

# **The People versus The People's Party: Maxime Bernier, the People's Party of Canada and the Twitter Response.**

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On August 23, 2018, Conservative MP Maxime Bernier announced he was leaving the Conservative Party of Canada. Following a narrowly unsuccessful bid for party leadership in 2017 that would then flourish into irreconcilable differences with his victorious opponent Andrew Scheer, Bernier's exit from the party was heavily publicized not only for its brash nature, but because of the increasingly xenophobic and anti-multicultural rhetoric he began to expound in interviews and on Twitter almost daily in the months leading up to his decision. Few would be surprised when Bernier announced his intent to create his own federal political party – the People's Party of Canada – less than one month later on September 14, 2018. The proposed study is a content analysis of public reaction on Twitter following Bernier's controversial announcement. Focusing on public responses to tweets made by Maxime Bernier's official Twitter account, as well as public responses to tweets made by prominent Canadian politicians and news organizations reacting to the launch of the party, this study intends to illustrate the utility of social media content analysis as a valuable means of real-time public opinion measurement and civil society activity.

Keywords: Canadian Politics, Electoral Politics, Political Parties, Populism, Multiculturalism, Twitter, Content Analysis, Social Media, Elections, Civil Society

## **Introduction**

On Friday September 14, 2018, former Conservative Party of Canada MP Maxime Bernier announced the creation of a new federal party to join the fray of Canada's party system – the People's Party of Canada. The decision surprised few – since Bernier's failed attempt at vying for the leadership of the Conservative Party in 2017, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs had become openly critical of his party, seemingly developing a new political approach in the process which embraced the tides of right-wing populism and nativism that were rising in presence in Conservative grassroots movements across the globe. Breaking ranks with the brokerage approach which defined the Conservative party throughout the various party systems in Canadian history (Carty and Cross, 2010), Bernier would make diversity a target, espousing anti-immigration rhetoric alongside a libertarian-inspired view towards the Canadian social, economic and political landscape that would echo the sentiments to other contemporary Conservative party movements such as UKIP in the United Kingdom and the Tea Party Movement in the United States.

Bernier would resign from the Conservative Party on August 23, 2018, citing irreconcilable differences with the party leadership under Andrew Scheer. And within a month he would announce the creation of the People's Party of Canada, his leadership of the party alongside his intent to contend in the Canadian federal election of 2019. Bernier also proudly exclaimed that the party – by the day of its announcement – had already raised over \$140,000

despite not even being formally registered as a party, insinuating a strong level of support amongst the electorate.

The following paper is a content analysis of the Twitter activity surrounding the announcement of the People's Party of Canada. Focusing on replies to tweets posted over the course of September 14, 2018 by Canadian media and political gatekeepers on the announcement, as well as a sample of the general conversation occurring on Twitter on the emerging party, this paper seeks to provide a portrait of the viral conversation surrounding the launch, Bernier's politics, Canadian politics more broadly and the people's views the People's Party. As part of a larger body of work I am attempting to cultivate, this paper seeks to establish social media – for all of its prevalent discursive woes – as an integral part of contemporary political dialectic and an important site of political socialization, contestation and civil society activity.

### **Literature Review**

This project is situated within the literature on political participation, civic engagement and civil society. Inspired by Jurgen Habermas' concept of the public sphere - the area of social life where political opinions are formed through discussion and interaction, and citizens become part of a united public body through a collective dialogue on the general interest – my research broadly seeks to establish how social media is becoming for the disinterested and traditionally disenfranchised a viral public sphere where they can actively engage the body politic, develop their political identity and engage in a more participatory form of citizenship counter to the democratic malaise that has come to define the formal institutions of democracy around the world. Though my work seeks to challenge many of the basic assumptions of this literature – namely its focus on formal, institutional participation as the hallmark of participatory activity - many of the inferences made by the literature on participation and civic engagement have provided much of the foundation of this project, even if they have focused solely on formal mechanisms.

Questions on the nature of political participation have been a chief concern of political scientists throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, with one of the earliest attempts coming from Downs (1957) in his *Economic Theory of Democracy*, where he developed a model based on the following equation to explain and illustrate the so-called 'paradox of voting',

$$R = (B)(P) - C + D$$

Viewing R as the reward a citizen will gain from voting weighed against variables of benefit, probability and cost (Downs, 1957), the model - although crude in the sense that it assumes pure rationality in voting and ignores subjectivities as motivation, affect, material circumstances, education and disability - remains as one of the first attempts to systematically explain why some individuals are politically engaged and others are not (Harder and Krosnick, 2008, page 526).

Gabriel Almond and Sydney Verba continued along this line in 1963 when they published their ground-breaking study *The Civic Culture*, which systematically measured participatory behaviour across five states to explain for variances in voting and civic engagement. In this study Almond and Verba put the *political culture* of a state front and center – or, the attitudes held by the citizenry towards the political system and the self in relation to that system (Almond and Verba, 1963, 11) – illustrating its outcome from complex processes of socialization involving the myriad of social institutions, such as friends, family, work and the state itself. According to Almond and Verba, the ideal proportions of democratic participation, in terms of voting in times of election and political activity, in a pluralistic *civic culture* should be at about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the population (Almond and Verba, 127).

Through the 1960's and 1970's the western world enjoyed electoral turnouts reflective of Almond and Verba's ideal proportions. However, beginning in the late 1970's and early 1980's participation in the form of voter turnout began to decline in democracies around the world - as such scholarship related to civic engagement began to shift as well, focusing no longer solely on the paradox of participation but the paradox of *non*-participation. Researchers have identified several important factors to explain these trends, the most significant of which are the demographic indicators related to class and poverty – with affluence, socio-economic status and education standing out as major antecedents for voting education (Gidengil et al, 2002, 173-174). The belief, in line with Almond and Verba's resource theory, is that formal political engagement requires a certain level of resources, such as time, money and education, and the absence of these resources results in diminished participatory capacity (Gidengil et al, 174). The same holds true for minority groups, such as those along lines of gender and race, as the institutional legacy of marginalization and social exclusion these groups have faced has resulted in a severe democratic gap, reinforcing overtime a sense of disillusionment in the political process (Brodie, 2002, 392).

The most significant work in this line of literature has been Robert Putnam's landmark Bowling Alone study. Using a battery of national surveys and longitudinal studies, Putnam was able to chart the wide-spread decline in American social engagement not only within the political realm, but in non-political endeavours as well (Putnam, 1993, 65). The study noted a decline not so much of activity in America, but of community engagement - or in Putnam's words, the diminishing of social capital: the connections, networks, group linkages and subsequent norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from social interaction (Putnam, 67-74).

As traditional measures of civic engagement have fallen to some of their lowest levels ever, social scientists have begun to study the mobilization potential of technology – specifically the internet and telecommunications – in fostering participation. This should come as no surprise; while citizens are increasingly 'bowling alone', the online world has expanded exponentially. For example, while only 10% of the US population used the internet in 1995 - around the time Putnam's thesis began to attain global attention - by 2011 this number skyrocketed to 78% (Rill and Cardiel, 2013, 39). And though global internet access remains at slightly above half the world's population with 4.2 billion people having access the years since

2000 have seen international internet access increase by over 1066% (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2018).

Studies into the participatory potential of the internet began in the late 1990s, generally using voter turnout as the outcome measure for participation (Cantijoch, Cutts and Gibson, 2011, 3), attempting to measure how exposure to political information online could potentially enhance the number of votes in times of election. However, these studies, such as Bimber (1999), actually found that the internet did little to actually aid citizen engagement and generally increased participatory biases and indirectly hindered engagement.

However, prior to 2000 the internet was hardly the medium it is today. Usage was limited even within the developed world, let alone globally, and its place in the political theatre was similarly rudimentary. Politicians would use websites as glorified yard signs, online content was largely a regurgitation of offline copy and the maximum participation for users was the basic consumption of information (Towner and Dulio, 2011, 166). This would change drastically with the evolution of the world wide web of old towards the more participatory world of social media (Effing, Van Hillgersberg and Huibers, 28).

With the rise of Web 2.0 technology – which seeks to allow users to become content creators, creating and exchanging their own content and information throughout their personal networks – social media sites have flourished throughout the internet, and their usage is now becoming a foundational social norm of contemporary times. With over one billion users world-wide, Facebook is the undisputed king of the social media world, but sites such as YouTube, Twitter, Tumblr and Wikipedia are nearly as ubiquitous in the domain of social media (Effing, Van Hillgersberg and Huibers, 25).

Soon enough debates began in the literature as to whether these sites would truly allow people to meaningfully participate in public life, or whether they merely foster shallow relationships and hollow forms of slacktivism masquerading as active citizenship (Gladwell, 2010; Zungia, Jung and Valenzuela, 2012). While studies in this area have been mixed, with some highlighting the effectiveness of social media in fostering social capital and participatory behavior and others maintaining that the semblance of public sphere activity online is an illusion (Raine et al., 2012, 6; Morozov, 2009; Bimber, 1999), what the literature does seem to indicate is that social media use does seem to positively correlate with pro-social behaviors that foster the foundations of civic engagement offline, such as personal political efficacy, information seeking and learning (Towner and Dulio, 183; Zungia, Jung, Valenzuela, 322; Kaid and Postelnicu, 2005, 275).

Network studies has emerged as a key field in the study of social media and political participation. For Shirky (2011), electronic participation through social media facilitates the expansion of not only personal networks, but political ones as well, with users potentially reaching a new level of enfranchisement through simple dialogue with other actors, interests, affinities and organizations – both non-governmental and governmental alike – within these

networks. Additionally, using Letour's Actor Network Theory (ANT), Joia and Soares (2018) have brought attention to the ways in which social media sites *themselves* have emerged as integral non-human actors within networks of political activity. According to these authors, as social media usage has become fundamentally tied to how citizens gather political information, frame political events and mobilize both in civil society and the institutions of democracy, contemporary participatory behaviour simply cannot be grasped without a consideration of the fundamental ways in which social media not only facilitates behaviour, but shapes it as well.

The power of social media as a machine of political mobilization has arguably had its most profound impacts in relation to social movements in the contemporary era. According to Sidney Tarrow's work on cycles of contention (1994), social movements are in essence the manifestation of political grievances in civil society to the extent that citizens are compelled to engage in collective activity in order to promote political change. For collective action to occur within civil society, social movements require a combination of political opportunity, resource management and organization, and discursive mobilization to catalyze mere grievance into a full-on movement (Tarrow, 1994). In the case of mobilization and discursive engagement, the growth of social media has made an innumerable contribution to spread and activation of movements across the world, shifting the locus of social movement theory and practice from internal, state-centered approaches to global, transnational forms (Keck and Sikkink, 1999; Earl, 2015). This recent thread of scholarship has identified the key role political activity on social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook have had in the manifestation of global protest movements and battles for justice across the globe – not only in established democracies.

Gleason (2013) highlighted the important role social media platforms had in the manifestation of the #Occupy movement, where citizens throughout the western world challenged the public discourse on inequality, the concentration of wealth and the overarching global capitalist system through numerous social jamming occupations in major western economic hubs. For Gleason, despite the movements failure to create lasting change, it still marked a major landmark for the intersection of political participation and the online world, as the engine of the movement laid in the widespread usage of social media apps on mobile devices, as they allowed participants to share images, videos and experiences of protest and occupation in real time to people around the world, as well as mobilize and participate in offline, real world demonstrations globally (ibid, 973-974).

#Occupy was hardly an isolated incident noted by the academy. From the mobilizing of protests and demonstrations on Twitter to bring about Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution in 2010 (Diroz, 2013, 69) to #sidibouzyd's continued prominence throughout the Middle East as cry against injustice and a rallying call during Arab Spring (Gleason, 967) to the integral usage of social media in protests by the underclass against oppression in Brazil's 20 Cent Movement (Joia and Soares, 2018), there has been a growing acknowledgement in the literature of the impact of social media on civil society. Jurgenson (2012) has likened this intimate connection between the digital and physical worlds in contemporary transnational social movements to technologies of

augmented reality. In his view social movements today simply cannot be fully grasped without an understanding of the fundamental merger between the online and the offline, where social media acts as the primary site for information-gathering, discursive diffusion and mobilization which then is articulated atop the physical world in the form of protest and activism (Jurgenson, 2012).

In the case of understanding the proliferation of populist movements in the global north, the role of social media cannot be understated in its contemporary manifestation. Populism is a term of great variance in definition, but at its core it is a thin-centered ideology grounded on a small spectrum of constitutive concepts, namely a hierarchical and segmented view of society into antagonistic and homogenous groups – the people and the corrupt elite (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013). As its nomenclature indicates, the focus in populist ideology often rests on ‘the people’ and the construction of this group as reflective of the general will – reducing elites and those that deviate from the ideological pretenses of ‘the people’ as the other, and a threat to the security and sanctity of a society under attack. Since the 1980s in the global north this has largely taken on a wholly exclusionary character in large part due to the rise of the radical right (ibid), gaining greater ideological ‘thickness’ by being grafted to other aspects of right-wing ideology, such as tradition, nostalgia, and fiscal and social conservatism (Kramer, 2017). In contemporary times the exclusionary rhetoric and elite-lamentation of populism has gained an increased prominence in not only the character of prominent Conservative grassroots movements, but in the rhetoric and success of election campaigns as diverse in background and locale as Donald Trump and Rodrigo Duterte (Williamson, Skocpol and Coggin, 2011; Baldwin-Philippi, 2019).

It is no mere coincidence that this has occurred alongside the proliferation of the internet – and specifically social media – as a ubiquitous aspect of social discourse. Indeed, much of contemporary populism's derision of traditional elites and elite-institutions has ensured a near universal and iron-clad disdain towards traditional legacy media as a tool of the elite to undermine the will of the people (Kramer, 2017). Social media, with its aforementioned central discourse of user-as-content-producer, has presented a parallel of opportunity to the contemporary populist movement: the ability to circumvent and undermine legacy media in sending out unfiltered messages in support of its ideology, and the creation of an environment for socialization, mobilization, narrative construction and overall ideological expansion (ibid, 1302). This has resulted in particular stylized forms of communication in populist social media usage involving consistent narratives, symbols, images and memes as a means of reinforcing presuppositions and attitudes (ibid), as well as communication strategies that signify a sense of authenticity, “realness” and grassroots connection (Baldwin-Philippi, 378). Though the nature of these strategies and forms of communication vary depending on whether used online by elite, organized actors versus non-organized, ‘citizen’ actors – such as the use of derogatory terms and racial slurs, which are typically *non-grata* for the former and of fair use for the latter – they are still indicative of populist social media usage broadly speaking (Kramer, 1300). Indeed, even

when looking at the communication techniques of the presidential campaign of US President Donald Trump, the evocation of the media as enemy proudly stood alongside 'all-caps' messages riddled with grammatical errors, re-tweets of regular citizens and images of Pepe the Frog all as a means to consolidate grassroots connection and reinforce a particular identity of nationhood and an ideological identity of who belongs and who should be excluded (Baldwin-Philippi, 376-377).

Without much surprise, when looking at the Twitter strategy of Maxime Bernier and the People's Party of Canada it has often been rife with similar communication strategies and narrative tools, heralding the Canadian state's mosaic stance towards diversity as weakness as opposed to strength, and using meme's nudging followers towards 'taking the red pill' to free their minds from the Matrix-apparent of Canadian PC culture. But how have citizens on Twitter responded to these techniques in the Canadian context? It is the goal of this paper to offer an illustration of just that.

## **Methodology**

The present study is a content analysis of the Twitter dialogue surrounding the launch of the People's Party of Canada on Friday September 14, 2018. The initial research design structured around replies made by users to tweets by major Canadian political/institutional gatekeepers on the PPC launch in the 24-hour period surrounding the announcement. Three groups of information gatekeepers were selected: intra-party gatekeepers, intra-political gatekeepers and extra-institutional gatekeepers. For the first group, analysis would focus on replies to tweets made by the official Twitter accounts of Maxime Bernier and the People's Party of Canada. For the second, tweets made by the official accounts of the major federal political parties – that is the Liberal Party of Canada, the Conservative Party of Canada, the New Democratic Party, the Green Party and the Bloc Quebecois – alongside tweets made by the leaders of the parties and the 338 current sitting members of the Canadian House of Commons were to be the target group. Finally for group three, the content of replies to tweets made by major Canadian media organizations would be analyzed – this sample would focus on individual tweets made by major national legacy news media organizations, namely CBC News, CTV News, Power and Politics (a CBC News current affairs show dedicated to Canadian Politics), Global News' The West Block and the Toronto Star, Canada's largest circulated daily newspaper. For this group a single tweet from each was selected, generally when each of these media organizations first broke the story on Twitter, using only the first tweet in a potential thread as the source to which replies would be drawn.

Early in the design execution it was discovered that source tweets for the second group – intra-political gatekeepers – would be insufficient as only one official Twitter account in the entirety of Canada's political system made a post directly referencing the PPC launch on the day of: the Conservative Party of Canada. As a result an additional content sample was added to the research design, focusing on a broad sample of tweets made about the PPC launch on September

14<sup>th</sup> – these tweets were compiled using Twitter's advanced search for the presence of key hashtags, namely #maximebernier and #peoplespartyofcanada, as well as the presence of the phrase "maxime bernier" and tweets mentioning and made towards Bernier's official Twitter handle. As the Twitter API allows for access to a randomized sample of 1% of all relevant items in such a search query (Ahmed, Bath and Demartini, 2017) these tweets were considered as a representative sample of the broader conversation occurring on Twitter. In the end 572 tweets made up the experimental sample of this content analysis.

Tweets were compiled and coded using NVivo 12 Plus, a qualitative analysis tool developed by QSR International. The various tweets and replies were subject to qualitative coding along a matrix of a wide breadth of categories, as illustrated in Figures 1(a) and 1(b) below. Broadly speaking, each tweet was categorized as being negative, positive or non-affective in nature, with the specific content of each reply being codified in terms of the primary subject matter of the tweet. For the broad categories of 'negative' and 'positive' the content of each tweet was analyzed for the presence of the following five broad focal categories: tweets specifically about Maxime Bernier, tweets about the People's Party of Canada itself, tweets on Canadian politics more broadly, intra-Twitter dialogue (that is, replying directly to the original tweeting account, not necessarily mentioning Bernier or the PPC) and inter-Twitter dialogue (that is, replying directly to other users replying to a tweet, not necessarily mentioning Bernier or the PPC).

For non-affective tweets, tweets were codified along 3 categories: informational, deleted and uncodable. For informational, these were tweets that contained no affective statement on Bernier or the PPC, but rather were sharing information on the announcement to followers, free of overt bias or evaluative language and sentiments. Deleted tweets were simply tweets that were unavailable – this lack of availability could be for a number of reasons, such as the original user deleting the tweet or the account associated with the tweet, the tweet being flagged for violating Twitter's terms of service or the original users account being suspended for similar violations of service. Finally, uncodable tweets were, in a sense, everything else – tweets where the content could not be coded or deciphered as falling under any of the evaluative categories.



Negative	1) Tweets about Maxime Bernier.	2) Tweets about the People’s PPC.	3) Tweets about Canadian Politics.	4) Intra-Twitter Dialogue.	5) Inter-Twitter Dialogue.
Positive	1) Tweets about Maxime Bernier.	2) Tweets about the PPC.	3) Tweets about Canadian Politics.	4) Intra-Twitter Dialogue.	5) Inter-Twitter Dialogue.
Non-Affective	1) Informational.	2) Deleted.	3) Uncodable.		

Figure 1(a): Coding Matrix – General Coding Categories

1) Tweets about Maxime Bernier:	2) Tweets about the PPC	3) Tweets about Canadian Politics	Intra-Twitter Dialogue	Inter-Twitter Dialogue
a) Ideological	a) Ideological	a) Ideological	a) Ideological	a) Ideological
b) Issue-focused: i) Economic ii) Global iii) Social	b) Issue-focused i) Economic ii) Global iii) Social	b) Issue-focused i) Economic ii) Global iii) Social	b) Issue-focused i) Economic ii) Global iii) Social	b) Issue-focused i) Economic ii) Global iii) Social
c) Leadership-focused	c) Democratic	c) Party System i) CPC ii) LPC iii) NDP iv) Other	c) Personal	c) Personal
d) Personality-focused	d) Ironic/Meme/Joke	d) State of Canadian Democracy	d) Ironic/Meme/Joke	d) Ironic/Meme/Joke
e) Ironic/Meme/Joke		e) Ironic/Meme/Joke		

Figure 1(b): Negative and Positive Coding Matrix - Detailed

A strict rulebook was followed regarding coding, with each tweet only being tallied for the presence of a single code, even in situations where more than one content code was present. Where more than one content code was present in a tweet coding priority was given firstly in terms of overt expression - that is, if one content frame is explicitly expressed in clear and straight-forward language, while others are present but are less straight-forward in terms of language or require interpretation to be coded, then the tweet was coded in line with the more explicit frame. For example, consider the tweet below:

I wonder how many days until **Maxime Bernier's** People's Party of Canada is openly flirting with the NRA, white national groups and the abortion-obsessed evangelicals? I give it a week.

Figure 2: Example of the Presence of Multiple Codes

While the tweet specifically references both Maxime Bernier and ideological concerns this tweet is primarily a negative evaluation of the PPC on the grounds of policies of social significance – therefore it was codified in the Negative 2(b)(ii) node within the coding matrix. In the rare case that more than a single form of content was overtly expressed in equal measure within a tweet, priority was given to the form of content that occupied the greatest amount of space/number of characters in a tweet. If no single codification could be derived from these two methods, then the tweet was coded as uncodable to avoid inferring meaning without greater contextual information – interpretation of the text or ‘reading between the lines’ beyond the text within the tweet was prohibited in this project.

For the tweets and replies where content was predominantly focused on Maxime Bernier – column 1 for both the Negative and Positive categories - tweets were specifically coded as being either ideological in nature, issue-based, leadership-focused, personality-focused or ironic. For the ideological category, whether critical or supportive of Bernier, the content of the tweet was steeped in political values, with evaluations being based on/expressed in terms of ideational concepts in line with particular political ideologies, whether populist, liberal, conservative or collectivist to name a few. Other considerations were the presence of ideologically-charged language or narratives above areas of policy, and the presence of ‘blind’ support or criticism in terms of policy. For tweets to be coded as issue-based content needed to focus specifically on policy and political considerations – this was further broken down and categorized in terms of the area of policy mentioned within the tweet, specifically: economic (where content was explicitly about issues of trade, the economy, taxation or spending), global (where content was explicitly about Canada’s place in the world and specific global commitments and concerns, such as immigration, climate change and security) and social (where content was explicitly related to social issues and areas of social policy, such as diversity, equality, health care, pensions, social investment and education to name a few).

For the democratic code within the Bernier set, the content of the tweet needed to speak specifically of Maxime Bernier’s capacity as a representative voice for the tweeting individual, whereas the personality-focused code required the expression of an evaluative statement of Bernier’s personality. While these two frames are similar the former was concerned with his

capacity as an MP or political representative – in essence, a professional assessment – while the latter is focused entirely on personality traits and Bernier as an individual beyond his capacity as a political agent. Finally the ironic/meme/joke code was used when the primary expression of the tweet was ironic or comedic – clearly any sardonic tweet would feature the presence of other forms of content, but these tweets put humour and irony ahead of political and ideological content in terms of overt expression. Meme-usage was also a key indicator for this tweet, as long as the meme itself was comedic and ironic in tone.

As is evident in Figure 1b, ideology, policy and irony were present across all affectively-codable content categories in the coding matrix. In line with previous content analyses I've executed I have found these three tonal categories to represent the main forms of tone present in Twitter civil society dialogue (Hameed, 2019 and Hameed, 2019 – forthcoming). While tone may be placed in a secondary position in overt expression over other forms of content, these three categories are nearly always present and as such were given placement in all codable affective content-categories.

For tweets on the PPC, in both positive and negative capacity, the three key tonal indicators of ideology, policy and irony were coding categories alongside a democratic category. In this category assessments on the PPC were potentially made – either positively or negatively – based on the PPC's performance as a representative party, its potential impact on the institutions of democracy in Canada and ultimately assessments of its potential effectiveness in the Canadian body politic.

As not all tweets related to the PPC launch were predominantly about the PPC or Mr. Bernier additional categories were added to consider dialogue on the Canadian political environment more broadly as well as the dialogue that occurred between users. For the former, in both positive and negative cases, categories included the three main tonal indicators, as well as categories for tweets focused on the other major political parties in Canada and the general state of Canadian politics as well. For the latter two different dialogue categories were set, the first – intra-Twitter dialogue – codified replies where the content of the tweet was predominantly targeted towards the original tweet in a thread. In the case of the second category – inter-Twitter dialogue – the content of replies were predominantly coded in relation to other replying tweets. Figure 3 below illustrates the difference between the two, with the reply on top being indicative of intra-Twitter dialogue and those on the bottom being examples of inter-Twitter dialogue.



This is disgraceful, is this what the CBC is turning into. Mr. Wells and the rest of the people should apologize

These kinds of "stupid" ppl enthusiastically elected ppl like Doug Ford or Trump who gave no actual plans to address their grievances, & have proceeded to discover that they have no plans to address their grievances  
Complain about ~\$400b Obama deficit, get ~\$1t Trump deficit

Obama added 10 trillion to the debt in 8 years. What are you talking about?

Figure 3: Examples of Intra-Twitter vs. Inter-Twitter Dialogue

For both intra- and inter-Twitter dialogue categories, in negative and positive classifications, the content codes included the three primary tonal categories as well as a code on personal communication, which was used if the content of the tweet was predominantly in reference to another user. This could take the form of a personal attack or insult in the case of negatively coded content or a compliment for positive content. Regardless if the content of the tweet referenced Bernier, the party or Canadian politics more broadly, if the specific target of the tweet was another individual user it was coded within the intra- and inter-dialogue categories.

## Results

In total 572 tweets across reply and general tweet categories were subject to the above coding matrix. Broadly speaking 325 tweets were negative in nature, 151 were positive and 96 were classified within non-affective coding categories. Breaking down the specific content of the negatively charged tweets 77 were predominantly in reference to Maxime Bernier, while 134 were predominantly about the PPC, meaning that 211 of the total number of tweets surrounding the launch of the PPC were critical of Bernier or the party – or 36.89%.

For critical tweets of Bernier 9 tweets were ideological in nature, 10 were issue-based – half of which were in reference to his stand on important social issues, largely diversity – and 35 were ironic or humorous. Only 2 critical tweets focused on issues of leadership, while 21 were critical of Bernier based on personality.

In terms of tweets critical of the People's Party of Canada, over half – 76 of the 134 tweets, or 56.72% - were ironic or humorous, often lambasting the PPC acronym in a variety of hilarious ways (generally within the realm of what is best described as “toilet humour”). 37 tweets were critical along ideological lines, often coming from other conservatives or libertarians criticizing the party's attempt to straddle both movements, 13 were issue-based and 7 were democratically based criticisms.

38 tweets critiqued elements of the broader Canadian political landscape – of these the largest proportion was related to critiques of other parties, totaling 16, with 11 targeting the Conservative Party of Canada and its leadership and 5 critiquing Justin Trudeau and the Liberal Party of Canada. In terms of the major tonal categories 5 of the negative tweets on Canadian politics were ideological in nature, 8 were issue-based and no ironic or meme-based tweets were coded. 8 tweets were critical of the larger state of Canadian politics.

Regarding the negative forms of dialogue occurring on Twitter in relation to the launch of the PPC, 43 tweets were coded within intra-Twitter dialogue categories while 33 were coded within inter-Twitter dialogue categories. For the former in terms of the primary tonal categories 9 tweets were ideologically coded, 7 issue-based and 11 were meme/humour-related; 16 were personal, largely constituting personal attacks towards Paul Wells in a tweet made by CBC's Power and Politics regarding his appearance on the show where he labelled Bernier's supporters as “the dumbest people on the internet”. In the case of negative inter-Twitter dialogue 8 tweets were coded as ideological, 11 were policy-based and 5 were humorous, with 9 tweets falling under the personal category. The results of the negative-coded contingent of the sample are summarized below in Figure 4(a).

1) Maxime Bernier: 77	2) PPC: 134	3) Canadian Pol.: 38	4) Intra-Twitter: 43	5) Inter-Twitter: 33
a) Ideological: 9	a) Ideological: 37	a) Ideological: 5	a) Ideological: 9	a) Ideological: 8
b) Issue-focused: 10 i) Economic: 2 ii) Global: 3 iii) Social: 5	b) Issue-focused:13 i) Economic: 1 ii) Global: 4 iii) Social: 8	b) Issue-focused: 8 i) Economic: 1 ii) Global: 5 iii) Social: 2	b) Issue-focused: 7 i) Economic: 0 ii) Global: 3 iii) Social: 4	b) Issue-focused: 11 i) Economic: 1 ii) Global: 8 iii) Social: 2
c) Leadership-focused: 2	c) Democratic: 7	c) Party System: 16 i) CPC:11 ii) LPC: 5 iii) NDP: 0 iv) Other: 0	c) Personal: 16	c) Personal: 9
d) Personality-focused: 21	d) Ironic/Meme/Joke: 76	d) State of Cda: 8	d)Ironic/Meme/Joke: 11	d) Ironic/Meme/Joke: 5
e) Ironic/Meme/Joke: 35		e) Ironic/Meme/Joke:0		<b>Total Negative: 325</b>

Figure 4a): Results – Negative-Coded Tweets

1) Maxime Bernier: 50	2) PPC: 72	3) Canadian Pol.: 5	4) Intra-Twitter: 10	5) Inter-Twitter: 14
a) Ideological: 17	a) Ideological: 30	a) Ideological: 1	a) Ideological: 1	a) Ideological: 5
b) Issue-focused: 2 i) Economic: 1 ii) Global: 0 iii) Social: 1	b) Issue-focused:7 i) Economic: 3 ii) Global: 2 iii) Social: 2	b) Issue-focused: 2 i) Economic: 0 ii) Global: 1 iii) Social: 1	b) Issue-focused: 3 i) Economic: 1 ii) Global: 1 iii) Social: 1	b) Issue-focused: 2 i) Economic: 0 ii) Global: 1 iii) Social: 1
c) Leadership-focused: 18	c) Democratic: 27	c) Party System: 3 i) CPC:1 ii) LPC: 2 iii) NDP: 0 iv) Other: 0	c) Personal: 2	c) Personal: 5
d) Personality-focused: 7	d) Ironic/Meme/Joke: 8	d) State of Cda: 1	d)Ironic/Meme/Joke: 4	d) Ironic/Meme/Joke: 2
e) Ironic/Meme/Joke: 6		e) Ironic/Meme/Joke:0		<b>Total Positive: 151</b>

Figure 4b): Results – Positive-Coded Tweets

A total of 151 tweets were coded as being positive in nature; of these tweets 50 were categorized as positive assessments of Maxime Bernier and 72 were coded as positive statements on the PPC.

For Bernier 17 of these positive assessments were predominantly ideological, only 2 were issue-based and 6 used humour; 7 tweets focused on his personality, while 18 praised him from a leadership point of view. In terms of positive views towards the PPC, 30 were ideological, 7 were issue-based and 8 used humour, while 27 predominantly exhibited democratically based content in their positive assessment. Positive assessments of Canadian politics were relatively scant compared to other categories, only totalling 5, while positive intra- and inter-Twitter dialogue was similarly less prevalent compared to their presence in negative terms. The findings as it relates to tweets coded within the positive categories are summarized above in Figure 4(b).

Finally, a total of 96 tweets were coded within non-affective categories. 28 of these tweets were informational in nature, whereas a total of 25 were deleted or unavailable at the time of compiling and 43 were uncodable. The uncodable category consisted largely of tweets that had no predominant code, were undecipherable in terms of meaning or required a level of context and interpretation beyond the tweet itself, thus were deemed unusable for the analysis.

## Discussion

From the dataset above several noteworthy trends can be extracted regarding the dialogue on Twitter surrounding the launch of the People's Party of Canada. The first is the general negative reception on Twitter towards Maxime Bernier's announcement of the new party. As evident in the figures above, negatively charged tweets represented the majority (56.82%) of all tweets within the sample set – interestingly, when isolating tweets that directly referenced Bernier and the PPC criticism increased to an even larger degree. Of the 127 tweets that were coded as being predominantly grounded on statements about Maxime Bernier 77 were critical of Bernier, amounting to 60.63% of all tweets falling under Bernier categories, nearly 4% higher than the general level of negatively charged chatter on Twitter on topics related to the launch. On the topic of the PPC criticism was even greater, with 134 of the 206 tweets coded under PPC categories – or 65.05% of all PPC-related tweets in the sample – being critical in nature. Taken together, 63.63% of tweets where the content was explicitly about Maxime Bernier and the People's Party of Canada held them in a negative regard, which is nearly 7% above the base level of negative tweets noted in the sample.

The data appears to indicate a strong negative trend on assessments towards the PPC and its leader on the day of the party's launch. While these negative assessments fall short of taking up a majority in relation to *all* tweets in the sample, as previously mentioned, together they still represent an incredibly large block of the total number of tweets in the experimental sample, representing 36.89% of all tweets across categories. As illustrated by the coding hierarchy in Figure 5 below these tweets alone outnumber all tweets coded within the various positive categories *combined*.

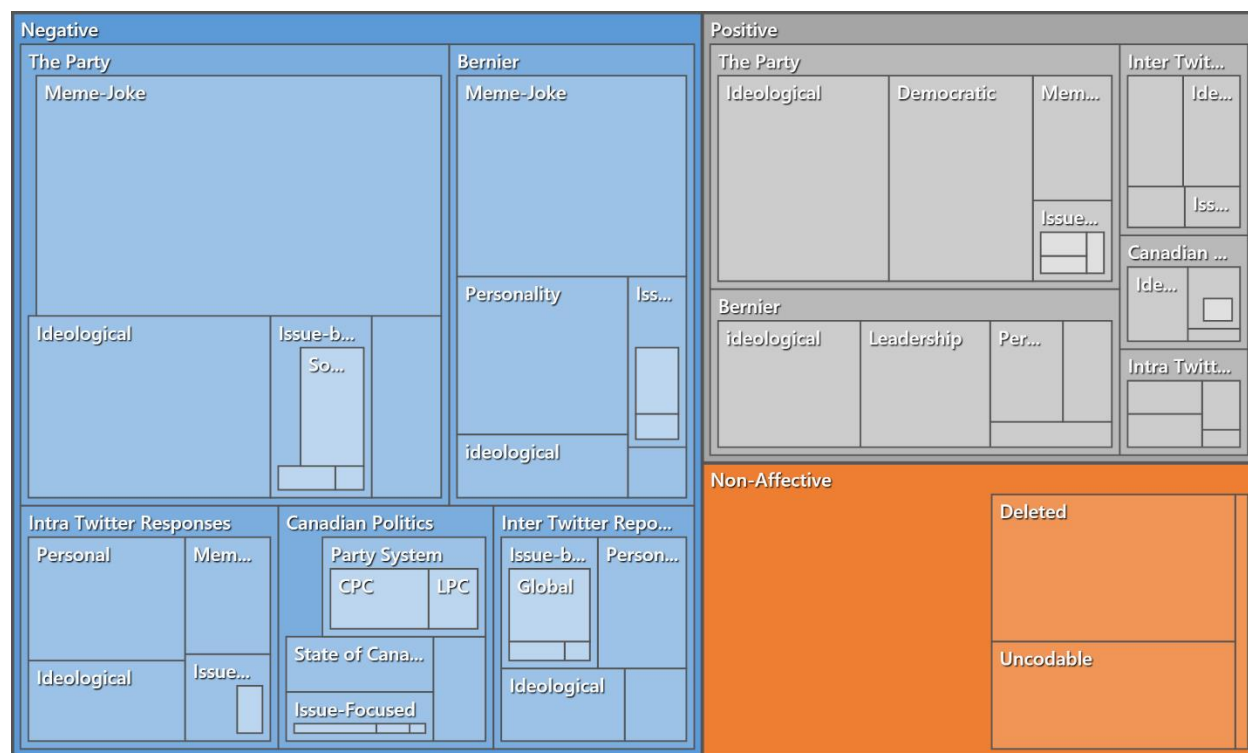


Figure 5: Coding Results Hierarchy Chart

The above chart also illustrates important trends regarding the prevalence of the three major tonal categories across different content codes. Broadly speaking across all coding categories irony/humour was the tone most often coded with 147 tweets predominantly featuring content using a sardonic tone; this was followed by ideological content at a total of 126 coded tweets and issue-based tweets rounding out the three tonal categories at 63. Between positively and negatively charged tweets however there were some important differences, the most glaring of which being the inversion of ironic and ideological tonal tweets between the two – in the case of negatively charged tweets, irony and comedy remain the most common tone, being the predominant code in 127 of the 244 tweets coded within tonal categories in the negative cohort of the sample – or 52.05% of those tweets. In the case of the positive group, tweets predominantly coded with ideological language or laden in political values represented the majority at 58 of the 92 tonally coded tweets, or 63.04% of the group.

Does this mean people who engage in positive interaction on Twitter generally do so in ideological terms? Obviously, the answer is no and, as above, when isolating content specifically related to Maxime Bernier and the PPC the truth behind these trends becomes quite clear. In the case of Bernier-related content, of the 25 positively charged – and generally supportive - tweets that were coded for predominantly exhibiting one of the three major tones 17 were coded as being in the language of ideology and political values, or 68% of this group. This compared to 6 using irony or comedy in supportive statements, and only 2 tweets supporting Maxime Bernier

coded for using issue or policy-based language. The prominence of ideology in supportive tweets was also evident in content surrounding the PPC – 45 tweets were coded as falling under positive tonal categories in reference to the PPC, of which 30 (or 66.67%) were classified as being ideological in nature, compared to 7 being issue- or policy-based and 8 using irony and humour.

In total, ideologically coded content within positive Bernier and PPC categories represented 66.20% of tonal tweets, illustrating a clear ideological trend in the language used by supporters of Bernier and PPC in this sample on the day of the announcement. This bedrock of ideological support for Bernier and the PPC ultimately represented 38.52% of all tweets in support of Maxime Bernier and the PPC within the sample group.

The story for those critical of Bernier and the PPC is similar to the trends above noted around ideological content, but with the major caveat that criticism towards Bernier and the PPC was largely steeped in ironic and comedic language, combining their critique with memes and mockery. As mentioned, across all tonal categories – both positive and negative – tweets coded for ironic language represented the largest proportion of content, with 147 of the 336 specifically tonal tweets being coded as such. The vast majority of ironic tweet classification occurred within negatively charged categories, with 127 of the 147 total humorous tweets being codified within critical groups.

When focusing in specifically on critical tweets related to Bernier and the PPC it becomes immediately clear that the majority of ironic content and a large proportion of more generally critical content related to them was comedic in tone. For tweets related to Bernier specifically, 35 of the 54 tonally-coded tweets criticizing him were coded as falling under the irony/humour code, representing 64.81% of this group outnumbering all tonally-supportive tweets on Bernier *combined*. Similarly, in regard to PPC tonal tweets, 76 of the 126 tweets critical of the party were coded as ironic, representing 60.32% of this group and similarly outnumbering all tonally-supportive tweets related to the party combined.

Taking the Bernier and PPC data together, ironic-critical tweets totalled 111, widely outnumbering the 15 ironic-supportive tweets and the combined 71 tonally-supportive tweets within the Bernier/PPC categories. In fact, as Figure 5 above visualizes well, ironic-critical tweets of Bernier and the PPC alone come close to equalling all tweets supportive of Bernier and the PPC combined. In fact this single category falls short of eclipsing the gamut of tweets in support of Bernier and the PPC (that is, including the Bernier categories of leadership and personality, and the democratic PPC category) by just 11 coded tweets. This combined Bernier/PPC ironic-critical category also unsurprisingly represents the bedrock of all criticism levied against Bernier and the PPC (including the aforementioned leadership and personality categories for the former and the democratic one for the latter), representing 52.61% of those combined categories. In total, the combined Bernier/PPC ironic-critical tweets represent nearly one fifth of all the sample data, with 19.41% of all tweets analyzed in this study falling in these two categories.



These above trends illustrate the diverging nature of support versus criticism of Maxime Bernier and the People's Party of Canada within this sample taken on the day of the party's announcement. Support for the PPC largely fell under ideological lines, with the vast majority of positive statements made regarding Bernier and the party brand being steeped in political values first and foremost. For critics, their laments of Bernier and his brand came largely in the form of lampooning his opinions, his choice of acronym and his larger political ideology and support base. While these tweets also featured a myriad of content forms, they put irony and mockery to the fore, eviscerating the populist tropes of the party through ridicule alongside substantive criticism.

As mentioned, for both critics and supporters of Bernier and the PPC – and positive- and negative-coded tweets more broadly – issue-based assessments were the least-present tonal coding category in the sample. In the case of tonal tweets related to Maxime Bernier and the PPC, the presence of issue-based tweets was incredibly low among the supportive cohort, amounting to only 12.67% of these tweets – or a total of 9. While in terms of sheer presence the incidence of issue-based criticisms in the Bernier and PPC categories are higher - with 23 of these tweets predominantly exhibiting issue- and policy-based content - as a percentage of the overall number of critical tweets coded for tone this category amounted to only 12.78%, just marginally more the support cohort.

A final important trend in this data lies in reference to the nature of dialogue on Twitter. While the sample data around intra- and inter-Twitter dialogue is significantly less prevalent than commentary on Bernier and the PPC – unfortunately as much a reflection of issues with Twitter data extraction with NVivo as an issue of incidence – there are still important inferences that can be made from the data available. The first is that dialogue between users in this sample set was largely adversarial in nature. For both intra- and inter-Twitter dialogue sets, negatively charged tweets outnumber positively charged ones – in the case of replies coded in the intra-Twitter category 81.13% were negatively charged in nature, with the largest proportion of replies being coded as personal attacks. It is worth mentioning however that content from this particular category was especially salient in response to the tweet by Power and Politics featuring Paul Wells, with responders often lamenting the feed for Wells' incendiary comments regarding PPC-supporter intelligence. In the case of inter-Twitter dialogue between responding users however the data is still negatively slanted, with 70.21% of content coded within this larger category being negative in nature.

While this does point to the adversarial nature of political discourse on Twitter, the data in this sample also seems to herald an important degree of debate and contestation occurring on Twitter more broadly. Instead of falling into silos and echo-chambers, it seems that much of the dialogue occurring between users involves the clash of opposing viewpoints and the argumentation therein. Whether or not this is has manifested in healthy forms of debate or spiteful laments was unfortunately beyond the scope of this project, but remains an important area to explore in future research.

## Conclusion

The preceding content analysis was an attempt to sketch from the canvas of Twitter a broad tapestry of the viral dialectic surrounding Maxime Bernier's announcement of the People's Party of Canada on September 14, 2018. Charting the commentary of actor and citizen alike as Bernier heralded a new Canadian populism steeped within the nation's clefs and crevices of identity and region, this paper sought to illustrate the diverse composition of that commentary, the myriad of subject-matter that ground it and the various tones it took. Broadly speaking, the sample here indicated that Bernier's political brand was met largely with criticism – derided for its assumptions and lampooned for its message and ill-advised acronym. The sample here illustrated that for many Canadians Bernier's signals to nativism and message of 'diversity as weakness' was cast aside with a laugh and teased for good measure. And for those minority voices that supported it, their support was largely grounded on statements of values, identity and a rejection of the ideologies that Bernier sought to attack.

While this project yielded great fruit, there were some significant limitations I hope to address in future research. The first relates to the primary unit of analysis in this paper: tweets. While replies and general tweets were relatively easy to compile, they only represent a portion of the important viral dialogue occurring on Twitter every day, neglecting important tweet-types such as quoted retweets and splinter replies, where over the course of the dialogue the object of the conversation changes (i.e. the original directed Twitter handle is taken out and replaced by a new handle over the course of a conversation). Especially in the case of the former – which sees users quoting a subject tweet and prefacing it with their own tweet - these two important areas of Twitter dialogue are becoming increasingly common, and their neglect narrowed the scope of this paper. While NVivo does allow for the compiling of this content, unfortunately there are some obstacles within the program itself towards making it codable – ideally with further engagement of the program I will be able to find a work-around that will allow this content to become usable within the sample data of future projects.

Related to this was issues of timing. While NVivo allows for the compiling of Twitter data without limitations of time, the nature of that compilation changes drastically beyond the first two weeks of posting. Within the first two weeks of a post, content is extracted as an entire dataset, with individual tweets, retweets and even likes appearing as easily searchable and codable datapoints. After the initial two weeks of posting however information can only be compiled as visual data in the form of a PDF – and an imperfect PDF at that. In the face of large content files being shared within Twitter posts, such as videos, the extraction of data becomes far more problematic, and in some cases impossible. Unfortunately this content analysis was done several months after the posting of the targeted sample set, so data extraction was a major concern that limited the scope of what this analysis could have been. For future research the time-sensitive nature of NVivo extraction will be taken into consideration, or another content analysis tool without these temporal limitations will be considered. Even beyond NVivo's limitations of time, the sheer number of deleted tweets – including Maxime Bernier's own

deleting of his announcement tweets beyond a single interview – further heralds the importance of avoiding delays in executing such a content analysis, a notion future research must consider.

Additionally, because of time and budgetary limitations, content codification was left to the subjectivities of an individual analyst. While strict adherence to the coding rules was practiced diligently, the simple fact is when using a single coder, the potential impact of individual bias and subjectivity seeping into content coding is unfortunately difficult to avoid. Where replies may straddle the line between, for example, one's personal conservative proclivities and actual insight into economic policy, the perspective of the coder becomes of paramount importance in terms of how the data is coded. For future research, I hope to mitigate the role of individual bias by using multiple coders and a combination of using mean data between datasets and developing a more robust coding rulebook as an avenue to avoid bias and promote intercoder reliability.

Next, this present content analysis was grounded solely on Twitter usage. With over 336 million active users, Twitter is one of the most widely-used social media platforms on the planet, and arguably the most active of all in relation to political engagement and civil society activity, with political actor, agent and subject alike engaging the body politic in unison. However, it is also a fundamentally mainstream application, and I cannot help but wonder how the data present would change in the face of using a different Web 2.0 platform, such as Reddit or 4Chan – or even niche right-wing platforms like Gab and Stormfront. Obviously the loss of analytical clout would be noted, as the presence of key public gatekeepers would – ideally for their sake – be non-existent in these particular online contexts; but it doesn't diminish the simple fact that Twitter does not speak for the entirety of digital agoras on internet, and the consideration of the composition of activity on these other social media sites as an avenue for future research presents an interesting opportunity to expand the line of study presented here.

Regardless though, this study sought to illustrate the importance of social media in contemporary political discourse as a key site for dialogue, activity and resistance. As the ubiquity of social media platforms continues to grow, scholars have a unique opportunity to use these applications as a source for data and a field for research. While social media does present a rather dubious playing-field given the spectre of data collection, issues of privacy and the growth of strategic social media usage through fake accounts, bots and the spread of misinformation, it is still an increasingly important part of the contemporary body politic, and the academy does itself – nor the state of the above issues – any favours by neglecting its paramount place in politics today.

From political campaigns to collective civic action, from public debates to world-changing revolutions, viral political participation and activity has emerged as a fundamental part of how politics is practiced, and a major facilitator of the dialogue it produces. This study sought to add to the literature on political activity by illustrating this simple fact, alongside the important nuances in the nature of viral political communication and their important contextual elements.

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