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PROFILE



Opposition to carbon pricing and right-wing populism: Ontario's 2018 general election

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Introduction

Doug Ford's victory in the 2018 Ontario general provincial election has been widely cited as an example of the global wave of right-wing populism coming of age as well as a major blow to the development of climate policy in Canada (Kassam 2018, Maher 2018). Just four days after being sworn in, Ford made good on his promise to scrap Ontario's cap-and-trade program, setting Canada's largest province on a collision course with the federal government's plan to ensure a minimum carbon price is applied in every province and territory across the country by 2019. This result, in combination with the protests against the French government's proposal to raise fuel taxes, has raised concerns about the extent to which carbon pricing schemes and climate change policy have the potential to fuel right-wing populist backlashes (Lockwood 2018). Here, we examine how far opposition to Ontario's carbon pricing scheme was related to the election of Ford. We find that it was independently related to support for the new government, but only marginally. Anti-immigration sentiment, partisanship and a general dislike of the incumbent premier were much more important predictors of support for Ford.

Electricity prices, coal phase-out and cap-and-trade

Since 2003, Ontario had been governed by the centrist Ontario Liberal Party under the premiership, from 2014, of Kathleen Wynne. Over this 15-year period, the province made significant progress in reducing its greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, meeting its Kyoto target of a 6% reduction relative to 1990 levels in 2014, and further reducing emissions to their lowest recorded level in 2016. These emission reductions reflect a serious and sustained commitment by the Ontario Liberals to implement effective

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climate and energy policies, including the Green Energy Act (2009), the phase-out of coal-fired electricity (completed in 2014), and the linking of Ontario's cap-and-trade program with Quebec and California (2017). In particular, Ontario's rapid and largely unmatched phase-out of coal-fired power is widely recognized as the single most important driver of GHG emissions reduction in North America.

Despite Liberal successes in implementing effective climate policies, several controversies helped pave the way for Ford's victory. Among the most significant was the steep rise in electricity prices between 2014 and 2018 (Figure 1). While the reasons for increased electricity prices were complex and varied, ensuing public debate focused narrowly on the Ontario Liberal government policies of investing heavily in natural gas, solar and wind energy to make up for the decline in electricity production that resulted from the province's shuttering of coal-fired power plants. In a textbook example of trading off short-term political gain for longer-term economic pain, and as a way of defusing public anger over rising prices, the Liberal government ordered a 25% reduction in electricity rates as part of the 'Fair Hydro Plan,' which essentially borrowed money to reduce the amount ratepayers paid on their electricity, leaving future ratepayers to pay back the loan. In addition, the provincial government's cap-and-trade program was introduced after the steep rise in electricity prices, contributing further to public anxiety around increasing energy prices.

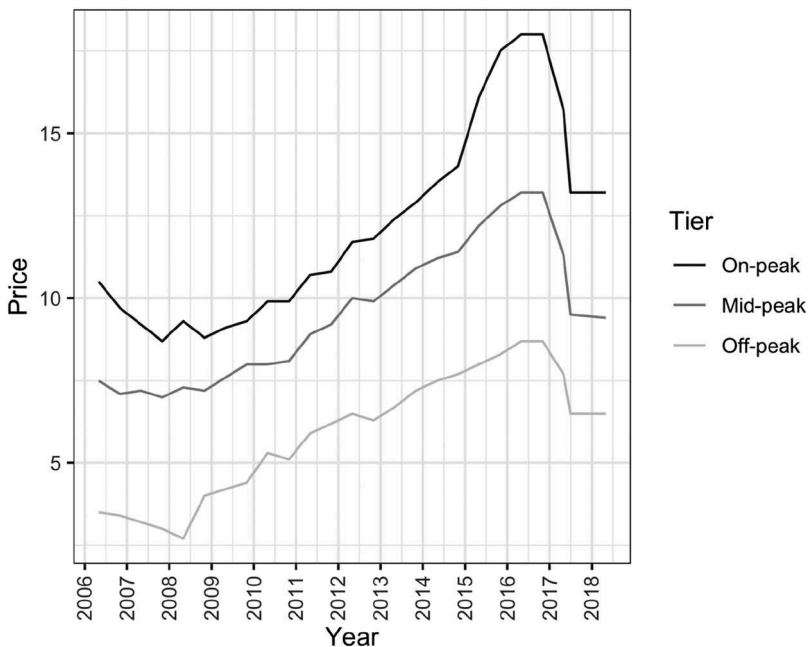


Figure 1. Electricity Prices in Ontario (Cents/kWh).

Doug Ford's promise that 'help is on the way'

In this context, Ford's 'Plan for the People' exploited popular concerns over pocketbook issues and broke ranks with his predecessor's position on carbon pricing. Yet, before he resigned just months before the election amidst allegations of sexual misconduct, the former leader of the Ontario Progressive Conservative (PC) Party – Patrick Brown – enjoyed a comfortable lead in the polls while publicly supporting a broad-based, revenue-neutral carbon tax. In Brown's place, Ford mounted a populist campaign, promising to reduce the minimum price for beer sold in the province to one dollar while also taking aim at the cap-and-trade 'carbon tax' on 'working families.' The populist PC platform also promised to 'fix the hydro mess,' which blamed the Green Energy Act for skyrocketing electricity prices while claiming that canceling cap-and-trade would lead to a further reduction in prices (Ontario Progressive Conservative party 2018).

The result was a crushing electoral defeat of the Ontario Liberals, whose share of the popular vote fell from about 40% in 2014 to just 20% in 2018. Due to the province's 'first-past-the-post' voting system, which amplifies the seat-vote elasticity, the party saw their seats slashed from 58 to just 7, stripping the Ontario Liberals of official party status (Table 1). Ford interpreted his landslide victory as a clear mandate from Ontario voters to 'scrap the carbon tax.' Ford subsequently joined Saskatchewan in mounting a legal challenge to the constitutional authority of the federal government to implement its national carbon pricing plan. Later, he traveled to Canada's oil capital, Calgary, to drum up support for Alberta's conservative opposition party ahead of a provincial election in 2019 that may prove decisive for the fate of the federal government's 'Pan Canadian' climate policy framework.

Whither climate policy in Ontario?

The Ontario election of 2018 raises several important questions for researchers and proponents of action on climate change. How important were Ford's attacks on climate policy in explaining his rise to power? In particular, what was the role of the electorate's climate policy preferences – relative to other factors – in bringing Ford's Progressive Conservatives to office?

Table 1. Vote share and seats won in the 2014 and 2018 Ontario General Provincial Elections.

| | 2014 election | | 2018 election | |
|--------------------------|---------------|--------------------------|---------------|--------------------------|
| | Vote share | No. of seats (of 107) | Vote share | No. of seats (of 124) |
| Progressive Conservative | 31% | 28 | 41% | 76 |
| Liberal Party | 39% | 58 | 20% | 7 |
| New Democrats | 24% | 21 | 34% | 40 |
| Greens | 5% | 0 | 5% | 1 |

To explore these questions, we examine data from the Ontario Provincial Election Survey (OPES), administered to a sample of 2551 Ontario voters recruited by Survey Sampling International's (SSI) online panel. The survey was in the field during the provincial election campaign between 28 May and 7 June 2018 and offers a unique perspective on the issues in the minds of voters.

Respondents were asked a series of questions about, *inter alia*, the perceived impact of electricity rates, the human sources of climate change, as well as their preferred approach to pricing carbon emissions. As shown in [Figure 2](#), neither climate change nor electricity rates proved to be top-of-mind issues for voters. A separate election-day exit survey by Ipsos (2018) found that relative to classic issues like health care (26%) and the economy (12%) neither electricity rates (2%) nor climate change (2%) scored particularly high on the 'most important problem' question, despite efforts by the Conservatives to prime the saliency of these latter issues during the campaign. However, [Figure 2](#) also highlights a number of bivariate relationships, which together suggest that attitudes toward climate change policy and electricity rates were associated with voting for the Ontario PC party in 2018. For instance, it suggests that the climate policy preferences of Ontarians with respect to complying with the Paris Agreement are related to beliefs about climate change as well as to voting for the PC in 2018. Indeed, among self-identified likely PC voters, a minority supported either keeping Wynne's cap-and-trade policy (30%) or a Brown-style carbon tax (13%), while a majority (57%) supported 'letting the federal figure it out,' which in this context might be interpreted as a preference to 'do nothing.' [Figure 2](#) also highlights substantial variation in perceptions of electricity rates in Ontario, despite the fact that rates actually decreased (albeit after

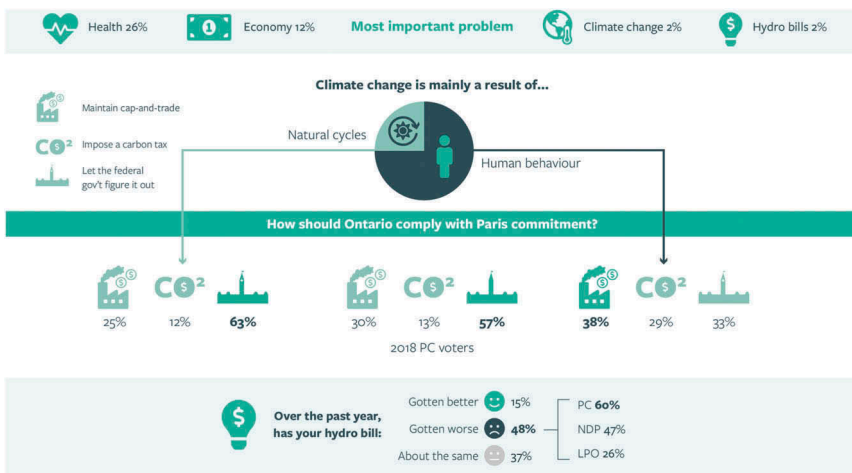


Figure 2. Issues in the 2018 Ontario General Provincial Election.

considerable increases) as of July 2017 when the 'Fair Hydro Plan' came into effect. These perceptions were strongly shaped by partisanship, with a majority of PC (60%), and a near majority of New Democratic Party (47%) voters feeling their bills had increased, compared to fewer than one third (26%) of Liberal voters. While a majority of Ontarians believe climate change is mainly a result of human behavior (75%) and support either keeping cap-and-trade (38%) or instituting a carbon tax (28%), the data also suggest that Ford's efforts to link energy prices with cap-and-trade resonated with a substantial part of the electorate.

To further examine these relationships, we estimated a series of logistic regression models predicting PC vote intentions by climate change attitudes in 2018 while controlling for a host of other potentially relevant factors, including issues, economic conditions, partisanship and attitudes toward the incumbent (Table 2). Looking first at issue voting in Model 1, we find that the odds of voting PC increased with a belief that climate change is primarily a natural phenomenon (as opposed to human-caused), perceptions that electricity had become more expensive, a preference for the federal government to take care of climate policy (as opposed to instituting some kind of provincial carbon price) and, most profoundly, with negative attitudes toward immigration. Next, Model 2 examines the role of economic voting and finds limited evidence that Ontarians voted with their pocketbooks, though voters who perceived the economy as worsening over the previous year were about six times more likely than others to vote PC. The largest effects are, however, found in Model 3, where the odds of voting PC in 2018 were nearly 13 times greater among those who reported voting PC in the previous 2014 provincial election. Dislike of Kathleen Wynne is also associated with substantially greater odds of voting PC, and including only these two variables provides a much better model fit, as suggested by the pseudo-R-square statistic. Interestingly, when we include all variables in Model 4, almost all of the issue-based variables cease to be significant, save for immigration attitudes and, to a lesser extent, opposition to carbon pricing. Indeed, in the fully specified model, the effect of immigration attitudes was about seven times larger than the effect of attitudes toward carbon pricing in predicting the PC vote, with those most hostile to immigration over three times more likely to vote for Ford relative to those with more positive immigration views. Moreover, the effects of these policy attitudes were dwarfed by partisanship, economic voting and personal animosity toward Wynne. Whether dislike of Wynne was driven by attitudes to these issues, or whether attitudes toward Wynne shaped subsequent evaluations of her climate and energy policies, is beyond the scope of this analysis. What is relevant here is that attitudes toward climate and energy policy appear to have played some role in the election of Ford, though to a lesser extent than has been widely assumed.

Table 2. Logistic regression models of PC vote, 2018.

| | Probability of voting PC, 2018 | | | |
|---|--------------------------------|------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
| Climate change (0 = Human, 1 = Natural) | 1.425* (0.226) | | | 0.868 (0.172) |
| Hydro (0 = Gotten Better, 1 = Worse) | 1.855** (0.382) | | | 1.189 (0.306) |
| Paris (0 = Carbon Tax or Cap and Trade, 1 = Federal Action) | 1.817*** (0.263) | | | 1.467* (0.255) |
| Views on immigration (0 = Pro-immigration, 1 = Anti-immigration) | 12.516*** (4.322) | | | 4.380*** (1.884) |
| Worse personal financial situation in the last year (0 = Gotten Better, 1 = Gotten Worse) | | 1.144 (0.234) | | 0.828 (0.205) |
| Worse Ontario economy in the last year (0 = Better, 1 = Worse) | | 6.823*** (1.527) | | 2.164* (0.651) |
| PC14 | | | 14.143*** (2.562) | 13.704*** (2.567) |
| Dislike of Kathleen Wynne (0 = Like, 1 = Really Dislike) | | 0.048*** (0.015) | 8.463*** (2.573) | 3.970*** (1.369) |
| Constant | 0.031*** (0.011) | | 0.051*** (0.019) | 0.023*** (0.010) |
| Observations | 1,204 | 1,204 | 1,204 | 1,204 |
| Log Likelihood | -622.982 | -641.844 | -483.274 | -467.811 |
| Akaike Inf. Crit. | 1,261.963 | 1,295.689 | 978.548 | 959.622 |
| Nagelkerke R2 | 0.17 | 0.13 | 0.44 | 0.46 |

Note: * $p < 0.05$ **, $p < 0.01$ ***, $p < 0.001$

This table shows four logistic regression models of the probability of voting for the Progressive Conservatives in 2018. Coefficients are the odds ratios. Significance stars are printed based on the p-values of the underlying logit coefficients. Standard errors are the standard errors of the odds ratios. All models include controls for gender, age and post-secondary degree status (unreported).

Conclusions

As the planet continues to warm, climate change and climate policy will become increasingly important electoral issues. From this perspective, Ford's electoral victory and his subsequent dismantling of key climate policies in Canada's largest province may be a cause for concern for advocates of climate action. Indeed, one could argue that the Wynne government tended to downplay public anxiety around the price impacts of cap-and-trade, thereby leaving the door wide open for Ford to exploit these concerns in his populist campaign. However, it is not at all clear that the self-professed mandate to scrap the 'cap-and-trade slush fund' in Ontario reflects the political preferences of the electorate. In fact, most Ontarians believe that human activity is causing climate change and most want the provincial government to take action. Even a non-trivial proportion of PC voters support a price on carbon, and before PC leadership dumped Patrick Brown the party had a sizeable and durable lead in the polls over the Liberals while supporting a revenue-neutral carbon tax. While the policy did generate opposition to the Liberals, it was not the core of a populist backlash. It was one of several factors, some of which were more determinant. For all his talk about having a mandate to kill cap-and-trade, climate policy preferences played a marginal role in getting Ford elected.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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