Moscrop speculated that the important policy gains contained in the deal – among them a pharmacare framework, expanded dental coverage, and anti-scab legislation – might not translate into electoral gains for its junior partner.[3] Since the election, other commentators have advanced a stronger version of this case: variously suggesting that the NDP's deal with the Liberals blurred public perceptions of its distinctiveness,[4] unhelpfully associated it with the unpopular Trudeau and diminishing the credibility of its opposition to the

government.[5] In this spirit, the University of Saskatchewan's David McGrane argues that the deal "turbocharged" the strategic voting phenomenon that has dogged the NDP in the past:

> Singh's criticism of the Liberals during the recent election campaign rang hollow given that he had held to the agreement for 2.5 years before backing out. That implicitly gave NDP supporters permission to vote Liberal. Voters' thinking may have been that the Liberals could not be that scary if the NDP had supported them.[6]

Whether one fully accepts this line of reasoning or not, the Confidence and Supply Agreement clearly did not pay the electoral dividends some NDP strategists hoped it would.

Looking Back and Looking Forward

In electoral terms, there can be no sugarcoating of the NDP's 2025 result. By any metric, whether seat count or popular vote, it represents the single worst outcome for parliamentary social democracy since the founding of the Co-Operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) in 1932. Placed in wider historical perspective, however, it may also reflect one part of a cycle that is all too familiar.

Throughout its now 93-year history, the fortunes of the CCF-NDP have perennially ebbed and flowed in quite dramatic fashion. During the first decade of its existence, the party never broke 10 percent in the popular vote, winning just 8 seats in 1940. Three years later, it led in national polls and had formed the Official Opposition in Canada's largest province after the 1943 Ontario election. With Tommy Douglas' landslide 1944 victory in Saskatchewan, it seemed only a matter of time before the CCF formed a national government. But even as events elsewhere —

notably the UK Labour Party's victory in Britain's 1945 general election — reinforced the impression of social democracy's favourable electoral prospects in Canada, the CCF's gains were minimal. After peaking in 1945 with 28 seats and 15.6 percent of the popular vote, the CCF gradually declined to the point of near collapse during the Conservative John Diefenbaker landslide of the 1958 election — which saw even heavyweight MPs like leader MJ Coldwell and Stanley Knowles personally defeated. The personal popularity of Diefenbaker on the Prairies, the ideological flexibility of the Liberals, the growing anti-socialist climate of the Cold War, and the rising importance of nationalism within the Quebec labour movement steadily combined to roll back the CCF's gains.

Since these early days, the same pattern has periodically repeated itself. By the mid-1970s, an era of growing pains and sometimes contentious internal NDP debates gave way to a new high watermark. For the first time the NDP came to power in British Columbia in 1972, and elsewhere won back elections in the prairie socialist heartlands of Manitoba and Saskatchewan. In Ontario, the NDP under Stephen Lewis returned to Official Opposition in Ontario after the 1975 election for the first time since the CCF breakthrough three decades earlier. Throughout the next 14 years during Ed Broadbent's federal leadership, provincial fortunes oscillated while the NDP crept ever closer to the long elusive goal of national power, ranking first in several polls and, for the first time in its history, leading in the province of Quebec.

In 1988, however, the strategic dilemma posed by the Mulroney's government's free trade agreement yet again thwarted the party's quest for government. Between the deal's relative popularity in Quebec and the Liberal capture of the anti-free trade vote in Ontario, the NDP found itself squeezed by all-too familiar pressures even as it achieved a record 43-seat showing. With 1988

having yielded neither triumph nor disaster, both came soon enough. On the heels of an unexpected majority victory in Ontario's 1990 provincial election, the 1993 federal campaign saw the federal NDP lose 35 of its (then record) 44 seats, and its vote share plummet from 20.38 percent to just 6.88 percent. Between the growing unpopularity of the Rae government, the emergence of the Reform Party in the West, and the increasingly conservative bent of global politics in the 1990s, its prospects suddenly looked bleak.

Viewed against this backdrop, recent history has in many ways been a retread of quite familiar ground: from the gradual rebuilding of the Alexa McDonough and Jack Layton eras spanning the late 1990s and early 2000s through the historic breakthrough of 2011, the disappointment of 2015, and the sectional decline the federal NDP has suffered ever since. This century, the electoral peaks and troughs have been notably more pronounced and come more quickly than their earlier equivalents. To wit: in the roughly ten years spanning the summer of 2015 (the start of that year's election campaign) to the present, the party has boasted both its highest ever and lowest ever seat counts in Parliament.

From this rather sobering observation, however, it may be possible to draw a somewhat more hopeful conclusion. The still elusive goal of winning federal power notwithstanding, the CCF-NDP has persisted across the decades because social democracy has continued to hold profound appeal among millions of Canadians. Four decades of neoliberalism have not fundamentally altered that reality, and the 21st century's increasingly fluid political and electoral landscape may yet redound to the NDP's benefit. With all this mind, there is no reason to think the party's current predicament will be a permanent one. The overwhelming weight of historical precede-

nt suggests the NDP will both survive and rebound from its present low of 7 seats. The question is not, fundamentally, whether the party will recover, but rather what the nature and path to that recovery will look like.

Here, both the NDP's history and its more recent experience offer important lessons. If the party hopes to rebuild on a national scale with the goal of eventually forming government, it will need to solve the strategic issues that have persistently thwarted even its most promising efforts to date. Broadly-speaking, these include (in no particular order): 1) the continued salience of the federalist/sovereigntist dynamic in Quebec and the obvious challenges this poses for a national social democratic party; 2) the continued, if sometimes provisional loyalty of many self-identified progressives and so-called "strategic voters" to the Liberals; 3) the party's periodic inability to translate its often high levels of provincial support in Ontario and the West into a commensurate number of federal seats. All of these, no doubt, merit dedicated pieces of their own and each should be approached with openness and humility.

In any case, it's clear the NDP cannot effectively recover if its renewal is treated solely as a rebranding exercise. Breaking the logjam of two-party politics will require more than just effective leadership and good messaging. Fundamentally, it calls for a creative populist strategy as well: rooted in both the engaged participation of a mass membership and the kind of bold, left-wing program that is impossible for the Liberals to appropriate or co-opt.

If nothing else, the current political landscape would seem to offer fertile ground for just such an approach. Having won a mandate on the promise of "nation-building," the Liberal Party is now in the process of implementing what is arguably the most

comprehensive austerity program Canada has seen in decades. Across the world, the neoliberal model retains only minimal democratic legitimacy and has resoundingly failed to achieve the vision of inclusive prosperity its proponents continue to tout. Having been declared moribund, meanwhile, democratic socialism has returned as a real, if still fledgling presence in global politics.

In important ways, there has not been a stronger case for breaking with the political and economic status quo since the CCF was founded in the early 1930s. Renewing and rebuilding its successor clearly demands no less than the same spirit of radical ambition.

Notes

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The Protean Politics of Social Democracy: New Democrats at a Crossroads?

Bryan Evans & Matt Fodor

This special edition of *Perspectives Journal* poses the question: "Canadian social democracy at a crossroads?" This framing suggests only presently has Canadian social democracy arrived at such a fork in the road. Yet the history of other social democratic parties in the Global North, including that of the CCF-NDP, points to other periods where other forks in the road appeared, and consequential political choices made. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, socialist and labour parties were established around the world with the goal of the socialist transformation of society. Throughout the latter 20th century, this transformative vision largely disappeared. Social democratic political parties that survived during this period no longer sought the whole transformation of society and instead pursued a pragmatic management of capitalism. The consequence for social democracy, in changing its pursuits, has become the contemporary decline in working-class support, declining leadership and representation of people from working-class backgrounds, and the weakening of once firm relationships with trade unions. (Rennwald 2020, 3). The CCF-NDP historical experience is not unique among these global historical trends for social democracy.

Social democracy, as a political movement, made peace with capitalism. However, the economic and political context of the

2020s requires social democracy to abandon this unrelenting adaptation. The post-1945 so-called "Golden Age of Capitalism" – characterized by Keynesian economic policies, an expansive welfare state, a male breadwinner/female caregiver family model, sustained economic growth, and a high employment rate – ended by the late 1970s. The neoliberal capitalist counter-revolution has now been sustained for considerably longer, and with that, a transformation in the post-1945 regime of labour-capital compromises.

The contemporary ruling-class, both within the state and among the corporate elite, have seen no need to negotiate with the working-class. Consequently, we have arrived in an era of obscene and accelerating economic inequality, aggressive militarization, a climate crisis to which there has been no meaningful response, the normalization of austerity and welfare state retrenchment, and a far-right authoritarian populism which is on the march. The fork in the road for social democracy today is, on the one hand, to pursue a deeply radical response to the contemporary poly-crises, or, on the other hand, to continue to allow a pathological neoliberal capitalism to proceed unchallenged. Contemporary social democracy is not equipped to take up the first of these options without a fundamental re-foundation ideologically, programmatically, and organizationally. Is such a deep reinvention possible by Canadian social democrats?

The contemporary federal NDP is like other social democratic parties of the Global North in terms of its programmatic and ideological trajectory. This also holds true with respect to its relationship to the working-class. This is to say, since the late 19th century, social democracy was anchored in the working-class through party membership, electoral support, and the trade unions. Since the neoliberal turn in the 1990s, this organic link

has thinned and rather seriously so. What is critical is the transformation in social democratic epistemology or put another way, how social democrats understand the state and economy to inform governance practice and public policy. Across the Global North, Social democracy has demonstrated a capacity to adapt to the variants of capitalism. This flexibility has led to a characterization of social democracy as, "not a fixed doctrine but a political movement, as protean as the capitalist economy" (Gamble & Wright 1999, 2).

As visions for political and economic transformation vanished as social democratic parties matured during the general turn to neoliberalism, their adaptation to the ebbs and flows of capitalism normalized. Governmental power, the *sine qua non* of social democracy, failed to factor in the specific structural relations the state embodied within its apparatus: the state in a capitalist society is a capitalist state, and for social democrats in government this point is often lost. The state, as constructed in the capitalist context, is not a neutral machine to be steered in whichever direction; its apparatus and function is tied to specific class interests. This had implications for the policy and practice of social democracy by the 1960s, where constraining private ownership over the means of production was de-emphasized. Socialism, as a goal, was then replaced by the objective of technocratic regulation of capitalism (Bailey 2009, 30). Obviously, there were serious forces at play such as the liberalization of trade and investment, otherwise known as "globalization," the disorganization of the working-class as precarity increased and union density declined, as well as capital's mobilization to weaken the democratic state and workers' bargaining power, but social democracy, having shed a class perspective, did not seek to resist. At this point, social democracy was no longer concerned with articulating an anti-capitalist vision and mobilizing the working-class for an alternative.

As the neoliberal project restructured capitalism and the state, social democracy had no logical response but to align and integrate with these forces after abandoning its raison d'être. The stagflation crisis of the 1970s set in motion a process which would ultimately deprive social democracy of the economic basis to continue the project of welfare state expansion. Business, under real economic stress from the mixture of high inflation, stagnant growth, and high unemployment, began to mobilize as growth in productivity rates slowed from an annualized global aggregate of 6.4 percent in the late 1960s to 3.4 percent for 1973-79. Meanwhile, as militant trade unions were able to win more at the bargaining table, business profit rates that peaked in 1968, then began to decline (Glyn, Hughes, Lipietz, and Singh 1990, 76 and 83). The crisis of profitability signalled a general crisis of capitalism and of a paradigm shift, marking the conclusion of the post-1945 Golden Age of capitalism's collusion with social democracy. As a result of new and serious constraints on the pursuit of socialist policies when in office, including the growing power of finance capital, by the end of the 1980s social democrats that were elected to power began to govern following the neoliberal playbook (Albo 2009, 119).

As neoliberalism became hegemonic through the 1980s, social democracy again transformed. Social democratic parties turned to a model of progressive competitiveness based on supply-side policies focused on training and skills formation, while simultaneously turning to public sector austerity (Merkel, Petring, Henkes, and Egle 2008, 6 and 25). The power of government would not be deployed to redistribute resources, as previously designed under social democratic auspices, but rather to enable individual workers to compete in an increasingly polarized and precarious labour market. By the mid-1990s, social democracy had come to accept many of the tenets of neoliberalism (Crouch 2011, 162).

The 2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC) should have been an opportunity for social democracy to realize its mistakes and reconnect with its wavering working-class and trade unions constituents. Instead, governing social democrats across the West turned to austerity. Public sector pay cuts and freezes, privatization of public assets, public pension cuts, sundry cuts to a range of social benefits, and regressive increases to the value added tax, constituted the program of social democracy in response to neoliberal capitalism's existential crisis. One indicator of social democracy's failure to respond to the crisis can be demonstrated by the 2009 "Amsterdam Process" – a series of discussions and publications regarding the ideological renewal of European social democracy, undertaken by social democratically aligned think tanks, the Policy Network (UK) and Wiardi Beckman Stichting, linked to the centre-left Dutch Labour Party. This reflection identified the problem where the, "financial crisis of 2008 … exposed an ideological vacuum in social democratic thinking" (Policy Network, The Amsterdam Process, n.d.). The conclusion, however, was not a refoundation of social democracy, but a confirmation of its existing *modus operandi*. Ultimately, the Amsterdam Process settled on accepting the need for further welfare state restructuring, increasing the retirement age, and the centrality of businesses interests in social democratic practice (Cramme, Diamond, Liddle, McTernan, Becker, and Cuperus 2012, 17-25). What social democrats post-GFC offered was somewhat greater enthusiasm of their embrace of neoliberal capitalism.

What the Amsterdam Process illustrated here was indicative of the ideas and position of 21st century social democracy generally. It has arrived at a point where it is, even as capitalism presents its weaknesses, incapable of rising to the real challenges of the time. Given this impasse, what is to be done about contemporary social democracy? Looking to the Canadian context, a couple of key que-

stions can guide this re-imagining: how can the federal NDP rebuild to become a vehicle for working-class politics and broader social transformation? What should the role of the party be in class formation; a process which transforms a collection of individuals, sharing similar economic contexts into a distinct agent with the capacity to resist and challenge the prevailing political and economic order, and in rekindling democratic socialism?

Obviously, Canada's political party system differs from most countries in Western Europe and the United States. While iterations of a Canadian social democratic party faced different historical developmental trajectories than European parties, such as later development in the early 20th century compared to the 19th century genesis of socialist parties across the Atlantic, it does substantially exist in a North American context where none exist in the US. Additionally, the 2008 GFC was not as acutely catastrophic in Canada, as elsewhere in the European Union and US. Yet nearly a half-century of economic restructuring has dramatically transformed the structure of today's economy and, with it, the class structure of Canadian society. For the NDP to become a vehicle for working-class electoral politics and broader social transformation, it would require a fundamental programmatic, organizational, and, indeed, cultural transformation away from what currently exits. Doing so would entail a process of broad democratic engagement with the party's membership, trade unions, and social movements outside of electoral politics. Operationally, this would include the drafting and circulating of discussion papers on urgent issues such as climate, economic inequality, decommodification of housing, taxation, trade and investment, and Canada's participation in NATO, to name a few. As the party is structured around the Electoral District Associations at the grassroots-level, they would be responsible for organizing constituency discussions of these

documents. Concluding with collective positions on these issues, EDAs would go forward to party central to collate and prepare the ground for a refoundation conference.

As part of this process, the work of class formation must become a key component in the political repertoire of the party practice. Class formation entails a range of processes through which workers build a shared identity and awareness of political and economic interests based on their location within social and economic structures. Through these processes, individuals and the class more broadly come to recognize what they have in common and create strategies and means to act collectively. The work of class formation includes education programs; engagement in popular struggles such as strikes and political mobilizations; cultural programs and events where the images and stories of the working-class are foregrounded; and mutual aid programs such as food co-ops and legal support for tenants and non-unionized workers. Ultimately, through such experiences, workers come to know which side they are on and, importantly, who is there with them. In this regard, class formation is a continuous process, and not a fixed point where the work stops upon arrival when it reaches a state of coherence and obtains power.

For the NDP to take up the work of class formation, it would need to dramatically re-imagine its functions beyond electoralism, which would require a transformation of its present organizational structure. EDAs would be supplement by party 'clubs' located in workplaces, neighbourhoods, schools, and other institutions in civil society. To be a member of such a party would entail more than frequent calls to 'chip in' with monetary contributions, without substantial engagement in its democratic functions. Instead, members would be called upon to actively participate in building the life of the party and engage with the

work of class formation through study circles, campaigns, cultural events, and elections. With respect to elections and their contribution to class formation, electoral work would be framed as an opportunity for popular education on crucial issues, offering a critique of capitalism and the tremendous inequalities it necessarily creates, but also popular education on an alternative vision for society. This also means developing a clear vision of where the NDP wants to go, and how to get there. If such a radical, explicitly anti-neoliberal – if not anti-capitalist – refoundation of social democracy were undertaken, it would not go unchallenged by capital. There have also been important changes in the class structure which demand consideration. This social transformation that has taken place under neoliberalism is particularly important to address with respect to undertaking the groundwork of class formation, as well as cross-class alliance building.

First and foremost, capital would respond aggressively as history has repeatedly demonstrated. In France, the Union of the Left government led by President Francois Mitterrand in the early 1980s implemented a program that included, among other actions, the nationalization of the banking industry and dramatic increases in the minimum wage. The response from capital was investment flight and rising unemployment. Soon after, Mitterrand's government would abandon the stated objective of a 'rupture with capitalism' to reconcile with it. As in the 1970s, a transformative social democracy today would induce capital to deploy think tanks and the highly concentrated corporate media to shape the narrative and redefine the problem. To underestimate business mobilization would be fatal to a party that is programmatically committed to re-balancing class power in favour of a broadly defined working-class. Countering such an inevitable response from business interests would require a party membership which fully understands the stakes and the fi-

eld, and is networked into trade unions, schools, and neighbourhoods to mobilize people, ideas, and political analysis. This means more than a passive 'chip in' membership – the party must help members must study power relations and help them train for active participation in the full range of political venues.

Beyond business, the task of mobilizing around a radical program requires confronting deep changes in the class structure. Structural weaknesses that have developed under the weight and tenure of neoliberalism include the decline in private sector trade union density; the commensurate decline in the number of industrial workers; the growth in the number of service workers which are typically, in the private sector, non-union; and the expansion of a professional-managerial class in the broader public sector, whose material interests may coincide with a radical, anti-neoliberal program. In Canada, private sector union density has declined from 32.2 percent in 1970 to slightly above 15 percent today (Doorey and Stanford 2023). The decline in union density is, at least in part, responsible for stagnant real median wages for Canadian workers which have hardly grown since 1970s and have not kept up with inflation (Breznitz 2024). Overall, economic inequality has been accelerating. In 1970, the bottom 50 percent income of Canadians incomes held 22.59 percent of all income. By 2023, the bottom 50 percent's share declined to 17.31 percent. In contrast, the top 1 percent of Canadians held 6.62 percent of all income, and by 2023 this had grown to 11.64 percent (World Inequality Database). These material conditions present an opportunity for a radical Left politics. As noted earlier, social democratic parties in government have largely alienated their working-class constituency. The political rebuilding here will take more than a call to "vote for us," and requires building a party that has a presence in elected legislatures, as well as civil society, engaging in more than electioneering.

The broad developments within and around social democracy point to the necessity of a refoundation. The disastrous result of the 2025 federal election for the NDP presents an opportunity for a fundamental re-think. It is the time to rediscover the radical imagination that social democracy was founded on and begin the work of building a truly independent socialist party that meets the challenges of growing economic inequality, climate change, integration with the American economy and so much more. The democratization of the party structures and processes create the space for a potential rethink of strategy and public policy based upon democratic planning and public ownership. The well-worn and failed formulas of the neoliberal era must be abandoned if there is to be renewal.

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Narrativizing Confidence and Supply:

NDP Political Communications during the Supply and Confidence Agreement

Dónal Gill & Ryan Mohtajolfazl

The 2022 Parliamentary Supply-and-Confidence Agreement (SACA) between Justin Trudeau's Liberal minority government and the New Democratic Party (NDP) under the leadership of Jagmeet Singh was a watershed moment for Canada's social democratic party. The party entered the agreement with two strategic goals: (1) to implement legislation aligned with its ideological agenda, and (2) to present itself as a "legible alternative" (Massé & Beland 2024, 499) to the governing Liberals on the progressive side of Canadian politics. However, the political communications deployed by Singh during the SACA was marked by incoherence, undermining the NDP's legibility as a viable left-wing governing option. The 2025 federal election results confirm the agreement's electoral failure: the NDP won only 7 seats with 6.3 percent of the vote.

Even before the election itself, the NDP remained stagnant in polling for the duration of the agreement, hovering consistently between 17 percent and 20 percent of intended voter support. The SACA never provided a boost in support for the party. Our analysis of the NDP's political communications during the SACA suggests that its messaging was overly negative and confused, emphasizing conflict over co-operation with the Liberal government. While the agreement successfully achieved the passage of legislation broadly aligned with social democratic val-

ues, it also had the potential to reframe parliament—challenging "the Canadian obsession with single-party government" (Godbout & Cochrane 2022, 22). The SACA ultimately failed to achieve this broader goal and must assume some of the blame for the federal party's worst ever performance during the 2025 election.

Singh's communications were consistently critical of the very government the NDP was supporting, creating a contradiction: if the Liberals and Trudeau were as problematic as portrayed, why maintain the agreement? This tension undermined the NDP's message coherence and strategic positioning. It is certainly true that a technocratic matter of parliamentary procedure like the SACA would inherently require nuanced messaging, because of the junior supply partner's dual role in opposition and collaboration (Kluver & Spoon 2020). However, the NDP's emphasis on conflict and negativity exacerbated the contradictions of its role, deepening the incoherence of its public narrative.

Research Agenda and Theoretical Framework

Political scientists have identified several key challenges faced by junior parties in parliamentary partnerships, both formal in the form of coalition governments, and informal like the Canadian parliamentary SACA, that cause penalties for the smaller party at the next election following participation in such an agreement (Thurk and Kluver 2024). These challenges primarily fall in the domain of communications. As such, we have analysed the social media posts of Singh from March 2022 to September 2024 to make sense of how the NDP navigated these challenges.

Research on "contract parliamentarianism" (the broader category of parliamentary agreement under which the SACA falls) has shown that the "supply" party in such an agreement faces unique communications challenges. These include successfully crafting messaging with regards to the relationship between the partners in the agreement, and landing the narrative that legislation connected to the agreement was passed only because of their input and insistence (IFG 2017).

The specific challenge for the NDP in this agreement was to accumulate credit-claiming capital to be used in the next electoral campaign (Massé and Beland 2024, 516), while maintaining differentiation from the governing Liberal minority government. These competing imperatives formed the nucleus of the strategic logic underpinning the communications deployed by the NDP between March 2022 and September 2024.

This research is further framed by three contexts which have defined the recent history of the NDP:

(1) Following LaFrance and McKenna, we frame the NDP as existing in a general context of a crisis of social democracy, shaped by class dealignment, mixed legacies of leftist parties pursuing Third Way ideologies and, as the historical connection to activist, working-class voters dissolves, parties increasingly adopt the "tools of other parties – political marketing, opinion polls, or focus groups" (Lafrance and McKenna 2024, 139).

(2) The NDP pursued a process of professionalization and modernization, beginning in the 1980s and fully implemented by the Jack Layton era of the 2000s, establishing the party's political marketing machine deployed by a cohort of professional political practitioners, replacing its previous programmatic appeal to the material

interests of the working-class (McGrane 2019; Fodor 2022). This shift from doctrinaire ideological commitments toward a focus on technocratic and data-driven political marketing also occurred in ostensibly social democratic parties around the world over the same period (Mudge 2018; Schenk 2024).

(3) Canadian politics has, since the latter 20th century, settled into a condition of permanent campaigning. This means that electioneering continues between elections and the strategies and tactics of the campaign setting also reign over governing periods for both those in opposition and office (Marland, Giasson & Lennox Esselment 2017). Political parties reinforce and perpetuate this political communications environment both to further their ongoing agendas and, most importantly, to jockey for position in the public consciousness ahead of the next dropping of the writ. One major accelerant of this phenomenon is the frequency of minority governments in Canada, with only two out of the eight governments formed since 2004 being majorities. The inherent instability of minority governments, typically lasting on average between 18 and 24 months, incentivizes parties to maintain an election footing, especially in the realm of political communications.

The LPC-NDP Agreement: *Delivering for Canadians Now*

In January 2022, negotiations for a supply-and-confidence agreement between the Liberals and NDP took place in the fallout of the 2021 federal election stalemate, and amid the Convoy occu-

pation of Ottawa that induced a leadership change among the Official Opposition Conservative Party. Strategically, the main Liberal objective in entertaining such an agreement was the stability it afforded the government. For the NDP, it sought to build a legislative record ahead of the next election in which the party would optimistically present itself as the main progressive option for government (Massé & Beland 2024, 499).

The SACA was formally announced by both parties and the PMO in a document entitled Delivering for Canadians Now on March 22nd, 2022. The agreement contained 7 major commitments:

1. Building a better healthcare system
2. Making life more affordable for Canadians
3. Tackling the climate crisis and creating good paying jobs
4. Creating a better deal for workers
5. Continuing to move forward on truth and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples
6. Delivering a fairer tax system for the middle class
7. Strengthening our democracy

The Office of the Prime Minister's announcement included language framing the agreement as a conscientious response to perceived excesses of partisanship in recent Parliaments (PMO 2022). It also, however, stressed the continued independence and separate identities of the two parties. The second paragraph of the announcement indicated the dilution of partisanship between the two parties that underlay the agreement: "*Politics is supposed to be adversarial*, but no one benefits when increasing polarization and parliamentary dysfunction stand in the way of delivering these results for Canadians" (PMO 2022) [emphasis added]. It goes on to say that "the Liberal Party of Canada and Canada's New Democrats have agreed to *improve the way we appro-*

ach politics over the next three years for the benefit of Canadians. Both parties hope that by approaching this Parliament more collaboratively, we will be able to deliver on these shared policy objectives before the next general election" (PMO 2022) [emphasis added]. Here, we see the desire to eschew excessive partisanship and the discursive framing of the SACA, to move beyond the polarization and dysfunction that emerges in a Parliament directed by default adversarial attitudes.

Both parties were presented in the agreement as seeking to increase co-operation as the key to improving the function of federal politics until the next scheduled federal election, were the agreement to be maintained. These sections of the announcement clearly indicated positive sentiments, establishing collaboration as the solution to the recurring challenge of perceived parliamentary dysfunction that impedes legislative progress on policy priorities shared by the two parties.

There are also elements within the announcement that lay out the boundaries of the SACA, wherein the NDP remained formally outside of the executive and dismissed the formation of a coalition government with the Liberals. It was made clear that "the agreement is not about compromising either party's core beliefs or denying their differences," and that "the NDP may oppose" elements of the government's agenda outside of legislation formally tethered to the agreement and matters of confidence. The communications strategy of the NDP during the SACA sought to strike a balance between these competing messages; "improving the way we approach politics" through behaving more "collaboratively," while also maintaining the "adversarial" nature of politics (as it is "supposed" to be), never "compromising" the party's "core beliefs" or hiding their policy and ideological differences with the Trudeau Liberals.

In analysing the NDP leader's posts on social media related to the SACA, we argue that an appropriate balance between these two strategic communications imperatives, co-operation and conflict, was not found. Overall, the heavy emphasis on negative sentiment and conflict failed to present the SACA as a mechanism to undo polarization and parliamentary dysfunction. The frequent criticism of the governing Liberal Party–justified or otherwise–particularly in communications directly lauding legislation linked to the agreement, ultimately rendered incoherent the NDP's decision to supply the necessary votes to maintain the confidence of the House.

Methodology

The work of Thurk & Kluver (2024) and Kluver & Spoon (2020) has highlighted the electoral risks for "junior" or "supply" partners entering contract parliamentary arrangements. Deft political communications are required to avoid these pitfalls.

As a junior partner, the NDP had to navigate a weaker communications delivery mechanism compared to the bully pulpit of government available to the Liberals (Thurk & Kluver 2024). It also had to maintain ideological and partisan differentiation with their senior partner in an era of permanent campaigning (Marland, Giasson & Lennox Esselment 2017), despite their entanglement in a formal parliamentary arrangement. Lastly it was imperative to "accumulate credit-claiming capital" (Massé & Beland 2024, 499) for legislation passed because of the agreement. Strategically, this generates two primary communication lanes for the junior partner in a supply-and-confidence-agreement, especially vis-à-vis their senior partner in government: (i) the party can frame their work in Parliament through the lens of co-operation and (ii) use a frame of conflict and obstruction.

The NDP leader's social media posts reviewed have been categorized with a simple quantitative sentiment analysis. This is a process of determining the emotional tone of a text, categorizing it as positive, negative or neutral. The codebook below presents the indicators associated with a generally negative (conflict) or positive (co-operation) sentiment in communications relating to the SACA itself, or legislation related to the formal agreement. The sentiment analysis has been coded as such to map onto the macro-strategic communication available to the NDP during the period of the SACA. Positive posts align with a broad message of parliamentary co-operation and productivity, whereas posts coded as negative emphasise conflict, dysfunction, or obstruction.

We analysed selected social media output of NDP leader Singh for the duration of the agreement, from March 22nd, 2022 when the agreement was announced to September 4th, 2024 when the NDP released a video signalling that Jagmeet Singh had "ripped up the Supply and Confidence Agreement." 362 posts from Instagram and 454 from Twitter/X related to the 7 commitments outlined in *Delivering for Canadians Now* and the SACA itself more generally were analysed. Given the centrality of the leader to the NDP's communications strategy, especially under Singh's leadership, although the process had begun in the Layton era (Fodor 2022), we chose to quantitatively analyze the social media output of Singh alone. When reviewing political communications from the party's social media channels, there was a very high level of direct duplication of materials from Singh's account, rendering deeper analysis of the former largely redundant. TikTok posts were excluded from this analysis, despite Singh being the most influential leader on the platform with over 878,000 followers, because the account was deactivated part way through the SACA period in February 2023 in response to geopolitical security concerns raised by government officials.

Table 1 - Codebook

Variable	Code	Indicators
Conflict		
negative	Corporate Influence	working for CEOs, rich donors, corporate greed, and corporate interests
negative	Blame and Accusation	blocked and voted against
negative	Systemic Failure/Rigging	rigged system
negative	Unfulfilled Promises/Delays	delayed and failed to deliver
negative	Economic Suffering/Crisis Language	can't afford, crisis, survive, cannot live without, and attacking you and your family every time you check out at the grocery store
negative	Worker Harm/Anti-Union Sentiment	scabs and replacement workers
Co-operation		
positive	Policy Victory	We delivered, became law, passed in Parliament, historic day, and possible because of YOU
positive	Empowerment and Solidarity	fight for your family's needs and stand with workers
positive	Hope and Vision	make life better for workers, for families, for you, and fighting for better days ahead for you
positive	Support for Workers	stand with workers and fair wages

Analysis

Singh's Instagram posts between March 2022 and September 2024 display a strong majority of negative sentiment when communicating around the SACA and legislation attached to it. Only 28 percent of posts maintain positive sentiments, highlighting co-operation through the lens of wins regarding passing laws, constructive policies, or giving people hope. 72 percent of posts contained a broadly negative sentiment that emphasized conflict, deploying rhetoric that blames or vilifies other parties, or stresses intractable problems like high rent and rich companies making big profits. This indicates that Singh's Instagram posts during the SACA, assessed through simple sentiment analysis, overwhelmingly framed the parliamentary agreement though a lens of negative discourse that stressed conflict and persistent challenges, rather than a co-operative discourse characterised by positive sentiments of achievement, hope, and empowerment.

Chart 1 – @jagmeetsingh Instagram post sentiments, March 2022 to September 2024

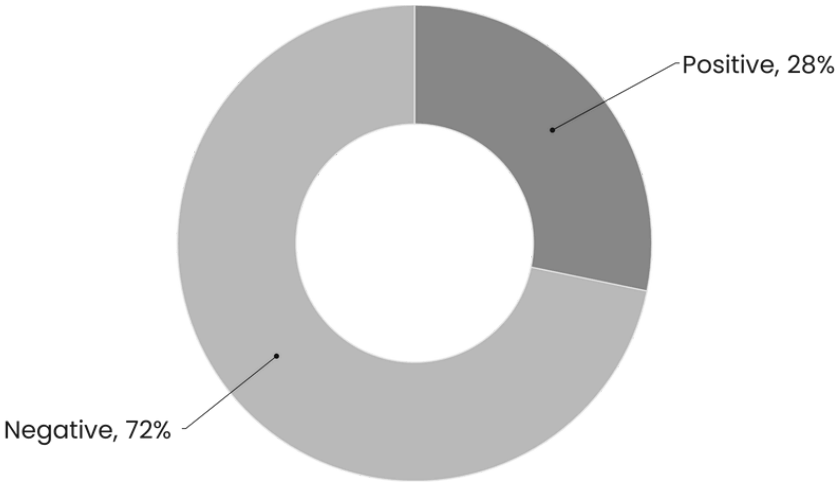
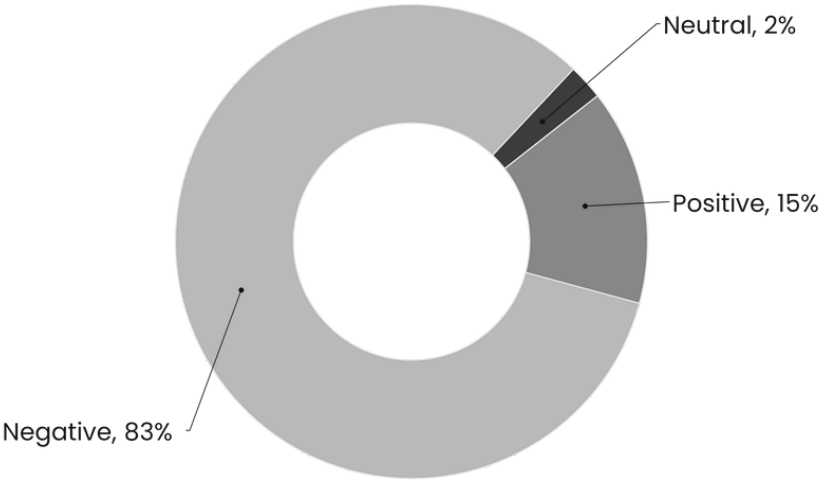


Chart 2 – @theJagmeetSingh Twitter/X post sentiments, March 2022 to September 2024



On Twitter/X, the sentiment analysis of Singh's posts indicates an even higher level of posts coded as negative. 83 percent of the tweets are negative, with many focused on parliamentary and policy conflict with the Liberal and Conservative parties. Only 15 percent of the posts contain a generally positive sentiment, while 2 percent of posts are neutral in the sentiment conveyed. Twitter/X is thus the platform where Singh pushed a more negative strain of messaging, focused on differentiating the NDP from its counterparts in Parliament. This difference in content sentiment between Instagram and Twitter/X demonstrates, to some extent, the medium determining aspects of the message. Singh's content on Instagram featured a mix of negative sentiment highlighting conflict with messages that contained positive sentiments of hope, solidarity, and empowerment. Twitter/X, on the other hand, was mostly used to hammer home a generally negative sentiment discourse of parliamentary conflict shaped by intractable ideological and policy differences

between the NDP, the Liberals, the Conservatives, presented as obstacles to the NDP's progressive vision.

This strong discursive emphasis on conflict rather than co-operation could therefore be considered a strategic miscalculation that confused and, ultimately, undermined the party's ability to capitalize on the gains won by the agreement. Rather than leveraging the SACA to frame the NDP as an effective collaborator in Parliament responsible for tangible progressive legislative wins, Singh's messaging confused by routinely positioning the party in direct opposition to the Liberal government. This strategy, while arguably necessary to maintain ideological differentiation and protect the NDP's social democratic base, failed to address the broader communication challenges faced by junior partners in contract parliamentary agreements as discussed above. Consequently, the opportunity to reframe Parliament as a constructive and co-operative institution was lost, potentially casting voters toward the anti-system politics of the right-wing populist message being delivered with consistency and vigour by the Conservative Party's leader, Pierre Poilievre.

It is notable that this discourse of conflict is conveyed in a sampling of 208 Twitter and 187 Instagram posts that emphasize conflict rather than co-operation specifically with the Liberal Party and/or Justin Trudeau, despite Singh and the NDP supporting the minority government. Again, it was a somewhat reasonable approach for some communications to appear oppositional given the NDP's need for credit-taking of legislation achieved under the SACA, but negative sentiments made up the overwhelming majority of posts on all analyzed platforms. This can be considered far too excessive for the purposes of credit-taking, and has evidently led to incoherence in the public perception of the NDP's involvement in the SACA.

For example, on nine occasions during the mid-way point of the SACA in Fall 2023, Singh tweeted some version of the message: "We can't trust those who caused the problem to fix it." Many of these messages explicitly and deliberately cast the Liberal Party with the Conservative Party as those who "caused the problem" and therefore "can't be trusted to fix it." Examples of constructive discourse that highlight co-operation over conflict include Singh's posts on April 9th, 2022, in which he framed legislative progress on dentalcare and pharmacare by "using our power to hold the Liberals accountable." Messaging more in line with this kind of tough-but-collaborative relationship between the parties d better communicate the value of the political decision to enter the SACA than the unilateral criticism of its parliamentary partner.

This contrasts with consistent messaging from the Summer and Fall of 2023, which saw frequently negative posts, accusing Trudeau and the Liberals of lying, teaming up with the Conservatives, and a heavy emphasis on "force" or "forcing" the Liberals toward any legislation connected to the SACA. An alternative form of this latter message, which is almost certainly unavoidable given the still partisan dynamic between the two parties, was used on June 13th, 2023, when Singh tweeted that the NDP were "*pushing* (emphasis added) the Liberals to act immediately and deliver pharmacare."

By continuously framing legislation secured through the SACA within a narrative of dysfunction, opposition, and obstruction, the NDP struggled to present itself as a constructive force in Parliament. Despite having played a direct role in key policy achievements, such as dental care and pharmacare legislation, its messaging appears to have undercut its ability to claim credit effectively. This discordant approach meant that the benefits of

the agreement were overshadowed by persistent criticisms of the Trudeau government, making the NDP's participation seem contradictory to its own rhetoric. The results of the 45th federal election demonstrated the consequences of this misstep. The NDP's significant electoral losses reflect the failure to translate legislative collaboration into a positive and electorally advantageous narrative. In emphasizing conflict and embedding a narrative in which parliamentary co-operation is pursued with reluctance and difficulty, the party lost credibility as a legible alternative.

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The Changing Class Basis of Canadian and Social Democratic Futures

Matthew Polacko, Peter Graefe
& Simon Kiss

Introduction

The international conversation about social democracy is quite focused on electoral sociology: What blocks of voters support social democratic parties? Can parties craft new electoral coalitions between the working-class, public-sector workers and even professionals? Do these coalitions undermine the parties' commitment to economic redistribution by favouring more middle-class issues?

The conversation about social democracy in Canada has had much less to say about which voting blocs or electoral coalitions the NDP is pursuing or ought to pursue. After the near complete desertion of its electorate in the 2025 election, it is crucial to ask what coalition of supporters the federal NDP has been able to attract over the past couple of decades, what challengers it faces in retaining those supporters, and what tensions exist within that coalition. We pay particular attention to working class voters. They have historically been an important voting bloc for the NDP. The supposed desertion of the working class from the NDP to the Conservatives has also been an effective trope for pol-

itical opponents making the case for the NDP's loss of relevance.

The discussion below draws on a number of recent analyses we have conducted on the relationship of socio-economic class to voting behaviour in Canada over the past half century, relying on the Canadian Election Study. We emphasize that the NDP has some cards to play to reconnect with working-class voters, especially around redistribution and economic populism.

Changing Class Bases

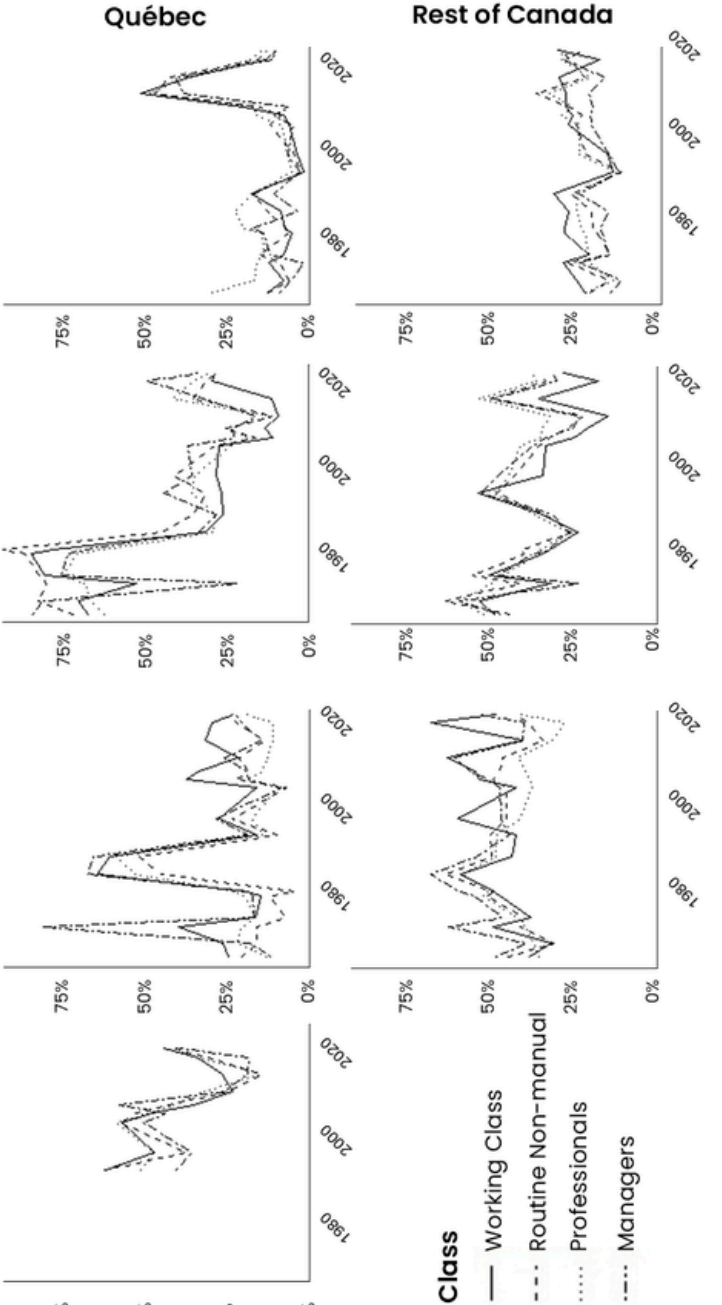
Social democracy emerged out of labour movements, and where it has been most successful, it has relied on working-class electoral mobilization. In these countries, the social democratic party could rely on winning a large plurality of the votes of workers, and indeed the largest share of its votes would come from the working-class (Rennwald 2020).

We measure the working class based on occupation. Up to the 2006 election, we used the occupational categories provided by the Canadian Election Study. After 2006, we used Statistics Canada's National Occupation Classification NOC) system which distinguishes skill levels and skill types for occupations. The working class are defined as workers in skills levels B, C, and D and occupational categories 7, 8, and 9. This combines skilled and unskilled working-class occupations such as boilermakers, ironworkers, delivery and courier drivers, and construction workers.[1]

Chart 1 shows that none of this applied in Canada given the long-run weakness of the NDP and its inability to disrupt the dominance of the two major parties. The NDP has never won the plurality of working-class votes – it is the Conservative party that has done so in every election over the past half century.[2] All the

recent talk about the Conservative party drawing working-class votes ignores that they have long done well with this electorate, although they may be further strengthening their hold.[3] Cultural issues have long attracted the working class to the Conservatives, which has accelerated since the 2004 merger on the right (Polacko, Kiss, and Graefe 2022). Koop and Farney (2025) show that recent Conservative politicians have also been able to attain greater support among the working-class by employing symbolism (through framing emphasizing their own working-class roots or connections), populism, and economic nationalism.

Chart 1 - Party vote share by class for Quebec and ROC, 1965-2021



The NDP has nevertheless historically done better with the working-class than with other classes, winning a higher percentage of their votes than the votes of routine non-manual workers, professionals or managers. This strength persisted at least until 2015, even after the Liberal party lost much of their working-class support in the 1990s. Nevertheless, the difference between working-class support and that of professionals and routine non-manual workers is not huge, such that the NDP's voting base can be seen as having a multiclass character.

To the extent that the NDP's electorate has had a working-class skew, this has reflected a capacity to win a slightly larger share of the votes of unionized members than among the electorate as a whole. Daniel Westlake, Larry Savage and Jonah Butovsky (2025) capture the characteristics of this support. While the NDP at its origins had close ties to the large private sector industrial unions in the Canadian Labour Congress, it currently draws its stronger union vote from public sector union members. Westlake et al. find important gender and regional variations. Women union members differentiate themselves from union men in weaker support for the Conservatives and stronger support for the NDP. They distinguish themselves from non-union women in that their "gender gap" (i.e. their tendency to vote disproportionately for non-Conservative parties) shows as a strong vote for the NDP, rather than a stronger vote shared between the Liberals and the NDP. Regionally, the non-Conservative union vote is more strongly NDP in Western Canada, while it is split between the Liberals and the NDP in Ontario.

These findings present strategic challenges for the NDP. While social democratic parties have historically relied on the votes of the working-class, the NDP has had to sustain a multiclass base. As the size of the working-class is shrinking (from about 25% of the labour force to 20% over the past quarter century), the party is

pushed to find support elsewhere. Many social democratic parties have attempted to add public sector workers and professionals to their electoral coalition, recognizing shared interests between pro-redistribution working-class voters, professionals reliant on strong public services (health and education) for their well-being, and public sector workers for whom an activist state means job security. In other work, we observe the emergence of a small sector cleavage in Canada, where public sector workers come to vote for the NDP at slightly higher rates than the overall population (Polacko, Graefe and Kiss 2025). However, sustaining such a coalition requires political skill as it works across flashpoints, such as private-sector workers seeing public sector workers as living off their taxes and slowing wealth generation (see Westlake, Savage and Butovsky 2025). It is also complicated by the presence of the Liberal party which has also recently prioritized attracting public sectors workers and professionals into its voting base.

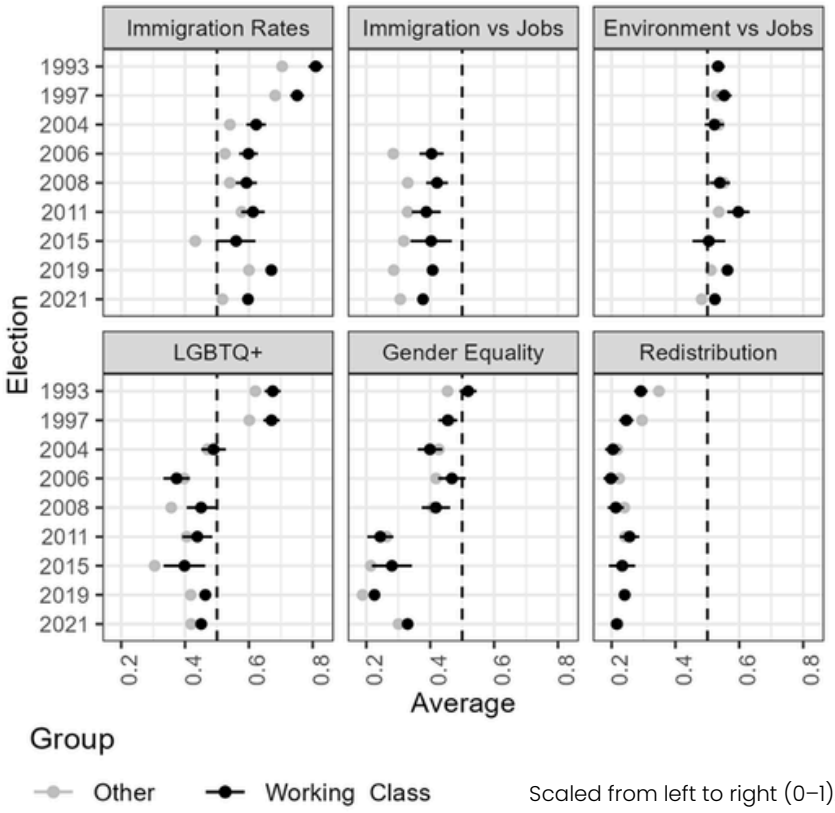
What Moves Working-Class Voters

Political Attitudes: Economic and Cultural Issues

To better understand coalitional possibilities, it is useful to consider the policy preferences of working-class voters compared to the broader electorate, as well as what pushes working-class voters to choose their preferred party. In terms of attitudinal preferences, Chart 2 compares the respective left-right positioning of working-class and non-working-class respondents on six key measures found in the literature on class realignment, which focus on immigration, the environment, moral traditionalism, and redistribution.[4] Overall, we note a leftward shift from 1993 to 2021 which is quite pronounced on the cultural issues of immigration, gender equality, and LGTBQ+ righ-

ts, and more muted in the areas of redistribution, jobs vs. immigration, and jobs vs. environment. The working-class has nevertheless remained slightly to the right of the general population in the areas of the environment, gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights. However, we see large differences between the working-class and general population for our two immigration items, which pertain to immigration rates and perceived trade-offs between immigration and jobs. This difference of roughly 10 percentage points has largely held up over time.

Chart 2 - Mean attitudinal preferences over time for working-class versus rest of population



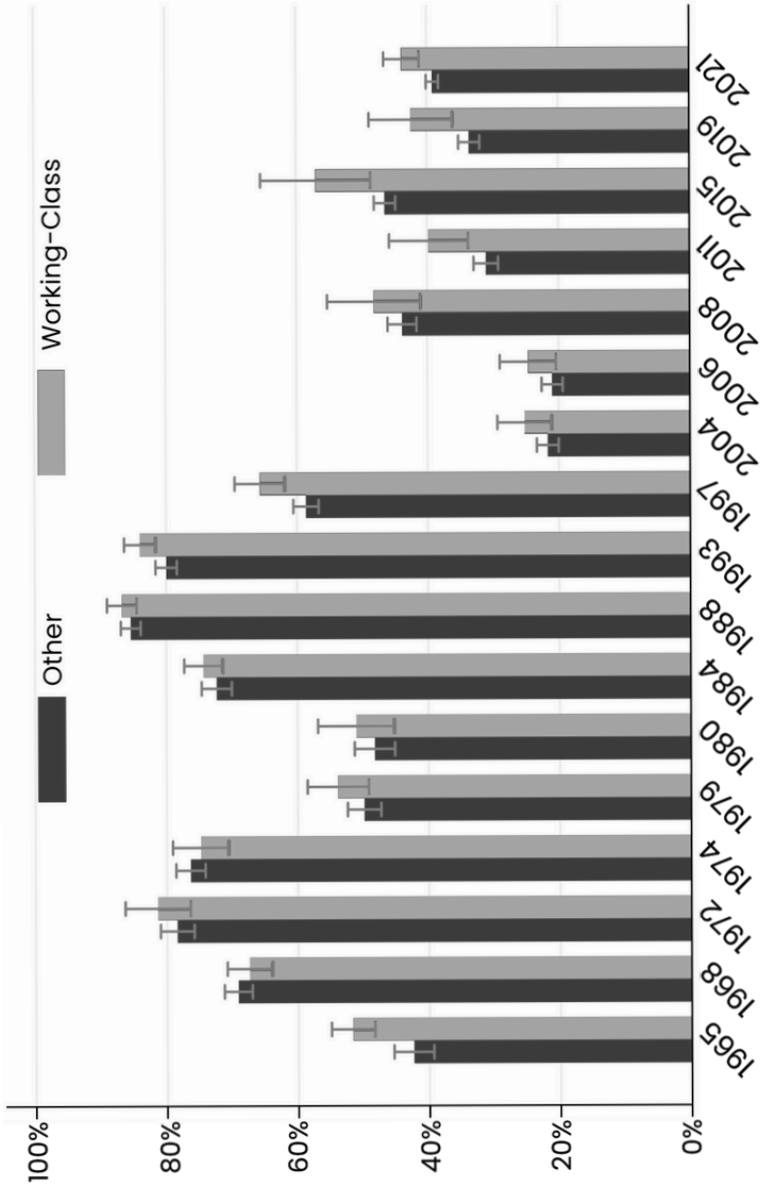
Scaled from left to right (0–1).

As for the economy, in the 1990s, the working-class was somewhat to the right of the general population on redistribution, but has since moved leftward to a greater extent, and there is little discernible difference between the working-class and general population on the issue. This is in contrast to each of the cultural issues, which show that the working-class is to the right of the general population on all five issues.

We can also measure economic preferences by examining which issue people believe is the most important problem that needs addressing in each election. For our purposes, we code the number of respondents who chose an economic issue (such as jobs, taxes, housing, inflation, free trade, etc.) as the most important problem. Chart 3 shows that this has declined since the twentieth century but still amounts to roughly 40% of respondents. This is not surprising, given the post-material shift in societal values from prioritizing basic material and physical security to emphasizing post-material needs such as autonomy, identity and self-expression (Inglehart 1977, 1990). However, when we compare the working-class with the general population, we find that the working-class has always been more concerned about the economy, but the gap has increased substantially since the 2011 Great Financial Crisis. This is not entirely surprising as the crisis disproportionately impacted the working class in the ensuing years via job losses, stagnant wages, and the erosion of household wealth (Mowad 2023). Prior to 2011, the only elections where there is a statistically significant difference between the working-class and general population was in 1965 and 1997. Yet, in the four elections taking place in the decade between 2011 and 2021, we see a statistically significant difference in each one and an average difference of roughly 8.5 percentage points. So, as the working-class has moved slightly leftward on redistribution over time, they have also become significantly more likely to see the

economy as the most important problem to be addressed by politicians.

Chart 3 – Mean % on economy as the most important problem for working-class versus rest of population, 1965–2021



Political attitudes: Political Efficacy and Support for Democracy

Canada has been plagued by a growing cost-of-living crisis and rising inequality (Osberg 2024). This has led to economic anxiety accompanied by decreasing support for democracy (Environics Institute 2024) and satisfaction with democracy (Wike and Fetterolf 2024). Political institutions are increasingly being deemed to be unresponsive to meeting the needs of many ordinary citizens. For example, a recent Angus Reid survey found that 30 per cent of English-speaking Canadians have no trust in democracy, and nearly 50 per cent do not feel represented by government, with lower-status individuals and individuals dissatisfied with the economy significantly more likely to hold both views (Stockemer and Gaspard 2025). Recent research also shows that the working-class in Canada votes at significantly lower rates than all other classes and that this participatory gap has increased substantially over time (Polacko 2025). A key culprit has been the reduced relative economic saliency offered by political parties over time: Canada's party system has not been providing the requisite saliency to economic issues needed to keep lower-status individuals political engaged. It is unsurprising that much of the working-class is checking out of politics, especially when there is mounting cross-national evidence that legislators produce substantially biased outcomes in favour of higher status individuals (Lupu and Warner 2022).

We can measure the political efficacy by social status by using two questions from the 2019 and 2021 CES. The question "people like me have no say in what the government does," taps into internal political efficacy via feelings of being represented, while the question "politicians only care about the rich and powerful," taps into external political efficacy via beliefs in who people think

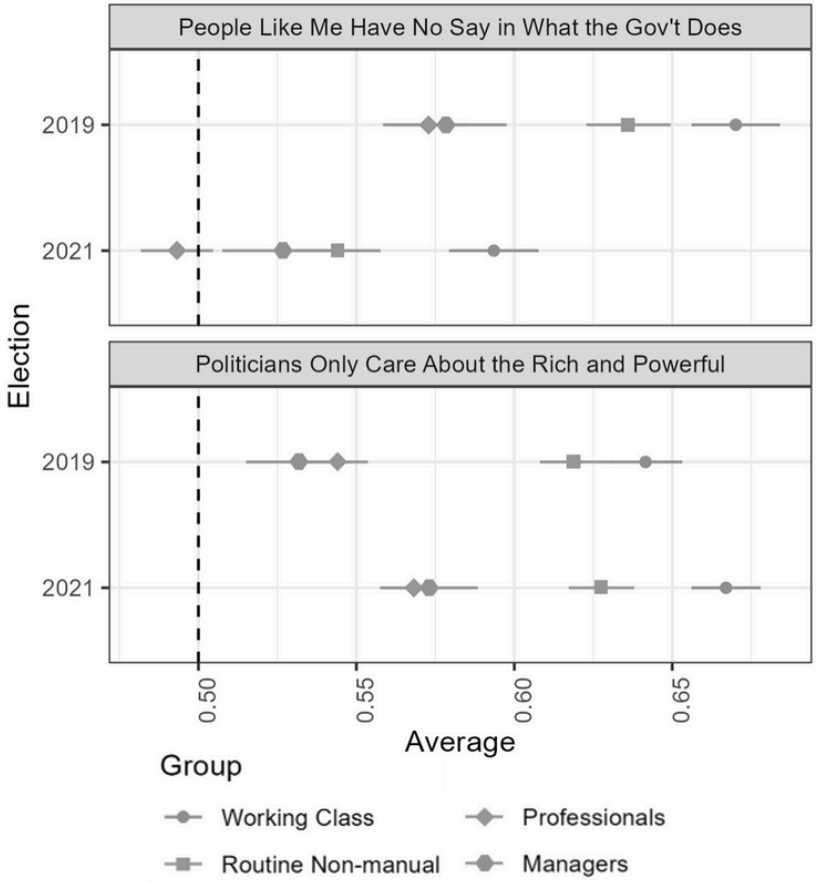
are represented by government. So, the two questions measure complimentary aspects of political efficacy.

The results from both questions in each election show similar results. In each case, the working-class are significantly more likely to agree with each statement than all other classes. There is a clear class gradient at work for both questions as well, as the routine non-manual class is closest to the working-class in positioning, and professionals and managers the least likely to agree with the statements. For the first question, in both elections, the working-class are a substantial 10 percentage points more likely to feel that they have no say in government, compared to professionals. Similarly, for the second question, in both elections the working-class are roughly 10 percentage points more likely to feel that politicians only care about the rich and powerful, compared to managers.

Taken together, clear majorities of the working-class (63% and 66% respectively) are in agreement with the two statements. The working-class clearly feels much less represented than the rest of the population and they feel that it is the rich and powerful that are represented by government.

Chart 4 - Mean political efficacy by social class, based on two questions in 2019 and 2021

Scaled from left to right (0–1).



Vote Choices

Do these attitudes show up in working-class voting choices? Our research on class voting in Canada shows that the biggest changes in working-class voting from 1988 to 2019 have occurred in the cultural realm, as the ideologically economic bases of support for the NDP and the Conservatives simply intensified (Polacko, Kiss and Graefe 2022, 2025). However, working-class

NDP support is consistently mobilized from the economic dimension, as the link between working-class voters' economic preferences and their support for the NDP has become more pronounced in the area of redistribution. Contrastingly, the primary driver of working-class support for the right occurs along the cultural dimension. Post-2000 marks a watershed; whereby culturally right-wing members of the working-class gradually abandoned the Liberals and NDP for the Conservatives. Led by immigration, cultural preferences have become a much larger predictor of support for both the Liberals and Conservatives, whereby the Liberals have picked up pro-immigration working-class voters and the Conservatives have captured anti-immigration voters.

We update this research by analyzing working-class voting in the 2021 election. We do so by undertaking logistic regression models estimating working-class voting for the four largest parties and including key demographic variables (age, gender, education, income, region, religion, community size, and native-born and union status), as well as the attitudinal variables included in the previous section. We include redistribution and the environment, and we combine our two immigration questions into an immigration index (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.71$), and the questions on gender equality and LGTBQ+ rights into a moral traditionalism index (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.74$). Table 1 displays the results.

We emphasize the following findings. First, most of the demographic variables are not key predictors, beyond the young being a key constituency for the NDP and men for the Conservatives. Second, we find that support for redistribution is the largest predictor of support for the NDP and opposition to redistribution the largest predictor of Conservative support (both significant at $p<0.001$) but is non-significant for the Liberals

and an effect size roughly 3.5 times smaller than for the NDP. Third, both support for moral traditionalism and opposition to the environment are strong predictors for the Conservatives (both significant at $p<0.001$), but both issues are limited predictors for the Liberals, and moderate for the NDP. Fourth, immigration is the key area of contestation between the Liberals and Conservatives and is a very limited predictor for the NDP. It is the only attitudinal variable that is statistically significant for the Liberals ($p<0.001$), while it attains an even higher effect for the Conservatives in the opposite direction.

In sum, it appears that redistribution and immigration are the two largest fault lines of party voting for the working-class. Redistribution is a key driver of support for the NDP, while immigration is the key driver for the Liberals. And redistribution is largely contested between the NDP and Conservatives, while immigration is the key battleground between the Liberals and Conservatives.

Table 1 - Logistic regression models predicting party vote in 2021 election for working-class sub-sample

	(1) NDP	(2) Liberal	(3) Conservative	(4) Bloc Québécois
Age	-0.031*** (0.006)	0.014** (0.005)	0.007 (0.006)	0.034** (0.012)
Female	0.293 (0.184)	0.276 (0.156)	-0.693*** (0.180)	-0.009 (0.292)
Degree	-0.495* (0.221)	0.213 (0.172)	0.169 (0.202)	-0.2 (0.340)
Income	-0.284* (0.123)	-0.025 (0.100)	0.269* (0.113)	0.187 (0.187)
Atlantic	ref	ref	ref	
Quebec	-1.798*** (0.373)	-0.801** (0.295)	-0.348 (0.348)	ref
Ontario	-0.067 (0.319)	-0.097 (0.279)	0.265 (0.324)	
West	0.382 (0.324)	-0.817** (0.293)	0.54 (0.330)	
No Religion	ref	ref	ref	ref
Catholic	-0.641** (0.226)	0.513** (0.185)	0.029 (0.209)	-0.15 (0.301)
Protestant	-0.665** (0.226)	0.263 (0.201)	0.444* (0.218)	-0.423 (0.672)
Other Religion	-0.222 (0.341)	-0.189 (0.308)	0.291 (0.326)	-0.149 (0.670)
Foreign-born	-0.657* (0.317)	0.547* (0.224)	0.068 (0.266)	-2.471* (1.069)
Urban	-0.056 (0.262)	0.647** (0.224)	-0.597* (0.246)	-0.424 (0.393)
Union	0.34 (0.223)	-0.008 (0.196)	-0.111 (0.215)	0.365 (0.336)
Redistribution	-2.178*** (0.510)	-0.605 (0.367)	2.413*** (0.394)	-1.47 (0.774)
Immigration	-0.188 (0.328)	-0.972*** (0.275)	1.425*** (0.306)	0.738 (0.515)
Moral Traditionalism	-1.460** (0.488)	-0.465 (0.409)	1.990*** (0.463)	-0.785 (0.791)
Environment	-0.712* (0.310)	-0.234 (0.257)	1.594*** (0.288)	-1.246** (0.470)
Constant	2.849***	-1.198*	-4.302***	-1.144
	(0.580)	(0.500)	(0.615)	(0.905)
N	1069	1069	1069	291
R2	0.22	0.08	0.28	0.09

* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

We can delve further into attitudinal predictors of party support by simply examining the vote shares among the three big parties for each of the key attitudes examined in this paper: redistribution, immigration, the economy as most important position, and political efficacy. Table 2 breaks down these vote shares among 6 different sub-groups. First, we can see that the Conservatives completely dominate support among individuals who are anti-redistribution with an 87.6% vote share. However, pro-redistribution individuals divide their support somewhat evenly among the three parties. Notably, the Liberals do attain 8.7% greater share than the NDP here, and even the Conservatives win over more pro-redistribution voters than the NDP. Second, the Conservatives also capture a majority of anti-immigration voters, with the NDP and Liberals at a very similar level (16.6% and 18.1% respectively). Third, when we narrow it further to then see who is winning over the most cross-pressured voters in this area (pro-redistribution anti immigration voters), we can see that the NDP and Liberals split the leftist vote nearly precisely the same, and the Conservatives win over more than both parties combined at 43.2%.

Table 2 - Party vote percentages of working-class in 2021 election

	NDP	Liberal	Conservative
Anti-Redistribution	5	5	87.6
Pro-Redistribution	23.5	32.2	27.6
Anti-Immigration	16.6	18.1	53.7
Pro Redistribution & Anti-Immigration	20.8	21.1	43.2
Most Important Problem: Economy	17.4	26	44.8
Political Efficacy	22.3	22.6	45.2

Therefore, even though redistribution is the biggest driver of NDP support and what attracts many voters to the NDP, the party is unable to win over as many pro-redistribution voters as the other big parties. The NDP is at a dead-end in winning over anti-redistribution voters, but importantly, they are also unable to win over very many cross-pressured pro-redistribution anti-immigration voters, as the Conservatives dominate in this area. The NDP also especially lose out on immigration to the Liberals, since the Liberals are viewed as the best choice on the left for this issue. So, the NDP appears to be hemmed in on both sides over immigration, unable to win over many cross-pressured voters, nor can they capture a sizable amount of pro-redistribution voters. Hence, the NDP desperately needs a new strategy in these policy areas, and it would make the most sense to emphasize redistribution and undertake strong leftist movement in this area, while downplaying immigration and separating themselves from the Liberals on the left, so that they can gain a larger share of cross-pressured anti-immigration voters from the working class.

Moving to the party vote shares of working-class members who viewed the economy as the most important problem, the Conservatives once again dominate with 44.8% of the vote. This is more than the NDP and Liberals combined, and 8.5 percentage points above the overall Conservative working class vote. The NDP only attained 17.4% of this group, despite redistribution being the biggest driver of NDP support. The Conservatives' emphasis on "powerful paycheques" coming from resource development and pipelines offers real material gains to workers. The NDP may be squeezed in this area by its competition with the Liberals to secure environmental votes from middle-class professionals but needs a clearer and more compelling offer to working class voters in this space.

Last, looking at our index of the two political efficacy questions, the Conservatives dominate at 45.2% vote share, which just edges the combined NDP and Liberal totals. The NDP do least well, despite the party's mantra as being the champion of "the little guy" and being the representative for the working class. Nearly two-thirds of the working class believe that the government only represents the rich and powerful, yet the Conservatives, who have long been the party that best represents the economic elite are able to win a near majority of their members. Clearly the NDP needs to do a much better job at pitching to and convincing this demographic, which should conceivably be very open to the party. Bernie Sanders' "fight oligarchy" tour this year, drew enormous crowds in America. Perhaps it can motivate a Canadian strategy to reach the working class on economic populist themes, given the substantial resources that the right has invested to harnessing disaffection with conservative cultural appeals.

Conclusion

As the NDP rebuilds, it will need to consider what coalition of voters it seeks to convince. It has traditionally seen the working class as its core voting block, even if its weakness has meant it has long been a cross-class party. The NDP can restore its relative success with the working class if it can find ways to play to the pro-redistribution attitudes of working-class voters. There is also significant support for redistribution among the young and higher educated, whose ranks have increased the NDP's electoral base. Hence, elements of a redistributive and working-class agenda are already in demand, but many voters and especially the working class, feel politically alienated and disaffected that their interests are not being pursued, while at the same time they perceive politicians as only catering to the interests of the rich and powerful. By fuelling the "culture wars," the Conservative

Party has convinced a significant number of working class voters to vote against their own economic interests. A big focus for the NDP should be aimed at combating alienation and disaffection among working class voters with stronger economic populist appeals and an economic strategy that promises direct material gains for workers. Nevertheless, there are potential flashpoints between these suggestions and the need to also rebuild support among routine non-manual workers and professionals who moved to the Liberals.

Notes

1. We distinguish the working-class from managers, professionals, and the routine non-manual, according to a modified version of Robert Erikson and John H. Goldthorpe's (1992) widely adopted class schema. The manager and professional categories capture those in the managerial and professional skill levels, while the routine non-manual category includes workers in skill levels B, C, and D, but in occupational categories 1 to 6, and includes occupations such as cashiers, salespeople, executive assistants and administrators.

   This classification of the working-class does skew more heavily male at a roughly 2 to 1 rate. It can be faulted for excluding people working in service sector jobs that many would consider as working class (such as cashiers or retail clerks), who are instead included in the "routine non-manual" category. Our interest is not to define what the "real" working-class is. We believe there is value in understanding the voting behaviour of a block of workers (those in manual professions), who once accounted for over a quarter of the workforce and still account for a fifth of all workers, and who have historically been more likely to support social democratic parties compared to other occupational blocks of voters. We hope others apply other occupational schema, or other markers of class, such as we do in studying education and income (Kiss, Polacko and Graefe 2023).

2. Occupation is not available in the 2000 election. Conservative vote is the amalgamated vote of right-wing parties that split off or merged with the Conservative Party—including Reform, Canadian Alliance, and the People's Party.

3. We display the 2019 phone survey mode results. It should be noted that there are significant differences between the phone and web survey results. For example, the Conservative vote is 16.6% lower in the web survey; Liberal vote is 12.35% higher; NDP vote is 3.38% higher; and Bloc Quebecois vote is 1.46% lower.

4. Each of the attitudinal variables are rescaled between 0–1 (left to right) for consistency.

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A Social Democratic Canadian Foreign Policy

INTERVIEW WITH
Jennifer Pedersen

Introduction

As the post-Second World War liberal international order gives way to a right-wing reactionary internationalism, the task of reimagining social democratic foreign policy and a progressive internationalism is more urgent than ever.

Canadian socialists have certainly experienced a different foreign policy trajectory than contemporary left-wing and centre-left parties around the world. While today's German SDP takes a zeitenwende towards increased militarism, reacting to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, left-wing governments in Latin America, such as Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Mexico, and Uruguay look to a new multilateralism. Through this multilateralism, countries in the Global South have demanded respect for international law in the ongoing genocide in Palestine, but Canada's foreign policymakers have lagged as they scramble to figure out their continued dependency on a far-right US government.

Meanwhile, new initiatives like the Progressive International have sprung forth to resurrect left-wing internationalist engagement. Canada's multicultural society always brings diaspora linkages to the world that should help Canada understand global affairs without the United States. As the new Mark Carney government drops the Trudeau-era "Feminist Foreign Policy" and the façade of international climate leadership that once enamoured the liberal world order, is there an opportunity for the Canadian left-wing to provide a vision that turns the superficial into something significant?

For this special issue on the state of Canadian social democracy for *Perspectives Journal*, guest editor **Simon Black** interviewed **Jennifer Pedersen**, Broadbent Institute Leadership Fellow and Senior Legislative and Policy Advisor to NDP Foreign Affairs Critic Heather McPherson, on a social democratic vision for Canadian foreign policy and new internationalism.

– Clement Nocos, Editor-in-Chief
Perspectives Journal

Simon Black: Let's sketch the outlines for a new progressive internationalism. What should the NDP be championing on the international stage and in matters of foreign policy?

Jennifer Pedersen: At a time of increasing inequality, foreign interference, the erosion of the rules-based international order, and threats to democracy, a progressive internationalism is more crucial than ever in promoting a positive and practical approach to foreign policy. More than other political parties, parties of the democratic left are deeply engaged in the concept of solidarity, of seeing people around the world as part of the same struggle against the same challenges: militarism, imperialism, neo-colonialism, ecocide, and neoliberalism. We understand the impacts that our countries' foreign policies have not only on our own populations and our national interests, but also on the global community – and in particular on people who are largely excluded from power.

These values of progressive internationalism – solidarity with workers, putting people before profit, advancing human rights, and promoting social justice, among others – aren't necessarily shared by all social democratic parties in the current global context. For instance, the failures of some social democratic parties in government to oppose the genocide in Gaza, to end arms trade with human rights abusers, and to defend international courts, is more than disappointing: it calls into question the survival of an internationalism espoused by some of the giants of social democracy, such as Olof Palme and the NDP's own Ed Broadbent. At the same time, the global context has shifted significantly with the rise of populist and authoritarian regimes which pose real and troubling security challenges that are forcing governments to make difficult choices in defence and trade priorities. Some of these choices – cutting foreign aid, for example – are dangerous and counter-productive, while others –

building new diplomatic, trade and defence partnerships – are necessary to counter the threats from malign actors. These new partnerships should also come with human rights guarantees, but too many governments, including Canada's, are disregarding human rights at a time when they are most needed.

Over the past few years Canadians have faced Trump's threats, foreign interference by several governments, increasing inequality, and a Liberal government that refuses to take principled stands on key human rights issues. The NDP has been the lone voice in Parliament fighting for the most vulnerable. At its core, the NDP's foreign policy is based on human rights, disarmament, and international law. And while some see the party's foreign policy as idealism, in reality it is very practical. We're informed by social movements and often take our cue from civil society, including human rights leaders, humanitarian practitioners, and progressive coalitions. We do what we can with the tools we have. We're limited by what we can achieve as an opposition party in Parliament, and by what the Government of Canada can do. We can't just shout into the wind – we need to be inventive, build and join coalitions, engage with communities and with other Parliamentarians. I think it is important to remember that the NDP is not the movement, it is the parliamentary and electoral wing of Canada's progressive movement. We can't be everything to everyone, but we can amplify the voices of those doing important work.

As social democrats we aim to build solidarity and global justice with like-minded people around the world. But we need to hold tightly to the international institutions and norms that Canadians have helped to build over decades. Globally, the UN system and international law are some of the few places we can look to create and maintain support and to build solidarity with others in a way that actually creates results for people. In other

words, we must be practical: what can we achieve in this moment? Who can we work with to achieve these ends? How can we build coalitions with like-minded progressives around the world? We should be results-focused and understand the political context we are working in; one shaped by an increasingly unpredictable and dangerous US foreign policy, but also challenges to unipolarity by China and Russia. The erosion of global norms, including blatant disregard for international law by many governments, make this an especially troubling moment.

SB: Given the party has lost official party status and has only seven Members of Parliament, how can the NDP remain relevant in matters of foreign policy?

JP: We're currently a political party with very limited resources, working within a Parliamentary system where we usually have a Foreign Affairs Critic, a Defence Critic, a Trade Critic, an Immigration Critic, and sometimes - when we have more caucus members - a separate International Development Critic. At present, our MPs each hold multiple critic roles and generally have only one staffer to help cover all of them. We have lost our seats on Parliamentary committees due to the loss of party status. The loss of Committee roles is especially unfortunate since we have done a lot of heavy lifting at committees in the past, proposing studies, amending bills, and suggesting progressive witnesses to testify. The loss of party status is certainly impacting our ability to raise concerns about foreign affairs and human rights in the House; recent news revealed the Liberals expect fewer questions in the House on foreign aid cuts because of a weakened NDP.

In my experience, every elected New Democrat believes strongly in a progressive human-rights based foreign policy. While most of this work falls to the Foreign Affairs, Trade, Defence and Immigr-

ation Critics, you'll often see other caucus members presenting petitions, attending meetings on human rights issues, or speaking with local stakeholders about Canada's role in the world. At the same time, foreign policy isn't usually a top priority of constituents. MPs offices are swamped with calls for help with federal government services, and the work for housing, healthcare, and affordability have to be the priority.

By necessity, our work is focused on what we can accomplish with the limited tools we have, in the moment we're in. Our work is largely responsive to international events that affect Canadians, like Trump's tariffs or the genocide in Palestine or the war in Ukraine. We respond to government bills and initiatives on issues like sanctions policy, immigration rules, and defence funding. Sometimes we introduce motions or legislation on urgent foreign policy concerns, such as Heather McPherson's March 2024 motion on Palestine that led to a full day of debate in the House of Commons – the first time Palestine was ever debated by all parties. This motion was debated because the entire NDP caucus saw it as a priority and pushed for it to be chosen as one of our three Opposition Days that year. Unfortunately, in the current Parliament we no longer have Opposition Days due to the loss of official party status.

Given our Parliamentary focus, there is rarely time to draft broader thought pieces on where Canadian foreign policy should go. Even so, when we are asked to define our vision of what a progressive foreign policy would be, it's generally within the established parameters of Canada as a middle power, as a member of the existing global organizations like the UN and its agencies, or the G7, or NATO, or the Commonwealth and La Francophonie. It's within the context of Canada as a major donor to humanitarian crises. We criticize where the government gets it wrong – for example, when Harper's Maternal, Newborn and

Child Health initiative didn't include reproductive rights; when Trudeau continued the $15 billion deal with Saudi Arabia for Canadian-made light armoured vehicles; when Trudeau (and now Carney) refused to accede to the Nuclear Ban Treaty; when the Liberals continue to send military goods and tech to Israel during a genocide; when Canada's sanctions policy has no teeth; when the Liberals refused to support the waiving of intellectual property rights for life-saving vaccines; or when Canada takes a lax approach to foreign interference, leaving Canadians vulnerable to repression and attacks.

Coming back to the question, "what should the NDP be championing?", we must choose what makes the most sense at a given time. The values will always be the same but the issues will depend on what can be done with the limited resources and opportunities available.

For example, the past two years we focused largely on Ukraine and on Palestine. We found that Canadian solidarity with Ukraine was strong from the beginning, and most parties were in general agreement on Canada's approach, with some differences. All parties oppose Putin's aggression and believe in a sovereign and free Ukraine.

On Palestine, the NDP stood mostly alone. Despite hundreds of thousands of calls and emails and actions from Canadians demanding more action from the Liberal government to end Israel's genocide, New Democrats were consistently the only voice in Parliament for the people of Palestine. We were the only party to oppose the genocide and demand an end to trade with Israel, sanctions on its leaders, a two-way arms embargo, and unlimited humanitarian access to Gaza. We brought the issue to the House of Commons repeatedly, with motions, questions, and petitions. Every day we defended international law and human

rights norms. Because it was the right thing to do – and our caucus had the political will to do it. I can't express how much pain the Palestinian community has gone through in seeing their existence and lives devalued by the Liberals and Conservatives over the past two years.

SB: From support for Israel's genocidal violence in Gaza to extrajudicial killings in the Caribbean Sea, the Trump administration is making a mockery of the "rules-based" international order. But Western double standards in matters of international law are not new, and some progressive parties, when in power, are guilty of upholding double standards as well.

JP: There is no question that over the past few years we have seen a horrific backsliding by many governments when it comes to the "rules-based" international order.

In Canada, it has been so disheartening to see the Liberals abandon the very principles that they helped to create. Former Liberal Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy was instrumental in developing the Ottawa Treaty and the Rome Statute. To see his successors backsliding on support for the International Criminal Court is horrifying. This government is choosing to defend the human rights of some people but not others. The principle of universality has been eroded under the Liberals.

And I don't know if there is consensus on the democratic left anymore - Palestine has been a good example of that. In Canada, the NDP has been unequivocal in its condemnation of Israel's genocide of Palestinians. I have been encouraged by progressive parties in countries like Spain, Chile, Ireland, France, and New Zealand who also bravely stood against the genocide.

But some social democratic parties in government – Labour in the UK, the SPD in Germany – have refused to uphold international law and recognize the genocide. This is profoundly troubling and a betrayal of progressive values. Progressive internationalism is under threat, not only from fascism and authoritarianism, but from social democratic governments who have abandoned social justice movements and millions of people demanding justice.

SB: At moments in the NDP's history, Canada's participation in NATO has been a matter of hot debate within the party. What should the NDP's position on NATO be? And how should the NDP respond to the Carney Liberal government's plans to ramp up military spending?

JP: There's no question we are entering a new era where collective security is going to matter a great deal more to Canada than a decade ago. Some of this is due to Trump's threats to Canadian sovereignty and the increasingly volatile relationship between our two countries. Much of it is also due to the rise of authoritarian governments, changing security threats, and foreign interference. In my conversations with social democrats in Europe, the Russian threat is real and terrifying in a way that hasn't been felt in decades. We are also seeing the impact of Russian disinformation in Canada, especially with the far right, and we have to work hard against that influence. Canada will have to build stronger partnerships with like-minded European partners in order to navigate the difficult years to come.

Of course, there are legitimate critiques of NATO coming from within and outside our party. I spent several years working in and studying peace movements, so I know these critiques well, and I think alternative visions for peace and security are both necessary and hopeful if we want to build a better world. Canada

should be championing peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and disarmament, but under the Liberals we are not. At the same time, I think it's clear from Canadians and the majority of our party members that, at this terrifying moment in time, isolationism is the wrong approach. We need to be at the table voicing Canada's priorities. And at home, we need to be electing New Democrats to ensure Canada is pushing for peace and security for all people, and not upholding oppressive systems that benefit the few.

The questions people in our movement are currently asking are less about Canada's membership in NATO and more about the government's senseless funding priorities. New Democrats consistently advocate for the most vulnerable in their communities, while the Liberals ignore the basic needs of Canadians and just increased the defence budget to 5% of GDP, without even discussing it during the election. People are right to ask: why is so much money going to Canada's defence industry when people don't have homes to sleep in, food to eat, or clean drinking water?

Of course, New Democrats have consistently argued for better resources and support for Canada's armed forces. But a sudden increase in military spending on that scale could take billions of dollars away from fixing healthcare, building affordable housing, training young people and helping families make ends meet. We have no guarantees of what the government's plans are and whether they will actually benefit the Canadian public. One of the key areas Canada should be focusing on is Arctic security – but that needs to be done right in full and meaningful consultation with Arctic and Inuit communities who will inevitably be at the front lines of the climate and security crisis, and who need far greater federal investment in infrastructure.

Clearly, Mark Carney is trying to appease Donald Trump by flirting with the outrageous Golden Dome, which could cost us billions and will deliver nothing. I am also concerned that a big chunk of Carney's increased defence spending is likely going to go to the same Canadian defence companies that are exporting military goods and technology to human rights abusers like Saudi Arabia, Israel, India, including through the United States. The NDP has been trying to fix this for years, and MP Jenny Kwan has recently introduced Bill C-233 to close loopholes that allow arms exports to go through the United States with zero oversight.

The Liberals' rapid increase in defence funding coincides with cuts to peacebuilding and human rights programs at Global Affairs – areas that are already seriously underfunded. Moreover, the government just announced a $2,7 billion cut to international development funding in the 2025 budget! Given the horrific impacts that Trump's cuts to USAID have had on global health and poverty, any cuts to Canada's international development funding are inexcusable. These cuts will be measured in lives.

None of this will actually make Canadians safer in the long run. People are right to be angry and scared. I often think of one of our fellow progressives in the UK, the late Tony Benn, who was a champion of human rights in the Labour benches and very active in the anti-war movement. He said in 2008: "There are two flames burning in the human heart all the time. The flame of anger against injustice, and the flame of hope you can build a better world."

The problems we are facing globally need to be addressed with a whole-of-government approach that tackles root causes of insecurity – not by fuelling insecurity through cuts to services, aid, and peacebuilding. We need to uphold the core progressive values that Ed Broadbent and others in our movement have articulated – cooperation, trade unionism, working for the public good, global consciousness, solidarity, feminism, indigenous rights. These are the values the NDP should continue to champion at home and abroad.

Labour and the NDP: Revisiting the Past, Looking to the Future

Larry Savage

While the Federal New Democratic Party could never rely on a majority of union members' votes, that support now appears as elusive as ever. Indeed, formal ties between the NDP and the labour movement are considerably weaker than they were at the time of the party's birth in 1961. The crisis of social democratic electoralism, the impact of campaign finance reform, and ongoing concerns about the party's electoral viability have all contributed to a weakening of the union-party link.

However, the loosening of ties between labour and the NDP has not shifted the landscape of labour politics in the direction of a more left-wing brand of working-class politics as some on the labour left had hoped. Rather, the opposite has occurred, as evidenced by the clear emergence of fair-weather and transactional alliances with Liberals and Conservatives as the main alternative to traditional partisan NDP links in the realm of electoral politics.

History and Institutional Links

When the NDP was founded in 1961, it was heralded as the political voice of Canada's labour movement. Born from a partnership between the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) and the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), the party's architects envisioned the NDP would realign Canadian politics along a left-right axis and unite workers under a single political banner. Yet, despite the initial fanfare, the relationship between the NDP and unions was never as strong as many assumed—and in recent years, it has only grown weaker.

There was never really a "golden age" of NDP-union relations. Despite widespread support from industrial union leaders and provincial federations of labour to launch the party, the relationship has always been organizationally weak, in relative terms, never coming close to matching the strength of labour-social democratic party ties in Britain, Australia, and across Western Europe. In fact, at its peak, union member affiliation to the NDP reached just 14.6% in 1963, only a couple years after the party's launch in 1961. By 1984, that number was cut in half and has declined even further since.

Nevertheless, there is no question the NDP survived its first two decades as a result of its close partnership with the labour movement. The structural and financial ties between labour and the party, while not as strong or reliable as they could have been, kept the NDP afloat. As detailed by Harold Jansen and Lisa Young, unions contributed an average of $1.9 million annually to the NDP between 1975 and 2002, representing 18.4% of the party's revenues. In election years, that average increased to $3.7 million, or 28.1% of overall party revenue.[1] Labour also played a critical role in providing research, campaign staff, candidates, and organ-

izers to the party at election time. Moreover, unions traditionally co-signed loans for the party to run its election campaigns. When the federal government announced a curtailment of corporate and union donations in 2003, unions moved swiftly to help the party purchase a building in downtown Ottawa to be used as a permanent headquarters and as collateral with which to secure future campaign loans.

Campaign finance reforms prompted the Federal NDP to modify its constitution to do away with per capita payments by union affiliates and instead required them to simply demonstrate that union members were also party members for the purpose of calculating convention delegate entitlement. Despite the fact that union affiliation did not require any per capita payments under this system, affiliation numbers continued to dwindle. In an effort to reverse this trend, delegates at the party's 2021 convention passed a constitutional amendment granting union affiliates delegate positions (through national and/or local affiliation) based on the size of the union, rather than the number of card-carrying New Democrats who were also members of the affiliated union. Whether or not this change will lead to an increase in affiliation rates and reverse the union movement's declining clout in the party remains to be seen. The impact of affiliation on key party decision-making processes, like leadership contests, however, has declined in recent decades given the gradual move towards a one-member-one-vote system.

Overall, while NDP union affiliation numbers never came close to meeting their potential, there is no question that union fundraising dollars and organizational ties that guaranteed labour representation in party structures ensured a close degree of cooperation between union leaders and the party in its first few decades. As the composition of the union membership changed and campaign finance laws became more restrictive, ho-

wever, NDP-union relations were further weakened in the context of the party's ideological shift away from its social democratic roots beginning, in earnest, in the 1990s.

Labour's Ideological Impact

Even as distance has grown between organized labour and the NDP, and the financial link has been severely undermined in recent decades, the party's opponents on the right continue to lambaste the party as the puppet of "unions bosses."

But fear of an outsized role for labour also lingers within the party itself. A 2009 NDP member survey revealed that while a slim majority (54 per cent) thought labour's decision-making influence on the party should "stay the same," 30 per cent thought it should be decreased or greatly decreased, while only 16 per cent thought it should be increased or greatly increased.[2] But what are the ideological implications of significant union influence on or within the NDP? The answer is not as straightforward as it may seem, in part because labour's ideological influence on the party has never been uniform and has evolved over time.

While labour has never been a monolithic ideological group, trade unionists were initially perceived by many longtime activists as a moderating influence within the party. In their survey of 1987 NDP convention delegates, Archer and Whitehorn reveal that non-union delegates were more likely than union delegates to identify as "socialist" and placed themselves further to the left than union delegates on a left-right scale.[3] They also concluded that union delegates were less likely to embrace radical policy positions and were demonstrably less committed to equity politics and demilitarization. On the other hand, perhaps unsurprisingly, union delegates were more likely to support pro-

labour policies that would advance union interests. For example, they were much more likely to oppose hypothetical NDP government intervention in the process of free collective bargaining or any kind of interference with the right to strike. Union delegates were also more likely to agree (60.8 per cent vs. 52.5 per cent for non-union delegates) that "the central question of Canadian politics is the class struggle between labour and capital."[4] In other words, while the labour link seemingly reinforced a more explicit class-based approach to politics, it did not necessarily reinforce a more left-wing politics overall. Rather, the presence of union delegates tended to anchor the party in a pragmatic class politics rooted in defending workers' institutional and economic interests as opposed to advancing transformative socialist or anti-capitalist agendas. Consequently, the labour presence within the NDP has sometimes worked to temper some of the more radical impulses of the party's activist and social movement components.

However, important segments of the labour movement have also played the role of left-wing party critics at important moments in NDP history. After Bob Rae's Ontario NDP government pushed through its infamous Social Contract Act– a fiscal austerity program that rolled back wages and suspended collective bargaining rights in the public sector – many unions came out swinging. In response to the Social Contract, the Ontario Federation of Labour's 1993 convention voted to condemn "the Ontario NDP government for violating the principles of free collective bargaining" and called on the OFL and its affiliated unions to disaffiliate from the provincial party. The law's passage had clearly alienated a majority of the province's labour movement and led to a re-evaluation of the traditional link between organized labour and the NDP across the country. The crisis in social democratic electoralism precipitated by the Social Contract contributed to the party's loss of the official party status

in the 1993 federal election.

The party and the labour movement were undoubtedly estranged in the wake of the Social Contract, but the Federal NDP's historic defeat did not precipitate an immediate divorce. The CLC waited until after the much anticipated defeat of the Rae government in 1995 to undertake a process of reviewing its relationship with the party. Although the CLC's May 1996 report reaffirmed labour support for the NDP, it also insisted that the party must recognize labour's special status as a founding partner and recommended more regular meetings between the NDP leadership and the CLC's Executive Council. Even though the party was receptive to the report's findings, most of the CLC's affiliates were not nearly as willing as the Congress to forgive the NDP for its apparent ideological drift.

In Ontario, party-union divisions precipitated by the passage of the Social Contract led to a significant fragmentation in the electoral approach of unions. While some unions, after pointing to the lack of alternatives, remained steadfast allies of the ONDP, others embraced anti-Conservative strategic voting as a preferred electoral strategy. In most cases, that meant forging closer ties to the Liberals as the party best positioned to defeat Conservatives in the vast majority of ridings.

In 2003, the Ontario Liberals received more in union campaign contributions than the Ontario NDP. This historic first demonstrated the extent to which organized labour was willing to shift allegiances. While the Federal and Ontario sections of the party had always been forced to contend with the problem of strategic voting, the fact that some of the party's traditional union allies were now backing strategic voting efforts caused enormous animosity between party officials and certain union leaders. In fact, Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) union President

Buzz Hargrove's endorsement of strategic voting in the 2006 Federal election led the Ontario NDP to revoke his party membership, thus precipitating an official break between the NDP and the CAW. This was a particularly significant fracture given the key role the union had played in both launching and bankrolling the NDP historically.

The CAW was not the only labour organization experiencing strained relations with the NDP during this period. The CLC and a host of labour leaders were critical of NDP leader Jack Layton's decision to pull the plug on Paul Martin's minority Liberal government in 2005 and trigger a federal election, leading a growing number of unions to embrace anti-Conservative strategic voting.

While the effectiveness of union-backed strategic voting campaigns are suspect at best, the electoral tactic has become normalized and widespread in labour movement circles, especially in Ontario and at the federal level where competitive multi-party systems have endured. Union-led anti-Conservative strategic voting has been framed by unions as a form of electoral harm reduction that prioritizes stopping Conservatives over a partisan focus on advancing the electoral standing of the NDP. While strategic voting campaigns have undoubtedly undermined the NDP in key jurisdictions in recent decades, it is important to remember that union leaders' concerns about the party's ability to win elections have always undermined the Federal NDP's electoral prospects.

From the very start, what David Lewis referred to as "success psychology" hampered the party's ability to secure union votes. Political scientist Gad Horowitz described the dilemma as follows: "Union support is necessary for the take-off; but the take-off is a prerequisite for support from these unions. Their leaders

want to back a winner; they want some assurance of large profits before they make their investment."[5] Languishing in third or fourth place in public opinion polls for most of its history has undermined confidence in the Federal NDP's ability to win. This "success psychology" continues to plague the NDP, both federally and in most provinces. However, it does help bolster the party in provinces where the NDP routinely forms government.

Delivering Union Votes

The labour leadership's hesitancy to fully embrace the Federal NDP is both a product and a symptom of the relatively weak level of support the NDP receives from union voters. Over the years, several studies have addressed this question and have consistently highlighted the disconnect between union leaders and union members on the question of support for the NDP.

In 1976, Robert Laxer wrote that while provincial federations of labour, the CLC, and most large industrial unions officially backed the NDP, most union locals in Canada remained non-partisan or offered only "perfunctory" support to the party.[6] Writing about the same period, historian Desmond Morton observed that "the few unions that found the courage and the cash to survey their own members' attitudes soon discovered that few of them had any allegiance to the labour movement's political or social goals nor even to their own elected leaders. Unions were strictly for benefits."[7]

Decades later, when asked about the party-union relationship CUPE National President and future BC NDP MLA Judy Darcy, lamented that "the focus has been far too much on the organizational relationship at the top, and not enough on the common education that needs to be done with union members and people in Canada around the programs that the NDP and lab-

our movement have in common."Adding, "we're not reaching our members with those issues between elections. It's no wonder we're not persuading them at election time."[8]

While research consistently shows that union membership makes voters somewhat more likely to vote for the party, it is worth remembering that the Federal NDP has rarely secured a plurality of union member votes at election time. The 2011 federal election, in which the NDP formed the Official Opposition for the first time in history, stands out as the exception to the rule. However, in that election, the party garnered an unprecedented share of union votes despite dwindling formal union support.

This leads to the question of whether or not union endorsements carry much weight at all. Take the example of party's historic breakthrough in Quebec under Jack Layton: the irony is that it occurred in spite of the provincial labour leadership's overwhelming preference for the Bloc Quebecois (BQ) in that election. While the NDP's slate of Quebec candidates included some union activists, most union leaders, and the Quebec Federation of Labour, were urging a vote for the BQ. Even after the NDP had overtaken the other parties in public opinion polls in the province, and were the odds-on favourite to secure the largest number of Quebec seats, the province's labour movement stubbornly stuck with the Bloc and even attacked the NDP in the dying days of the campaign. The Quebec Director of the Steelworkers, for example, argued that the NDP would defend Ottawa's interests at the expense of Quebec's and warned that a vote for the NDP would split the vote and facilitate the election of Conservative MPs. A week later, the BQ lost official party status and the NDP made history. In the subsequent 2015 election, the province's unions largely abandoned the Bloc as an electoral vehicle and rallied around the NDP, now led by Tom Mulcair, as the party best positioned to defeat the Harper Conservatives. Af-

ter a lacklustre campaign, however, the NDP managed to hold on to just 16 of its Quebec seats.

In the 2015 federal election, union voters across Canada tended to abandon the party in greater proportion than their non-union counterparts, leading to speculation that union members' votes were more likely driven by the fear of a Conservative government than strongly held pro-NDP views. In the 2025 federal election, this dynamic shifted as the NDP shed votes and seats to both the Liberals and Conservatives, resulting in the loss of official party status and its worst ever electoral performance.

In his book, *The New NDP*, David McGrane argues that during the Layton years, the Federal NDP's political marketing and locus of power shifted away from direct party stakeholders, like organized labour, towards party competitors and swing voters. This shift, he argues, had a moderating effect on the party as it abandoned class-based approaches to political organizing in favour of issues-based political micro-targeting driven by party insiders and staffers. According to McGrane, because the Federal NDP managed to increase its vote share and seat count in each election between 2000 and 2011, "in a virtuous circle, electoral success and moderation and modernization reinforced each other."[9] The irony of McGrane's analysis, however, is that for most of the NDP's history, organized labour had a demonstrably conservative or moderating effect on the party's policies and ideological brand. Thus, the idea that loosening ties with labour helped contribute to even further moderation speaks then to the extent to which the party's commitment to any semblance of social democratic politics has been compromised.

In response to focus groups and public opinion surveys, the party has, at times, gone out of its way to disassociate itself with class-based politics, opting instead to embrace a political marketing st-

ategy that slices and dices the electorate into issue-based consumer-voters. An overreliance on polling and focus groups has seemingly transformed the NDP into an ideologically incoherent weathervane in search of the coveted moderate swing voter. This strategic gamble has largely come at the expense of a focus on politically organizing and mobilizing working-class voters for the purpose of building sustained support for positions and policies that will redistribute power and wealth in meaningful ways. While the slate of federal NDP candidates has always included a good number of local union leaders, staffers, and activists who continue to consider the NDP to be "their" party, the party can no longer credibly be described as the political arm of the labour movement.

For their part, labour organizations are more active than ever in electoral politics. But they have largely migrated to ad hoc strategic alliances with a variety of parties, strategic voting campaigns, third party advertising, or parallel issue campaigns as ways of educating and mobilizing members. The efficacy of some of these tactics requires further examination, but what is clear is that most unions continue to struggle with meaningful member engagement as it relates to political parties and elections, and certainly do not engage in the type of political education that Judy Darcy had called for.

The Future of Labour and Working-Class Politics in Canada

Unprecedented union endorsements and increased working-class support for the Conservatives in Ontario and federally suggests that the NDP's strategic reorientation away from organized labour as a formal partner has opened real opportunities for other parties to compete for the labour vote.

While the Liberals have always made an effort to cut into the NDP's labour and working-class base, Conservatives have more recently begun to pursue populist frames and strategies designed to win over union voters traditionally hostile to that party's anti-labour policy positions. There is evidence that the Conservative strategy is working, especially among male blue-collar private sector union workers. [10]

The Conservative case for private sector unions, steeped in populist rhetoric, is designed to exploit fissures between private and public sector workers by positioning the party as a catalyst for private sector growth and opportunity, on one hand, and public sector restraint on the other. Conservatives decry economic inequality, but in a way that lays blame not on capitalism as an economic system, but rather foreign actors and greedy elites. In short, the Conservatives are using populist and conservative cultural appeals to address the very real material concerns of union members in a way that clearly differentiates them from other parties more closely associated with the promotion of working-class interests.

In the aftermath of the Federal NDP's disastrous 1993 campaign – the only other time the party lost official status – unions played a key role in sustaining the party financially and through research support. That investment paid off when the party managed to regain status in 1997. But because of campaign finance changes, unions cannot play the same role in the wake of the 2025 result. Even if they could, the level of ambivalence towards the party from segments of organized labour should concern party leaders.

A good number of left-wing union activists view the NDP as an unreliable electoral vehicle to achieve a social democratic government, even on its own terms. The ghosts of Bob Rae and other unpopular provincial NDP premiers loom large here, but

this does not absolve labour leadership from its shared responsibility for the sorry state of working-class politics in Canada.

The labour movement has also drifted politically, lowering its expectations in the face of a crisis in social democracy, and showing little interest in pursuing political alternatives that might challenge the fundamental pillars of Canada's labour relations regime, let alone the broader capitalist economic system. Some unions continue to steer clear of parties and elections altogether, insisting that talk of politics has no place in the union, thus reinforcing the status quo. Even among those unions who embrace political action, democratic socialist political education is largely absent from labour education courses, which focus primarily on the technical and legal aspects of labour relations, rather than the labour movement's political vision or potential.

Union density, particularly in the private sector, has experienced steep declines, and the labour movement's capacity to mount effective and sustained fight back campaigns has taken a similar hit. Where unions have become more politically active, electoral engagement has tended to be transactional in nature, as labour organizations have grown increasingly defensive in the context of right-wing restructuring. The drift towards strategic alliances with Liberals or Conservatives by important segments of the labour movement, then, should be understood as a sign of organized labour's weakness rather than strength.

If the crisis in social democratic electoralism is breathing new life into transactional approaches to electoral politics, what does this mean for the future of labour and the NDP? Given that a formal institutional rapprochement between unions and the NDP appears increasingly unlikely, cooperation may take on more inf-

ormal dimensions. Over time, however, as historical attachments wither, union density declines, and personalities in key decision-making positions change, we can expect the NDP-union link will erode even further unless conscious decisions are made to turn things around.

No amount of finger-wagging by NDP activists will bring unions back to the fold. In fact, that approach is likely to be counterproductive. While it's too early to tell if Conservative appeals to union voters will lead to a sustained electoral realignment, it's clear that the NDP's weakening ties to the labour movement have invited such strategic interventions from the right. Of course, this dynamic is not unique to Canada. Right-wing populist frames have helped to construct an alternative narrative about the sources of economic insecurity, and the solutions needed to bring back working-class prosperity, in different national contexts.

The challenge for both the NDP and the labour movement is to contest the legitimacy of such frames – not by dismissing the intended audience as stupid or ignorant – but rather by putting forward an alternative vision and understanding of the economy that directly addresses their material interests in ways that unite workers through shared class interests. This undoubtedly requires a great deal of education, but it also requires organizing and clear messaging about the shortcomings of capitalism as a system that produces and reproduces the very economic, social, and racial inequalities that stratify and divide working-class communities. The NDP's ability to credibly advance this alternative vision depends largely on whether the labour movement is itself willing and able to engage in such political and economic education.

Notes

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2. Linda Erickson and Maria Zakharova, "Members, Activists, and Party Opinion," in Laycock and Erickson, *Reviving Social Democracy*, 178.

3. Keith Archer and Alan Whitehorn, *Political Activists: The NDP in Convention* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997), 54.

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5. Gad Horowitz, *Canadian Labour in Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968), 262.

6. Robert Laxer, *Canada's Unions* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 1976), 263.

7. Desmond Morton, *Working People: An Illustrated History of the Canadian Labour Movement 4th ed*. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998), 315.

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9. David McGrane, *The New NDP: Moderation, Modernization, and Political Marketing* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2019), 41.

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NDP Leadership Race Should Look to History on How to Change Canada

Clement Nocos & David McGrane

A version of this opinion article was originally published online, October 22, 2025, and has been updated for this special issue release.

Read Nocos and McGrane's research paper ***'One Hundred Years of Progressive Influence: Social Democracy in Canada'*** *for the Foundation for European Progressive Studies online:*
broadbentinstitute.ca/research/next-left-canada

This federal NDP leadership race presides over a caucus of just 7 MPs in Parliament and no party status, in the aftermath of the 2025 election, but this is not a unique situation for the Canadian left-wing in the House of Commons. Nor does it mean that the working-class can't influence public policy in Canada. With Prime Minister Mark Carney's government a few seats shy of a majority government, working-class Canadians should be asking NDP leadership candidates how they would wield this balance of power as they make their appeals to party membership for their respective campaigns. They can look to one hundred years of progressive influence that social democratic Parliamentarians have had in Canada for answers.

Before the NDP and its predecessor party, the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, an ad-hoc "Ginger Group" of fifteen MPs was formed in 1924. While belonging to left-wing party fact-

ions or sitting as independents, the Ginger Group used their small, but outsized, influence to push for progressive policies during the majority government of Prime Minister McKenzie King, such as the establishment of Canada's first publicly funded pensions in 1926.

It is this kind of progressive influence that has also historically differentiated Canada from the United States. The US has never had a full-fledged labour party or a social democratic party that could wield significant political power and influence. Canada's Medicare system, the envy of progressive US policymakers like Bernie Sanders, was the result of Tommy Douglas' NDP and its outsized influence during the minority governments of Prime Minister Lester Pearson. All the while, there has never been a social democratic government, nor a real coalition government, that could directly implement these policies.

The NDP and the CCF, however, do form provincial governments where progressive, working-class policies are tested and proven. Social democratic provincial governments have been able to pioneer many groundbreaking working-class policies such as public ownership, social programs, and workers' rights. The birth of Canadian Medicare in Saskatchewan under the CCF preceded its adoption across Canada.

Progressive US Democrats today, like Zohran Mamdani and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, must contend with a political party that does not necessarily align with their values. They continue to fight for the working-class, but only to hold on to meager gains and cannot dream of universal programs like healthcare, even when Democrats are in power. This especially hampers them in defending democracy against the Trump administration's lash outs, when establishment Democrats prefer appeasement that pushes US policy right-ward. For progressives in Canada, versions

of Canada's parliamentary left have delivered policy for the benefit of the working-class far ahead of the US.

The Parliamentary Confidence and Supply Agreement was the last such push by Jagmeet Singh's NDP on Justin Trudeau's minority Liberal government to deliver working-class policies such as anti-scab rules to empower labour unions, the start of pharmacare and dental care programs, and just transition legislation. Arguably, this has demonstrated more policy movement in Canada while holding the balance of power, than Thomas Mulcair's Official Opposition NDP, at its zenith of 109 seats.

In this pivotal position, but diminished state, the NDP leadership candidates need to pitch Canadians on their plan to advance wins for the working-class in Parliament. Their policy visions need to include how they would use their power to turn proposals into reality. Leadership candidates need to demonstrate how they would counterbalance the Americanization of Canadian politics with the weight of the working-class behind them. From defending democracy, to fighting inflation, and building on the foundational working-class wins already achieved, leadership candidates should bring up this history when they talk to Canadians throughout the leadership race. It is certainly needed to help articulate how they would continue to use the outsized influence of progressives, delivering change for Canadians needed now more than ever.

Contribute to Perspectives Journal

Perspectives Journal welcomes contributions such as opinion, long-form analysis, in-depth explainers on matters of current affairs, as well as reviews of media and other publications that interrogate questions of political economy.

Contributions to *Perspectives Journal* are meant to help inform strategists, organizers, academics, policymakers, and the interested public of the policies and strategies to dismantle systems of oppression, build social movements based on justice and equality, as well as advance an egalitarian economy and the decommodification of social necessities. *Perspectives Journal* accepts submissions from contributors in several formats including:

- **Opinion —** Perspectives Journal provides an outlet for experts to quickly express their points-of-view in short format (600-1000 words) pieces.

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Though *Perspectives Journal* is an English-language publication with critical content translated into French, we encourage submissions from contributors whose first language may not be English. The editorial team welcomes submissions from both established and new writers, researchers, and experts from across Canada and beyond.

Perspectives Journal pays honoraria to working contributors whose works are published, or contributors in financial need. We normally do not extend this honoraria offer to contributors who have 'day jobs,' such as professors, paid organizers, etc. The editorial team reserves the right to choose not to publish unsolicited submissions that fall outside the purview of our publication's editorial scope and guidelines.

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- **While research can be LLM-assisted, it is not preferred and works cited must have clear links to the arguments written. Upon discovery of LLM-sourced links, a time-strenuous review will be conducted regarding the veracity of the citation that may affect publication.**

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- Responds to/deconstructs right-wing ideas and approaches to public policy.

- Does not derive so substantially from previous work by the author so as to be redundant or repetitive, derive from another author's work so substantially that publication would be accused of plagiarism.

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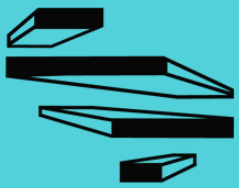
Please include "Submission" in the subject line. If the piece is time sensitive, please indicate that in brackets (Time Sensitive).



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