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À propos du PhiLab | About PhiLab

Le **Réseau canadien de recherche partenariale sur la philanthropie** (PhiLab) a été créé en 2014 dans le cadre d'une demande de financement « développement de partenariat » obtenue du Conseil de recherche en sciences humaines du Canada (CRSH). Ce financement a été reconduit en 2018 pour six années par l'obtention d'une subvention « partenariat » du CRSH. Depuis 2024, PhiLab profite de financements octroyés par différentes fondations dont la Fondation Lucie et André Chagnon et la Fondation Mirella et Lino Saputo. Le Réseau pancanadien constitue un lieu de recherche partenarial, de partage d'information, de mobilisation des connaissances sur la philanthropie subventionnaire et de formation à la recherche. Les activités de recherche conduites en partenariat valorisent les connaissances auprès d'une diversité d'acteurs sociaux, d'agences gouvernementales, milieux universitaires et petits et grands médias. La valorisation des connaissances, via des outils de communication novateurs et accessibles, permet une diffusion élargie des connaissances produites ou déjà existantes. Le Réseau regroupe des chercheurs, des décideurs et des membres de la communauté philanthropique à travers le monde afin de partager des informations, des ressources et des idées.

The **Canadian network of partnership-oriented research on philanthropy** (PhiLab) was created in 2014 as part of a "partnership development" funding application obtained from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). This funding was renewed in 2018 for six years by obtaining a "partnership" grant from SSHRC. Since 2024, PhiLab has benefited from funding granted by various foundations, including the Fondation Lucie et André Chagnon and the Mirella and Lino Saputo Foundation. The Pan-Canadian Network is a hub for partnership research, information sharing, knowledge mobilization on grantmaking philanthropy and research training. Research activities carried out in partnership promote knowledge among a wide range of social players, government agencies, academics and small and large media. The valorization of knowledge, via innovative and accessible communication tools, enables a wider dissemination of the knowledge produced or already existing.

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PHILANTHROPIE SOUS TENSION | PHILANTHROPY UNDER PRESSURE

Credit : Tommy Trenchard

Connecting the Dots: Investigating Institutional Philanthropy's Support of Right-Wing Populism in Canada

By Adam Saifer, *Co-director of PhiLab* ; **Fahad Ahmad**, *Assistant professor in the Department of Criminology at Toronto Metropolitan University*

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Institutional philanthropy—independent foundations using private assets for public purposes—is widely regarded as an important tool for achieving social inclusion (Canadian Revenue Agency, 2017; Phillips, 2018). Yet, there is growing global evidence suggesting that some philanthropic foundations are propping up movements that deploy violent tactics against immigrants, racialized people, women's rights groups, and other marginalized communities (e.g., Barzegar & Arain, 2019; Kulish & McIntire, 2019; Rosc, 2022). These movements represent the rise of "right-wing populism" (RWP): a nativist ideology that subscribes to a worldview of "pure people" protecting the social order of their nations against corrupt elites and alien others, notably racialized migrants and Muslims (Gerbaudo, 2022; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). In North America and Europe, RWP overlaps with white nationalism, explaining the rise of authoritarian leaders like Donald Trump in the U.S., Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, and Georgia Meloni in Italy.

At a time when Canada is reckoning with the amplification of RWP views—exemplified in the so-called "Freedom Convoy" as well as within electoral politics (Erl, 2020; Kestler-D'Amours, 2022)—this article proposes theoretical mechanisms through which Canadian philanthropy enables and supports RWP organizations and movements that coalesce around white nationalist, anti-immigrant, Islamophobic, and anti-feminist ideologies. While critical scholars have examined the relationship between philanthropy and

social injustice (Paarlberg, 2022) through the lens of colonial dispossession (Villaneuva, 2020), racial capitalism (Saifer & Zanoni, 2024), depoliticization (Francis, 2019), and anti-democracy (Reich, 2018), there remains a gap in the study of ways in which philanthropy knowingly or inadvertently enables RWP movements and organizations. Additionally, while the mechanisms of support for right-wing and fascist movements in Europe and the U.S. have generated considerable research interest (e.g., Bacchetta & Power, 2013; Blee & Creasp, 2010; Rosenthal, 2020; Stefancic & Delgado, 1996), they have received little attention in the Canadian context.

Addressing these gaps, our article proposes four mechanisms through which philanthropy supports RWP. The insights in this article emerge as part of our SSHRC Insight Development Grant funded study that asks: **what role does institutional philanthropy play in the legitimization and mainstreaming of right-wing populism in Canada?** In the SSHRC project, we use a social network analysis to map the extent of financial and board networks between philanthropic institutions and RWP actors and organizations in Canada. We offer novel ways to consider how the philanthropic sector deliberately or inadvertently supports racial, gender, and class inequalities. Additionally, the project generates insight into the material and symbolic modalities through which institutional philanthropy enables RWP to take hold within the national imaginary. Such an investigation is particularly urgent in Canada given the widely held—yet empirically false—assumption that Canada has resisted RWP and white nationalism (Crosby, 2021; Kwak, 2020; Laycock, 2005; Perry & Scrivens, 2015, 2016).

Mechanisms of mainstreaming right-wing populism

Elite philanthropy's power is mainly ideological, which is to say, it is not commonly exercised by making coercive demands but by legitimizing and naturalizing contingent political-economic structures and institutional arrangements (Kapoor, 2012; Roelofs, 2015). Through philanthropy, elites exchange financial capital for symbolic and social capital, which can be leveraged to circulate, reproduce, and validate social programs and discourses that reflect their interests and exclude alternatives in a given context (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2024). To understand the ideological power of philanthropy, the example of climate change funding is instructive. Among a range of market and non-market responses to the climate crisis, progressive foundations in Canada have committed to fighting climate change by funding market-oriented initiatives working toward a net-zero carbon economy. Implied in these efforts is (1) that fighting climate change by reducing CO2 emissions is of vital importance and (2) that fighting climate change is best achieved through market-friendly "green" growth and innovations in the financial sector. This illustrates how philanthropic funding can prioritize particular political-economic agendas.

In this article, we propose four ideological mechanisms through which elite philanthropy facilitates the mainstreaming of RWP ideas and beliefs. We conceptualize mainstreaming as "the process by which [...] discourses and/or attitudes move from marginal positions on the political spectrum or public sphere to more central ones, shifting what is deemed to be acceptable or legitimate in political, media, and public circles and contexts" (Brown et al., 2023, p. 170). Under each proposed mechanism, we highlight cases of foundations that emerge as important nodes in our mapping of financial links and leadership interlocks between philanthropic institutions and RWP actors and organizations in Canada.

What role does institutional philanthropy play in the legitimization and mainstreaming of right-wing populism in Canada?

1. Financing think tanks that push RWP ideas into the mainstream:

Philanthropic funding for conservative think tanks facilitates the movement of RWP ideas into mainstream policy debates. These organizations produce reports, host events, and engage traditional and social media strategies to legitimize xenophobic and exclusionary discourses, framing them as academically grounded or pragmatically necessary. Nativist and racist views are often interspersed with more conventional conservative economic policy positions (e.g., tax cuts and deregulation) in ways that shift the boundaries of what constitutes the conservative mainstream. For example, whereas the Fraser Institute maintains a consistent opposition to taxation, the Aristotle Foundation regularly targets diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies (e.g., Haskell, 2024). Think tanks like the Fraser Institute, CD Howe Institute, the Aristotle Foundation for Public Policy, and the True North Centre for Public Policy are registered charities funded primarily through philanthropic donations yet play a significant role in mainstreaming RWP ideas and actors.

2. Associating philanthropic activities with national "values" to rehabilitate nativist worldviews:

Elite philanthropists can tie their activities to narratives around national identity and patriotism, positioning their support for RWP-aligned policies as expressions of national pride. As a branding strategy, philanthropic elites can deploy national identity to obscure the violent processes of capital accumulation that generate their charitable assets (Kapoor, 2012). Dehumanization of the foreign "Other" within global supply chains or through resource extraction in the Global South becomes justified as it generates philanthropic dollars for "deserving" Canadian citizens, advancing a kind of philanthropic "welfare chauvinism" (see, de Koster et al., 2013). Nation branding can also obscure broader histories of settler-colonialism foundational to the Canadian nation-state (Saifer, 2021). In a similar vein, elite philanthropists can rehabilitate nativist worldviews, making them more palatable to a broader audience. For example, Peter Munk— celebrated philanthropist and head of mining giant Barrick Gold—once said "gang rape is a cultural habit" in Papua New Guinea where Barrick Gold had mining operations (Posner, 2011). This kind of racially charged civilizational discourse is a hallmark of RWP that Munk can normalize under cover of his extensive philanthropic endeavours.

3. Leveraging philanthropic reputation to inject RWP discourse into the mainstream directly:

Philanthropy's association with selflessness and "goodness" (Ahmad & Saifer, 2023) earns wealthy elites social legitimacy that can be used to insert RWP ideologies into public discourse. By attaching their names to philanthropic causes or institutions, right-wing donors are solidified as legitimate actors within the mainstream. They can then use this legitimacy to lend credibility to exclusionary politics and worldviews. For example, elite philanthropists like Gwyn Morgan (of the Gwyn Morgan and Patricia Trottier Foundation) draws on his reputation as a major donor to write op-eds for mainstream news outlets. However, these op-eds advance RWP talking points such as climate change denial (e.g., Morgan, 2019) and anti-immigration discourses that tie racialized immigrants to the healthcare and housing affordability crisis (e.g., Morgan 2023, 2024). The halo of philanthropy obviates any serious inquiry into the substance of these op-eds. Thus, philanthropy provides elites with social and symbolic capital (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2024) that can then be leveraged to mobilize exclusionary views.

4. Co-opting "neutral" discursive space for the normalization of RWP:

Elite philanthropists can target seemingly ideologically neutral areas, such as education or public policy forums, to normalize RWP ideas. Perceived impartiality or neutrality in these spaces provides RWP actors generous space for exposing their agendas and discourses, reducing the confrontation or criticism posed against them, and portraying them as experts (Merino & Kinnvall, 2022). A prominent example is the Munk Debates, a semi-annual series of debates on major policy issues held in Toronto, Canada. Funded by Peter Munk's Aurea Foundation, the Munk debates bring together four debaters, two representing each 'side' of an issue, to argue for or against a motion on a relevant and current topic. Recent motions include: "Be it Resolved, anti-Zionism is antisemitism" and "Be it resolved, don´t trust Mainstream Media." The Munk Debates have routinely provided a platform for extreme right-wing figures like Steve Bannon,

Douglass Murray, and Nigel Farage, among others (BBC News, 2018). The fringe ideas of the radical right are legitimized as these actors and discourses are placed on 'equal footing' with mainstream actors and ideas and invited to comment on the topic at hand (Ekström, Patrona, & Thornborrow, 2020). This strategy obscures the ideological motivations behind their funding, embedding RWP discourses in mainstream institutions without overt confrontation.

The above four mechanisms demonstrate how elite philanthropy—through non-coercive ideological mechanisms—promotes and normalizes nativist and xenophobic discourses. Our analysis further makes a case for liberal and progressive grantmaking foundations to grapple with their roles and responsibilities to curtail the mainstreaming of RWP ideologies. This involves appreciating the different dimensions through which RWP enters the mainstream. We call for funders to advocate for policies that will disincentivize philanthropic giving to groups that harbour RWP ideologies. Additionally, we invite grantmakers to consider directly confronting and challenging RWP philanthropic actors through their own philanthropic practices.

Conclusion

Right-wing populism (RWP) represents a worldview that coalesces around nativist and conservative ideas. RWP defines "the people" by imagined ethnic and national traits, claiming their wishes are ignored by "elites" running the current political systems. While RWP points to legitimate socioeconomic grievances, its underlying driver is a fear of outsiders. Adherents of RWP believe that states should be controlled by the "native" group of "the people" and sees "non-native" people as threats to the nation-state (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Unlike liberal multiculturalism, RWP supports ethno-nationalism, Islamophobia, and anti-immigrant sentiments. It often targets those seen as "ethnically, culturally, and religiously foreign" (Pelinka, 2013, p. 8). RWP adopts a "post-class" view that rejects the conventional divide between the working and ruling class; this allows economic and political elites—including elite philanthropists—to speak on behalf of the "people" and their grievances. In this context, our study underlines the mechanisms through which elite philanthropists facilitate the mainstreaming of RWP. Our insights emerge from a broader study of networks of RWP actors in Canada. Canada finds itself at a critical juncture of renationalization as US President Donald Trump makes apparent challenges to Canadian sovereignty. In this light, our study prompts a consideration of how RWP proliferates in the national context of Canada that differs from the US due to its stronger social safety net and multicultural policies. Our research showcases how philanthropic foundations—generally understood as positive social actors—may contribute to producing, circulating, and legitimizing RWP ideologies.

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