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With an election call in Ontario, and one looming federally, conservatives are riding high in the polls.

But if you're casting a vote for one of those conservative parties, do you really know what you're voting for and if they're on your side?

Looking at the federal Conservative party under Pierre Poilievre, one is hard pressed to find any remnant of the pragmatic centrism reflected in the party of John Diefenbaker, Robert Stanfield, Joe Clark and Brian Mulroney.

In a similar way, the case of Ontario's Progressive Conservatives provides real insights into this transformation of the conservative movement.

Under Premier Doug Ford, the party has departed from Ontario's long-held view as a place of propriety, moderation and tempered progressivism - where a public sphere and public interest were widely understood as necessary elements in a well-functioning economy and society. In the past two elections, the PC party's campaign slogans were "For the People" and "Get It Done." But just what was getting done, and for which people?

At various points in Ontario's history, the policies of the Ontario government were directed toward building public education, health care, housing, cultural institutions and popular public assets. It was an Ontario where social and economic development policies were directed at modernizing an industrial economy. Both John Robarts' and Bill Davis's Tory governments invested heavily in education, establishing new public universities and community colleges, rent controls, new hospitals - even going as far as to purchase a 25 per cent stake in the energy company Suncor.

The elements for an unprecedented degree of social and economic inclusivity were put in place, even if they were unequally distributed. Not all social groups had a seat at the table, but the provincial government applied its legal and fiscal powers to reshape what had been a remarkably staid and unequal society.

By the mid-1990s, however, conservatives of that earlier era were all but gone.

With Ford, like Mike Harris before him, facilitating business investment became the primary function of government. But instead of across-the-board cuts in public expenditures and taxes like Harris made, the Ford PCs have been much more selective, increasing public expenditures and subsidies for the corporate

sector, especially for large infrastructure projects, while restraining public expenditures in health, education and other social programs.

The Ford government has also taken a more autocratic approach to governing by using restrictive procedural mechanisms to pass controversial legislation. It has overruled municipal decisions, contravened Charter-protected labour rights when it removed the rights of 55,000 education workers to collectively bargain, and has threatened to do it again to with homeless encampments.

Still, Ford is no Trump-style populist. While sharing certain similarities - generational wealth, press hostility and anti-establishment tirades - Ford does not share the racial intolerance, paranoia and anti-immigrant sentiment that predominate populist movements elsewhere.

Ford does, though, share a penchant for simple slogans, exaggeration, disregard for facts and limitations on executive power. Ford's brand of "retail politics" offered to make life easier for "the people" in small but measurable ways - think buck a beer or \$200 rebate cheques - that expelled the special interests of elites and cleaned-up government corruption. Whether he was successful is a different story.

The Ford Conservatives' success - which Poilievre is replicating nationally - lies in mobilizing people's individual fears into class politics. People are motivated by several issues, such as faith and politics, gender, age and economic security. He doesn't deny climate change, for instance, but thinks that working people shouldn't bear the costs of carbon reduction plans.

In both 2018 and 2022, the PCs won not only in the predominantly white rural districts of southern Ontario, but in the multiracial suburbs of Toronto, including Scarborough and Mississauga, exurban and industrial towns. Ford's strongest support came from those who identified as East Asian, South Asian and eastern European, especially those with strong religious and socially traditional views.

Conservatives also won the votes of workers in former NDP strongholds, including Windsor, Hamilton, Timmins, London and Oshawa, areas that experienced sharp manufacturing losses and declining incomes.

Ford's electoral success shows that working-class conservatism can thrive in places other than the white, Christian, rural heartlands most often imagined as the "natural" home of conservatism. Former federal Conservative leader Erin O'Toole, was explicit about chasing votes from unionized workers - which Poilievre has continued to run with.

Since the Ford government has come to power, Ontario is more clearly divided between those who must work longer and harder, and those who live off the work of others. And class identity, historically weak and uneven in Canada, is confoundingly weaker than ever. Now more than ever we need to ask serious

questions about what can really be done "for the people" - and who's best to do it.

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