

In the Name of Freedom
From Personal Grievance to Collective Dissent in the Freedom Convoy

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the emergence of politicized collective identity among participants of the Freedom Convoy in Canada. Initially framed as a protest against federal vaccine mandates, the Convoy rapidly evolved into a broader populist challenge to state authority, institutional legitimacy, and liberal democratic norms. Through a qualitative methodology grounded in life-history interviews, this study examines how participants transformed personal grievances into political agency. Drawing on the Politicized Collective Identity (PCI) framework, the research investigates the emotional, social, and biographical processes that catalyzed identity transformation among individuals often excluded from conventional political discourse. Hence, the thesis introduces the concepts of narrative hybridity and digital identity to describe the ideological bricolage and platform-mediated subjectivities that characterized the movement. Participants blended libertarian legalism, evangelical prophecy, wellness-spirituality, and conspiracist thinking into personalized worldviews animated by distrust in institutions and a deep yearning for sovereignty and truth. Special attention is given to gendered experiences and emotional repertoires. As a result, this research addresses critical gaps by centring the lived experiences and affective motivations of participants, often overlooked in analyses of right-wing populism and extremism. It reveals how digital media ecosystems, and moral storytelling converge to produce politicized identities in conditions of epistemic crisis and social fragmentation. Ultimately, the dissertation contributes to political sociology, and populism studies by offering a multidimensional account of dissent in the age of post-trust. It challenges binary framing of the Convoy as either extremism or legitimate protest, and instead foregrounds the complex interplay of biography, belief, and belonging in shaping contemporary political subjectivity.

Keywords: Freedom Convoy, social movement, far-right activism, Canadian politics

Résumé

Cette thèse explore l'émergence d'une identité collective politisée chez les participant.es du Convoi de la liberté au Canada. D'abord présenté comme une manifestation contre les mandats vaccinaux, le mouvement a rapidement pris une ampleur nationale, contestant l'autorité de l'État, la légitimité institutionnelle et les fondements de la démocratie libérale. S'appuyant sur une méthodologie qualitative combinant des entrevues de trajectoires de vie, cette recherche examine comment des individus ont transformé des doléances personnelles en engagement politique. En mobilisant le cadre conceptuel de l'identité collective politisée (ICP), l'étude analyse les processus sociaux, émotionnels et biographiques sous-tendant la transformation identitaire. La thèse introduit les concepts d'hybridité narrative et d'identité numérique pour décrire le syncrétisme idéologique et du rôle des plateformes numériques dans la formation de subjectivités politiques caractérisant le mouvement. Les participant.es ont tissé des visions du monde personnalisées, mêlant légalisme libertarien, prophéties évangéliques, spiritualité du bien-être et pensée conspirationniste, animées par une profonde méfiance envers les institutions et un désir de souveraineté et de vérité. Une attention particulière est accordée aux expériences genrées et aux répertoires émotionnels. Ainsi, cette étude comble alors des lacunes au sein de la recherche sur le populisme de droite et l'extrémisme en plaçant au centre l'expérience vécue et les motivations affectives des participant.es. Il révèle comment les écosystèmes médiatiques numériques et les récits contribuent à la formation d'identités politisées dans un contexte de crise et de fragmentation sociale. En définitive, cette thèse apporte une contribution originale à la sociologie politique, et aux études sur le populisme en proposant une analyse multidimensionnelle de la dissidence à l'ère de la post-vérité. Elle remet en question les lectures binaires du Convoi comme extrémisme ou protestation légitime, en mettant plutôt en lumière l'articulation complexe entre biographie, croyance et appartenance dans la subjectivité politique contemporaine.

Mots-clés : Convoi de la Liberté, mouvements sociaux, activisme d'extrême droite, politique canadienne

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Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Résumé	iii
Acknowledgment	iv
List of Tables	viii
List of Figures	ix
The Problem of Freedom in a Fragmented Democracy	1
<i>Situating the Convoy – A Simple Protest?</i>	2
<i>Mobilization, Right-Wing, and the Canadian Case</i>	4
<i>Methodology – Tracing Identity Through Narrative and Digital Worlds</i>	8
<i>Reimagining Political Subjectivity in the Age of Post-Trust</i>	11
Chapter Overview	11
Chapter 1 - In the Name of Freedom: Echoes of Dissent in the Freedom Convoy	13
Historical and Political Context – The Evolving Canadian Landscape	14
<i>Pre-Confederation Toryism and Foundational Ideology</i>	14
<i>20th-Century Fragmentation: Progressive Conservatism and Crisis</i>	15
<i>Reform Party and Canadian Alliance: Western Populism Takes Root</i>	16
<i>The Strategic Merger and the Creation of the Modern Conservative Party (2003)</i>	17
<i>The Harper Era (2006–2015): Strategic Governance and Incrementalism</i>	18
<i>Post-Harper Conservatism: Crisis, Realignment, and the Populist Surge</i>	20
Historical Roots of Right-Wing Extremism in Canada	23
Canadian Political Climate and the Emergence of the Freedom Convoy	29
<i>Quebec, the Rest of Canada, and the Freedom Convoy: Provincial Specificities</i>	31
<i>Provincial Political Culture and Regional Variation</i>	32
<i>Secularism, State Authority and Political Identity in Quebec</i>	32
<i>Pandemic Governance and Provincial Experiences</i>	33
<i>The Pandemic and the Mobilization Crisis</i>	34
<i>Tactical Evolution: Occupation, Blockades, and Digital Mobilization</i>	35
<i>Leadership, Key Events, and the Escalation Toward Crisis</i>	36
Converging Ideologies: The Freedom Convoy’s Narrative Ecology	39
<i>Health or not to health, what narrative should we use?</i>	39
<i>Anti-government, QAnon, and Conspiracist Narratives</i>	42
<i>Identitarian and Ethno-Nationalist Narratives</i>	45
<i>New Age and Alternative Health Narratives</i>	49
<i>Holocaust, Apartheid, and Victimhood Narratives</i>	53
Mobilization and Participation	56
Impact and Legacy	62
A New Populist Synthesis	64
Chapter 2 - Theoretical Perspectives of Social Movement Participation: Examining the Limits of Traditional Social Movement Theories in Explaining the Socio-Political Trajectories of Ordinary Individuals into the Freedom Convoy	67
What is a social movement?	68
Why individual join SMO?	71
<i>An Introduction – The Supply and Demand Nexus</i>	72
<i>Relative deprivation theory – Focus on Demand</i>	73
<i>Resource mobilization theory – Focus on Supply</i>	76
<i>Political opportunity structure theory – Integrating Supply and Demand</i>	80
<i>Synthesis</i>	83
Cultural, and Structural Dynamics – A Supply and Demand Analysis of SMOs	86
<i>Introducing Politicized Collective Identity</i>	87
<i>The Foundations of PCI</i>	88

<i>The Steps to a Politicized Collective Identity</i>	91
Step I: Awareness of Shared Grievances	91
Step II: Adversarial Attribution and Framing	93
Step III: Societal Involvement or Triangulation	94
<i>Conditions and Catalysts</i>	97
<i>Critiques and Limitations of PCI</i>	99
<i>Integrating Gender into PCI</i>	101
<i>Application</i>	104
Chapter 3 - Empirical Approach to Uncover the Socio-Political Trajectories of Freedom Convoy Supporters	108
Socio-Political Trajectories and Politicized Collective Identity	108
Epistemological Commitments	111
<i>Theoretical Reminders</i>	115
<i>Hypothesis 1 – Politicization through Shared Grievances</i>	117
<i>Hypothesis 2 – Ideological Resonance and Adversarial Framing</i>	118
<i>Hypothesis 3 – Moral and Emotional Catalysts</i>	120
<i>Hypothesis 4 – Social Media as an Identity Amplifier</i>	121
<i>Hypothesis 5 – Socio-political Trajectories as Outcomes of PCI Transformation</i>	123
Case Selection: Ontario and Quebec	125
Sampling and Recruitment	128
Data Collection Methods	132
Interview Analysis and Analytical Procedure	133
Ethical Considerations	136
Limitations and Reflexivity	137
Chapter 4 - Who Joined and When? Analyzing the Stages of Engagement in the Freedom Convoy	141
The Journey to Activism: How Early and Later Joiners Shaped the Movement	141
<i>Early Joiners: The First Wave of Protesters</i>	142
Who Are They and Why They Stayed?	142
<i>High Sensitivity to Push Factors</i>	142
<i>Strong Pre-existing Beliefs</i>	146
<i>Early Exposure to Pull Factors</i>	150
<i>Lower Threshold for Action</i>	151
Late Joiners: The Expanding Wave	153
<i>Gradual Increase in Push Factors</i>	154
<i>Increased Visibility of Pull Factors</i>	156
<i>Social Pressure</i>	159
<i>Reduced Perceived Risk</i>	160
Concluding Remarks	162
<i>Additional Findings – A Gendered Perspective of Men versus Women in the Freedom Movement</i>	163
Mothers, Workers, and Activists: The Varied Faces of the Convoy’s Female Participants	163
The Diverse Voices of the Convoy: Men United by Frustration, Family, and the Fight for Freedom	166
Chapter 5 - Voices of Belonging and Resistance from the Convoy: Gender, Grievances, and the Making of a Politicized Identity	170
<i>Cognitive Dimension: Grievances and Adversaries</i>	174
<i>Emotional-Moral Dimension: Affective Investment</i>	176
<i>Action-Oriented Dimension: Participation and Risk</i>	178
Gendered Patterns of Participation in the Freedom Convoy Movement	185
<i>Gendered Motivations and Timing of Mobilization</i>	185
<i>Division of Roles: Leadership, Labor, and Visibility</i>	188
<i>Barriers to Participation and Risk Perception</i>	191
Convergence Through Divergence	194
<i>Long-Term Identity Transformation</i>	196

Worldview Reorientation	196
Lifestyle Reconfiguration	197
Political Engagement and Movement Continuity	197
Gendered Trajectories of Politicization	198
Durability and Reproduction	199
Discussion	200
<i>Expanding PCI Through Gender</i>	200
<i>The Utility of Gender-Sensitive PCI</i>	201
<i>Exceptions and Internal Tensions</i>	203
<i>Situating the Convoy: Populism, Sovereignty, and Canadian Protest Culture</i>	204
Summary	206
Chapter 6 - Reclaiming the Self in the Age of Disruption: Identity, Belonging, and Meaning-	
Making in the Freedom Convoy	209
Rearticulating the Research Question: From Discontent to Dissent	209
<i>Summary of Key Findings - Politicized Identity as Emotional, Gendered, and Narrative Work</i>	210
<i>Theoretical Contributions</i>	212
<i>Rethinking Political Subjectivity and Civic Belonging</i>	214
<i>Democracy in an Age of Disorientation</i>	217
Limitations of the Research	220
Recommendations for Future Research	221
Bibliography	224
Appendices	242
Appendix 1 – Narratives Highlights & Associated Key Figures	242
Appendix 2 – Diagram of the different conspiracy beliefs regarding the COVID pandemic	246
Appendix 3 – Summary of conspiratorial points on COVID-19	247
Appendix 4 – Potential Typologies for Early and Late Joiners	248
Appendix 5 – Interview Guide	250
Appendix 6 – Consent Form	252

List of Tables

Table 1 Theoretical Synthesis	85
Table 2 Politicized Collective Identity Stages and Individual Participation Logic	96
Table 3 Factors to Consider for Early and Later Joiners	162
Table 4 Hypotheses	171
Table 5 Gendered-focus Motivations	186
Table 6 Roles within the Movement	189
Table 7 Barriers to Participation between Men and Women	192
Table 8 Gendered Expressions of PCI	194
Table 7 Typology for Early Joiners	248
Table 8 Typology for Late Joiners	248

List of Figures

Figure 1 Right-wing extremist groups in Canada	26
Figure 2 Demonstrations against vaccines in Canada before and after the Trucker Vaccine Mandate	34
Figure 3 Political structure model	81
Figure 4 Emergence of SMOs	85
Figure 5 The Holocaust and Apartheid Narratives	242
Figure 6 Anti-government Narrative	242
Figure 7 Identitarian Narrative	243
Figure 8 New Age Narrative	244
Figure 9 Key Politicians	244
Figure 10 Freedom Convoy Figures	245

The Problem of Freedom in a Fragmented Democracy

In January 2022, a Convoy of long-haul trucks began its journey across Canada, converging on Ottawa, the nation's capital. Billed as a protest against federal vaccine mandates targeting cross-border truckers, the demonstration quickly evolved into a sweeping challenge to pandemic governance, elite authority, and liberal-democratic legitimacy. Known as the Freedom Convoy, the movement culminated in a four-week occupation of downtown Ottawa that paralyzed the city, disrupted daily life, and dominated headlines across the globe. Protesters brandished Canadian flags upside down, called for the dissolution of Parliament, and demanded the resignation of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. A patchwork of grievances that included opposition to mask mandates, distrust in vaccines, outrage over school closures, economic precarity, institutional alienation which coalesced under the unifying cry of "freedom." But what did this invocation of freedom mean? For some, it signalled a defence of bodily autonomy and civil liberties; for others, it echoed deeper suspicions about globalization, technocratic governance, and cultural decline. Moreover, some argued that it signalled a quasi-spiritual awakening, couched in apocalyptic prophecy and anti-authoritarian revelation. Beneath the surface of policy critique lay something more profound: a symbolic reckoning over whose voices mattered in Canadian democracy, whose knowledge counted as truth, and whose identities were legible to the state.

This analysis is a study of that reckoning. It asks not only *what* the Freedom Convoy was, but *who* its participants were, and *how* they came to see themselves as political actors. It investigates the social, emotional, and biographical pathways by which individuals moved from passive discontent to active mobilization, and from a personal grievance to politicized collective identity. In doing so, it seeks to illuminate the processes through which everyday people like truckers, nurses, small business owners, stay-at-home mothers and retirees, reconstituted themselves as part of a "freedom movement," and ultimately, as dissenting citizens within a contested democracy. The central research question guiding this analysis is: **How do individuals transform their identities, leading to their participation in a contentious social movement, and what social, emotional, and biographical factors shape their socio-political trajectories?**

Situating the Convoy – A Simple Protest?

The Convoy has generated intense political, scholarly, and media debate over its meaning, origins, and implications. Some commentators, particularly in mainstream outlets and government circles, have described the protest as a dangerous eruption of far-right extremism, animated by racist, antisemitic, and conspiracist ideologies. Others have framed it as a populist response to pandemic overreach, a spontaneous expression of working-class frustration with elite paternalism. Still, including many participants themselves, describe the movement in spiritual or eschatological terms: as an awakening, a reckoning, a spiritual war between good and evil. This diversity of interpretations speaks to the multivalent nature of the movement. It cannot be reduced to a single ideology, tactic, or constituency. Rather, the Convoy functioned as what Laclau (2005) would call a populist chain of equivalence: a convergence space in which disparate grievances and identities could be sutured together through a shared antagonism toward “the establishment.” Drawing on Laclau’s theory of populism, as well as Mudde’s (2007) more institutional focus on right-wing populist parties, this analysis approaches the Convoy as a discursive formation one that united anti-state sentiment, distrust in expertise, cultural nationalism, and emotional loss into a flexible rhetoric of freedom.

Importantly, this populist formation was not simply rhetorical, it was lived. Participants in the Convoy were not passive recipients of elite discourse, nor mindless followers of demagogic leaders. They were active producers of meaning, identity, and political subjectivity. They authored livestreams, debated legal strategies in Telegram threads, recited prayers on TikTok, invoked divine sovereignty at protest speeches, and performed ritualistic acts of defiance against the state. To understand the Convoy, then, is to understand the identity work that undergirded it: how participants constructed themselves as truth tellers, defenders, victims, warriors, and sovereign individuals in opposition to a system they experienced as unjust, coercive, and opaque.

To analyze this identity work, the analysis draws on a series of interrelated theoretical concepts. First, the concept of right-wing populism serves as a broad umbrella under which many of the Convoy’s discursive features can be understood. Right-wing populism is defined here as a political logic that constructs society in binary moral terms “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite” while mobilizing around themes of cultural grievances, national sovereignty, and institutional distrust (Mudde 2007; 2017). In Canada, this populism has taken distinct forms: from the regional alienation of Western separatist movements (e.g. Wexit) to the anti-globalist

messaging of the People's Party of Canada (PPC), to the digital sovereignty claims made by followers of QAnon and Romana Didulo. Second, it is also anchored in the concept of politicized collective identity (PCI), developed by Simon and Klandermans (2001). PCI refers to the process by which individuals come to see themselves as part of a collective engaged in political struggles. It comprises three components: (1) the identification of shared grievances against an out-group; (2) identification with a positively valued in-group; and (3) emotional engagement in the cause. This framework provides a scaffold for analyzing how Convoy participants linked their personal struggles (i.e. economic hardship, isolation, moral injury) to broader narratives of resistance. However, the PCI model in its original formulation remains limited in key respects: it tends to treat identity formation as linear and rational, underplays affective, spiritual, and gendered experiences, and lacks attention to gender. This dissertation builds on PCI while expanding it to account for these neglected dimensions. A third key concept is that of digital media ecosystems. Protest movements today are not only organized through digital platforms; they are constituted through them. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Telegram, and X function as echo chambers, affective intensifiers, and spaces of epistemic contestation (Papacharissi 2015; Bennett and Segerberg 2013). In the context of the Convoy, digital platforms served as the primary arena in which information was disseminated, solidarity was built, and identities were publicly performed. These platforms also blurred the line between factual reporting and symbolic narrative, enabling the viral spread of disinformation and emotionally charged content that mobilized participants far beyond the Convoy's physical footprint.

Recent research emphasizes that contemporary Canadian populism is increasingly shaped by digitally mediated epistemic communities that challenge institutional authority and redefine the boundaries of legitimate knowledge. Rather than merely disseminating populist messages, digital platforms actively structure how grievances are interpreted, validated, and politicized. Scholars argue that these environments foster what can be described as alternative knowledge regimes, in which personal experiences, moral intuition, and collective storytelling displace expert authority (Marwick and Lewis 2017). In the Canadian case, this dynamic has been particularly visible in pandemic-related mobilization. Anti-mandate networks did not simply reject public health policies; they constructed parallel interpretive frameworks through Telegram channels, livestreams, and alternative media outlets. These spaces functioned as sites of identity formation, emotional

reinforcement, and epistemic boundary-making. Participants learned not only what to believe, but who they were in relation to institutions perceived as corrupt or deceptive.

Finally, the study refers to the concept of narrative hybridity to describe the ideological bricolage that characterized the Convoy. Participants did not subscribe to a single doctrine; instead, they wove together elements of libertarian legalism, evangelical prophecy, sovereign citizenship, pseudoscientific wellness, anti-globalist conspiracy, and nostalgic nationalism into personalized worldviews. This narrative hybridity was not a sign of incoherence but a source of strength: it allowed the movement to appeal to a wide range of actors and to adapt dynamically to changing contexts and criticisms.

Mobilization, Right-Wing, and the Canadian Case

A growing body of literature has emerged in recent years to address the rise of right-wing populism across liberal democracies. From the Trump presidency in the United States to Brexit in the United Kingdom and the electoral gains of populist parties in Europe, scholars have attempted to understand why segments of the population have become increasingly alienated from traditional institutions, susceptible to conspiratorial thinking, and drawn to moralize anti-elite narratives (Norris and Inglehart 2019; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Moffitt 2016). While this literature has significantly advanced our understanding of global populist dynamics, Canadian populism has often been under-theorized or treated as exceptional due to the country's perceived centrism and multiculturalism. Hence, recent scholarship has increasingly challenged earlier assumptions that populism occupies a marginal or episodic role in Canadian politics. While Canada was long as comparatively insulated from the populist waves affecting Europe and the United States, a growing body of research now argues that populism has become a durable and evolving feature of the Canadian political landscape (Boily 2020a; Farney and Koop 2017). Rather than emerging solely through formal political parties, Canadian populism increasingly manifests through discursive styles, affective grievances, and digitally mediated mobilizations that blur the boundaries between institutional politics, social movements, and conspiracy-driven counterpublics.

Several scholars have emphasized that Canadian populism is also best understood not as a coherent ideology but as a political logic or discursive frame that constructs politics through moralized antagonism between "the people" and "the elites" (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Boily 2023). In the Canadian context, this antagonism has historically been articulated through regional

alienation, particularly in Western provinces¹, but more recently it has expanded to include distrust of public health institutions, media, scientific expertise, and transnational governance. As Farney and Rayside (2013) and Banack (2021) note, these narratives are increasingly detached from traditional party structures and circulate through decentralized digital networks. More recent work highlights how Canadian populism has undergone a process of deinstitutionalization. Boucher, Rutherglen and Kim (2024) argue that populist appeals in Canada now operate across multiple political arenas simultaneously including parliamentary rhetoric, social media ecosystems, protest movements, and alternative knowledge communities. This shift has been accelerated by the erosion of trust in institutions, declining partisan identification, and the fragmentation of media authority. Rather than mobilizing voters alone, contemporary populism increasingly mobilizes identities, emotions, and moral narratives that extend beyond electoral cycles.

The COVID-19 pandemic represents a critical accelerant of these dynamics. Studies of pandemic-era mobilization show that public health measures acted as a focal point for pre-existing grievances related to autonomy, expertise, and legitimacy. Importantly, opposition to pandemic governance did not emerge *ex nihilo* but was layered onto longer-standing populist and conspiratorial repertoires. As scholars of Canadian extremism have observed, the pandemic created a unique convergence space in which libertarian populism, wellness spirituality, far-right nationalism, and sovereign citizen ideologies became mutually reinforcing (van der Zwet et al. 2022; Neblo and Wallace 2021; Muhajarine et al. 2025; Zweig et al. 2021; Leman-Langlois et al. 2024). This literature increasingly stresses the importance of affect and identity in understanding Canadian populist mobilization. Rather than framing participation as a rational response to policy disagreement, recent studies emphasize emotional drivers such as resentment, moral outrage, humiliation, fear, and perceived betrayal (Jasper 2018; Tietjen 2023; Gillies et al. 2024; Medeiros 2021). Despite this growing attention to these dynamics, relatively few studies have examined the non-institutional dimensions of Canadian populism that is, how right-wing populist identities are

¹ Canada has its own populist traditions rooted in regionalism, fiscal conservatism, and cultural backlash particularly in the West. Historically, Canadian populism has oscillated between agrarian progressivism and reactionary nationalism. Movements such as Social Credit in Alberta and the Reform Party of Canada (1987-2000) mobilized around a sense of moral decline, institutional betrayal, and regional exclusion. These sentiments were later absorbed, though never fully resolved, within the post-2003 Conservative Party of Canada, itself a product of merger between the Progressive Conservatives and Canadian Alliance. Stephen Harper's tenure as Prime Minister (2006-2015) represented a calibrated effort to contain and institutionalize these populist energies while retaining a technocratic posture. His successors have struggled to manage this tension. Andrew Scheer's reliance on social conservative rhetoric alienated moderates, while Erin O'Toole's centrist pivot led to backlash from the party base. With Pierre Poilievre's ascendancy, the party appears to have embraced a more overt populist identity, oriented around anti-elite messaging, libertarian economic critiques, and digital-savvy communication strategies (Boily 2020b; 2023; Lewis and Everitt 2017).

formed, lived, and enacted outside of political parties. In particular, the affective and biographical undercurrents of these mobilizations remain underexplored. Scholars such as Perry and Scrivens (2019) or Leman-Langlois, Campana and Tanner (2024), have mapped the organizational ecology of right-wing extremism in Canada, documenting the rise of groups such as Soldiers of Odin, La Meute, and Yellow Vests Canada. Others, like Carvin et al. (2022), have analyzed digital propaganda networks and disinformation campaigns surrounding COVID-19. Yet these studies often treat participants as either ideological adherents or information consumers, not as complex individuals navigating trauma, dislocation, and identity flux in an era of systemic instability. This is not merely a scholarly omission; it reflects a deeper epistemological bias in how social movements are studied. As Jasper (1998; 2011) argues, political sociology has long privileged instrumental rationality over emotional motivation, treating activists as strategic actors rather than moral agents embedded in cultural lifeworlds. Likewise, McAdam's (1986) concept of the "risk/reward calculus" in high-risk activism foregrounds cost-benefit thinking while underplaying how moral outrage, spiritual duty, or existential longing might override instrumental logic. While affect theory has gained traction in feminist and poststructuralist circles, it has yet to be fully integrated into the study of right-wing mobilization particularly in the Canadian context

Moreover, as several scholars note, gender remains under-theorized in Canadian populism studies, despite its centrality to movement framing and participation. When they do appear in literature on populism or extremism, women are often cast as symbolic props, "mothers of the nation," or as anomalies within male-dominated spaces. Yet recent research has shown that women play vital and complex roles in far-right movements, often mobilizing through caregiving discourses, maternalist morality, or spiritual authority (Blee and Deutsch 2012; Gentry et al. 2018). In the context of the Convoy, women were not only present but frequently visible as livestreamers, influencers, organizers, and spokespeople. Their narratives reveal a distinct emotional repertoire rooted in protection, moral clarity, and spiritual transformation that cannot be subsumed under existing models of political identity. What is needed, then, is an integrated account that combines political sociology, social psychology, gender studies, and ethnography to understand how politicized identities are formed, framed, and mobilized in conditions of cultural, economic, and epistemic uncertainty. This analysis seeks to offer precisely that account by examining the Convoy as a case study in contentious identity transformation: a site where personal crisis meets collective

meaning-making, and where everyday citizens come to see themselves as agents of resistance, revelations, and redemption.

The current state of scholarship leaves critical gaps that this research directly addresses. First, there is a tendency in both academic and media discourse to collapse movements like the Convoy into one of two frames: either as fringe extremism (i.e. neo-fascist threat) or as legitimate populist dissent (i.e. grassroots outrage). While these framings are not necessarily incorrect, they are insufficient. They obscure the movement's internal diversity, its emotional resonance, and its capacity for ideological fusion. This thesis introduces the concept of narrative hybridity to account for the way in which participants drew from multiple, sometimes contradictory, belief systems merging New Age spirituality with sovereign citizenship legalism, evangelical Christianity with anti-globalist paranoia, and nostalgic nationalism with post-truth epistemologies. Rather than viewing this hybridity as incoherence, I argue that it is precisely what allowed the Convoy to function as a "big tent" movement capable of absorbing disparate social anxieties and affective attachments.

Second, while the PCI framework offers a valuable lens for analyzing politicization, it remains underdeveloped in terms of emotional and digital dynamics. Simon and Klandermans (2001) identify three necessary components for politicized collective identity: awareness of injustice, shared in-group identity, and emotional investment in collective action. Yet the framework lacks explanatory power for the mechanisms through which these components develop in fluid, post-institutional digital contexts. What kinds of stories resonate with potential recruits? How do emotions like betrayal, grief, pride, or spiritual euphoria reinforce collective identity? How do gendered experiences shape different paths into politicization? This dissertation builds on PCI while extending it through the integration of affect theory, gender analysis, and media studies. It positions politicization as a non-linear, recursive process one shaped as much by ritual, community, and moral storytelling as by ideological clarity.

Third, the methodological approaches commonly used to study right-wing populism (i.e. content analysis, survey research, network mapping) often obscure the lived experiences and biographical transformations of participants. By contrast, this thesis employs life-history interviewing to capture the granularity of identity work. This approach enables a bottom-up reconstruction of how individuals come to interpret their lives through a politicized frame. For example, a mother who left the public education system during school closures may narrate her

journey through the language of protection and betrayal; a former oilfield worker from Alberta may frame its disillusionment through economic nationalism and regional alienation; a New Age healer may describe the pandemic as a spiritual awakening, in which she came to see institutional science as corrupted and divine intuition as truth. Each of these cases reflects different trajectories into the same movement, trajectories that are irreducible to ideology alone.

Lastly, most existing scholarship on Canadian extremism or right-wing mobilization pays insufficient attention to the spiritual and moral dimensions of belief. While scholars have examined theocratic and apocalyptic strands of U.S. religious nationalism, Canadian scholarship tends to isolate religion as either conservative or progressive, without exploring its more esoteric and syncretic forms. The Convoy revealed a growing spiritual counterculture in Canada, one that fuses wellness, prophecy, energy healing, and sovereignty doctrine into an anti-establishment worldview. This study treats these belief systems not as fringe delusions but as coherent (if internally diverse) moral narratives that help participants make sense of disorder and orient themselves toward action. By addressing these gaps, the thesis contributes to multiple scholarly conversations. It offers a new way to conceptualize right-wing populist movements in Canada, not as discrete ideological blocs, but as affectively charged, digitally mediated, and narratively hybrid formations. It advances the PCI framework by embedding it in a broader understanding of gendered emotional repertoires, digital connectivity, and moral world making. And it foregrounds the human experience of political identity: the ways in which loss, fear, love, and transcendence shape collective action.

Methodology – Tracing Identity Through Narrative and Digital Worlds

This thesis is rooted in a qualitative, interpretive methodology designed to uncover the complex, layered, and often contradictory processes by which individuals come to politicize their identities and participate in contentious collective action. Given the conceptual emphasis on transformation, emotional investment, and meaning-making, a purely structural or positivist approach would be ill-suited to the questions at hand. Instead, I adopt a methodology grounded in life-history interviewing and narrative analysis, each selected to explore the rich texture of subjective experience and identity construction within the Convoy movement.

Life-history interviewing is a methodological approach that centres the participant's personal narrative over time, paying close attention to turning points, moments of rupture, and processes of self-understanding. In contrast to structured interviews or surveys that emphasize

discrete variables or opinions, life-history interviews foreground the temporal, affective, and existential dimensions of identity. They ask: How did this person come to see themselves as part of a movement? What events, beliefs, or relationships shaped their political journey? What meaning do they ascribe to their participation, and how does it relate to the broader arc of their life? This approach is especially relevant for studying politicization under conditions of uncertainty and ideological fluidity. Many Convoy participants did not enter the movement with fixed political commitments. Their engagement was often the result of cumulative disillusionment, moral injury, spiritual awakening, or relational influence. For example, a participant may trace her involvement back to her father's suicide during the 2008 financial crisis, followed by job loss during the pandemic and her discovery of sovereign citizen videos online. Another may cite childhood experiences of rural exclusion, a deepening distrust in public education, and the feeling of "awakening" after watching livestreams from Ottawa. Life-history interviewing allows for the excavation of these long arcs, capturing how disparate experiences are woven into a coherent political identity through narrative labour.

Forty-five interviews were conducted between 2023 and 2024 with individuals who identify as either participants or strong sympathizers of the Convoy. Participants were recruited through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling, with attention to diversity in geography, gender, occupation, and ideological expression. Interviewees included long-haul truckers, former nurses, stay-at-home mothers, small business owners, teachers, former military members, and spiritual influencers. The interviews ranged from 60 minutes to over 2 hours. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing participants to guide the flow of conversation while ensuring coverage of key domains: family background, educational experiences, work history, major life disruptions, political and spiritual beliefs, media consumption habits, and interpretations of the Convoy itself. Special care was taken to allow for emotional expression and silence; many participants cried, prayed, or recited testimonies during the interviews. These expressions were not treated as distractions from data but as central elements of politicized identity work. The interviews were transcribed in full and subjected to thematic and narrative analysis.

The analytic core of this thesis lies in the synthesis of the PCI framework. Simon and Klandermans' (2001) model posits that politicization occurs when individuals (1) identify a shared grievance against an out-group, (2) affiliate with an in-group that offers solidarity, and (3) invest emotionally in a collective goal. This model provides a useful scaffold for mapping the stages of

identity transformation. However, as previously discussed, the model needs expansion to account for the recursive, affective, and technologically mediated character of contemporary politicization. To this end, I employ a narrative analytical approach that examines how participants tell the story of their political becoming: what metaphors they use, which events they highlight, how they frame moral turning points, and which temporal logic (e.g. awakening, betrayal, redemption) shape their narratives. I draw on treating narrative not as a reflection of identity but as its very construction. Particular attention is paid to stories of loss (e.g. economic displacement, family breakdown), trauma (e.g. abuse, betrayal), and awakening (e.g. spiritual realization, “red-pilling”), which often serve as pivotal frames for politicization.

Hence, this analysis is motivated by a desire to understand how ordinary individuals and those who do not occupy elite political positions, hold formal ideological training, or belong to militant organizations, become politicized actors in contentious movements. More specifically, it seeks to illuminate how participants in the Convoy came to see their personal grievances as politically meaningful, emotionally urgent, and collectively shared. The central aim of the research is to develop a multidimensional framework for understanding identity transformation in the context of right-wing populist mobilization, particularly in digitally mediated, post-institutional environments. It does so by combining political psychology (through PCI) and narrative analysis to construct an account of how politicized collective identity is constructed, sustained, and performed.

The original contributions of this thesis are fourfold. First, through forty-five life-history interviews, this study offers an in-depth, participant-centred account of the Convoy to date. It moves beyond media caricatures and critiques to provide a bottom-up portrait of the movement, grounded in the lived experiences, moral reasoning, and emotional repertoires of its participants. Second, this thesis extends the PCI framework by incorporating gender. It reconfigures PCI as a recursive, emotionally textured, and platform-mediated process sensitive to gender, trauma, and non-linear identity work. Third, the study introduces two key conceptual tools: narrative hybridity and digital identity laboratories. The former captures the ideological bricolage that characterizes movements like the Convoy, while the latter conceptualizes digital platforms as sites of political subjectivity formation, rather than mere communication tools. Lastly, by taking the moral and spiritual language of participants without endorsing their conclusions or ideologies seriously, this analysis contributes to democratic theory by exploring what happens when trust in institutions

collapses, and when official channels of grievance redress are no longer seen as legitimate. In this sense, it offers a critical lens on the failures of liberal pluralism, the dangers of epistemic polarization, and the emergent spaces of civic reimagination in the digital age.

Reimagining Political Subjectivity in the Age of Post-Trust

In the final analysis, this thesis is not only a study of a protest movement; it is a study of political subjectivity under conditions of fragmentation, uncertainty, and perceived betrayal. The Convoy revealed not simply a backlash against mandates or a platform for extremism, but a profound transformation in how individuals come to understand themselves as political agents. It exposed the emotional and moral undercurrents of populism, the fragile legitimacy of liberal institutions, and the growing importance of digitally mediated, spiritually infused, and narratively hybrid forms of resistance. As the legitimacy of established institutions continues to erode, and as traditional categories of Left and Right become increasingly inadequate to capture the political imaginaries of ordinary people, it is more urgent than ever to ask: What kinds of identities are being formed in the name of freedom? What moral frameworks are guiding political action? And how can we reimagine civic life in a way that takes these questions seriously without capitulating to post-truth relativism or reactionary nostalgia?

This thesis does not offer easy answers, but it does offer tools: conceptual, methodological, and analytical tools for understanding the complex terrain of contemporary dissent. In doing so, it aims to contribute not only to the scholarship on social movements, populism, and political identity, but also to the broader project of democratic reckoning in a time of disorientation and desire.

Chapter Overview

The thesis unfolds over six chapters, moving from macro-level historical and ideological context to meso-level movement dynamics, and ultimately to micro-level narratives of identity transformation. Each chapter builds on the previous to construct a cumulative and multi-scalar understanding of politicization in the Convoy. Chapter 1 establishes the historical, political, and social context for the Freedom Convoy. It traces the evolution of Canadian conservatism highlighting how shifting ideological landscapes set the stage for the Convoy's emergence. It also examines the historical roots of right-wing extremism, the pandemic as a mobilizing crisis, and the diverse narrative ecologies that converged in the movement, including anti-government,

conspiracist, identitarian, and alternative health frames. The chapter situates the Convoy within broader patterns of Canadian protest culture and populist mobilization. Chapter 2 reviews and critically evaluates the main social movement theories to assess their applicability to the Convoy. It examines demand-oriented approaches, supply-oriented frameworks, and integrative models. It then introduces the Politicized Collective Identity (PCI) framework, outlining its three stages that are awareness of shared grievances, adversarial attribution, and societal involvement, and consider the catalysts and conditions for each. The chapter also addresses the limitations of PCI and advances a gender-sensitive extension to better capture the diverse pathways of politicization observed in the Convoy. Chapter 3 details the methodological design, epistemological commitments, and case selection for the study, focusing on Ontario and Quebec. It explains the sampling strategy, which combined online recruitment via digital platforms with in-person engagement, and describes the life-history interview method used to capture participants' socio-political trajectories. The chapter also discusses ethical considerations, reflexivity, and limitations, ensuring transparency in the research process. As for Chapter 4, it analyzes temporal patterns of participation, distinguishing between early joiners and late joiners. Early joiners are shown to have strong pre-existing beliefs, high sensitivity to push factors, and lower thresholds for action, while late joiners were influenced by increasing visibility of pull factors, social pressure, and reduced perceived risks. The analysis highlights how the timing of entry into the movement shaped participants' experiences, motivations, and commitment levels. Chapter 5 offers a gendered analysis of participation, drawing on interview narratives to compare men's and women's experiences in the Convoy. It explores gendered patterns in grievances, emotional investment, leadership roles, labour division, and risk perception. The chapter also examines how gender influenced timing of mobilization, barriers to participation, and long-term identity transformation, integrating these findings into an expanded, gender-sensitive PCI framework. Lastly, chapter 6 concludes by situating these trajectories within broader discussions of populism, sovereignty, and Canadian protest culture.

Chapter 1 - In the Name of Freedom: Echoes of Dissent in the Freedom Convoy

Freedom means living in the Democracy we once had, not the Dictatorship we have now...a country that takes care of its own before it sends enormous amounts of funds away...a country that is as a safe place to live, with a promising future for our upcoming generations...a country where we have freedom of choice with what we do, hear and say...a country where our politicians actually understand that they work for us and our tax dollars, not the other way around...how sad we have become when we had it all²

I am sorry God. I don't know what more I can say or do. I have tried my very best to help save as many lives as I could for your kingdom. I pray in their last hours, that the victims of this genocide find you and your Grace Dear Lord. In Jesus Strong Name, Amen.³

It's not a naturally occurring virus, it's a man-made bioweapon that was put out to make people sick, to push the narrative for all these jabs, is what it was, because the jab is the way, they want to be able to track you, follow you, know your every movement you do.⁴

In January 2022, the Freedom Convoy emerged as one of the most visible and disruptive protest movements in recent Canadian history. Initially framed as a response to federal vaccine mandates affecting cross-border truckers, the movement quickly expanded, drawing in a wide array of actors and ideological positions. From its symbolic occupation of Ottawa to its reverberations across multiple provinces and online platforms, the Convoy rapidly transformed from a sector-specific protest into a national flashpoint for debates on civil liberties, populism, and political legitimacy. This chapter begins by exploring the evolving landscape of Canadian conservatism and the historical context of right-wing extremism in Canada, tracing its roots and examining key moments in the development of conservative and far-right ideologies. It then turns to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which played a critical role in galvanizing right-wing and populist activism, culminating in the Freedom Convoy protests of 2022. The analysis subsequently focuses on the Freedom Convoy itself, investigating its origins, leading figures, and the mobilization of participants. Particular attention is paid to the underlying narratives that animated the movement, including anti-government sentiment, resistance to public health mandates, and broader grievances

² A comment left on the Facebook page of *Freedom Convoy 2022* under a post titled “*What does Freedom mean to you?*”

³ A quote from James Bauder (2021a)

⁴ See Rachel Gilmore (2022b)

related to pandemic governance and perceived state overreach. The chapter also engages with the rhetorical and strategic evolution of the Convoy, showing how it came to incorporate far right, conspiracist, religious, and new age discourses, and how its message was amplified through social and alternative media. A central focus is placed on the occupation of Ottawa and its ripple effects across the country, providing insight into the Convoy's tactical repertoire, its geographical reach, and its social and political resonance. The role of mainstream and fringe media is assessed, particularly in shaping public perceptions of the movement and mediating the tension between protest legitimacy and extremism. By situating the Convoy within a broader context of Canadian conservatism, populism, and right-wing extremism, this chapter offers a nuanced understanding of how moments of crisis can catalyze the reconfiguration of political identities. In doing so, it highlights the complex and evolving relationship between ideology, affect, and mobilization in contemporary Canadian society.

Historical and Political Context – The Evolving Canadian Landscape

The political context from which the movement emerged cannot be understood without examining the broader evolution of Canadian conservatism. Long before the COVID-19 pandemic, Canada had been experiencing growing political polarization and dissatisfaction with federal institutions. A sense of alienation, particularly in Western provinces, has simmered beneath the surface of Canadian federal politics for decades. Discontent with perceived centralization of power in Ottawa, frustrations over multicultural policies, and anxieties about national identity and economic dependency on resource industries were already shaping public sentiment prior to Stephen Harper's rise to power in 2006 (Harrison 1995; Banack 2021). These sentiments did not arise in a vacuum. They are rooted in deeper ideological and historical shifts within the Canadian conservative tradition itself. Tracing the evolution of Canadian conservatism, from its origins in 19th-century Toryism to the emergence of populist currents in the Reform movement, reveals underlying tensions and transformations that have made space for new forms of protest, including those witnessed during the Convoy.

Pre-Confederation Toryism and Foundational Ideology

The ideological roots of Canadian conservatism lie in 19th-century British Toryism, which emphasized loyalty to the Crown, the preservation of traditional institutions, and an organic view

of society grounded in hierarchy, duty, and order. In British North America, this translated into a political culture that prized deference to authority and skepticism of popular radicalism. The “Family Compact” in Upper Canada and the “Château Clique” in Lower Canada were early manifestations of this conservative elite, upholding Anglican hegemony, colonial loyalty, and oligarchic governance. This Tory worldview was institutionalized in the post-Confederation era through the leadership of Sir John A. Macdonald and the Liberal-Conservative Party. Macdonald fused classical conservative values with pragmatic nationalism. His *dirigiste* approach to political economy was exemplified by the National Policy of 1879, which introduced protective tariffs to foster domestic industry, and by state-led infrastructure development, most notably the Canadian Pacific Railway (Ives 2009; Farney and Rayside 2013). These measures were underpinned by a strong federalist vision aimed at consolidating political authority and securing unity in a geographically vast and culturally diverse federation. Unlike later iterations of conservatism influenced by neoliberalism, this foundational phase of Canadian Toryism was interventionist and paternalistic. The state was seen not merely as a guarantor of order, but as a moral steward responsible for shaping a cohesive national identity. This tradition, later conceptualized as Red Toryism (Horowitz 1966), emphasized the moral responsibilities of elites, the importance of public institutions, and a communitarian ethos rooted in the Anglican tradition. Red Toryism viewed liberty as a function of social duty, not atomistic individualism, and saw market forces as needing tempering by a strong, morally grounded state. However, these early principles would eventually be challenged by individualist, free-market ideologies setting up a long-standing tension within Canadian conservatism between traditionalist, collectivist impulses and liberal-capitalist rationalities.

20th-Century Fragmentation: Progressive Conservatism and Crisis

During the mid-20th century, the Progressive Conservative (PC) Party developed into a broad-based coalition that blended moderate reformism with traditional conservative values. Under John Diefenbaker in the 1950s and 60s, the party championed civil rights and democratic inclusion, most notably through the passage of the Canadian Bill of Rights in 1960 and the extension of voting rights to Indigenous peoples. While maintaining an attachment to national unity and traditional institutions, the PC also endorsed pragmatic bilingualism and a centrist economic orientation that retained aspects of the postwar Keynesian consensus. This balancing act

continued under Brian Mulroney in the 1980s, although it took on a more paradoxical character. Mulroney's government simultaneously embraced economic globalization most visibly through the negotiation of the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement and later NAFTA while also expanding federal spending on regional development programs and pursuing ambitious constitutional reforms. His efforts to integrate Quebec through the Meech Lake (1987) and Charlottetown (1992) Accords represented a continuation of the Red Tory commitment to state-led nation-building and national cohesion. However, the combination of neoliberal economic policies and federalist outreach alienated key constituencies and exposed the ideological limits of the PC coalition. The party's dramatic collapse in the 1993 federal election, falling from a majority government to just two seats, was rooted in a combination of structural and ideological weaknesses. Internally, tensions between Red Tories, who favoured state activism and communitarianism, and emerging market conservatives, who pushed for economic liberalization and reduced government, eroded the party's coherence. Externally, the PCs faced growing alienation from Western Canadians who perceived the party as dominated by central Canadian elites indifferent to regional grievances. This disaffection created fertile ground for the rise of the Reform Party in the West and the Bloc Québécois in Quebec, both of which capitalized on regional nationalism and identity-based discontent (Campbell 1983; Egerton 2004; Patten 2018). As political theorist Paul Lucardie has argued, the collapse of the PC Party signalled the exhaustion of the traditional Tory ethos of state-building conservatism. The older model, grounded in institutional authority, national stewardship, and paternalistic interventionism, gave way to a political vacuum on the right. This vacuum was increasingly filled by new currents of neoliberalism and populism, setting the stage for a profound reconfiguration of Canadian conservatism in the decades to come (Lucardie 2009).

Reform Party and Canadian Alliance: Western Populism Takes Root

The Reform Party, founded by Preston Manning in 1987, emerged as a direct response to long-standing Western alienation and quickly positioned itself as a populist alternative to the political establishment in Ottawa. Drawing on deep-seated frustrations in Alberta and other Western provinces, the party emphasized direct democracy through mechanisms like referenda and recall, advocated for fiscally hawkish governance focused on deficit reduction and tax cuts, and deployed a robust anti-elite rhetoric that critiqued federal centralization, official bilingualism, and perceived favouritism toward Quebec (Budd 2021). Social conservatism was also a defining

feature, with strong appeals to traditional family values and a pronounced skepticism toward multiculturalism and immigration policy. In contrast to the hierarchical and paternalistic orientation of Red Toryism, the Reform Party represented a turn toward plebiscitary populism and a libertarian suspicion of centralized state authority. The formation of the Canadian Alliance in 2000 sought to nationalize this political formula and unify right-wing forces under a broader electoral tent. However, while the Alliance attracted significant support, it struggled to extend its base meaningfully beyond its Western stronghold. Hence, the Reform and Alliance trajectory signalled a departure from the communitarian foundations of Canadian conservatism and imported key elements of American-style conservatism, including market fundamentalism, anti-federalist decentralization, and religiously inflected moralism. Yet unlike the U.S. Republican Party, which is deeply embedded in long-standing institutional networks such as think tanks, churches, and business lobbies, the Canadian populist right remained relatively thin in its organizational depth (Tetrault 2025; Budd 2021). As a result, the Reform and Canadian Alliance parties often functioned more as vehicles for protest and identity assertion than as coherent governing alternatives. Their rise nonetheless reshaped the ideological terrain of Canadian conservatism, paving the way for the eventual merger with the Progressive Conservatives and the creation of a newly unified Conservative Party in 2003.

The Strategic Merger and the Creation of the Modern Conservative Party (2003)

The unification of the Canadian right in 2003 was more than a tactical alliance; it was a pivotal moment in the ideological reconstitution of conservatism in Canada. Negotiated by Stephen Harper, then leader of the Canadian Alliance, and Peter MacKay, the newly elected leader of the Progressive Conservative Party, the merger was driven by mounting pressure from donors, party activists, and an electorate increasingly frustrated by the long-standing dominance of the Liberal Party. Both Harper and MacKay shared the conviction that continued vote-splitting between the Alliance and the remnants of the PCs would consign conservatives to permanent opposition status. Beyond electoral necessity, the merger was also about institutional survival. The Progressive Conservatives, still reeling from their 1993 electoral collapse, had lost their organizational coherence and much of their base, while the Alliance had failed to extend its appeal beyond Western Canada (Lewis and Everitt 2017; Behiels 2010). Uniting the parties promised not only a solution to the vote-splitting dilemma but also a chance to consolidate opposition to what

both sides viewed as Liberal moral permissiveness, fiscal complacency, and centralized state overreach. Yet the ideological synthesis required to sustain this merger was inherently fragile. The new Conservative Party of Canada (CPC) had to forge a coherent identity capable of housing a wide spectrum of ideological orientations, from Red Tories committed to state stewardship and national unity, to populist libertarians and social conservatives deeply suspicious of government power and cultural liberalism. What emerged was an ideologically heterogeneous formation that scholars such as Frédéric Boily have described as a “triple helix” conservatism. It combined three principal strands: market liberalism inherited from the Canadian Alliance’s emphasis on small government and free markets; the Red Tory legacy of the Progressive Conservatives, emphasizing institutional continuity and cautious incrementalism; and a resurgent moral conservatism driven by evangelical Christians, anti-abortion activists, and Western populists animated by cultural and regional grievances (Boily 2016; 2020b).

Stephen Harper’s political acumen showed his ability to discipline this ideological diversity without allowing it to fracture the party. His strategy relied on centralized message control, strict discipline over caucus communications, and a methodical, incremental approach to conservative policymaking that avoided alarming centrist voters while slowly reshaping the ideological terrain. Most importantly, Harper fostered a powerful unifying narrative: a shared opposition to Liberal hegemony, characterized by perceptions of fiscal irresponsibility, judicial activism, and moral relativism. This anti-Liberal ethos functioned as ideological glue, allowing internal contradictions to be temporarily submerged in the interest of political coherence. The result, as Boily argues, was a distinctly “Canadian neoconservatism” (Boily 2007), influenced by American conservative ideas such as market liberalism and moral traditionalism, yet rooted in uniquely Canadian dynamics of regional alienation, pragmatic governance, and institutional moderation (Lewis and Everitt 2017). The CPC thus emerged not merely as a coalition of former rivals, but as a reimagined conservative force capable of winning (and holding) national power.

The Harper Era (2006–2015): Strategic Governance and Incrementalism

Stephen Harper’s tenure as Prime Minister marked the consolidation of a new form of conservative governance in Canada strategically incremental, ideologically hybrid, and pragmatically populist. Ideologically, Harper’s government adhered to key pillars of economic conservatism, advancing corporate tax reductions, deficit reduction, and a rhetorical commitment

to limiting the size and scope of the state. Yet, unlike the confrontational neoliberalism of Reagan or Thatcher, Harper's approach was cautious and calibrated (Jeffrey 2015). Social conservatism was pursued largely by stealth. Polarizing moral issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage were kept off the legislative agenda, but the government nonetheless advanced a cultural realignment through other channels such as defunding feminist and progressive NGOs, altering citizenship guides to emphasize military history and traditional values, and investing in symbolic projects like the commemoration of the War of 1812. On security matters, Harper expanded the powers of the state significantly, most notably through Bill C-51, which broadened anti-terror legislation, while promoting a militarized national identity and a "values-based" foreign policy centred on democratic allies and opposition to perceived global threats. Harper's governing style was marked by what might be called governing conservatism, a technocratic, disciplined approach that fused populist appeal with elite policy management. His was a form of technocratic populism: speaking on behalf of "ordinary Canadians" while carefully avoiding ideological overreach (Raphael 2020; Narine 2017; Garneau 2018; Budd 2021). The centralization of power in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) was key to this strategy. Parliamentary committees and independent watchdogs were weakened, while judicial appointments were used strategically to gradually shift the ideological orientation of the courts without provoking a public backlash. This model of governance did not resemble American-style right-wing populism or libertarianism but rather embodied a distinctively Canadian form of conservative realism market-oriented, nationalist, security-conscious, and electorally cautious.

To reconcile the disparate factions within the newly unified Conservative Party of Canada, Harper employed several mechanisms of internal and external moderation. First, through rhetorical reframing, he carefully distanced the party from the divisive language of the Reform era. He avoided open critiques of bilingualism and multiculturalism, instead portraying the CPC as a pragmatic and moderate alternative to Liberal mismanagement and corruption. The invocation of "ordinary Canadians" became a populist referent broad enough to encompass both the party's libertarian-populist base and centrist swing voters. Second, Harper ensured organizational centralization by shaping the party's constitution to consolidate authority in the hands of the leader and the PMO. This structural control enabled him to discipline the caucus, enforce message coherence, and reassure moderate voters that more radical elements of the party, particularly its social conservative wing, would not dominate the agenda. Third, Harper deployed a strategy of

issue fusion and agenda calibration that merged populist rhetoric with technocratic policy delivery (Macfarlane 2018; Marland 2016; Wilson 2015; Farney and Koop 2017). Populist themes such as the “taxpayer revolt,” “family values,” and being “tough on crime” were translated into policy through income-splitting, the Universal Child Care Benefit (UCCB), mandatory minimum sentences, and expanded anti-terror legislation. Even his rhetoric around “Senate reform,” though ultimately stalled, tapped into populist anti-elitism without requiring immediate institutional overhaul. This approach created a form of conservative populism flavoured to suburban middle-class voters while still energizing the base. Fourth, Harper managed moral conservatism by stealth. While avoiding direct engagement with contentious cultural issues in Parliament, the party quietly accommodated social conservatives within its internal structures. They were given a voice, particularly through backbench MPs and party conventions, but not a dominant role, thus preventing internal schisms while maintaining ideological diversity (Flanagan 2013; 2020).

The outcome of these strategies was the formation of a distinctive hybrid conservatism in Canada, what scholars have called technocratic populism. This model was populist in tone, invoking themes of hardworking taxpayers, national pride, and skepticism toward elites; conservative in content, delivering tax cuts, deregulation, and law-and-order policies; and moderate in strategy, avoiding overt culture wars and focusing instead on incremental policy shifts and electoral discipline. Harper, once a Reform Party ideologue, thus emerged as a bridge figure: someone who understood the language of populist insurgency but mastered the institutional grammar of conservative statecraft. His leadership not only reshaped the Conservative Party but also left a lasting imprint on Canada’s political culture, proving that a carefully managed populism could serve as a durable governing strategy in a complex, multi-regional federation.

Post-Harper Conservatism: Crisis, Realignment, and the Populist Surge

Since the departure of Stephen Harper in 2015, the CPC has undergone a turbulent period marked by leadership volatility, ideological disorientation, and shifting electoral strategies. Andrew Scheer, elected in 2017, attempted to preserve elements of Harper-era conservatism while courting traditionalist voters through appeals to social conservatism. However, his inability to clarify the party’s stance on issues like LGBTQ+ rights, climate change, and cultural pluralism left the CPC vulnerable in urban and suburban ridings. Despite winning the popular vote in the 2019 federal election, the Conservatives’ support remained heavily concentrated in the West,

limiting their capacity to form government. The result was a sense of stagnation rather than momentum, with Scheer ultimately stepping down amid concerns about leadership efficacy and strategic coherence (DeGagne 2021; Boulianne et al. 2021). Erin O'Toole's leadership from 2020 to 2022 signalled a deliberate, albeit short-lived, pivot toward the political centre. Embracing the language of Red Toryism, O'Toole introduced a platform focused on worker protections, climate moderation, and outreach to organized labour. His centrist rebranding aimed to attract suburban voters alienated by Scheer's social conservatism. However, this repositioning alienated large segments of the party's populist and libertarian grassroots, who saw his overtures as inauthentic or opportunistic. O'Toole's inability to reconcile the party's centrist ambitions with its ideological core, especially in the West, led to internal fractures and his eventual removal in early 2022.

The rapid ascent of Pierre Poilievre marked a decisive break from both Scheer's caution and O'Toole's centrism. Drawing inspiration from Donald Trump's insurgent populism and European right-wing movements, Poilievre rebranded the CPC as a party of "freedom," targeting carbon pricing, the Bank of Canada, and federal "gatekeepers" as symbols of elite overreach. His rhetorical alignment with the Convoy and embrace of vaccine skepticism and anti-mandate sentiment revealed a new, emotionally charged conservatism rooted in class grievance and cultural defiance. Poilievre positioned himself not as a technocrat or institutionalist but as a tribune of working-class Canadians alienated from the perceived consensus of the political, academic, and media elite. His brand of neo-populism combines market libertarianism, economic nationalism, and cultural grievance into a potent political style that has reoriented the CPC's ideological centre of gravity (Labine 2022; Gridneff 2025; Beauchamp 2024). While Poilievre's rise reflects a rupture with earlier forms of Canadian conservatism, elements of continuity remain. The CPC still upholds fiscal orthodoxy and champions law-and-order policies. It continues to draw strength from regional asymmetries particularly the enduring divide between Western alienation and central Canadian federalism. Yet, under Poilievre, the party has abandoned the paternalist ethos of Red Toryism, as well as the pragmatism and institutional stewardship once central to the Progressive Conservative tradition. Today's CPC defies easy ideological categorization: it is at once elite-driven in its structure and anti-elitist in its messaging, statist in its policing functions and anti-statist in its economic agenda. This contradiction is central to the CPC's electoral strategy under Poilievre. Alberta and Saskatchewan remain ideological strongholds, defined by resource-driven conservatism and hostility to federal intervention. In Ontario, the party targets suburban ridings

with messages emphasizing affordability, inflation, and government mismanagement. Quebec remains difficult terrain; while culturally conservative, the province's electorate is deeply wary of federal overreach and Anglophone dominance. Meanwhile, new constituencies are emerging. Disillusioned working-class voters, particularly those from immigrant backgrounds, have grown skeptical of Liberal technocracy (Boily 2021). Among young men active in digital spaces, Poilievre's anti-establishment rhetoric resonates powerfully, especially in the wake of pandemic-era restrictions.

The political terrain in which Poilievre's CPC now operates is shaped not only by leadership changes but also by broader socio-political forces. A key catalyst was the emergence of Maxime Bernier's People's Party of Canada (PPC), formed in 2018 as a reaction to what Bernier viewed as the CPC's excessive moderation. Although the PPC has never achieved significant electoral success, its ideological influence has been profound. It created a platform for anti-globalist, anti-immigration, and anti-mandate rhetoric, and helped to mainstream ideas such as "medical freedom" and "elite betrayal." During the COVID-19 pandemic, the PPC gave political voice to vaccine skeptics, libertarians, and conspiracy-influenced voters. It popularized discourses that would later be taken up by segments of the CPC and the Freedom Convoy, functioning less as a party than as an ideological incubator for right-wing populist sentiment. This shift was facilitated by the rise of a parallel media ecosystem, including Rebel News, True North, and The Post Millennial, which positioned themselves as champions of "free speech" and "truth" against the perceived bias of mainstream media. These platforms amplified populist voices, circulated conspiracy theories, and cast core institutions, courts, universities, public health authorities as captured by liberal, globalist elites. In this environment, institutional trust eroded, and populist outrage was increasingly framed not in terms of political disagreement but as an existential defence of freedom and sovereignty (Laxer et al. 2025; Medeiros and Gravelle 2023; Budd 2021).

Nowhere were these currents more visibly crystallized than in the Convoy. Though triggered by vaccine mandates for cross-border truckers, the Convoy quickly became a vessel for deeper grievances related to state authority, regional exclusion, and cultural alienation. With its symbolic staging in Ottawa and its open defiance of public health directives, the Convoy embodied the ideological porousness between mainstream conservatism, radical populism, and conspiratorial anti-statism. It was not an isolated event, but the culmination of years of growing tension between leadership and base, West and East, elite governance and populist revolt. In this context, Pierre

Poillievre's rise is not anomalous but symptomatic. He emerges as the political expression of a redefined conservative movement that fuses institutional ambition with anti-systemic rage (Hunt 2025; Roy et al. 2024a)

This reconfiguration must also be understood within the broader context of deepening political polarization and dissatisfaction with federal governance across Canada over the past decade. Since the mid-2010s, a wide swath of Canadians particularly those outside major urban centres, have come to view federal institutions as unresponsive, elitist, or hostile to their economic and cultural concerns. What began as regional discontent has expanded into a national mood of distrust, amplified through online networks and alternative media. This disillusionment has not only fractured the traditional left-right spectrum but has given rise to a more diffuse and emotionally charged populism, one that frames politics as a zero-sum struggle between ordinary people and an entrenched elite. The CPC's evolving identity underpinned by anti-establishment rhetoric, cultural grievance, and distrust of public authority, mirrors this wider societal shift, blurring the boundary between mainstream party politics and a growing anti-system sentiment.

Historical Roots of Right-Wing Extremism in Canada

Hence, far-right extremism in Canada is not a recent phenomenon, nor is it an imported anomaly. It is rooted in the country's own history of settler colonialism, white nationalism, and authoritarian political projects. From the early 20th century onward, Canada has witnessed recurring surges in organized far-right activity, each wave adapting to the cultural anxieties and socio-political fissures of its time. In the 1920s, the *Ku Klux Klan* (KKK) grew a strong base in British Columbia, the Prairies, and Ontario due to a convergence of demographic shifts, religious tensions, settler colonial anxieties, and economic instability. In each of these regions, the Klan successfully localized its message, adapting the white supremacist and nativist ideology imported from the United States to align with specific Canadian concerns around race, religion, and national identity. In British Columbia, the KKK capitalized on widespread anti-Asian sentiment. During the early 20th century, the province had growing populations of Chinese and Japanese immigrants, especially in urban centres like Vancouver and Victoria. This demographic shift fed a racially exclusionary politics deeply rooted in British Columbia's settler colonial history. Organizations like the Asiatic Exclusion League had already established a precedent for racialized agitation, and the Klan's anti-immigrant and white nationalist rhetoric found fertile ground. The Klan in B.C.

positioned itself as a defender of white British-Canadian identity against what it portrayed as the threat of an “Asian invasion.” Public support for exclusionary immigration policies, such as the Chinese Head Tax and the 1907 anti-Asian riots, reflected the receptiveness of local society to these views (Bartley 2020; Perry et al. 2022). The Klan’s appeal was further enhanced by its alignment with the province’s Protestant British elite, who feared that increasing pluralism would undermine the Anglo-Canadian cultural order.

In the Prairie provinces, particularly Alberta and Saskatchewan, the Klan’s influence grew in response to the influx of Eastern European immigrants, many of whom were Catholic, Orthodox, or otherwise culturally distinct from the Anglo-Protestant majority. These newcomers, arriving in large numbers during the settlement drives of the early 20th century, challenged the demographic and cultural dominance of British settlers. The Klan’s messaging in the Prairies thus emphasized Protestant supremacy, assimilationist education, and the need to resist bilingual or Catholic schooling. The rural conservatism of the region, combined with economic uncertainty and deep-seated cultural insecurities, made the Klan’s appeal particularly potent among small-town and farming communities. Moreover, the rise of moral reform movements and populist agrarian politics, such as the temperance movement, offered ideological overlaps that helped normalize the Klan’s presence (Bartley 2020). Ontario’s Klan base was rooted in the province’s long tradition of anti-Catholic, nationalist Protestantism, epitomized by the Orange Order. The Klan found ideological common cause in this milieu, portraying itself as a bulwark against the perceived threat of Catholicism, particularly from Irish and French Canadians. While Ontario had more institutional stability than the West, the Klan still managed to exploit anxieties about immigration, bilingualism, and labour unrest in the industrial cities (Bartley 1995). Economic hardship in the post-WWI period intensified fears about foreign influence and social instability, giving rise to nativist movements that targeted not only ethnic and religious minorities but also labour activists and political radicals. In this context, the Klan was able to frame itself as both morally upright and nationally loyal, committed to protecting what it defined as “true Canadian values.”

The broader conditions that enabled the Klan’s expansion across Canada were shaped by the aftershocks of World War I, including widespread disillusionment, inflation, and fears of Bolshevism. As urbanization accelerated and women’s rights movements gained visibility, many white Protestant Canadians feared that their traditional moral and cultural order was under threat. The Klan positioned itself as a defender of this order, warning against the erosion of Christian

values, the dilution of British identity, and the encroachment of foreign ideologies. Governmental tolerance of anti-Catholic and xenophobic rhetoric, combined with a lack of legal enforcement against hate groups, allowed the Klan to operate relatively freely in public spaces, including rallies, parades, and newspaper campaigns.

That said, the KKK is a racist, anti-Catholic, and anti-immigration movement from the United States. What is important to mention is that anti-Catholicism was already present in Canada since the 1830s with the Orange Order. By the end of World War I (WWI), Canada saw the KKK strength decline, but new fascist movements emerged such as the *National Social Christian Party of Canada* and replaced the fatigued force. Fascist movements also gain supporters in Quebec with Adrien Arcand. Known as the Canadian *Führer*, Arcand actively promoted antisemitism and founded the *Parti national chrétien du Canada* (PNSC) in 1933. Arcand dreamt of a Commonwealth between fascist nations where fascism would shine (Nadeau 2010; Légaré-Tremblay 2010). With the end of fascism/Nazism in Europe in the late 40s, RWE steadily declined with exceptions. For example, “the Orange Order continued to exist in Canada, but with little clout. In 1949, Adrien Arcand attempted to reassert his political power with the National Unity Party, but was never fully successful in doing so.” (Perry and Scrivens 2019, 24) Notorious far-right members such as Paul Fromm, John Ross Taylor, Leigh Smith, and Don Andrews established various newspapers, political parties, and societies in order to pursue RWE-related activities and memories. By the 70s, a new wave of RWE emerged. Influenced by Britain, Canada saw the popularity of neo-Nazi skinhead rise, a popularity gained through punk music. Skinheads reconfigured urban areas in Montreal, Vancouver, and Toronto. As stated by Barrett (1987), the key organizations to emerge from this neo-Nazi wave are: *The Western Guard*, *Aryan Nations*, *Concerned Parents of German Descents*, and *Citizens for Foreign Aid Reform* (C-FAR) among others. These organizations are rooted in what is left from the KKK idea of white supremacy, but more importantly, derived from the *Edmund Burke Society* established by Paul Fromm, Leigh Smith, and Don Andrews in the early 70s. By the end of the 80s, *Heritage Front* is established by ex-*Nationalist Party of Canada* members⁵. While fascism declined after World War II, far-right ideologies did not disappear; they merely adapted. In the postwar period, figures like Paul Fromm, Don Andrews, and John Ross Taylor sustained white supremacist activism through newsletters,

⁵ Wolfgang Droege, Gerry Lincoln, Grant Bristow, and James Dawson. Infamous members are Paul Fromm and Ernst Zundel. The party dissolved in 2005.

fringe political parties, and public speaking tours. By the 1970s and 1980s, Canada experienced a resurgence of far-right activity through the rise of neo-Nazi skinhead crews, especially in urban centres like Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver. These movements often mobilized through subcultural spaces punk and hate core music, underground zines, and later, internet forums like Stormfront. Organizations such as the Western Guard, Aryan Nations, and Heritage Front drew upon global white supremacist discourses while reframing them in response to local conditions: immigration policy, bilingualism, multiculturalism, and Indigenous rights.

Figure 1 Right-wing extremist groups in Canada



Source: Perry and Scrivens (2019, 46)

More importantly, some RWE organizations and individuals gained public attention due to their racist activities. That is the case of *Aryan Guards*, a neo-Nazi organization established in Alberta by Kyle McKee in 2006. The white supremacist organization made headlines due to “staging counter rallies against anti-racists, disseminating discriminatory fliers and engaging in an array of violent activities.” (Perry and Scrivens 2019, 27) McKee was accused of planting a pipe bomb outside a rival’s house and some members were accused of murder (CBC News 2009; Lamoureux 2017). *Western European Bloodline*, *Blood & Honour*, and *Combat-18* replaced, in 2010, *Aryan Guards* who disbanded a year earlier (Hutchinson 2011). In Quebec, skinhead organizations⁶ have mostly conducted violent actions against minorities and presented themselves as the “local” branch of *Combat-18*. More importantly, skinhead organizations in Quebec are known as “crews” where “Crews generally emerge out of “old time comradeship” and among groups of friends in specific

⁶ *Légitime Violence*, *Légion Nationaliste*, *Dead Boy Crew*, *Ragnarok*, *Ragnarok Vinland*, *Vinland Front*, *Quebec Radical*, and *Vinland Warriors* (Tanner and Campana 2014).

neighbourhoods. Ideology comes later.” (Tanner and Campana 2014, 19) Canadian RWEs are not only divided among neo-Nazi (white supremacists⁷), anti-government and lone ideologue classes. For example, religious right is not as widespread as in the United States but has gained activists in the Prairies. Rooted in conservative evangelical Christianity, religious right activists are particularly vocal on a single issue as compared to other RWE organizations in Canada. Particularly vocal on issues related to education (i.e. homeschool movement), the LGBTQ+ community (i.e. same-sex relationships), and abortion⁸ (Fetner 2019), some movements such as *aborterrorism.ca* and *Human Life International* (HLI) have strongly contradicted government policies and as vilify minorities. For example, *Catholics for Choice* claims that HLI

representatives have spoken out against almost every conceivable minority group, expressing concerns that Asians, Latinos and Muslims will overrun the world; proclaiming that Jews were responsible for abortions worldwide; labelling homosexuality and feminism as degraded and satanic, respectively; and condemning black leaders in the anti-apartheid movement. (Catholics for Choice 2011, 1–2)

As Perry and Scrivens (2019) argue, Canadian far-right groups have always been heterogeneous in form ranging from militant neo-Nazis to Christian fundamentalists and conspiracy theorists, but their ideological core remains remarkably consistent. At the heart of Canadian RWE is a defensive narrative of racialized grievance: the belief that the Canadian state has abandoned “real” (white) Canadians in favour of immigrants, Indigenous peoples, feminists, and LGBTQ+ minorities. This story is rearticulated over time whether through anti-Catholicism in the 1920s, antisemitism in the 1930s, or anti-Muslim sentiment post-9/11, but the fundamental structure of “white victimhood” persists. Despite this long-standing presence, Canadian state institutions have historically minimized the threat of RWE. For much of the 2000s and 2010s, agencies such as the *Canadian Security Intelligence Service* (CSIS)⁹ and Public Safety Canada¹⁰ continued to frame terrorism as

⁷ For White supremacists, everything and everyone is against them. For example, there is, in Quebec and Western provinces, an anti-Aboriginal sentiment. White supremacists believe that First Nations are trying to gain access to land, natural resources, and hunting privileges by exploiting the “white guilt”. In other words, First Nations claims are illegitimate (i.e., Oka tensions in Quebec) (Perry and Scrivens 2019).

⁸ For an example of a homophobic policy, see the *Trinity Western University covenant issue 2018*. In sum, TWU students and staff members were required to sign a document “maintaining that any sexual activity outside of heterosexual marriage is contrary to its “biblical values.” Even if the covenant document is no longer mandatory, students and staff members still face discrimination (Bouwman 2018; Shipley 2020) On abortion and homosexuality, see André Bruneau (2012).

⁹ In Canada, CSIS defined RWE as ideologically motivated (IMVE). “A range of grievances motivates IMVE actors’ willingness to incite, enable, and/or mobilize violence. [... More so, t]he IMVE threat is complex and constantly evolving and is fuelled by proponents that are driven by a range of influences rather than a singular belief system.” (Canadian Security Intelligence Service 2021, 24)

¹⁰ “The principal terrorist threat to Canada and Canadian interests continues to be that posed by individuals or groups who are inspired by violent ideologies and terrorists groups, such as Daesh or al-Qaida (AQ).” (Public Safety 2018)

a foreign, Islamist threat, sidelining domestic white supremacist violence even in the wake of the 2017 Quebec City mosque shooting. Only recently has the category of ideologically motivated violent extremism” (IMVE) emerged to describe the evolving landscape of right-wing extremism in Canada. However, even this terminology reflects institutional hesitation, failing to fully name white nationalism, conspiracism, or far-right populism as key ideological drivers. While Canada’s far-right actors often operate at the margins of formal politics, their ideologies remain resilient because they are deeply embedded in popular narratives. These include the defence of “Western civilization,” “traditional family values,” “freedom from government tyranny,” and the protection of “Canadian heritage.” Such tropes are malleable, allowing them to circulate not only within extremist circles but also in mainstream conservative discourse albeit in more sanitized forms. For example, the notion of a “silent majority” under attack by liberal elites has animated both fringe conspiracy groups and major political campaigns.

Digital media has supercharged this process. The internet has not only connected far-right actors across borders but has enabled a rapid circulation of ideas, memes, and grievances. Far-right influencers in Canada, whether affiliated with groups like the Proud Boys, QAnon, or the People’s Party, use platforms like Telegram, X, and TikTok to bypass traditional media filters. These digital narratives often blend conspiratorial thinking with personal grievance, promoting an anti-system worldview in which the government, media, universities, and even science are seen as illegitimate. COVID-19 further amplified these dynamics. Public health mandates, vaccine requirements, and lockdowns were reframed as authoritarian overreach, giving rise to new coalitions that brought together libertarians, anti-vaxxers, and white nationalists under the banner of “freedom.” The Freedom Convoy represents a pivotal moment in this evolution. Though sparked by vaccine mandates for cross-border truckers, the Convoy quickly became a symbol of broader resistance to state authority, cultural liberalism, and perceived elite betrayal. It functioned as a convergence space for disaffected citizens, conspiracy theorists, and organized far-right actors (Leman-Langlois et al. 2024). Ideologically, the movement was amorphous but coherent in its underlying narrative structure: Canada was under siege from globalist elites, and “ordinary people” had a duty to resist. As Perry and Scrivens (2019) show, key provinces with a high concentration of far-right groups (i.e. Quebec, Alberta, Ontario, and B.C.) were also central to the Convoy’s mobilization. Figures like Pat King and Tamara Lich, who were instrumental in organizing the protests, had long histories in separatist, anti-immigrant, or conspiratorial circles. Importantly, this form of

extremism does not require formal organizations to persist. Canadian RWE today thrives in a decentralized, meme-driven, emotionally resonant ecosystem. It is sustained by discursive repetition: narratives about government betrayal, the decline of Western civilization, “inverted racism” against white Canadians, and the erosion of parental rights and bodily autonomy. These narratives circulate in encrypted chat rooms and Facebook groups, but they also increasingly shape public discourse, especially when echoed by sympathetic politicians or media personalities.

What makes RWE in Canada so enduring is its capacity to mutate. Its actors borrow from past movements but adapt to new fears: communism in the Cold War, immigration in the 1990s, Islam after 9/11, and “globalist” health mandates during COVID-19. In every case, the ideological scaffolding remains the same nationalism, white identity, anti-elitism, and a vision of moral decay, but the language and targets shift. The persistence of Canada’s far right is thus not simply a question of group membership or organizational strength. It is a function of ideological continuity, narrative adaptability, and institutional blind spots. As long as economic precarity, cultural anxiety, and political distrust remain widespread, and as long as far-right actors can offer emotionally compelling stories that make sense of these experiences, Canada’s far right will continue to evolve, survive, and occasionally erupt into public spectacle.

Canadian Political Climate and the Emergence of the Freedom Convoy

The Convoy did not emerge in a political vacuum; rather, it was the product of an increasingly polarized and fragmented political climate in Canada. Over the past decade, the country has experienced growing ideological division, especially along geographic and cultural lines. Urban-rural cleavages, regional discontent (i.e. Alberta and Saskatchewan), and long-standing distrust toward centralized federal authority have contributed to a volatile political environment. The Liberal government’s progressive policies on climate change, Indigenous reconciliation, immigration, and particularly COVID-19 management, were perceived by many as emblematic of a governing elite disconnected from the everyday realities of working-class and rural Canadians. Within this context, populist sentiment, defined by an antagonism between “the people” and “the elite,” began to flourish, providing a fertile cultural and ideological foundation upon which the Freedom Convoy could mobilize. This sense of alienation was especially acute in Western Canada, where economic grievances linked to the energy sector were compounded by broader regionalist frustrations. Federal decisions such as the cancellation of pipeline projects, the imposition of

carbon pricing, and the centralization of environmental regulation were interpreted not merely as technocratic adjustments but as violations of provincial sovereignty and symbols of federal overreach (Neubauer and Gunster 2019). This regional discontent, often couched in the language of lost autonomy and betrayal by Ottawa, laid the groundwork for a protest movement capable of transcending its initial focus on vaccine mandates and resonating with a broader spectrum of disaffected citizens.

The COVID-19 pandemic functioned as both a trigger and an amplifier of these latent grievances. Far from being a temporary health emergency, the pandemic became a site of sustained political contestation. Government responses including lockdowns, mask mandates, vaccine certification systems, and cross-border restrictions, were not universally experienced as protective measures. For a growing subset of the population, particularly in sectors like transportation, healthcare, and services, these measures imposed economic hardship and emotional strain. More critically, they were interpreted as infringements on civil liberties, personal autonomy, and democratic norms. Truck drivers, especially those engaged in cross-border transport, were directly affected by the January 2022 federal mandate requiring full COVID-19 vaccination for re-entry into Canada. While presented as a necessary public health measure, this mandate became a flashpoint for broader frustrations. For many, it signified a government willing to impose sweeping decisions without consultation, transparency, or democratic oversight. Such grievances coalesced around a narrative of resistance not merely to pandemic policies, but to an entire political and epistemic order perceived as illegitimate and unaccountable. Public trust in institutions, including health authorities, political leaders, and mainstream media, was eroded during the pandemic, deepening a wider crisis of legitimacy. Conflicting guidelines, changing definitions of “fully vaccinated,” and visible hypocrisy among elites such as politicians flouting restrictions, undermined the credibility of institutional actors. Many citizens began to turn instead to alternative sources of knowledge grounded in personal experience, peer networks, and digital communities. This epistemic shift was not merely incidental; it was central to the formation of a politicized collective identity based on distrust, autonomy, and truth-seeking outside official channels (Breton et al. 2024).

Hence, digital media ecosystems played a decisive role in catalyzing this identity and facilitating collective action. Platforms such as Facebook, Telegram, and X (formerly Twitter) enabled rapid mobilization, decentralized coordination, and the circulation of grievance-based

narratives. These online spaces functioned as echo chambers in which anti-establishment sentiment was continuously reinforced, and the line between legitimate dissent and conspiratorial worldviews became increasingly blurred. The erosion of traditional media's gatekeeping function allowed the Convoy to frame its own message and reach audiences that felt excluded or misrepresented by mainstream narratives. In doing so, participants often claimed to represent a "silent majority" of Canadians an imagined community disillusioned with liberal political discourse and mobilized around notions of moral clarity and common sense (Roy et al. 2024b; Pinheiro 2021). This digital environment further fed into a broader crisis of political representation. Many Convoy supporters expressed a belief that none of the established political parties adequately reflected their cultural values or economic interests. The Conservative Party of Canada, under Erin O'Toole, attempted a centrist stance on pandemic policy, ultimately alienating segments of its populist base without securing broader support. This strategic ambiguity created a vacuum that the Convoy readily filled, offering itself as an extra-parliamentary alternative, a populist movement speaking on behalf of "the people" against a corrupt, unresponsive elite (Pinheiro 2021; Cinelli et al. 2021).

In sum, the COVID-19 crisis should be understood not simply as a health emergency, but as a profound political inflection point. It catalyzed and accelerated long-standing tensions in Canadian society regional alienation, distrust of federal institutions, and a populist rejection of elite authority. The pandemic response became the crucible in which these disparate grievances were forged into a unified, oppositional movement. The Convoy was thus not an isolated protest but a highly visible expression of deeper structural fractures in Canadian liberal democracy fractures shaped by geography, class, ideology, and a shifting digital public sphere.

Quebec, the Rest of Canada, and the Freedom Convoy: Provincial Specificities

Although the Convoy was widely portrayed as a unified national mobilization, its meanings, trajectories, and modes of participation varied across provinces. These variations are analytically consequential particularly when comparing Quebec to the rest of Canada. Situating this study within both provincial and national contexts is essential for understanding how politicized collective identities emerged under conditions of crisis.

Provincial Political Culture and Regional Variation

A substantial body of scholarship demonstrates that provincial political cultures in Canada are distinct, enduring, and empirically measurable. Drawing on five decades of public opinion surveys, Blanchard (2023) shows that provinces differ systematically in their political values, institutional trust, and orientations toward authority with Quebec consistently exhibiting distinctive patterns relative to the rest of Canada. These differences are not merely attitudinal but reflect deeper historical and institutional trajectories that shape how citizens interpret political conflict and collective action. Quebec's political culture has been profoundly shaped by the Quiet Revolution and its aftermath, which reconfigured relations between the state, religion, and society. Subsequent research highlights that Quebecers display lower levels of generalized social trust compared to other Canadians, a pattern linked to linguistic, historical, and institutional factors rather than individual-level characteristics alone (Bridgman et al. 2022). This lower baseline trust has important implications for how state authority and legitimacy are evaluated during periods of crisis.

Secularism, State Authority and Political Identity in Quebec

One of the most salient dimensions distinguishing Quebec from the rest of Canada is its approach to secularism. Empirical studies show that support for secular state arrangements is significantly higher in Quebec than elsewhere in Canada, a difference largely explained by lower religiosity and a distinctive configuration of liberal values (Bibeau et al. 2023). These attitudes are not merely policy preferences but are embedded in broader narratives of emancipation from clerical authority and collective self-determination. Secularism in Quebec also functions as an identity-defining boundary vis-à-vis the rest of Canada. Analyses of debates surrounding *Loi 21* demonstrate how laicity is framed as a core element of Quebec's national identity often contrasted with Canadian multiculturalism, which is depicted as insufficiently attentive to Quebec's historical experience (Taher et al. 2024). These identity dynamics shape how Quebecers conceptualize rights, state neutrality, and the legitimate limits of government interventions, themes that re-emerged forcefully during the pandemic.

Pandemic Governance and Provincial Experiences

Provincial variation in COVID-19 governance further reinforces the importance of situating the Convoy within regional contexts. Comparative analyses of Canadian pandemic responses reveal substantial interprovincial variation in policy timing, stringency, and governance structures (Cameron-Blake et al. 2021). Quebec stands out for its early adoption of stringent measures including prolonged curfews and centralized public communication, reflecting both its health infrastructure and its political decision-making traditions. Research on pandemic governance in Quebec emphasizes that policy decisions were shaped by distinct institutional configurations including the central role of provincial authorities in evidence synthesis and rapid decision-making (McSween-Cadieux et al. 2024). These governance arrangements structured how residents experienced restrictions and assessed their legitimacy. For some individuals, particularly those already predisposed toward skepticism of authority, these measures contributed to perceptions of moral overreach and democratic rupture rather than collective protection.

Implications for Mobilization and Sample Composition

Against this backdrop, the predominance of Quebec-based respondents in this study should not be treated merely as a methodological limitation. Rather, it reflects an analytically meaningful case selection. Quebec provides a particularly revealing context for examining politicized identity because dissent emerged not from a traditionally anti-statist political culture, but from one historically characterized by relatively high acceptance of state intervention in social and economic life. The convergence of lower generalized trust (Bridgman et al. 2022), strong secular state traditions (Bibeau et al. 2023), and stringent pandemic governance (Cameron-Blake et al. 2021; McSween-Cadieux et al. 2024) created conditions in which opposition to public health measures was often framed in terms of democratic legitimacy, bodily autonomy and moral authority rather than market libertarianism or wholesale rejection of the state. This distinguishes Quebec-based participants in the Convoy from mobilization patterns more commonly observed in parts of Western Canada or Ontario, where anti-federalism and economic libertarianism have historically played a more prominent role.

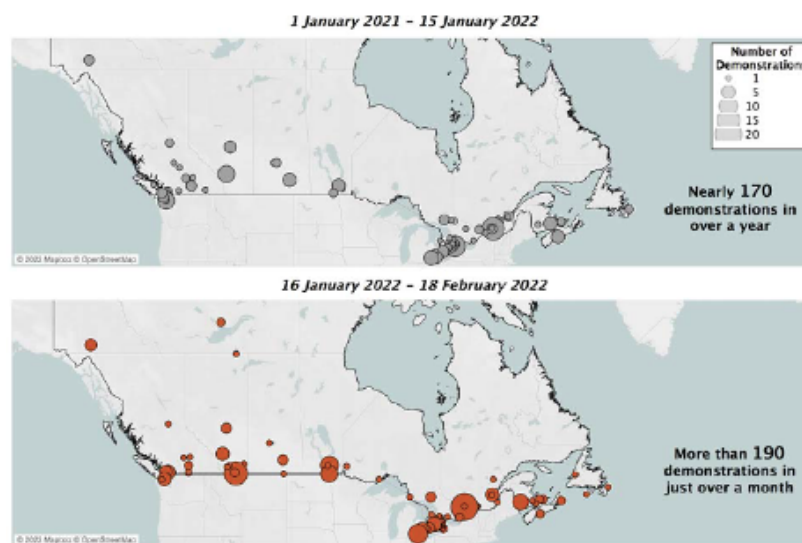
By explicitly situating the study within Quebec's distinctive political and institutional context, while remaining attentive to broader Canadian dynamics, this thesis is able to capture the heterogeneous pathways through which politicized collective identities formed during the Convoy.

The Quebec-centric composition of the sample thus enhances, rather than constraints, the study's capacity to theorize how regional political cultures mediate processes of grievance articulation, identity transformation, and protest mobilization.

The Pandemic and the Mobilization Crisis

The Convoy emerged in early 2022 as a large-scale populist protest against COVID-19 public health mandates, most notably the federal government's requirement that cross-border truckers be vaccinated. While framed as a grassroots movement led by ordinary truckers, the Convoy was deeply rooted in a broader climate of pandemic-era grievances and political polarization that had been building years prior. Early anti-lockdown and anti-mask protests, which surfaced across the country from the onset of the pandemic, created the discursive and organizational scaffolding on which the Convoy would build.

Figure 2 Demonstrations against vaccines in Canada before and after the Trucker Vaccine Mandate



The introduction of the trucker vaccine mandate in January 2022 served as a catalyst. Convoys originating in British Columbia, Alberta, and Manitoba began travelling across Canada, picking up support in cities along the way. In Edmonton, over 2,000 demonstrators gathered outside the Legislative Assembly to protest what they viewed as unconstitutional restrictions (CTV News Edmonton 2022). As the convoys moved eastward, they functioned as both literal and symbolic vehicles for dissent, drawing in diverse supporters from libertarians and small business owners to Christian nationalists and far-right actors. The Convoy framed its demands around a defence of

“freedom” and “bodily autonomy,” yet these demands increasingly encompassed broader narratives about government overreach, Western alienation, and the erosion of national identity (Jones et al. 2022; Carvin et al. 2022).

By the time the Convoy reached Ottawa on January 29, it had transformed from a sectoral protest into a nationwide populist movement. Protesters entrenched themselves in the capital’s downtown core, particularly around Parliament Hill, where they set up an encampment, blocked streets with large trucks, and organized daily rallies. The occupation lasted for over three weeks, profoundly disrupting daily life in Ottawa and signalling a high-stakes confrontation between protesters and the Canadian state (Canadian Anti-Hate Network 2022b).

Tactical Evolution: Occupation, Blockades, and Digital Mobilization

The Convoy’s tactical repertoire evolved rapidly, expanding from mobile protest to territorial occupation and strategic economic disruption. The Ottawa encampment was the epicentre of this strategy. Protesters used their vehicles to barricade major intersections, established kitchens and supply chains, and utilized digital platforms to broadcast speeches, fundraise, and galvanize support across the country and abroad. These tactics turned the protest into both a logistical stronghold and a symbolic assertion of popular sovereignty. Parallel to the Ottawa occupation, a series of illegal blockades were staged at critical border crossings (CBC News 2022b; Lemoyne 2022). The Ambassador Bridge in Windsor responsible for a significant portion of Canada-U.S. trade was blocked from February 7 to 14, disrupting the automotive and manufacturing sectors. In Sarnia, protesters targeted the Blue Water Bridge, while in Fort Erie, demonstrators impeded access to the Peace Bridge, creating delays for commercial goods and essential services. The Emerson blockade in Manitoba, beginning February 13, further exacerbated disruptions to cross-border commerce, especially for perishable goods. In Coutts, Alberta, the blockade was especially severe: it interrupted trade, restricted the transport of live animals and fuel, and led to 11 arrests on February 14 after authorities uncovered firearms and links to the extremist group Diagonol. In British Columbia, protesters broke through an RCMP barricade at the Pacific Highway crossing in Surrey on February 12, blocking international traffic for several days (Public Safety 2022; Public Order Emergency Commission 2022a; 2022b).

These blockades exemplified the Convoy’s strategic shift toward economic leverage, utilizing chokepoints in Canada’s supply chain to amplify the protest’s national and international

visibility. The simultaneous use of digital tools (i.e. Telegram, Facebook, GoFundMe, and GiveSendGo) enabled real-time coordination, decentralized decision-making, and substantial financial mobilization, with over \$20 million raised before authorities intervened (Parkhill 2022). However, the Convoy's tactics also invited increasing public backlash. Residents of Ottawa endured incessant horn-blaring, verbal harassment, and the occupation of public space. Health workers were impeded from reaching hospitals, and journalists faced intimidation. Protesters were also criticized for using children as human shields to deter law enforcement, adding to ethical concerns about protester conduct. These developments intensified demands for a state response. The federal government's invocation of the Emergencies Act on February 14, 2022, marked a decisive turning point. The Act granted sweeping powers, including the freezing of financial assets, the authorization of arrests, and the mobilization of inter-jurisdictional police operations (Canadian Anti-Hate Network 2022d). Between February 18 and 20, a coordinated effort by law enforcement dismantled the Ottawa encampment, removed blockades at key crossings, and arrested prominent leaders such as Tamara Lich and Chris Barber. Although the occupation formally ended, its political and cultural reverberations persisted long afterward.

Leadership, Key Events, and the Escalation Toward Crisis

Central to the emergence and radicalization of the Convoy was a constellation of highly visible, controversial figures whose backgrounds reveal a dense web of far-right activism, conspiracy dissemination, and populist mobilization. These actors not only provided ideological scaffolding for the protest but also shaped its public image, digital reach, and tactical escalation. Individuals such as Pat King, Tamara Lich, James Bauder, and Benjamin "BJ" Dichter were not peripheral supporters but central architects of a movement that increasingly aligned with identitarian, conspiratorial, and anti-democratic currents. Pat King, dubbed the "commander-in-chief" of Convoy operations in Alberta and later the "commander-in-chief" of Ottawa's red zones, exemplifies the violent, racialized, and conspiratorial underpinnings of the protest. Previously active in Wexit, United We Roll (UWR), and Yellow Vest Canada (YVC), King first gained traction in Alberta through his vocal promotion of the Great Replacement theory. He claimed that "True-blooded Canadians are being weeded out while our corrupt government is letting in ISIS terrorists across the border" (Zhou 2019). His Facebook live sessions served as platforms for propagating a wide range of conspiracy theories, including that Justin Trudeau was a pedophile

and that the Canadian government was covertly funding terrorism through refugee policies. Identitarian and openly anti-Muslim, anti-Jewish, and anti-Chinese, King also infamously stated that “The only way this is going to be solved is with bullets,” referring to COVID-19 health mandates (Parkhill 2022). Despite public distancing from other Convoy organizers following these statements, King’s large digital following amplified his role in shaping the Convoy’s tone (Canadian Anti-Hate Network 2022d). King’s earlier political capital was derived from his status as a co-campaigner of Wexit, a Western Canadian secessionist movement that trended nationally under the hashtag #Wexit following Trudeau’s re-election in 2019. The campaign, spearheaded by Peter Downing and King, was grounded in anti-globalization, anti-Muslim rhetoric, and conspiracy theories. It was also linked ideologically to the Christian Heritage Party, where Downing had previously stood as a candidate (Zhou 2019; Canadian Anti-Hate Network 2022b).

Tamara Lich, born in Saskatchewan and originally involved in YVC, similarly emerged as a key figure through her role in Wexit. Lich’s articulation of Western alienation fed into her later involvement with the Maverick Party, from which she resigned to focus entirely on organizing the Convoy. Her rhetoric positioned the federal government as a colonial oppressor of Western interests: “The west needs a party that is willing to fight for what is best for their interests and their people without having to pander for the eastern vote” (Crawford 2022). As the Convoy’s official spokesperson and chief fundraiser, Lich oversaw GoFundMe and GiveSendGo campaigns that collectively raised nearly \$20 million CAD (Parkhill 2022). Her claims to Métis identity have been heavily disputed by Indigenous groups, who denounce her alleged “strategic appropriation” of Indigenous heritage to gain public sympathy and soften her extremist affiliations (Canadian Anti-Hate Network 2022d). Lich has espoused white nationalist sentiments, arguing that “pure” Canadians are disappearing due to immigration, echoing Renaud Camus’s Great Replacement theory. She has also echoed discredited theories about the Muslim Brotherhood’s infiltration of Canadian institutions, many of which originated from self-proclaimed security expert Tom Quiggin whom Lich has endorsed publicly (PressProgress 2017).

James Bauder, founder of Canada Unity (CU), authored the Convoy’s notorious Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), which demanded the resignation of Prime Minister Trudeau and the repeal of all vaccine mandates. Although Bauder insisted CU was “not an anti-vaccine organization” and stood for “lawful freedom of personal choice” (Bauder 2021b, 3), the MOU is unmistakably an anti-government manifesto. Prior to the pandemic, Bauder had organized

multiple convoys aimed at delegitimizing Trudeau’s government. His conspiratorial worldview includes beliefs that COVID-19 was a bioweapon released with the complicity of global elites like George Soros. Since 2020, Bauder and his wife Sandra have infused their rhetoric with Christian nationalism and apocalyptic language, aligning with the broader New Apostolic Reformation movement present in North America (Southern Poverty Law Center 2025). Benjamin “BJ” Dichter, another central figure, was a former Conservative Party candidate in Toronto-Danforth and a known affiliate of the People’s Party of Canada (PPC). Dichter repeatedly used international platforms, including appearances on Tucker Carlson’s show, to frame the Convoy as a battle against “globalist tyranny,” often accompanied by xenophobic undertones. He has promoted anti-immigrant conspiracy theories and Islamophobic narratives, portraying Canadian multiculturalism as a threat to national sovereignty. Chris Barber, known as the Convoy’s digital strategist, amplified this messaging through social media. He described vaccine mandates as “tyranny at its finest” and likened Canada’s public health policies to those of North Korea (Parkhill 2022).

Other prominent figures offered tactical legitimacy rooted in their former careers. Tom Quiggin, who claimed expertise as a military intelligence officer, spread misinformation about the “Great Reset” and international subversion. Former RCMP officer Daniel Bulford and former Calgary police officer Brian Denison also joined the Convoy’s operations team. All three are associated with “Taking Back Our Freedoms,” a group claiming that vaccine mandates violate the Canadian Constitution. They frame their opposition in libertarian legalist terms, but their rhetoric often overlaps with anti-globalist and sovereign citizen narratives (Parkhill 2022). The Convoy also received endorsement from political actors on the fringes of the mainstream. Maxime Bernier, leader of the PPC, openly defied public health orders and embraced religious nationalist rhetoric. In Quebec, Bernier aligned with figures like Carlos Norbal of the *Église Nouvelle Création*, who described COVID-19 policies as “*du satanisme promu par des communistes athées qui cherchaient à profiter de la pandémie pour prendre le contrôle de la planète*”¹¹ (Geoffroy, Boily, and Nadeau 2022, 27). Bernier’s connections to anti-lockdown protests and conspiracy theorists such as Chris Sky and Daniel Pilon further cemented his place within the ecosystem of pandemic populism (Belfer 2021). In Ontario, expelled PC Party MPPs Randy Hillier and Derek Sloan found renewed relevance through their involvement in the Convoy. Hillier, removed from the PC caucus

¹¹ Translated by the author: “satanism promoted by atheistic communists seeking to take advantage of the pandemic to take control of the planet”

in 2019 for insulting a parent of an autistic child, later encouraged supporters to “flood Ottawa police phone lines,” a tactic reminiscent of sovereign citizen “paper terrorism” (CBC News 2019; Ireton 2022). Sloan was expelled for making discriminatory remarks against LGBTQ+ and immigrant communities but continued to gain traction during the pandemic by promoting misinformation and resisting public health mandates (Basa 2020; Baldwin 2020). These figures transformed the movement from a decentralized protest into a coordinated political operation drawing from the discursive repertoire of the far right. The Ottawa occupation, border blockades, and the unprecedented invocation of the Emergencies Act exposed deep-seated fractures within Canadian politics urban versus rural, federal versus provincial, and populist versus liberal-democratic visions of order. As demonstrated, this was not merely a protest about vaccines or mandates; it was a performative and symbolic convergence of grievance-based identities. The Convoy functioned as both a flashpoint for anti-government mobilization and a convention of aspiring far-right influencers a watershed moment in the evolution of Canada’s populist radical right.

Converging Ideologies: The Freedom Convoy’s Narrative Ecology

Health or not to health, what narrative should we use?

What is particularly interesting with the Convoy is its sense of continuity. The “new” narrative incorporates anti-Jewish, anti-government, New Age spiritualism and religious components as other demonstrations, but it is its organizers and their willingness to relaunch the Yellow Vest Canada (YVC) and United We Roll (UWR) spirits that are compelling. At its inception, the movement presented itself as a grassroots movement standing in defence of civil liberties, bodily autonomy, and democratic rights. The initial publicized demands were relatively limited in scope, focusing on the repeal of vaccine mandates, the elimination of digital vaccine passports, and the restoration of pre-pandemic norms. Protesters claimed to speak on behalf of ordinary Canadians (i.e. truckers, small business owners, and citizens disillusioned with government overreach). In this framing, “freedom” operated as the central rallying cry, evoking liberal-democratic ideals and expressing a generalized frustration with the COVID-19 response. However, this framing was short-lived. Rapidly and unsurprisingly, the Convoy shifted its narrative and moved away from its

original four (4) demands¹². The notion of “freedom” became a malleable and ideologically polyvalent signifier, allowing the movement to subsume a diverse and often contradictory range of grievances.

Indeed, the movement succeeded in attracting an eclectic coalition: from far right and conspiracist actors to members of the working class, disaffected moderates, and even marginalized communities. This convergence was not accidental. The Convoy’s organizers strategically polished their narrative to latch onto the broader discontent generated by the pandemic-induced reconfiguration of everyday life. The romanticization of the pre-COVID era was central to this effort. The movement consistently portrayed the pre-pandemic period as a lost time of order, tradition, and freedom, an idealized past that had allegedly been corrupted by government mandates and progressive social change. According to the Canadian Anti-Hate Network (2022b), this appeal to a traditional way of life was often rooted in a reactionary critique of modernity, motivated by the belief that gains made by women, people of colour, and other marginalized groups were part of the societal decline. In this context, “freedom” served as an empty signifier (Laclau 2005) capable of absorbing and articulating diverse social frustrations into a single populist discourse. While some Convoy supporters interpreted freedom as a demand for civil liberties in the face of emergency public health measures, others filled the term with anti-democratic, anti-immigration, and conspiratorial meaning. This semantic openness allowed the movement to grow rapidly, but also to obscure its radical undercurrents. The narrative was not simply one of resistance to mandates; it was a discourse of restoration, seeking to return to an imagined national past unsullied by globalization, liberalism, and multiculturalism.

Moreover, the ideological architecture of the movement cannot be disentangled from its historical continuity with earlier far-right mobilizations in Canada. The Convoy represented a reconfiguration, rather than a rupture, of previous efforts such as the UWR movement in 2019. Organized by YVC, UWR similarly claimed to defend the working class against Ottawa’s alleged betrayal of Western Canada’s energy sector. However, the movement was deeply entangled with Islamophobic, white identitarian, and conspiratorial narratives. Its promoters, many of whom were also prominent figures in the Convoy such as Lich and King, were already well established within

¹² As stated by Lich and Dichter (2022), these four (4) demands are: “1. The federal and provincial governments terminate the vaccine passports, and all other obligatory vaccine contact tracing programs, or inter-Canada passport systems; 2. Terminate Covid vaccine mandates and respect the rights of those who wish to remain unvaccinated; 3. Cease the divisive rhetoric attacking Canadians who disagree with government mandates; 4. Cease to limit debate through coercive measures with the goal of censoring those who have varying or incorrect opinions.”

far right and identitarian circles. These figures openly espoused variants of Renaud Camus's "Great Replacement" theory and leveraged grievances over federal policies to mask a racialized and exclusionary vision of Canadian identity (Canadian Anti-Hate Network 2022d). As the Convoy gained momentum, this radical continuity became increasingly visible. While its outward-facing message shifted toward generalized populist slogans about "freedom" and "working-class revolution," the movement remained anchored in far-right ideological frameworks. Organizers continued to frame the Convoy as a necessary uprising against a corrupt and illegitimate federal government. In many interviews and speeches, the movement was cast as Canada's equivalent to the January 6th insurrection in the United States. Groups such as Diagonol, led by Jeremy MacKenzie, a known military accelerationist and anti-government agitator, became visible during the protests in Ottawa and Coutts. Diagonol explicitly promotes the collapse of liberal-democratic institutions through violence and the exacerbation of social divisions (Canadian Anti-Hate Network 2022c). MacKenzie's vision of a "diagonal" line of sanity across anti-mandate provinces was emblematic of the ideological extremism embedded within the Convoy's supposedly mainstream demands.

This convergence of extremist and populist narratives was not limited to ideological production. The Convoy, like previous movements, also functioned as a logistical and networking hub. It allowed far-right organizations to regroup, rebrand, and extend their reach through coordinated fundraising, digital media amplification, and public spectacle. The pandemic, and more precisely the Convoy, became a catalyst for far-right actors to expand their repertoire of appeal no longer confined to racial or religious scapegoating but now able to mobilize around health, civil liberties, and sovereignty discourses. As Lim and Rigato (2022) note, the shift in narrative, from racism and xenophobia to civil rights and conspiracy, allowed these groups to reach wider audiences, simplify complex crises, and offer clear enemies for public blame. The result was the mainstreaming of previously marginal ideologies under the guise of legitimate dissent.

Ultimately, the Convoy's narrative ecology was marked by strategic ambiguity, ideological hybridity, and opportunistic framing. Its promoters claimed to defend bodily autonomy echoing slogans like "my body, my choice," but the deeper architecture of the movement was steeped in years of far-right persistence and mobilization. The movement offered a ready-made platform for grievances that transcended pandemic policies, including deep-seated distrust of multiculturalism, central governance, and institutional authority. As the WHO observed in relation to the pandemic's

“infodemic,” the proliferation of disinformation and conspiracy theories during this period disproportionately empowered far-right networks while eroding the credibility of scientific and governmental institutions. The Convoy thus revealed how public health crises can serve as fertile ground for the repackaging and dissemination of extremist ideologies under the veneer of civic resistance.

Anti-government, QAnon, and Conspiracist Narratives

The Convoy’s ideological ecosystem was saturated with anti-government and conspiracist narratives that originated in long-standing extremist movements but gained renewed prominence during the pandemic. Central to this narrative is the sovereign citizen (SC) and Freeman-on-the-Land (FTL) ideologies, which reject the legitimacy of the state and promote a vision of absolute personal sovereignty rooted in pseudo-legal reasoning and conspiratorial cosmology. These movements originated in anti-tax and anti-federalist circles but have evolved into potent vectors of extremism, known for their hostility toward public institutions and, at times, their promotion of violence¹³ (Parent and Ellis III 2016; Jackson 2019). Underlying the SC/FTL worldview is a deep suspicion of centralized authority, coupled with foundational elements of racism and antisemitism traits that have made these narratives particularly appealing to segments of the white nationalist far right.

Hence, at the heart of the ideology is the belief that the government is an illegitimate corporate entity that imposes a fraudulent social contract. By refusing to acknowledge this contract, individuals can allegedly regain access to “real” freedoms and unmask the state’s “true” agenda, namely, participation in a vast international scheme to impose a “new world order” that strips citizens of their rights and autonomy. As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, this foundational anti-government narrative gained renewed traction, amplified by the climate of uncertainty and state-imposed public health mandates. SC/FTL beliefs were frequently combined with New Age spiritualism (NA), creating what Geoffroy, Boily, and Nadeau (2022) describe as a potent hybridization of anti-institutional worldviews: “*Dans le cas du NA [Nouvel Âge], on s’oppose surtout aux autorités sanitaires et scolaires qui font la promotion de la connaissance scientifique au détriment de la connaissance intuitive qui est valorisée en priorité par ses adeptes.*”¹⁴ (23)

¹³ In Canada, the SC/FTL movement is considered a national security threat (Canadian Security Intelligence Service 2012)

¹⁴ Translated by the author: “In the case of the NA [new age], the main opposition is to the health and education authorities who promote scientific knowledge to the detriment of the intuitive knowledge that is valued primarily by its followers.”

This fusion proved ideologically powerful during the pandemic. Both SC/FTL and NA frameworks privileged personal intuition and spiritual authority over scientific expertise or legal reasoning, legitimizing defiance of public health mandates and enabling radical reinterpretations of the pandemic as a spiritual or esoteric conflict. The pandemic thus offered fertile ground for SC/FTL rhetoric to be deployed in practical and confrontational ways. For example, a restaurant owner in Vancouver who refused to comply with public health regulations told inspectors that she did not recognize their jurisdiction and accused them of trespassing (Judd 2021). Similarly, an Ontarian man involved in the Convoy stated in court that “God was his lawyer,” and declared: “Everything that goes on in these courtrooms is fiction” (Taekema 2022). These statements mirror the broader SC/FTL refusal to acknowledge Canadian law and courts. Prominent SC/FTL figures such as Christopher James Pritchard and Marcus Anthony Ray also emerged as Convoy supporters; the latter promoted conspiracy theories alleging that the pandemic itself was fabricated to serve a globalist agenda (Canadian Anti-Hate Network 2022a).

The anti-government narrative was also closely entangled with the QAnon movement, which blends millenarianism, anti-elitism, and a belief in an imminent reckoning against a hidden cabal of global conspirators. QAnon’s impact on the Convoy was evident in widespread references to “deep state” manipulation, the claim that the pandemic was a “plandemic,” and the recurring expectation that institutional collapse or mass arrests were imminent. In Canada, the most visible figure embodying this fusion of QAnon and SC/FTL rhetoric was Romana Didulo, a self-declared “Queen of Canada,” “Commander-in-Chief,” and “President and national Indigenous Chief of the Kingdom of Canada.” Didulo, whose rise began in 2020 and gained momentum with the support of QAnon influencers, created a political party known as Canada 1st Party of Canada, and amassed a following of over 66,000 people on alternative social media platforms¹⁵ (Lamoureux 2021).

Didulo’s beliefs extended beyond politics into cosmic and spiritual domains. She has claimed to be a non-human alien being with Arcturian origins, possessing the power to cloak herself and become invisible (Sarteschi 2022). Such claims might seem delusional, but they resonated with audiences already immersed in QAnon, New Age, and sovereign citizen content. Didulo encouraged her followers to cease paying taxes and bills, issued pseudo-legal “decrees,” and even called for the execution of health workers and politicians involved in the vaccine rollout:

¹⁵ Didulo rose to fame early 2020 but gathered public attention in late 2021 after American QAnon influencers such as Charlie Ward and Whiplash347, supported her newly unregistered political party (Lamoureux 2021).

“Shoot to kill anyone who tries to inject Children under the age of 19 years old with Coronavirus19 vaccines/bioweapons or any other Vaccines.” (Lamoureux 2022) Experts have increasingly described Didulo’s movement as cult-like, based on its charismatic leadership, closed information loops, and collective estrangement from broader society (Cecco 2022; Sarteschi 2022; Agence QMI 2022).

Another influential conspiracist figure in the Canadian context is Alexis Cossette-Trudel¹⁶, the operator of Radio-Québec, a far-right YouTube channel that became popular not only in Quebec but also in parts of Europe. Cossette-Trudel disseminated QAnon-aligned content during the pandemic, mixing conspiracy theories about the pandemic, American politics, and Trudeau’s government. His strategy involves selective use of information and strategic omission of context, as described by Balthazard (2021). According to Geoffroy, Boily, and Nadeau (2022), Cossette-Trudel portrays the provincial and federal governments as totalitarian regimes: “*Le gouvernement Legault est un gouvernement dictatorial qui invoque, encore une fois, une menace fantôme [...] une fausse menace pour suspendre les libertés. [...] Ce sont des décisions illégitimes politiques de suspension des libertés civiles des Québécois [...] sous de faux prétextes.*”¹⁷ (29) Cossette-Trudel’s fusion of pandemic conspiracies with broader populist and anti-globalist sentiments mirrors the broader ideological architecture of the Convoy.

Perhaps the most dangerous expression of anti-government ideology during the movement emerged through the accelerationist movement Diagonol, founded by Jeremy MacKenzie, a military veteran and far-right content creator. Diagonol promotes the collapse of democratic institutions through violence and instability. It rose to public prominence when individuals affiliated with the group were arrested during the blockade in Coutts, Alberta for allegedly plotting to kill police officers. MacKenzie created Diagonol in 2020, claiming it represented the “sane” corridor of North America which is stretching diagonally from Alaska to Florida where COVID-19 mandates were rejected (Gilmore 2022a). According to MacKenzie, “this is where all the sane people live. The rest will go crazy.” The group’s ideology, rooted in military accelerationism, is explicitly violent and aimed at hastening societal collapse. Diagonol’s presence at Convoy events underscores the interpenetration of paramilitary extremism and populist protest. As the Canadian

¹⁶ Alexis Cossette-Trudel was also a key PQ figure, see Bélair-Cirino (2020).

¹⁷ Translated by the author: “The Legault government is a dictatorial government that is once again invoking a phantom threat [in reference to the Covid], a false threat to suspend freedoms [...] We’ve said it from the start, they don’t have science on their side, [...]. It is us who have science on our side [...]. And they [the government] are making illegitimate political decisions to suspend the civil liberties of Quebecers and people everywhere, under false pretences.”

Anti-Hate Network (2022c) observes, what distinguishes Diagonol from other far-right currents is its “willingness to use force against police.” While QAnon and Didulo may rely more heavily on digital mythologies and spiritual disinformation, Diagonol represents a concrete threat to state security through the active encouragement of armed confrontation.

The Convoy thus served as a platform for convergence between radical ideologies that previously operated in distinct spheres. SC/FTL narratives undermined trust in legal authority, QAnon provided a shared mythos of global manipulation, Didulo offered a messianic alternative to democracy, and Diagonol operationalized violence as a political tool. What unified these actors was not ideological coherence but a shared belief that the Canadian government was illegitimate, corrupt, or controlled by hostile forces. This convergence allowed the far right to present itself as the vanguard of a “people’s revolution,” while embedding extremism within a more palatable populist frame. In sum, the anti-government and conspiracist narratives that permeated the movement were not peripheral anomalies, but structural elements of the movement’s identity and mobilization. The pandemic merely accelerated the articulation and diffusion of these beliefs, offering both a justification for political action and a shared imaginary of resistance, revelation, and revolt.

Identitarian and Ethno-Nationalist Narratives

Beneath the Freedom Convoy’s popular discourse of “freedom” and “bodily autonomy” lies a deeper ideological layer influenced by identitarian, ethno-nationalist, and white supremacist currents. These undercurrents are not uniformly expressed across all participants but remain central to the symbolic, cultural, and discursive architecture of the movement. In many respects, the convoy functioned as a vessel through which long-standing right-wing populist and racialized grievances could be rearticulated and mainstreamed under the cover of anti-health, anti-state protest. Thus, it is not surprising to see a narrative on COVID-19 that is intertwined with nativism. If anti-health demonstrators are xenophobic in nature, these social movements are also nationalistic and identitarian. These characteristics manifest themselves through the rejection of globalization or neo-liberal values. This rejection is preferred by anti-health leaders as they believed globalization as threatening their “people’s” heritage. This destruction is shown through jobs’ dislocation, and the openness of the labour market to foreign workers who are preferred over

“national” workers. Thus, anti-health figures reject the concept of multiculturalism, and are strong advocates for border closure economically, and culturally.

This closure falls within the identitarian narrative defence of national identity as it is at the heart of the rejection of immigration and Islamophobia. Identitarian social movements are in favour, for example, of policies oriented toward the protection of “natives” (e.g. welfare chauvinism redistribution) and believe in strong politicians who will halt immigration. As highlighted by the CÉFIR, “*Les minorités sont accusées de diluer l’identité et de vouloir imposer leur culture tout en profitant d’avantages indus, attribuables à la faiblesse de politiciens incapables de s’imposer face à la rectitude politique et davantage motivés par les gains électoraux que par la défense des intérêts de la nation.*”¹⁸ (Geoffroy et al. 2022, 26) The “Us before Them” rhetoric is rooted, in part, in Camus’s concept of “*grand remplacement*.” Under this concept, the identitarian narrative forward the idea that governments and elites want to destroy the Western “White” civilization. This so-called “*Grand remplacement*” is, for identitarian, made possible through “*l’immigration en masse*.” It is within this matrix that multiculturalism is rejected, and policies of diversity are recast as tools of civilizational erosion.

This broader identitarian positioning reveals itself in the movement’s calls for closed borders, not only to prevent viral contagion, but also to resist cultural contamination. Border nationalism, in this context, becomes a metaphor for cultural purity and demographic sovereignty. Hence, anti-health figures often conflate epidemiological concerns with cultural anxiety, rejecting the labour market openness that supposedly disadvantages “national” workers and facilitates demographic change. The pandemic thus enabled a reframing of previous targets such as immigrants and racialized communities, by shifting the focus of blame toward the federal state and its “authoritarian” public health regime. This convergence of anti-health activism and white nationalism is particularly visible in the figures who rose to prominence during the pandemic. Tyler Russell, self-declared “Prime Minister” of the Canada First Party, a Canadian offshoot of Nick Fuentes’ America First movement¹⁹, epitomizes this intersection. A former Ryerson University political science student, Russell gained traction after his 2020 Canada Day speech at a Freedom Rally in Ottawa, where he invoked prominent alt-right ideologues such as Fuentes and

¹⁸ Translated by the author: “Minorities are accused of diluting identity and trying to impose their culture while enjoying undue advantages due to the weakness of politicians who are unable to stand up to political correctness and are more motivated by electoral gains than by defending the interests of the nation.”

¹⁹ For more information on Nick Fuentes, consult Southern Poverty Law Center (2022b) and Anti-Defamation League (2020)

Faith Goldy. Though his Telegram channel had only 310 followers in 2021, his influence is more pronounced on less moderated platforms such as Discord. In the “Sloanzone” Discord server, chatters regularly praise Adolf Hitler and Mussolini, deny the Holocaust, and fantasize about mass violence underscoring the explicitly fascist and racist nature of the group’s digital ecosystem. As stated by Russell himself, he ridiculed public health efforts and mocked COVID-19 fears:

There’s been chaos [talking about rapid COVID-19 test distribution in Ontario] that has just been sparked due to all these freaks, all these libtards, lib shits, leftists, neocons, whoever they are. These people that actually believe the government lie that they’re going to ya know get COVID and like infect your grandma and die or something like that. All these vaxxs are idiots, they are freaking out. They’re climbing over one another to try and get their hands one of these rapid test kits. (Canada First clips 2021, sc. 2:08-2:45)

Such rhetoric does not emerge in isolation but reflects broader alt-right conspiracist thinking that sees COVID-19 as a fabricated bioweapon designed by a shadowy elite to decimate the white population. As Amarasingam, Carvin, and Philipps (2021) explain, “Far-right movements have latched on to COVID-19 conspiracy movements to lure anti-vaccine activists and conspiracy theorists to their cause.” (7)

This convergence is also evident in Quebec, where identitarian leaders adapted their discourse to the pandemic. Figures such as André Pitre and Steeve “l’Artiss” Charland (i.e. many with past ties to *La Meute* or *Église Nouvelle Création*) shifted from explicit anti-immigrant rhetoric to more generalized opposition to state authority. The group *Les Farfadaas*, co-founded by Charland, denounced the pandemic as a hoax and positioned François Legault’s government as tyrannical. Charland’s public denunciations reflect the identitarian style of populist resistance: “*On n’a pu le droit de faire grand-chose dans cette société. Mais, on a encore le droit d’envoyer [fait un doigt d’honneur]... Fuck you Legault! Fuck you Arruda! Et fuck you à toutes ceux [sic] qui tirent les ficelles de ces deux-là.*²⁰” (Geoffroy, Boily, and Nadeau 2022, 28) These expressions reveal how identitarian actors strategically rearticulated their enemies: from immigrants to public health officials, from racialized others to the liberal state. The pandemic provided a new justificatory framework for an older racialized logic one that sees white Western civilization under siege by feminists, LGBTQ+ activists, migrants, and corrupt elites (Carignan et al. 2022; Canadian

²⁰ Translated by the author: “We don’t have the right to do much in this society. But, we still have the right to send [gives middle finger] ...Fuck you Legault! Fuck you Arruda! And fuck you to all those who pull the strings of these two.”

Anti-Hate Network 2020; Phillips 2020; Loreto 2021; Al Jazeera and New Agencies 2020; Balthazard 2021).

Moreover, this identitarian ecosystem is reinforced by the enduring political phenomenon of Western alienation, particularly salient in Alberta and Saskatchewan, where mistrust toward federal institutions, especially those based in Ottawa, has become entrenched over decades. Historically rooted in disputes over resource control, fiscal federalism, and perceived neglect by Canadian elites, Western alienation has long fuelled regionalist movements and discourses of disempowerment. These grievances intensified during periods such as the National Energy Program (NEP) under Pierre Trudeau, which many Westerners saw as a direct assault on provincial autonomy and economic sovereignty. More recently, conflicts over climate policy, carbon taxation, and pipeline development have revitalized this sentiment, with federal environmental regulations seen as disproportionately harming resource-dependent economies (Banack 2021; Berdahl 2021; Young and Berdahl 2022).

While these grievances were once largely expressed through mainstream provincial politics or Western-based federal parties, they have, in recent years, increasingly fused with racialized and cultural nationalist discourses, giving rise to a form of ethno-regionalist populism. In this emergent configuration, the alienation is no longer only about economic exploitation or constitutional imbalance; it is also framed in civilizational and demographic terms. Federal immigration policies, multicultural initiatives, Indigenous land claims, and even gender and diversity mandates are recast as products of a Central Canadian liberal elite that is not merely out of touch, but culturally “foreign” and morally illegitimate. As such, the alienation becomes not just political but identitarian: “we” in the West are not only economically marginalized, but also culturally and racially displaced by “them” that are urban, liberal, racialized, or immigrant populations empowered by Ottawa. This discursive shift is evident in populist slogans that emerged from convoy rhetoric, such as “Make Alberta Great Again” or calls for “freedom from Laurentian elites,” which function as dog whistles evoking both regional pride and ethno-nationalist protectionism. Groups such as Wexit and Take Back Alberta draw upon this logic, mobilizing not only constitutional frustration but also an implicitly white, settler-colonial notion of who truly “belongs” to the nation. For some segments of these movements, particularly those overlapping with far right and identitarian currents, Western Canada is imagined as the last bastion of “authentic” Canadian values (i.e. rural, hardworking, self-reliant, and implicitly white) under threat from globalist ideologies and

multicultural demographics. These values are perceived to be incompatible with the bureaucratic, technocratic, and progressive ethos of Central Canada (Beauvais and Stolle 2022; Kwak 2020; Ruiz-Soler and Chun 2022).

In this context, identitarian narratives interacted seamlessly with Western alienation, reinforcing the portrayal of federal governance not merely as economically unjust, but as culturally corrosive and existentially dangerous. Ottawa becomes not just a seat of power, but also a symbol of cultural betrayal; an institution that enables mass immigration, promotes “woke” ideology, and sidelines the Western “people.” The result is a potent political mythology in which economic marginalization, demographic anxiety, and cultural resentment coalesce into a call for “sovereignty,” whether framed in provincial, racial, or spiritual terms. This synthesis of regional discontent with white grievance politics has become a strategic entry point for far-right actors seeking to normalize identitarian ideologies. As documented by Perry and Scrivens (2019), Canadian far-right groups increasingly frame their cause in “defensive” terms protecting the nation, its traditions, and its people from corrupt elites and foreign intruders. Western alienation thus provides fertile ground for radicalization-by-proximity, where economic frustration transitions into cultural paranoia and ultimately into far-right mobilization under the guise of regional self-determination.

In sum, the Freedom Convoy did not simply manifest as a protest against mandates, but as an incubator of broader identitarian and ethno-nationalist grievances. Through white replacement theory, border nationalism, and regional discontent, the movement is aligned with a global trend of right-wing populism that sees diversity, feminism, and internationalism as threats to an idealized “white Western civilization.” The pandemic catalyzed this convergence by offering a new narrative frame that is state overreach and medical tyranny, through which old hatreds could be reframed, rebranded, and re-amplified.

New Age and Alternative Health Narratives

Among the diverse ideological currents underpinning the movement, New Age (NA) spirituality and alternative health belief systems occupy a central, if often underestimated, position. Frequently dismissed as fringe or harmless, these narratives have in fact contributed significantly to the movement’s epistemological structure, affective appeal, and mobilization capacity. In particular, they offered a moral and spiritual rationale for resisting public health mandates,

reframing acts of non-compliance not merely as political disobedience, but as expressions of cosmic truth, vibrational integrity, and spiritual sovereignty. Rooted in a belief system popularized in the 1970s, the NA movement envisions humanity as being on the cusp of an evolutionary shift in consciousness, often tied to astrological cycles. According to NA believers, “*Le nouvel âge évoque une temporalité astrologique dans laquelle le passage de l’âge du poisson à l’âge du verseau, une aire où les êtres humains pourront atteindre une pleine conscience de l’univers*”²¹,” (Geoffroy et al. 2022, 33). Within this cosmology, health and illness are not merely biomedical states but indicators of one’s spiritual vibration and energetic alignment. The body, far from being a passive recipient of medical intervention, is seen as a sacred vessel that synthesizes universal energy. For NA believers, “*c’est la corporalité humaine qui synthétiserait l’univers et serait conséquemment source de toutes vérités*”²².” (Geoffroy, Boily, and Nadeau 2022, 34) Thus, public health mandates, especially vaccines, are perceived as direct violations of both bodily sanctity and cosmic law.

This worldview overlaps in significant ways with SC/FTL narrative. Like those movements, NA believers reject modern medical institutions, seeing them as tools of domination operated by hidden elites. They believe that HIV²³ and COVID-19 are fabricated or exaggerated threats, used to justify medical surveillance, pharmaceutical profit, and social control. Guylaine Lanctôt, a former physician turned NA spiritual guru, epitomizes this synthesis of anti-health and metaphysical discourses. Banned from practising medicine in Quebec, Lanctôt gained notoriety with her book *La mafia médicale* (1994), in which she alleged that: “*les vaccins ont causé le sida, qu’ils ont décimé des populations entières en Afrique, elle suggère que la campagne de vaccination massive contre la méningite réalisée uniquement au Québec aura sans doute servi à se débarrasser sciemment d’un peuple encombrant (le nôtre) [...]*”²⁴ (Lacroix 1995, B1) Lanctôt teaches followers to regulate their internal vibrational frequencies to become “invisible” to state oppression (Collectif Immunisation Covid-19 2021; Geoffroy et al. 2022). On this point, Lanctôt, in an interview on Youtube, mentions that: “*C’est de vibrer au même niveau de vibration que la*

²¹ Translated by the author: “The new age evokes an astrological temporality in which the passage from the Age of Pisces to the Age of Aquarius, an area in which human beings will be able to achieve full awareness of the universe.”

²² Translated by the author: “it is human corporality that would synthesise the universe and consequently be the source of all truths.”

²³ See Noël, Mathieu-Léger, and Deetjens (2022) as well as Lavoie (2021) to read on the death of Bernard Lachance, a man who ceased his tri-therapy medication based on Ghylaine Lanctôt’s advice.

²⁴ Translated by the author: “vaccines caused AIDS, they decimated entire populations in Africa, she suggests that the massive vaccination campaign against meningitis carried out only in Quebec may have served to knowingly get rid of a troublesome people (White people).”

*vérité, de vibrer dans la vérité. La vérité est un autre niveau vibratoire. Et la vérité pure c'est vraiment la conscience pure de qui nous sommes.*²⁵” (Personocratie Diesse 2020, sc. 33:28-33:45)

The pandemic catalyzed the convergence of NA beliefs with far right and conspiracist ideologies, creating a hybrid discourse of resistance that was deeply spiritualized. Alternative treatments were portrayed not just as safer or more effective, but as essential tools to “purify, unify, and awaken the masses.” Visualization techniques, detoxification regimens, and self-healing practices were valorized not only for their supposed health benefits but as political and spiritual acts of resistance (Enquêtes 2022; Noël et al. 2022) This resistance was also deeply gendered, with women especially white, middle-class women in Quebec and across Canada taking leading roles in articulating spiritual alternatives to biomedical compliance. This group, often at the intersection of motherhood, wellness, and conspiracy cultures, reframed pandemic measures as threats to maternal sovereignty and energetic purity. Influencers like Amélie Paul frequently referenced Lanctôt, asserting: “*se faire vacciner, c'est vendre son âme [...]*” and “*Tous ceux qui vendent leur âme avec les injections n'auront pratiquement plus d'espoir d'éveil...*”²⁶ (Carignan et al. 2022, 83) As seen here, these remarks are also closely related to Sylvie Boucher “energetic reset” techniques (see Collectif Immunisation COVID-19 2021). Mel Goyer has fervently defended the “natural,” “holistic” method (see Appendix 1, Figure 8). That said, Goyer believes that our immune system is capable of facing COVID-19 such as it faces other viruses. For Goyer, “*Notre système immunitaire est efficace à 99% contre la Covid. Pis vous êtes là à attendre de vous faire shooter du poison dans les veines. C'est pas l'Ébola, ni la tuberculose. C'est qui les coucoux?!?*”²⁷ (Geoffroy et al. 2022, 83) A comparable hybridization of spiritualism and conspiracy theory is seen in the discourse of Jean-Jacques Crèvecoeur, who merged NA tropes with apocalyptic readings of Klaus Schwab’s “Great Reset.” According to Crèvecoeur, the pandemic was planned in advance, and state actors used the flu vaccine to poison the elderly with graphene in the fall of 2019: “*une hypothèse possible d'un des empoisonnements qui a contribué à la pandémie, ou la pseudo-pandémie, de la Covid-19 qu'on connaît depuis 2 ans*”²⁸.” (Théovox 2022, sc. 4:50-5:02) He further

²⁵ Translated by the author: “It is to vibrate at the same level of truth vibration, to vibrate in the truth. Truth is another vibratory level. And pure truth is really the purest consciousness of who we are.”

²⁶ Translated by the author: “to be vaccinated is to sell one’s soul [...]

” and “All those who sell their soul with the injections will have practically no hope of awakening...”

²⁷ Translated by the author: “Our immune system is 99% effective against Covid. And you're sitting here waiting to get a poison shot into your veins. It's not Ebola or TB. Who are the cuckoos now?”

²⁸ Translated by the author: “a possible hypothesis of one of the poisonings that contributed to the Covid-19 pandemic, or pseudo-pandemic, that we have known for the past two years.”

claimed that even unvaccinated children could be harmed by contact with vaccinated parents: *“c’est encore une image [Figure 8] d’un autre enfant non vacciné ayant des parents vaccinés. [...] Voilà, on voit donc en fait que le sang de ces enfants non vaccinés est complètement déstructuré à cause du contact qu’il a eu avec ses parents²⁹.”* (Théovox 2022, sc. 17:13-17:45) This highly emotive and visual rhetoric fed into a broader New Age-fuelled biopolitical paranoia, where state-led interventions are reframed as deliberate acts of genocide, spiritual manipulation, or energetic contamination.

These patterns were not unique to Quebec. In British Columbia, Joseph Roberts, founder of Common Ground magazine, also drifted from wellness advocacy into NA spiritualism and anti-vaccine activism. His shift reflects a broader realignment in the wellness and anti-globalization spheres. Roberts promoted narratives that claimed COVID-19 was a fabricated crisis benefiting only “big pharma” and global elites, and claimed to have healed himself from tonsillitis through self-purification: “People had a need to connect with other people, to achieve something greater than they could by themselves. [...] [Common Ground is] organic, sustainable, fair trade, anti-globalization, peace and justice movements” (Roberts 2022) Roberts gave space to controversial figures such as Ted Kuntz³⁰, a prominent vaccine skeptic also associated with Druthers, another alternative publication with anti-vaccine ties (Canadian Anti-Hate Network 2020; Kuntz 2021). Together, these actors reinforce the idea that healing must be reclaimed from institutional authority and returned to intuitive, sovereign, and vibrational modes of knowing.

In sum, the New Age and alternative health narratives within the Freedom Convoy reveal a spiritually charged form of resistance rooted in distrust of the state, belief in higher cosmic laws, and the moral sanctification of the self. These beliefs are often articulated in terms of “truth vibration,” “soul contracts,” or “energetic warfare,” provide a powerful counter-discourse to biomedical science and liberal democracy. Rather than opposing mandates from a purely libertarian perspective, New Age participants framed their resistance as part of a cosmic battle for human consciousness, where rejecting vaccination is not only a right but a sacred duty.

²⁹ Translated by the author: “this is another picture [Figure 8] of another unvaccinated child with vaccinated parents. [...]. So, you can see that the blood of these unvaccinated children is completely de-structured because of the contact they had with their parents.”

³⁰ A direct link is made by Kuntz between vaccines and autism as his son was diagnosed with autism a few weeks after receiving a shot. Ever since, he joined Vaccine Choice Canada and has been a popular anti-vaccine figure in Canada.

Holocaust, Apartheid, and Victimhood Narratives

The narrative surrounding COVID-19 public health measures in Canada was not solely framed around infringements on constitutional rights and civil liberties. A powerful symbolic and rhetorical weapon used by anti-lockdown protesters was the strategic appropriation of historical traumas particularly the Holocaust and South African apartheid to frame their opposition as morally righteous and historically resonant. These tropes served to cast protesters as victims of a nefarious state, equating temporary public health mandates with genocide, racial segregation, and authoritarian rule.

Following an American trend³¹, some demonstrators in Canada wore yellow Star of David badges labeled “unvaccinated,” intentionally referencing the identification symbols imposed on Jews during the Holocaust. This symbolic inversion allowed protesters to claim moral high ground, portraying themselves as oppressed minorities. As noted by Bergen (2021) and Weiss (2022) such comparisons were made explicitly and repeatedly, despite widespread public and academic condemnation. In this view, vaccine mandates, travel restrictions, and vaccine passports were reinterpreted not as public health tools, but as mechanisms of dehumanization and exclusion, akin to those used by totalitarian regimes. This misuse of Holocaust memory is not an incidental rhetorical flourish; rather, it represents a core discursive strategy that enables a politics of moral inversion. Protesters appropriate historical atrocity to recast themselves as noble victims, while portraying governments and public health officials as “dictators.” Hence, as highlighted by Vera Sharav, a Holocaust survivor and president of the Alliance for Human Research Protection, she claims that the fear instated by the government is only to control and to dehumanize its citizens. According to Sharav, COVID-19 is not propagated by the unvaccinated, but it is rather a government tactic to segregate unvaccinated and to eliminate a part of its population. Sharav adds that individuals should look into “history and recogniz[e] parallels [...]” More importantly, Sharav argues that citizens should “stop obeying [because by being obedient, the people] are allowing the dictators to flourish.” (Humphrey 2022; Skrodzka et al. 2022; Bergen 2021; Carpay 2021; Duke 2022; Weiss 2022; Young and Boucher 2022)

Alongside Holocaust analogies, protesters have also deployed the language of apartheid. The idea of “medical apartheid,” in particular, has circulated widely in Convoy-related discourse, referencing the differential treatment of vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals. As articulated

³¹ See Russell (2021)

by John Carpay, a Canadian lawyer and president of the Justice Centre for Constitutional Freedoms, this concept reimagines public health as a system of legalized segregation.

Excerpt from John Carpay (Post Millennial)

Medical apartheid is upon us. Canada now has two classes of citizens, the Vaccinated and the Unvaccinated, each with a different set of legal rights. I anticipate howls of outrage at comparing South Africa's racial apartheid to Canada's medical apartheid. People will argue that the former was based on evil racism, and that the latter is based on public safety and solid science.

[...]

Medical apartheid in Canada today cares not about race, but about whether an individual has received the correct number of injections of the experimental mRNA vaccine. I say "experimental" because the mRNA gene therapy has not been subjected to any long-term testing in human beings. Currently, Canada's provincial and federal governments accept two injections as enough to qualify for "full" vaccination. But this may soon change to requiring three, four, and more injections to maintain one's legal status as "fully" vaccinated, as has been demonstrated in Israel and the Netherlands.

Fully vaccinated Canadians are first-class citizens, enjoying unrestricted access to [...] public facilities. Canadians who have not been injected with enough mRNA (as determined by government) are decidedly second class and subjected to physical separation and segregation.

[...]

First-class Canadians are free to work anywhere. But Canadians who are second-class [...] are getting fired [...].

First-class Canadians can attend university; second-class Canadians may not [...].

Source: John Carpay (2021)

In Carpay's framing, vaccine passports are not scientific tools, but ideological tests, determining access to work, education, and civic participation. The term "medical apartheid" evokes the systemic racial exclusion of Black South Africans under the apartheid regime, but is now recontextualized to refer to temporary, revocable health-based distinctions in liberal democracies. This false analogy distorts the historical specificity of racial oppression and allows relatively privileged individuals to claim they are subject to systemic persecution.

The narrative of victimhood extends beyond historical analogy to incorporate classic antisemitic conspiratorial themes. As highlighted by the Southern Poverty Law Center (2022a), many hate movements "racialize Jewish people and vilify them as the manipulative puppet masters behind an economic, political and social scheme to undermine white people." Within the context of the pandemic, protesters linked the outbreak and global health responses to well-known

antisemitic tropes, naming figures such as George Soros and the Rothschild family as allegedly behind global vaccine campaigns and lockdowns. In this view, Jews are framed as the powerful elite orchestrating societal collapse, economic reset, or even genocide aligning with historical narratives long present in white supremacist and identitarian discourse. This antisemitic reframing has historical precedent: disease and contagion have long been weaponized within antisemitic rhetoric, from the Black Death to 20th-century eugenics, portraying Jewish people as both literal and metaphorical “carriers” of social degeneration. In pandemic-era conspiracies, this tradition continues, with far-right actors blaming Jews for controlling pharmaceutical companies, manipulating media, and orchestrating a global bio-surveillance regime.

In Canada, these narratives were not isolated incidents. Rather, they were absorbed and amplified within a broader far-right ecosystem that linked Holocaust analogies, anti-globalism, anti-vaccine discourse, and New Age conspiracies. As Geoffroy, Boily, and Nadeau (2022) argue, these movements merged into a shared epistemological and moral system, where truth is intuitive, governance is malevolent, and resistance is spiritually sanctioned. The rhetorical invocation of historical trauma serves a dual purpose: it elevates the protester’s moral status, while simultaneously delegitimizing institutional authority by associating it with fascism and genocide. This strategy is powerful because it evokes visceral emotional responses, especially among individuals who feel politically marginalized or spiritually alienated. It also allows individuals particularly white, settler Canadians to claim the identity of the oppressed, without recognizing their own structural positions of power or historical privilege.

As with other elements of the Freedom Convoy, these narratives were not only deployed rhetorically but ritually performed through protest symbols, banners, online memes, and influencer discourse. Protesters regularly carried signs referencing Nuremberg, posted online tributes to “medical martyrs,” and adopted the aesthetics of wartime resistance. These performances functioned as a form of moral theatre, wherein the anti-vaccine citizen becomes the “new Jew,” the “new Black,” or the “new Indigenous person,” recasting themselves as victims of state overreach, while trivializing the actual, lived experience of genocide, slavery, and colonial violence. Although these analogies were more prominent in the United States, they nevertheless gained traction in Canada particularly among those already immersed in anti-government, identitarian, or alternative health discourses. As such, the Holocaust and Apartheid tropes cannot be understood in isolation; they are part of a larger symbolic system through which the far-right

and conspiratorial actors legitimate their cause, morally sanitize their rhetoric, and blur the line between historical memory and contemporary grievance.

Mobilization and Participation

Mobilization and participation in the Convoy began as a grassroots effort initiated by a small group of truckers in Western Canada who opposed the government's vaccine mandate for cross-border drivers. One of the most significant factors in the movement's rapid growth was its use of a crowdfunding campaign on GoFundMe, which raised over \$20 million. This funding not only helped to sustain the convoy with fuel, food, and supplies but also demonstrated "widespread public support." The campaign became a rallying point for participants and supporters, with donations pouring in from individuals across Canada and internationally. One of the most prominent fundraising efforts for the Freedom Convoy was organized on GoFundMe, which initially raised over \$10 million from individuals across Canada and internationally before the platform suspended the campaign (CBC News 2022a). Following the suspension, supporters turned to GiveSendGo, where another campaign raised millions of dollars in support of the convoy (Thompson 2022). These massive crowdfunding campaigns demonstrated the strong financial backing and widespread appeal of the movement. Moreover, donations were not limited to Canadian supporters; people from countries like the United States and Europe also contributed significantly (Thompson 2022; CBC News 2022a). It is suggested that some funds came from U.S.-based donors, reflecting the international resonance of the movement's themes. This international support underscored the broad ideological alignment with the convoy's objectives and the global impact of its message (Thompson and Rocha 2022; CityNews Ottawa 2022).

Supporters across Canada made smaller, grassroots contributions, reflecting widespread appeal among everyday citizens. These ranged from small financial donations to in-kind contributions like food, fuel, and shelter for participants. The grassroots nature of these contributions highlighted the local support and community involvement in sustaining the convoy. In response to concerns over financial censorship, supporters turned to cryptocurrency as an alternative fundraising method. Millions of dollars in Bitcoin were raised and distributed among participants, demonstrating the adaptability of the convoy's support network. This shift to crypto donations showcased the movement's ability to leverage technology to overcome obstacles and continue its operations (Tunney 2022; Fraser 2022; Chawaga 2022).

As for social media, these platforms played an equally critical role in mobilization. Social networks such as Facebook, X, and Telegram were used to organize routes, announce meeting points, and coordinate protests (Gillies et al. 2023). For example, Facebook groups like “Freedom Convoy 2022” acted as hubs for discussion and planning. Another example, Telegram, known for its encryption and rapid message delivery, played a crucial role in providing real-time updates on logistics, weather conditions, and police movements. Its features enabled the rapid dissemination of information to large audiences while offering a degree of privacy and security, which was particularly important for protest organizers concerned about surveillance. Meanwhile, X amplified the convoy’s message to a broader audience. Hashtags like #FreedomConvoy and #TruckersForFreedom trended widely, bringing the movement to national and international attention. X users, including influencers and prominent figures, contributed to the spread of the convoy’s narrative, often reframing it within broader debates about individual freedoms and government mandates. The viral nature of tweets, coupled with the platform’s global reach, helped shape public discourse and ensured that the protest’s visibility extended beyond those directly involved (Huang et al. 2022; Al-Rawi 2022; Laidlaw 2022). Moreover, traditional media were not the only platforms at play; “alternative social media sites Bitchute and Rumble” were also used by protesters and organizers to gather funds, support, and gain newcomers (Ling 2022).

Social media also played an emotional and motivational role. Organizers and participants shared a steady stream of images, memes, videos, and live streams, often showcasing the convoy’s scale, enthusiasm, and sense of solidarity. These visual and interactive elements inspired more individuals to join, even those initially hesitant. As a result, “Ultimately, through the deployment of weaponized emotions via the (re)production and dissemination of tweets, videos, and other discursive and highly affecting tools, FCM [Freedom Convoy movement] sympathizers create a series of *affective alignments*. That is, through affectively charged and exceedingly demeaning gendered and racist discourses and imagery, users circulate and produce a form of *emotional collectivity* among themselves that supports, for example, an “us vs. them” mentality.” (Farokhi 2022, 69) Moreover, by broadcasting the movement’s momentum, social networks fostered a feedback loop, where online engagement translated into a desire for on-the-ground participation and vice versa. Then, it is no surprise that these platforms allowed organizers to counter mainstream media narratives, presenting their perspective unfiltered. For many supporters, this alternative stream of information enhanced their trust in the movement while deepening their

distrust of traditional news outlets. Social media thus became both the heartbeat of the convoy's logistics and the lifeline of its ideological message, cementing its role as a transformative force in modern protest movements (Laidlaw 2022; Farokhi 2022; Huang et al. 2022; Wheeler 2018).

As the movement expanded, it attracted a diverse range of participants beyond the initial trucker cohort. Small business owners who had suffered economically due to lockdowns joined the convoy, viewing it as a platform to voice their frustration with government restrictions. For instance, restaurant and gym owners affected by extended closures and capacity limits marched alongside the convoy to protest the impact of these measures on their livelihoods. For example, in Quebec, the closure of gyms sparked protests from business owners, trainers, and gym members who argued that gyms were essential for both physical and mental health. Gym owners such as Daniel Marino and Marc-Antoine Grondin became critics of the closures, reopening their gyms in defiance of government orders. As stated by Grondin in regards of him defying Legault's measures, "*Je ne ferai pas une deuxième faillite.*³²" (Boutin 2020; Morrissette-Beaulieu 2020)

Right-wing populist groups and anti-government activists also rallied around the convoy, using it as an opportunity to push broader grievances about government overreach and perceived elitism. These groups were often motivated by opposition to not just vaccine mandates but also broader pandemic-related measures, such as mask requirements and business closures. In fact, anti-Covid-19 influencers such as Pat King, Tamara Lich, or François Amalega, took advantage of the public's dissatisfaction with health measures to grow their support base and propagate false information on what COVID-19 is. However, Canada is not new to oppositional groups. Long-lasting organizations such as Vaccine Choice Canada have influenced citizens' decisions on health for decades. Though long-lasting, newer organizations and protest groups emerged such as Hugs over Masks, Liberty Coalition Canada, and No More Lockdown (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project 2022; Amarasingam et al. 2021). More importantly, these so-called influencers are, for some, already known to the public. Indeed, popular narratives within the anti-lockdown demonstrations are anti-government, identitarian, religious, and beyond. Not surprisingly, anti-health measures influencers are already known for their participation in the Yellow Vest, United We Roll, La Meute or Horizon Quebec Actuel. As highlighted by Carvin et al. (2022): "There appear to be four drivers of anti-lockdown narratives in Canada: misinformation reported by alternative media outlets; the adoption of anti-lockdown positions by politicians;

³² Translated by the author: "I won't go bankrupt again."

extremist groups are latching on to COVID-19 conspiracy theories to attract new members; and opposition to public health measures by the religious far right.”

Moreover, the anti-lockdown movement is an interactive, dynamic, and growing network. Over the years, the anti-lockdown movement has aligned their narrative to reach newer grievances as a result of the pandemic. However, these new grievances are integrated to their previous extremist views. Additionally, this network also tends to favour a narrative that resembles millennials and Gen Z. As shown by Everts and Greenberg (2020), the access point selected by the conspiracists influencers is well chosen. In fact, “younger individuals (aged 18 to 29) were slightly more likely to believe the conspiracy theories than older people surveyed. [...] [Moreover,] individuals who believe the discredited conspiracy theories spend more time every day on social media platforms than those who don’t believe them. This held true on all platforms, including Facebook, X (formerly known as Twitter), Snapchat, Instagram, and Tik Tok.” Thus, it is not surprising to see a greater mobilization among young adults who prefer alternative media such as Rebel News, True North or Postmillennial. For example, Rebel News has created a special website dedicated to Western University students. This special website, *NoForcedBoosters.ca*, is denouncing what they called “unjust measures” and “discriminatory booster requirements.” This special website followed the announcement from Western University asking students to get their 3rd dose in order to be on campus. *NoForcedBoosters.com* denounces not only Western University health measures, but also the health measures of the University of Toronto. Additionally, a fund, *The Democracy Fund*, has been launched to support the constitutional rights of students³³ (see Jay 2022).

Additionally, late joiners were particularly drawn to the evolving narrative of the convoy, which framed it as a fight for fundamental freedoms rather than a single-issue protest. This broader messaging galvanized a wide spectrum of participants, including individuals from rural areas who felt disconnected from urban-centric pandemic policies, and parents opposing vaccine requirements for children. The movement’s ability to mobilize such a diverse group of participants, from truckers and farmers to small business owners and ideological activists, showcased its adaptability and wide-ranging appeal. This inclusivity, combined with effective use of digital platforms and financial resources, allowed the Freedom Convoy to sustain its momentum and

³³ See <https://www.thedemocracyfund.ca/>

influence for weeks. We should also add that the transformation of the narratives also played an equal role in sustaining this momentum.

The Role of Media

Social media can be used to propagate good news, to extend your network, and be kept informed of ongoing issues; however, “[s]ocial media also allows hate speech, propaganda, conspiracy theories, and lies to spread farther, faster, and cheaper than ever before. This too was an important dynamic both before and during the Freedom Convoy protests. False beliefs that COVID-19 vaccines manipulate DNA, social media feeds rife with homophobic or racist content, and inaccurate reporting of important events [...]” (Public Order Emergency Commission 2022a, 29) The Freedom Convoy became a flashpoint for polarized media narratives. Alternative media outlets, such as *Rebel News*, and influencers sympathetic to the movement, consistently presented the Convoy as a grassroots response to government overreach. They highlighted personal stories of truckers and their families, emphasizing themes of resilience, sacrifice, and the defence of civil liberties. For example, livestreams by participants like Pat King or Chris Barber often portrayed the Convoy as peaceful and celebratory, showing truckers waving Canadian flags and speaking about their motivations. Conversely, mainstream outlets like the *CBC* and *The Globe and Mail* emphasized the disruptive aspects of the protest (Public Order Emergency Commission 2022a). Reports often detailed the constant noise pollution caused by truck honking, the economic toll on local businesses, and the impact on Ottawa residents’ mental health. The portrayal of fringe elements within the protest, such as the presence of confederate flags or antisemitic symbols, further fuelled negative perceptions and reinforced narratives of extremism among critics. What social media also emphasized during the various protests is the mis-/disinformation related to COVID-19. For example, “Bauder testified that mRNA vaccines alter people’s genes, that the 2020 United States presidential election was rigged, and that an international declaration on ethical principles for medical research involving human subjects authorizes the Senate of Canada to override domestic law in certain circumstances. Mr. King testified to his apparent belief that the Government of Canada had “implement[ed]” the presence of Chinese soldiers in Canada, and that the former president of Iran had plans to “breed...out” the “Anglo Saxon race,” then “flood” the borders of western countries “with immigrants.”” (Public Order Emergency Commission 2022b, 80)

Additionally, public opinion was similarly divided. Supporters of the Convoy viewed it as a legitimate pushback against authoritarian policies, aligning with the broader “freedom” discourse resonating internationally during the pandemic. In contrast, critics saw it as a harmful, lawless movement that disregarded public order and democratic norms. Polls conducted during the protest revealed this divide, with some showing strong disapproval of the Convoy’s methods, while others highlighted significant support for its message, particularly in rural areas and among politically conservative Canadians. Moreover, social media played an indispensable role in organizing and sustaining the Convoy. Platforms like Facebook and Telegram became hubs for coordination, fundraising, and storytelling. The GoFundMe campaign, spearheaded by Tamara Lich, quickly raised over \$10 million before being shut down due to concerns about fund misuse and ties to fringe elements. The campaign then shifted to GiveSendGo, where it raised millions more, showcasing how digital platforms can circumvent traditional funding barriers. Viral posts on platforms like X and Instagram, such as images of truckers enduring Ottawa’s freezing temperatures with messages of hope and resistance, further galvanized support. For instance, the hashtag #FreedomConvoy2022 trended internationally, drawing sympathizers from as far as the United States and Europe. Livestreaming also played a critical role in the protest’s visibility. Participants streamed from downtown Ottawa, showing crowd rallies, speeches, and moments of solidarity, such as the construction of communal food stations. These streams, shared widely on platforms like YouTube and Facebook Live, allowed supporters to feel connected to the movement despite geographic barriers. Additionally, counter-narratives emerged online, with critics sharing videos of disruptive behaviour by protesters or imagery of controversial symbols, which mainstream media often picked up to challenge the Convoy’s framing as peaceful and unified. Social media’s dual role as both a mobilization tool and a battlefield for narratives highlights its centrality in modern protest movements. Beyond its online presence, the Convoy’s impact extended into the political landscape, sparking debates over government authority, personal freedoms, and populist sentiment. The movement not only influenced public discourse but also resonated with political leaders and parties, who sought to harness its energy to reshape policy debates and electoral strategies.

Impact and Legacy

The Freedom Convoy had an undeniable impact on Canadian politics, particularly in the context of rising populist movements and debates surrounding government mandates. The Convoy became a symbol of resistance against COVID-19 restrictions, particularly the vaccine mandates affecting truckers and cross-border travellers. While the direct political consequences were more indirect—since the mandates remained in place following the Convoy—the protest nevertheless helped fuel a growing populist sentiment, aligning with other anti-establishment movements globally. For example, Maxime Bernier, leader of the People’s Party of Canada (PPC), used the Convoy’s momentum to further the party’s message, which resonated strongly with those opposed to COVID-19 measures. His political rhetoric echoed the Convoy’s central themes of freedom and individual rights, portraying the Convoy as emblematic of a broader anti-authoritarian stance. Bernier’s platform gained traction, particularly in regions where vaccine mandates were most unpopular, such as in parts of Western Canada. As an example, Bernier stated that

[i]nstead of listening to and trying to understand these Canadians, and adapt his [Prime Minister Justin Trudeau] policies to avoid creating a larger rift in our society, the Prime Minister has demonized them. [...]. As for the mainstream media, they have become nothing less than the propaganda arm of the government. I have never in all my life seen so many outright lies, distortions and disinformation in the media, especially when it comes to reporting what’s going on here in Ottawa. [...] A peaceful, democratic society cannot function properly without trust. Now, a large and growing minority of Canadians have lost trust in our government, in our institutions, in our media. They feel like they are being treated as enemies of society, subhumans. These people won’t be going away and won’t stop protesting. (People’s Party of Canada 2022)

Moreover, Conservative Party leader, Pierre Poilievre, also capitalized on the Convoy’s themes, appealing to a base that was galvanized by the protest. In fact, during a conference in Vancouver B.C. on November 9th, 2022, Poilievre mentions that:

I support those peaceful and law-abiding protesters, who demonstrated for their lives and livelihoods and liberties, while condemning any individual who broke laws, behaved badly, or blockaded critical infrastructure. I think it’s possible to support the overall cause, a personal free choice in vaccination, and the overall cause of respecting the truckers’ ability to earn an income while holding individually responsible anyone who behaves badly, broke laws or blockaded critically infrastructure. That was my position before, during, and now. (CPAC 2022, at 13:51-14:33)

The Convoy thus inadvertently shifted political dynamics, influencing elections and strengthening opposition platforms focused on limiting government intervention.

The protest also had a provincial impact where support for the Convoy was most pronounced. Premier Scott Moe of Saskatchewan voiced support for the Convoy, framing it as an expression of legitimate frustration with government policies (Pasiuk 2022; Scott Moe [@PremierScottMoe] 2022). This regional political support underscored the geographic divisions in Canada over how COVID-19 restrictions were perceived. Furthermore, public opinion polling during and after the Convoy revealed a significant polarization between those who supported the Convoy as a stand for personal liberty and those who condemned it as disruptive and dangerous (Carignan et al. 2022). The protest ultimately underscored deep divisions within Canadian society and political circles, giving rise to new political platforms based on resistance to government mandates and intervention. In other words, although certain elements are specific to the particular context of the health crisis linked to the pandemic, it reflects a more global phenomenon where the pandemic has favoured the emergence and emphasis of already present contemporary societal issues that are a crisis of democracy and political representativeness, a rejection of neoliberal globalization, and the normalization of extremist ideologies. The concerns that arise in times of crisis do not appear in a vacuum, just as they are not forgotten once the crisis has passed, which is why it is essential not to minimize them by reducing them to a single, isolated event. Economic concerns, in particular, have emerged since the 2008 recession and the crisis of neoliberalism. The Freedom Convoy has highlighted social, political and institutional difficulties that are not only limited to the circumstances, but are indicative of the state of Canadian society and, more generally, of Western societies. And while the worst of the pandemic is behind us, new health, environmental, economic, political and social crises will inevitably emerge in the future, and with them these difficulties if left unaddressed.

On its legal side, the invocation of the Emergencies Act during the Convoy's occupation of Ottawa marked a pivotal moment in Canadian political history. This emergency legislation allowed the government to freeze the bank accounts of protest organizers and seize vehicles involved in the blockade. Critics, including civil liberties groups like the Canadian Civil Liberties Association (CCLA), argued that invoking such extreme measures represented an overreach by the state and set a dangerous precedent. These actions led to debates about the balance between civil liberties and public order. For instance, Justice Minister David Lametti defended the invocation as necessary for maintaining public safety, while others expressed concerns about the long-term implications for Canadian freedoms (CBC Radio 2022; Bronskill 2024). The legal

ramifications of these decisions were felt in the continued discussions about police powers and state authority during protests, especially given the growing role of digital mobilization in modern protests.

As for the societal legacy of the Convoy, it is intertwined with Canada's ongoing polarization regarding the role of government in personal freedoms. The convoy, by its very nature, intensified divisions over how public health measures should have been handled, particularly in the wake of COVID-19. For example, the RCMP and Ottawa law enforcement's response to the Convoy became a subject of public debate, with many questioning whether the government overreacted by invoking the Emergencies Act or whether the use of force was warranted to remove protesters (Public Order Emergency Commission 2022c). The cultural divide created by the Convoy remains evident, with some Canadians viewing the Convoy as a symbol of democracy and freedom of speech, while others saw it as a dangerous disruption to the country's social fabric. Moreover, debates over the Convoy's legacy continue to shape national conversations about individual rights and the limits of state power. Ultimately, political leaders have continued to address the "freedom versus security discourse," often referencing the protest as a point of comparison for other potential confrontations between protesters and state authorities. The Freedom Convoy has forced us to reflect on our understanding of the challenges posed by large-scale protests in the modern era, particularly in the digital age, where mobilization can occur rapidly and spread far beyond the immediate context of the protest itself.

The Convoy also left a lasting cultural impact, contributing to a growing narrative about the erosion of trust in governmental institutions, especially in the context of public health measures. Canadians continue to debate whether the response to the Convoy helped preserve public order or unnecessarily infringed upon the right to peaceful protest. This legacy continues to influence political discourse, with future protests likely to be shaped by the memory of the Freedom Convoy as both a cautionary tale and a rallying cry for those opposing government overreach.

A New Populist Synthesis

The Convoy provides a rich example of how contemporary social movements evolve through a combination of digital mobilization, emotional triggers, and the intersection of identity politics. The movement's ability to spread across multiple platforms, especially through Facebook and Telegram, helped it build and sustain a broad base of supporters. For instance, GoFundMe

campaigns that raised millions of dollars not only showcased the financial mobilization of the Convoy but also highlighted the emotional appeal of the movement. The campaign's success demonstrated the deep emotional connection that many supporters felt toward the Convoy's central message of freedom and individual rights. The support from alternative media outlets and the viral nature of videos shared on social media further amplified the Convoy's message, broadening its reach to an international audience.

As the protest evolved, the Convoy managed to reframe its initial focus on vaccine mandates to a broader, more inclusive message about the right to protest and opposition to government overreach. This shift in identity and goals reflects the concept of identity evolution in social movements, where movements adapt their framing to attract more participants and maintain momentum (Goodwin et al. 2001). Early on, the Convoy was framed as a protest primarily by truckers against vaccination mandates, but as the protests grew, it took on a wider significance, connecting with various groups opposed to COVID-19 restrictions, such as small business owners, and even those skeptical of government intervention in general. This process of frame expansion allowed the movement to bring in new participants at different stages of the protest, aligning with broader societal discontent with government restrictions.

Emotion was also central to the Convoy's sustained mobilization. Frustration, anger, and a sense of disempowerment over public health mandates catalyzed the initial protests, but as the movement progressed, emotions evolved. Later participants were often driven by a sense of defiance and a desire to assert their rights, as exemplified by the frequent testimonies shared by protesters who felt marginalized or ignored by mainstream politics. These emotional investments are important to understanding how the Freedom Convoy maintained momentum despite challenges like harsh winter weather and police confrontations. Research on social movements has shown that emotional engagement, whether through anger or hope, is crucial for sustaining participation in protest over time (Jasper 1998). The Convoy's ability to tap into these emotions allowed it to maintain a core group of committed participants while continuing to draw in new ones.

Although the Convoy did not immediately achieve its political goal of reversing vaccine mandates, its impact on Canadian politics and society has been significant. Politically, the Convoy contributed to a rise in support for anti-mandate and anti-authoritarian political groups where opposition parties, like the People's Party of Canada, gained traction. The Convoy thus influenced

public discourse around freedom, government intervention, and civil liberties. Despite being dispersed by law enforcement and the invocation of the Emergencies Act, the legacy of the Convoy continues to shape political rhetoric and strategy, particularly for parties and groups that appeal to those who oppose government mandates. The use of the Emergencies Act, which allowed the Canadian government to seize protesters' vehicles and freeze bank accounts, became a symbol of government overreach for many of the Convoy's supporters, deepening the political polarization and setting the stage for future debates about the limits of government power in times of crisis. This legal and societal tension remains unresolved, continuing to fuel debates on how to balance individual freedoms with public order in Canada's political landscape.

Chapter 2 - Theoretical Perspectives of Social Movement Participation: Examining the Limits of Traditional Social Movement Theories in Explaining the Socio-Political Trajectories of Ordinary Individuals into the Freedom Convoy

[Collective challenges] occur when *ordinary* people – often in alliance with more influential citizens and with changes in public mood – join forces in confrontation with elites, authorities, and opponents.
Tarrow (2011, 6)

[Collective challenges are] episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects when (a) at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a party to the claims and (b) the claims would, if realized, affect the interests of at least one of the claimants.
Adam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001, 5)

People may want to change the world they live in, they may want to be part of a group, or they may want to give meaning to their world and express their views.
Klandermans and Mayer (2006, 7)

Why some individuals decide to join social movement organization (SMOs) while others never do? This question has always taunted social scientists. Authors have wondered why individual join and maintain engagement in social movements. Indeed, scholars, over the last decades, have examined the necessary elements that prompted individuals to join similarly minded people. Although the question may seem straightforward, research about social movements is complex as some individuals, even if they share the same ideas and values, will never actively participate in a SMO. That said, how can we define collective action when the concept itself is eclectic., Reasons are multiple when considering factors explaining collective action. Authors such as Olson (1965) and Gurr (2015) argued that socio-economic factors could help identify the reasons behind group mobilization. However, others such as della Porta (1988) have argued that beliefs, values, and/or ideology are better suited to determine engagement in SMOs. In the end, each approach should not be analyzed separately but seen as an engaging theoretical web. Moreover, this reciprocal relationship requires an analysis beyond politics. As stated by Klandermans and Mayer (2006), individuals are complex, and the analysis of SMOs should reflect this complexity. Each theory has strong and weaker points.

This chapter presents the theoretical base to this thesis. It will briefly review the key theoretical frameworks of SMO. The first section is dedicated to defining what a social movement is. Subsequently, I will highlight the key approaches to individual participation. By examining the causes of people's thoughts, emotions, and behaviours – particularly how these are shaped by social contexts – these frameworks offer valuable insights into the factors driving engagement. The next section responds to previously formulated critiques toward SMO theories by integrating a cultural-structural explanation. As a result, I have selected Simons and Klandermans' model of Politicized Collective Identity (PCI) as the main framework as it integrates the strengths of SMO approaches while balancing agency and structure. Lastly, I will discuss the dynamics of mobilization and engagement. Precisely, this section demonstrates how this model will help explain the trajectory of the individuals who joined the Freedom Convoy movement.

What is a social movement?

Efforts to define what is a social movement have been multiple. Social movement takes on many forms, reflecting its complexity in defining the concept itself. Social movement can be “brief or sustained, institutionalized or disruptive, humdrum or dramatic, but also occurs within institutions on the part of constituted groups, which fight for clearly defined goals.” (Stockemer 2013, 2) Thus, social movements are eclectic and can define small and larger organization, objective- or value-oriented to big tent (ideological) organizations. Scholars have often defined social movements from a macro-level perspective, focusing on broad structural factors. In this context, frameworks such as relative deprivation, resource mobilization, and political opportunity structures have provided key insights into the dynamics of collective behaviour. Helpful to our understanding of behaviours, these approaches accounted for strategies, processes, repertoires of actions, state involvement, internal and external movement interactions (Porta and Diani 2015). However, definitions have been theory-bound. Agency-oriented scholars underlined the reductionist tendencies of these macro-level approaches. Critiques stressed that individuals are complex, meaning that even if a group of individuals behave similarly, reasons (i.e., motives, beliefs, and goals) to stay within the group, might differ (Simon et al. 1998; Stürmer and Simon 2004). Structures alone cannot explain why people join SMO; other factors such as internal interactions might play a role in explaining individual's decision to join (or remain/leave) a SMO. As stated by Diani (1992),

These elements connote social movements as a specific social dynamic which is logically related to, yet distinct from, [...], it consists in a process whereby several different actors, be they individuals, informal groups and/or organizations, come to elaborate, through either joint action and/or communication, a shared definition of themselves as being part of the same side in a social conflict. By doing so, they provide meaning to otherwise unconnected protest events or symbolic antagonistic practices and make explicit the emergence of specific conflicts and issues. (2-3)

As mentioned by Diani (1992), defining a SMO emphasizes the notion of the relativity of belief systems. Generally, the common element is a focus on change.

For Zurcher and Snow (1990), social movements are organized collectivities bringing issues to light. SMO are promoting (or resisting) what they view as societal change and are ready to expose these changes (and ideas) through a variety of means. Finally, social movements demonstrate “the importance of human agency or social action” (447) for societies. This emphasis on human agency by Zurcher and Snow (1990) respond to the macro-level critiques. McCarthy and Zald (1977) define SMO as “a set of opinions and beliefs in a population which represents preferences for changing some elements of the social structure and/or reward distribution of a society.” (1217-1218) SMOs are seen here as what McCarthy and Zald (1977) classify as “issue cleavages” or “interest aggregation.” Garner (1997) goes in a broader term following controversies surrounding SMO definitions. For Garner (1997), SMOs are “collectivities engaged in noninstitutionalized discourses and practices aimed at changing the existing condition of society.” (1). Additionally, Hickman (2010) adds that social movements “give a voice” to groups to shed light on injustices which can, in turn, incite change and “create new possibilities.” (197) In sum, these definitions reflect the dynamics surrounding SMOs as they are an informal collective of networks; in other words, SMOs are a collective of interactions between various individuals sharing a common identity, belief, or value.

These definitions underline the evolution of the SMO concept itself. From an analysis mostly focused on the irrationality of individuals to an analysis focusing on organizational/political arguments, SMO slowly shifted to a definition closer to collective action, collective behaviour (McAdam and Scott 2005). The concept of SM went from an institutional perspective to being reframe as to be more inclusive of tensions existing between value commitment and concerns over organizational survival. “Rather than stressing common grievances, SM theorists focused attention on mechanisms of mobilization and opportunities to seek redress.” (McAdam and Scott 2005, 6).

However, this thesis is guided by the following definition of what constitutes a social movement. For us, a social movement is a collective endeavour rooted in shared identities and grievances, where individuals come together not only around common experiences but also through a conscious alignment with broader political goals. Social movements, in this view, emerge when personal and social identities become politicized, that is, when people perceive their group's struggles as tied to systemic power structures and see collective action as a vehicle for change. From this perspective, a social movement is not merely a reaction to grievances or inequalities, but a structured process through which individuals come to see their experiences as part of a larger, collective struggle. Central to this understanding is the concept of collective identity, which serves as the psychological foundation of collective action. This identity is not innate or static; rather, it is constructed, negotiated, and activated through interaction with others and engagement with the political environment.

The process begins with group identification, as individuals align themselves with a social group sharing common experiences, values, or interests. This shared identity fosters solidarity and a sense of belonging, both crucial for sustained mobilization. As this identity deepens, individuals develop an awareness of injustice and engage in adversarial framing, recognizing their group's struggles as unjust and attributing the injustice to a specific source, often a dominant group or institution. This framing transforms passive dissatisfaction into a moral imperative for action. The final stage involves engagement in collective action aimed at political or structural change, where the group sees itself explicitly in political terms and recognizes participation in protests, advocacy, or other forms of mobilization as both necessary and legitimate. In other words, a social movement is about those who dare to stand up, take risks, and bear the costs of challenging the mainstream.

Hence, this definition places significant emphasis on the micro-level perspective by focusing on individual identity formation, perceptions of injustice, and emotional engagement. It highlights how individuals come to see themselves as part of a broader struggle, not merely as passive group members, but as active agents who construct meaning around their experiences. This process is fundamentally interactive and cognitive, involving how people interpret their social world, make sense of grievances, and negotiate belonging with others. Moreover, individuals do not simply react to structural conditions; they make conscious choices to identify with a cause or group, interpret and frame their experiences, decide whether and how to act, and engage in strategic actions such as protesting, advocating for change, or creating counter-discourses. Thus,

social movements arise not from passive mobilization by external forces, but from individuals' self-mobilization by linking personal identity with political goals.

In sum, this approach provides a nuanced bridge between structure and agency, and between macro and micro perspectives, demonstrating that social movements emerge not only from external economic or political factors, but also from internal psychological processes and personal meaning-making that motivate collective action. Within this framework, a social movement is best understood as a process of politicization, a transformation of individual and group identities through which people move from passive observers of injustice to active participants in collective efforts to reshape society. Movements become powerful when they align personal identity, group solidarity, and political struggle. While definitions of social movements tend to converge on core dynamics, approaches to SMOs reveal both overlaps and important divergences (McCarthy and Zald 1977; Tilly and Tarrow 2015; Tilly 1993; Tarrow 2011; Touraine 1985; Melucci 1998). Then, which approach could possibly explain individual engagement in SMOs?

Why individual join SMO?

Decades of research have led social scientists to develop various approaches to address a fundamental question: why do individuals join SMOs? From early theories of collective behaviour to resource mobilization (McCarthy and Zald 1977), political opportunity structures (Tilly 1993; Tarrow 2011), and new social movement (NSM) theories (Touraine 1985; Melucci 1998), the field has produced valuable insights into patterns of individual engagement. These perspectives have shaped our understanding of (a) structural and societal dynamics; (b) the role of cultural representation and symbolic meaning; (c) the rationality of actors; and (d) the influence of political and institutional contexts on mobilization. For example, relative deprivation theory highlights how underlying structural grievances can produce societal tensions that motivate action. Resource mobilization theory focuses on how access to tangible and intangible resources enables collective organization, while political opportunity theory emphasizes the importance of favourable political contexts. In contrast, the politicized collective identity framework (Klandermans 1997; Simon and Klandermans 2001) offers a micro-level perspective, centring on how individuals construct meaning, develop a shared sense of injustice, and align personal identity with political goals. Increasingly, analysts have emphasized that symbolic production and identity formation are

essential mechanisms that allow individuals to interpret their experiences as collectively significant and to define themselves as participants in a broader political struggle (Porta and Diani 2015).

An Introduction – The Supply and Demand Nexus

The supply and demand nexus offers a comprehensive framework for understanding when and how social movements emerge. It draws on a fundamental insight that collective action arises not solely from grievances, but from the interaction between individual motivation (demand) and the structural conditions that enable mobilization (supply). In this view, successful mobilization requires both a desire for change and the means to act on that desire.

Hence, demand refers to the motivational forces that push individuals toward collective action. This includes perceived grievances, such as social or economic injustice, as well as broader feelings of discontent rooted in unfulfilled expectations. Scholars such as Gurr (1970) conceptualized this as relative deprivation, where individuals or groups feel deprived not in absolute terms, but in comparison to what they believe they are entitled to. Emotional responses such as anger, frustration, and moral indignation often accompany this perception of injustice, acting as powerful catalysts for action (Jasper 1998). Moreover, the belief in the legitimacy of protest and in its potential efficacy further strengthens individuals' willingness to engage (Gamson 1992). While these subjective motivations are essential, they alone are insufficient to explain why social movements emerge since grievances are nearly universal, yet protest remains relatively rare (Jenkins and Perrow 1977).

This is where supply becomes crucial. Supply encompasses the structural and organizational conditions that enable mobilization. These include access to material resources like funding, communication tools, and infrastructure, as well as human resources such as leadership, skilled organizers, and volunteers (McCarthy & Zald 1977). Social networks and relational ties also serve as mobilizing structures, providing trust, coordination, and collective identity. Equally important are political opportunities where external conditions make protest more feasible or attractive. As Tilly (1978), McAdam (1982), and Tarrow (1998) have shown, movements are more likely to emerge and succeed when elites are divided, repression is weak, or institutional channels are open to influence.

Crucially, the emergence of social movements depends on the interaction between supply and demand. Demand provides the motive while supply offers the means. Mobilization occurs when enough people are motivated by shared grievances and when organizational infrastructures and political conditions allow them to act. Political entrepreneurs often serve as key intermediaries in this process. As Opp (2009) and McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001) argue, these actors frame grievances in ways that resonate with broader audiences, coordinate collective strategies, and help transform individual willingness into collective action. The process through which demand matches supply is shaped by framing, organizational support, and the interpretation of political opportunities. Framing processes help align personal discontent with broader collective goals, transforming isolated frustrations into mobilizable grievances (Snow and Benford 1988). Mobilizing structures such as churches, unions, and community groups provide the necessary organizational platforms. Moreover, McAdam (1982) introduces the idea of cognitive liberation, the moment when individuals not only perceive injustice but also come to believe that change is possible, and that collective action is an effective path forward. The alignment of grievances with available resources and political openings creates the necessary conditions for social movement emergence.

In sum, the supply and demand nexus underscores that social movements arise through the dynamic interplay of motive and means. While grievances generate the energy for protest, successful mobilization requires favourable organizational and political contexts. By integrating emotional, structural, and strategic dimensions, this framework offers a more complete understanding of the conditions under which collective action occurs.

Relative deprivation theory – Focus on Demand

Collective action emerges from an amalgam of individual's frustrations. Considered a classic explanation, the relative deprivation (RD) approach, or grievance theory, states that perceived discrepancies between individuals incline people to engage in unconventional actions. That so, these discrepancies are rooted in individuals' value expectations and value capabilities. Expectations are often associated to an individual's feeling of entitlement, while their capabilities are associated to an individual's belief of attainability. Further, the RD theory is instructive to intergroup relations. Whereas the theory suggests that people have an in-built tendency to categorize themselves into one or more "in-group identities," as individual also build a part of their

identity based on membership of that said group and enforce boundaries with other individuals. In sum, the logic would be that the most aggrieved individuals/groups are more likely to join force and engage in collective action. However, “It is against this logic that relative deprivation theorists argue that it is not the most absolutely deprived groups that typically revolt or rebel, either because their time and energy must be devoted to sheer survival or because their situation breeds a fatalism and passivity that preclude collective behaviour on their behalf.”

Collective action often arises from individual feelings of frustration. One classic explanation for this is relative deprivation (RD) theory, also known as grievance theory. It suggests that people are more likely to engage in protest when they perceive a gap between what they believe they deserve (their expectations) and what they think they can actually achieve (their capabilities) (Stockemer 2013). These feelings of deprivation are not just personal. They often emerge within group contexts. People tend to identify with certain social groups, shaping their sense of belonging and drawing boundaries between “us” and “them.” When enough individuals in a group feel deprived, they may come together to take collective action. However, RD theorists also point out that those who are most severely deprived do not usually rebel, either because they are too focused on basic survival or because their circumstances have led them to feel hopeless or powerless to create change (Buechler 2000; Tyler and Smith 1995; Walker and Pettigrew 1984).

At its base, the approach was defined as an individual “[who] may feel deprived of some desirable thing relative to their own past, another person, persons, group, ideal, or some other social category.” (Walker and Pettigrew 1984, 302) However, pioneers such as Davies (1962) Stouffer et al. (1949), Runciman (1966), and Gurr (1970), have explored the theoretical dimension of RD leading to an analysis of intergroup comparison and using these intergroup interactions to explain social engagement. If RD highlights citizens dissatisfaction, the underlying assumption is that if citizens are satisfied with their life condition, they are less likely to engage in collective action. Nonetheless, citizens can engage in collective action if one experiences a perceived, or real, inequality (i.e., a loss considered lowering one’s societal status; a sudden change in state’s affairs considered immoral; or an imposed grievance) (Klandermans 1997). As argued by Davies (1968), grievances can emerge three ways: decremental, aspirational, and progressive. First, decremental deprivation is where expectations remain constant, but the individual capabilities are declining, or perceived as declining. For example, the steady decline of the middle-class as the status of the working-class increases might expose the middle-class to this pattern of deprivation. Second,

aspirational deprivation is where capabilities remain seemingly constant, but expectations increase rapidly. Lastly, a progressive deprivation, as during revolutions *per se*, is where expectations increase as capabilities simultaneously decrease. If one of these three patterns is present, individuals will try to identify who is responsible for their losses or perceived grievances (Buechler 2000). Alternative patterns, such as Geschwender's idea of gradual dissatisfaction even without sharp economic decline, highlight the complex dynamics behind social movements. RD advocates also suggest that individuals who join are not always the most materially deprived but those who have seen a relative decline in status or entitlements (Geschwender 1968). In other words, individuals want to diminish discrepancies between reality and perceptions. They can do so by acknowledging their discontent and translating it into direct action. By doing so, individuals could be, according to Gurr (2015), more inclined to engage in violent actions. Hence, RD theorists argue that political violence and peaceful protests result from declining life expectations and emerging grievances, such as poverty and low wages (Stockemer 2013).

However, while RD theory offers valuable insights into the motivations behind mobilization particularly in contexts of sharp economic decline and perceived loss of status, it does not fully capture the complexity of collective action. In fact, RD has been widely critiqued for its conceptual and empirical limitations, particularly its overreliance on psychological explanations of protest behaviour. One of the most enduring criticisms is that RD assumes a direct causal link between feelings of deprivation and collective action, yet empirical evidence consistently shows that while grievances are widespread, social movements are relatively rare (Jenkins and Perrow 1977; Klandermans 1984). This discrepancy suggests that the presence of perceived injustice or frustration alone cannot account for why some individuals or groups mobilize while others remain inactive. As such, RD is often accused of mistaking a necessary condition for a sufficient one. Furthermore, the theory is largely silent on the practical and structural barriers to mobilization, such as fear of repression, political apathy, or lack of social support which are factors that often inhibit protest despite strong grievances. Critics also point out that RD neglects the strategic and organizational dimensions that are essential to sustained collective action. It offers little insight into how movements form, coordinate, and scale up from individual discontent to collective action. By focusing narrowly on emotional triggers, the theory fails to address the role of networks, leadership, communication infrastructures, and resource availability which are all dimensions emphasized by later frameworks such as resource mobilization theory. Additionally, RD has been

critiqued for its ahistorical and overly individualistic approach, which does not sufficiently consider how social, political, and cultural contexts shape perceptions of deprivation and the likelihood of protest. In sum, while RD draws attention to the emotional foundations of discontent, its analytical scope is too limited to explain the complex and multifaceted process of social movement emergence.

This limitation has prompted scholars to seek alternative frameworks that better account for the broader social and cultural dimensions of collective action. New social movement (NSM) theories, for example, respond to these critiques by emphasizing that modern grievances often extend beyond material deprivation to include post-materialist values such as well-being, identity, and spirituality. As stated by Melucci (1998) and Touraine (1985), individuals are no longer trying to fulfill essential material needs, but are rather seeking post-materialist values such as increasing their well-being, protection, spirituality or gender relations (Inglehart 1977). NSM suggests that social movements arise as reactions to societal dissatisfaction, allowing individuals to join or form organizations that align with their grievances. However, NSM also notes that individuals may disengage if organizations no longer meet their needs, and engagement is not guaranteed (Fuchs 2006; Stockemer 2013).³⁴ Lastly, the NSM approach introduces this idea that engagement, in a social movement, is not predetermined. In other words, we cannot assume that aggrieved individuals will engage in any type of actions. On the contrary, dissatisfied individuals are less likely to engage in any form of SMO (van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013). This idea leads to the resource mobilization (RM) approach, which views individuals as rational actors in decision-making regarding participation in social movements.

Resource mobilization theory – Focus on Supply

RM approach, originating from Olson's (1965) work, shifts focus from grievances and deprivation to cost-benefit analysis in collective action. Hence, the framework emphasizes that successful social movements rely on the effective acquisition and deployment of resources such as funding, leadership, organizational structures, and communication networks. Rather than viewing collective action as a spontaneous reaction to grievances, RM theorists argue that mobilization depends on the strategic use of these resources to plan, coordinate, and sustain action.

³⁴ As stated by Fuchs (2006), the emergence of LGBTQ+ associations are linked to everyday discrimination against the community; feminist movements have emerged due to a lack of response by governments to gender-specific oppression; or the emergence of anti-fascism has a reaction to the rise of the far-right problem.

This perspective highlights the importance of infrastructure, external support, and institutional linkages in shaping a movement's capacity for influence and longevity.

Early formulations of the RM framework, particularly by McCarthy and Zald (1973; 1977), emphasized that successful social movements depend on access to material and organizational resources such as funding, leadership, and institutional support. Drawing on rational choice theory and influenced by Olson's (1965) theory of collective action, early RM theorists treated movements as formalized entities competing for resources in a broader marketplace of ideas. Individual participation was seen as the result of calculated cost-benefit analysis rather than emotional, moral, or cultural factors. Grievances were considered ever-present and thus insufficient to explain mobilization, which was instead attributed to strategic leadership and elite sponsorship. This early approach prioritized meso-level organizational structures and largely ignored micro-level dynamics such as identity formation, cultural framing, or interpersonal motivations.

However, the RM framework evolved over time in response to its critics, incorporating socio-psychological and cultural dimensions that brought greater attention to identity, values, and meaning making. Scholars such as Doug McAdam (1982), Sidney Tarrow (1994), Charles Tilly (1978; 2004) and William Gamson (1992) helped to reframe RM by recognizing that individual decisions to engage are shaped not only by resources and opportunities, but also by collective identity and shared worldviews. This turn acknowledged that individuals possess intersecting identities that influence how they interpret their experiences, connect with others, and construct grievances. As McClurg Mueller (1992) argues, grievances, expectations, and cost-benefit calculations are "socially constructed within a collective context." (7) Thus, individuals come to see their struggles collectively through in-group bonds and face-to-face interactions, which in turn transform personal frustrations into collective demands.

This approach also addresses Olson's (1965) free rider problem by showing that social ties, emotional connections, and shared identities can override purely rational calculations. As participants build strong in-group bonds, they begin to prioritize mutual obligations and a sense of belonging over self-interest (McClurg Mueller 1992). The strength of a movement's collective identity influences its ability to mobilize and retain members. Moreover, embedded participants do not merely act upon static grievances or resource constraints; they reinterpret them through ongoing interaction and engagement with others (Ferree 1992; Buechler 2000). As movements

evolve, so do the beliefs, values, and organizational structures of their participants. Micro-mobilization processes such as informal discussions, community meetings, or acts of protest, foster awareness of structural inequality, shift individual perspectives toward collective understandings, and build solidarity through shared opposition to dominant power structures (Klandermans 1992; Taylor and Whittier 1992; Gramsci 1971). Mobilization is most effective in contested spaces where hegemonic ideologies are challenged, and new identities and meanings are actively constructed.

RM theory represented a pivotal shift in social movement scholarship by redirecting attention from psychological grievances to the strategic acquisition and deployment of resources such as funding, leadership, communication networks, and organizational infrastructure (McCarthy and Zald 1977). This approach professionalized the study of social movements, underscoring the importance of formal social movement organizations, and highlighting the role of professional activists in sustaining collective action. However, despite these contributions, RM has faced extensive and nuanced critiques from scholars who argue that its narrow focus on material and organizational factors inadequately captures the complexity of social movements.

One major critique is that the theory adopts an overly rationalist and structural perspective, portraying movement actors primarily as cost-benefit calculators who mobilize when the necessary resources are available. This rational choice framework tends to marginalize the emotional, cultural, and identity-based motivations that often animate participation. For instance, McCarthy and Zald's early formulations largely overlooked how processes of identity formation and meaning-making influence mobilization trajectories. The dynamic evolution of in-group and out-group boundaries through daily face-to-face interactions can profoundly shape activists' sense of grievance, goals, and strategies, factors that RM insufficiently addresses. Furthermore, RM's emphasis on formal organizational structures has been criticized for neglecting the significance of informal networks and grassroots activism. Many movements rely heavily on decentralized, spontaneous, or culturally rooted modes of mobilization that may not possess the bureaucratic capacity or elite ties highlighted by RM. Critics such as Buechler (1993) and Piven and Cloward (1977) argue that this focus on institutionalized SMOs risks reproducing elitism, as it prioritizes access to established channels of power and marginalizes the agency of ordinary participants who lack such resources.

In addition, RM has been faulted for its limited engagement with broader historical and structural contexts. By concentrating largely on meso-level organizational dynamics, the theory often overlooks long-term social, political, and economic transformations that shape the environment in which movements arise. Buechler (2000) notes that this results in an ahistorical understanding of social movements, similar to the weaknesses of earlier frameworks like relative deprivation theory. Without incorporating the influence of enduring structural inequalities or shifting political opportunity structures, RM risks providing a fragmented explanation that misses the full scope of movement emergence and development. Lastly, the theory underestimates the importance of cultural and symbolic elements in collective action. Movements frequently draw strength from shared values, narratives, rituals, and symbols that create a sense of solidarity and collective identity beyond resource calculations. By sidelining these cultural dimensions, RM fails to explain how movements sustain commitment and resilience, especially when material resources are scarce, or repression is high.

In sum, while the theory advanced social movement research by foregrounding organizational capacity and strategic action, its tendency to privilege formal, elite-controlled resources and downplay emotional, cultural, and identity factors limits its explanatory power. This has prompted scholars to develop complementary approaches that integrate these neglected dimensions to better understand the complex processes driving social mobilization. In other words, despite criticisms, RM approach highlights four key elements that explain why individuals might join a SMO: monetary resources, networks, commitment/time, and opportunities (Edwards and McCarthy 2004; McCarthy and Zald 1977; Freeman 1977). First, money is crucial for SMOs, as it allows them to publicize their movement and attract supporters. However, not all SMOs have equal financial resources, especially grassroots organizations, which often rely on external funding (McCarthy and Zald 1977; 1973). Second, networks are vital. SMOs need skilled adherents with expertise and established networks to help attract new members and secure financial support. Higher education is also linked to greater volunteer commitment and donations. Third, commitment and time are essential, with adherents' willingness to take risks and contribute energy benefiting the SMO's efforts. Finally, opportunities are critical. SMOs must strategically identify and seize opportunities to recruit followers and take political action, even with limited resources. Leadership skills and strategic planning help SMOs access leverage points within the system, allowing them to persist or evolve depending on the opportunities available (Tarrow 1994).

Political opportunity structure theory – Integrating Supply and Demand

Political opportunity structure (POS) theory explains how broader political environments condition the emergence, development, and strategies of social movements. Evolving from early structural explanations to more nuanced, relational frameworks, POS provides a bridge between political institutions and collective action. Early formulations of POS theory, developed by scholars such as Charles Tilly (1978), emphasized relatively stable external factors like institutional openness, elite alignments, and state repression that either facilitated or constrained activism. These “windows of opportunity” allow movements to emerge when the political environment becomes more receptive to collective action. Early participants, attuned to these openings, often act before the movement gains widespread visibility. A shift in political structure also leads to changes in the repertoire of contention. Tilly (1993) notes that transformations such as state-making, economic shifts, and demographic changes create conditions for new, large-scale national protests. POS theorists typically treat opportunities as objective and constraining of individual actions. Since actors cannot anticipate all possible outcomes, the theory relies on heuristic assumptions about behaviour, often invoking the rationality principle: political actors are presumed to act strategically within a given opportunity set to attain their goals (Kriesi 2004; Gamson and Meyer 1996). However, this broad conceptualization has faced criticism for “conceptual stretching” (Sartori 1970), as its scope can become so expansive that it loses analytical precision.³⁵ McAdam (1982), while analyzing Afro-American mobilization, critiques POS’s volatility and argues that neither external conditions nor internal movement dynamics alone explain insurgency. Rather, social movements depend on reconfiguring power relations between mobilizing groups and political structures.

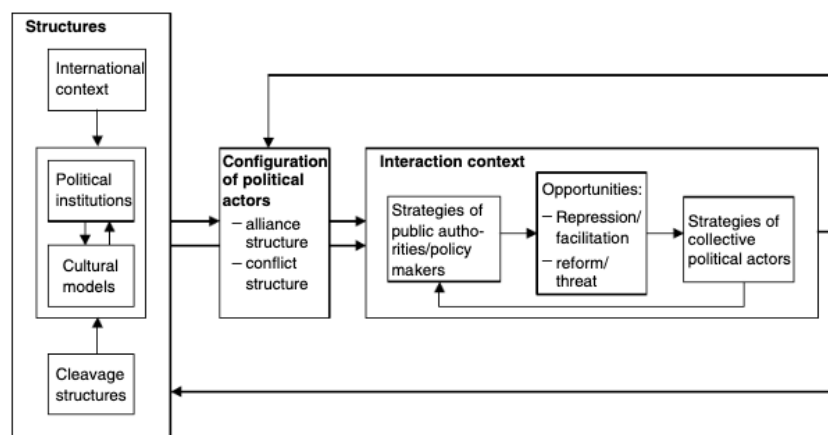
Later theorists such as Sidney Tarrow (1994) refined the POS framework by emphasizing the dynamic and socially constructed nature of political opportunities. Opportunities are not just

³⁵ That so, Tarrow (1994) combines history, politics, and sociology together in order to complement McAdam’s analysis. Four elements are added: degree of openness, policy stability, allies, and elites. For Tarrow, these four elements will likely create a “cycle of protest” meaning “that people join in social movements in response to political opportunities and then, through collective action, creating new ones.” (Tarrow 1994, 17). Kriesi et al. (1995) identify three different elements: state formal structure, power configuration, and elites’ procedures and strategies. Historical linkages and contemporary opportunities are combined to highlight how past structures have shaped new social movements. As of Tilly and Tarrow (2008), they rather divide POS definition into six elements: independent power sources within a regime; openness to new actors; political instabilities; network allies; propensity to facilitate (or suppress) collective action; and lastly, major shifts in the previous five elements (Fillieule and Mathieu 2020; McAdam 1982; McAdam et al. 2001; Tilly and Tarrow 2015). In sum, “people act on their perceptions of political opportunities. If movement initiators do not perceive an opportunity to act, then SMOs will not materialize. However, if aggrieved people develop or discover a sense of efficacy or empowerment, then they are likely to launch an SMO.” (Stockemer 2013, 19)

external structures but are interpreted, framed, and exploited by movement actors as they navigate shifting political landscapes. As movements gain visibility and momentum, late joiners are mobilized when they perceive increased opportunities for influence. This highlights how both early and late participation are shaped by dynamic and relational understandings of political opportunity. The structure of political systems influences the strategies and visibility of social movement organizations. Kriesi (2004) distinguishes between “open” and “closed” systems. Open systems provide some access but limited power, while closed systems may offer more concentrated decision-making. For instance, decentralized systems, with multiple decision-makers, can complicate access, while centralized or professionalized political systems may be less accessible to grassroots actors. Similarly, proportional electoral systems offer more points of entry for SMOs through broader political representation, while majoritarian systems restrict access.

Different political systems also shape movement strategies. Consensus-based systems, often influenced by cultural or religious traditions, tend to foster cooperative approaches, whereas majority-based systems encourage confrontational tactics. These institutional dynamics influence which movements gain visibility and legitimacy. For example, far-right movements may thrive in restricted discursive environments by leveraging nationalist and ethnic narratives to gain traction. Koopmans and Statham (1999) observe that such movements often craft their programs around national identity and exclusionary ideals. Actors within the POS model are not static. Their roles vary over time and across contexts depending on access to resources, values, perceptions of opportunities, and strategic capabilities.

Figure 3 Political structure model



Source: Kriesi 2004, 70

Kriesi (2004) emphasizes that the configuration of actors – comprising allies (protagonists), adversaries (antagonists), and bystanders (audience) – results from dynamic processes of identity formation, coalition-building, and network development. The degree of compatibility among actors affects both internal SMO interactions and relationships with external institutions.

Finally, the interactional context connects structure and agency. SMOs and activists assess the likely responses to their strategies and adapt accordingly. Authorities may either respond with policy reform or impose repression, influencing whether SMOs persist or recalibrate their tactics. Opportunities are thus context-dependent and subject to strategic interpretation. As Kriesi (2004) and Gamson and Meyer (1996) note, opportunity shifts may benefit specific factions such as radicals, leading to a broader radicalization of the movement. In this way, POS theory accounts for both the structural and strategic dimensions of social movement development. In such contexts, far-right SMOs often adopt a national identity discourse tied to ethnic ideals, shaping their programs and policies (Koopmans and Statham 1999).

Even so, POS provides an integrated supply/demand framework for understanding how external political contexts interact with internal movement dynamics to influence the emergence and success of social movements. By focusing on the presence of favourable political conditions such as elite fragmentation, reduced repression, and accessible political institutions, POS highlights how such factors can open “windows of opportunity” for collective action. However, despite its widespread influence, the theory has been subject to significant and ongoing critique.

A central criticism of POS concerns its conceptual vagueness. Scholars have long debated what exactly constitutes a political opportunity, with definitions varying widely across cases and research traditions. This ambiguity has led to what Sartori (1970) termed “conceptual stretching,” whereby the term “opportunity” is applied too broadly, reducing its analytical precision and making it difficult to consistently operationalize or measure in empirical studies. The lack of a clear, standardized definition undermines the theory’s explanatory power and comparability across different social movement contexts. Moreover, POS’s tendency to treat political opportunities as objective, external conditions has been challenged for neglecting the subjective and socially constructed nature of these opportunities. Movement actors do not simply respond passively to fixed political realities; rather, they actively interpret, frame, and sometimes create opportunities through their perceptions, strategies, and interactions (Goodwin and Jasper 1999). This oversight

limits POS's ability to fully capture the dynamic and negotiated processes by which activists identify and capitalize on political openings.

Similarly, POS has been critiqued for underestimating the role of agency, emotion, and culture in shaping movement responses to political contexts. By emphasizing structural conditions, the theory often downplays how activists' identities, collective meanings, and emotional motivations influence their willingness and ability to mobilize. The focus on external opportunities risks overshadowing the internal cultural and psychological factors that are critical for sustaining activism, particularly in the face of repression or political uncertainty. Additionally, POS's emphasis on favourable political conditions can lead to a deterministic view of social movements, implying that protest is largely contingent on external factors beyond activists' control. This perspective can marginalize the creativity, resilience, and innovation of movements that emerge under less-than-ideal political circumstances, including repressive regimes or closed political systems.

In sum, while the theory offers valuable insights into the structural enabling or constraining factors of social movements, its conceptual imprecision, neglect of subjective interpretations, and insufficient attention to agency and culture limit its comprehensiveness. These critiques have motivated the development of more nuanced frameworks that integrate structural and cultural dimensions to better explain when and how social movements arise and endure.

Synthesis

To understand the emergence and development of social movements, scholars have long relied on a set of "classic" or structural theories notably relative deprivation theory, resource mobilization theory, and political opportunity structure theory. These approaches conceptualize mobilization through a supply-and-demand framework, whereby the presence of grievances (demand) must intersect with enabling structural conditions (supply) to trigger collective action.

Each theory highlights a distinct mechanism within this dynamic. First, the RD theory focuses on psychological grievances. It posits that social movements arise when individuals or groups perceive a disjunction between their current reality and what they believe they are entitled to. This perceived injustice produces frustration, anger, and emotional dissatisfaction, which can drive mobilization. RD is thus rooted in emotional and cognitive reactions to inequality, but it has been criticized for assuming that grievances inevitably translate into action, despite the fact that many

aggrieved individuals do not protest. Next, the RM theory responds to this limitation by emphasizing strategic action and access to resources. According to this theory, grievances are widespread and constant; what differentiates successful mobilization is the availability of material and organizational resources, including leadership, networks, funding, and communication infrastructure. Movement actors are seen as rational agents who calculate costs and benefits before engaging. While this model professionalized the study of social movements, it has been critiqued for privileging formal structures and downplaying grassroots efforts, emotional resonance, and identity formation. Scholars such as McCarthy and Zald (1977) were criticized for ignoring how evolving personal identities and informal networks shape mobilization. Lastly, POS integrates both internal and external dynamics, highlighting the role of political context in enabling or constraining protest. Movements are more likely to emerge when political structures are favourable, such as during periods of elite conflict, lowered repression, or institutional openness. While POS expands the explanatory scope, it has faced criticism for conceptual vagueness, for treating opportunities as objective rather than socially constructed, and for underestimating cultural and emotional agency within movements.

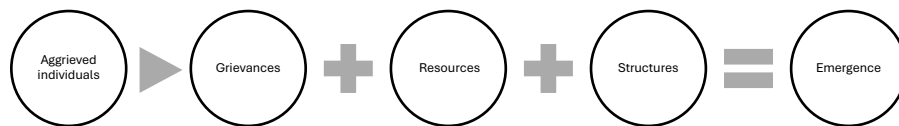
Together, these models suggest that SMOs tend to emerge when three core elements align: (a) individuals experience grievances, (b) sufficient resources are available and participants are willing to use them, and (c) political conditions are conducive to mobilization. When these conditions coalesce, the probability of collective action increases significantly. However, the critiques of these structural models are substantial. Scholars argue that these frameworks overemphasize structural variables and underestimate the subjective dimensions of mobilization. Additionally, critiques have highlighted that these theories treat movement participation as the outcome of rational calculations or external openings, while neglecting the cultural values, emotional ties, and identity shifts that often underpin engagement. Moreover, these theories have marginalized individual agency and meaning making, portraying participants as passive recipients of structural forces rather than as dynamic actors constructing their own pathways to activism. Likewise, theories fail to account for the symbolic and affective power of protest, particularly how collective identity and shared narratives shape both movement formation and sustainability.

Critics also note that by focusing predominantly on macro- and meso-level conditions, these theories risk becoming ahistorical and reductionist, overlooking how historical legacies, social meanings, and everyday experiences influence mobilization (Buechler 2000; Piven and Cloward

1977). In doing so, they reproduce the same analytical blind spots that limited earlier psychological models, such as RD, in the mid-twentieth century.

In response to these critiques, scholars have increasingly turned to frameworks that foreground the interplay between structure and agency, with particular attention to identity formation, cultural meaning, and emotional dynamics. As Figure 2 suggests, SMOs are more likely to emerge when aggrieved individuals are not only angry or frustrated, but also possess the energy, resources, and willingness to act collectively, often catalyzed by the efforts of political entrepreneurs. These entrepreneurs play a vital role in translating structural conditions into mobilization by framing grievances in resonant ways, building networks of solidarity, and fostering organizational cohesion (Opp 2000).

Figure 4 Emergence of SMOs



Importantly, the relationship between political entrepreneurs and grassroots participants can be understood in economic terms: entrepreneurs supply platforms for expression and collective organization, while participants demand meaningful programs and shared community. As Stockemer (2013, 21) puts it, the connection between movement leaders and potential recruits mirrors “the relationship between the entrepreneurs of a social group and the grassroots members to that of firms and consumers in the free market economy.” Hence, Table 1 synthesizes the approaches explained in Part I of this chapter. These models should not be seen as exclusive or competing, but rather complementary to explaining SMO participation.

Table 1 Theoretical Synthesis

Models	Main Elements	Key Authors
<i>Relative deprivation</i>	The model explains how feelings of dissatisfaction and injustice arise when individuals or groups perceive a gap between their current situation and what they believe they deserve. This perceived inequality leads to frustration, which can motivate collective action or protest.	Davies (1962) Runciman (1966) Gurr (1970)
<i>Resource mobilization</i>	By focusing on the importance of resources such as money, organizational skills, leadership, and networks, social movements are more likely to succeed when they	McCarthy & Zald (1973; 1977) Oberschall (1973) Freeman (1977) Tilly (1978)

	effectively gather and use resources to achieve their goals and where success depends on the movement's ability to secure and manage resources rather than just grievances or frustration.	
<i>Opportunity structure</i>	This model highlights how external factors such as changes in political openness, government stability, public opinion, or elite support—create opportunities or barriers for collective action. Movements are more likely to succeed when the political context is favourable, offering access to resources, allies, or less repression.	Eisinger (1972) Gamson (1975; 1992) McAdam (1982; 2001) Tarrow (1994)

This conceptual evolution marks a growing scholarly interest in the subjective and symbolic dimensions of protest that is, how individuals make sense of their social position, identify with collective causes, and experience emotional resonance within movements. These developments lay the foundation for the next theoretical shift, which is the Politicized Collective Identity (PCI). PCI offers a powerful lens for understanding how individuals come to see themselves as part of a politicized group engaged in collective struggle, thereby bridging the gap between structural conditions and individual agency in social movements. Hence, what conditions could potentially explain the relationship between political entrepreneurs and potential recruits? As stated, unity is key. That said, political entrepreneurs supply potential recruits with a platform to debate, express, and value their concern. On the other hand, recruits demand that political entrepreneurs (or SMO) offer a program that address their concerns as well as a community of like-minded people they can identify to. The next section examines how subjective experiences, and cultural contexts intersect with political agency to shape collective action.

Cultural, and Structural Dynamics – A Supply and Demand Analysis of SMOs

There are different approaches that could inform us on why an individual might want to join a SMO and how organizations have maintained their popularity, but the politicized collective identity (PCI) by Simons and Klandermans is instructive on the matter. Indeed, the politicization of identities is central to the dynamics of SMOs. Thus, there is a division of labour in the study of politicized identities. Ideology-wise, SMOs have retained their members and gain recruits by framing and tapping into individuals' grievances. They did so by persuading potential recruits that other individuals with a similar set of values and beliefs were joining the SMO and convinced

them of the necessity to engage. However, some individuals do not get involved with SMOs based on shared values, but on the likeliness of a potential socio-political change. In other words, values are less important to these individuals, whereas individuals evaluate the SMO capacity to take action in altering current policies. Lastly, the third feature is intertwined to the two previous dimensions. That so, a sense of identity (or a sense of unity) might convince potential recruits to join a particular SMO over another. These recruits might, at first, join for reasons linked to ideology and/or policy change, but will eventually stay within the SMO thanks to their sense of belonging. In other words, the division of labour is divided between sociology and social psychology. On the one hand, sociologists focus on the supply side analyzing the structural characteristics of SMO such as whether these protest movements resonate with activists' identities and whether activated frame taps into political issues. Social psychologists, on the other hand, examine the demand side by exploring how individuals perceive societal problems, and whether these individuals assign political meaning to them (cf. Klandermans 2004).

Introducing Politicized Collective Identity

The concept of politicized collective identity offers a compelling framework for understanding how individuals become actively engaged in collective action by linking their personal identities with broader political struggles. Introduced by Simon and Klandermans (2001), PCI refers to a form of collective identity that is not only shared among a group, but explicitly connected to a political cause or goal. It is through this linkage that individual concerns, values, and emotions are transformed into the basis for coordinated, purposeful action. PCI emerges through an evolving process of identification, whereby individuals come to perceive themselves as members of a group with shared grievances and goals. This identity formation involves the drawing of symbolic boundaries between “us” (the in-group) and “them” (the perceived adversaries), and is reinforced through practices of solidarity, shared meaning-making, and emotional resonance. Unlike more static conceptions of identity, PCI is dynamic and context-dependent, shaped by interactions within the movement and with external factors such as the state, media, or public institutions.

The relevance of PCI lies in its ability to address the limitations of earlier structural models of social movement theory, such as relative deprivation theory, resource mobilization theory, and political opportunity structure theory. These classic approaches tend to explain mobilization in

terms of macro-level conditions such as perceived grievances (RD), access to resources (RM), or favourable political environments (POS), but often underestimate the role of subjective experience, emotional motivation, and cultural identity in shaping why and how people engage in collective action. While these models help explain the conditions under which mobilization is possible, they struggle to account for how individuals interpret their circumstances, develop a sense of belonging to a cause, or sustain long-term commitment to a movement. PCI fills this theoretical gap by emphasizing the psychosocial and cultural dimensions of mobilization. It provides insight into how people come to view their personal struggles as politically relevant and shared with others, how they emotionally invest in collective projects, and how movement participation becomes a form of self-expression and moral engagement. As such, PCI bridges the divide between structure and agency, offering a more holistic understanding of social movements that encompasses not only external conditions but also internal processes of identity construction, meaning-making, and emotional alignment.

This perspective is particularly crucial in contemporary contexts where mobilization is often driven not solely by material deprivation or formal political opportunity, but by moral outrage, symbolic identification, and affective belonging as seen with the Convoy. In these cases, PCI offers an analytical lens through which to understand how grievances become politicized, how individuals become activists, and how movements sustain themselves through shared identity and emotional solidarity.

The Foundations of PCI

The analysis of political mobilization, especially in the context of protest and contentious politics, requires a nuanced understanding of how individuals come to see themselves as part of a collective cause. Collective identity serves as a central analytical lens in this regard. Defined as the shared cognitive, emotional, and evaluative understanding among group members (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Klandermans 2014), collective identity is not merely a static label but a dynamic process through which individuals locate themselves in relation to others, adopt shared goals, and construct a sense of “we-ness.” It plays a critical role in shaping participation, sustaining commitment, and interpreting the meaning of political action.

Two foundational theories that are social identity theory (SIT) and self-categorization theory, provide the groundwork for understanding how collective identities emerge and operate.

As stated by Tajfel and Turner (1979), identity can be “conceptualize[d as] a group, in this sense, as a collection of individuals who perceive themselves to be members of the same social category, share some emotional involvement in this common definition of themselves, and achieve some degree of social consensus about the evaluation of their group and of their membership of it.” (40) In that sense, the collective identity is a combination of group membership awareness, a shared understanding of the group’s place in society as well as a definition of group members within symbolic boundaries between “us” and “them.” But, identity can also refer to how we understand ourselves with Simon et al. (1998) describing it as an individual place in society based on a set of dimensions such as nationality or gender. Individuals have two types of identity that is both personal and social identities. A personal identity relates to individual characteristics while social identity stems from holding a membership in a social context. On the other hand, social “concerns the socially constructed cognitions of an individual about his membership in one or more groups” (Klandermans 2014, 3; Turner 1987; Taylor and Whittier 1992; van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013). As summarized by Klandermans (2014),

The roles and positions a person occupies form his personal identity. At the same time, every place a person occupies is shared with other people. I am not the only professor of social psychology, nor the only Dutch or the only European. I share these identities with other people—a fact that turns them into social and collective identities at the same time. Social identity concerns the socially constructed cognitions of an individual about his membership in one or more groups. Collective identity concerns cognitions shared by members of a single group about the group of which they are a member. Indeed, while social identity is a characteristic of an individual and involves more than one group, collective identity is a characteristic of a group and involves more than one individual. (3)

Hence, group identification connects collective and social identities. In other words, a strong identification means that the more strongly an individual identifies with a group, the more they feel obligated to act on behalf of the group. Similarly, individuals with politicized identities often feel empowered and capable of effecting change through collective action. As explained by Ellemers et al. (1997), social identity theory (SIT) explains why individuals sometimes prioritize group memberships over personal identities. It explores how people respond to unfavourable social status, offering either individualistic or collective coping strategies based on their beliefs about social structures. As part of SIT, self-categorization theory delves deeper into group identification, highlighting how the salience of personal versus social identity shapes behaviours. However, the literature tends to forget that individuals have various identities. Thus, it emphasizes that

individuals can hold dual identities, identifying with both the movement (or marginalized groups) and another competing group, such as the state or the organization they are protesting. In that sense, this duality can lead to cross-pressure where there is a tension between loyalties to different identities, but rather than weakening participation, it often encourages involvement in protests. Hence, a theoretical tension arises when predicting responses from lower status groups; self-categorization theory suggests group identity salience leads to collective behaviour, while social identity theory posits that individuals may avoid affiliating with low-status groups unless social conditions favour group boundaries. In other words, the strength of group identification, rather than identification itself, significantly affects individuals' willingness to act based on group membership, especially in political contexts (van Zomeren et al. 2008; Simon et al. 1998; Hogg 2000; Bélanger et al. 2020).

Building on these foundations, the PCI model introduces a more refined understanding of how identities become explicitly political (Simon and Klandermans 2001). PCI refers to the process through which a social identity becomes mobilized in a political context, often involving the recognition of shared grievances, the identification of an adversary, and the development of collective action frames. The PCI model emphasizes three key features. First, politicized identities do not exist in isolation but are embedded within broader and often overlapping social categories. For instance, an individual may identify as a student, which is nested within larger categories such as youth or national citizenry. This nested structure allows for the fluid articulation of political demands across different scales of identity, enabling actors to draw on multiple repertoires of meaning. The interconnectedness of these identities provides a versatile framework through which individuals navigate and express their political positions. At the same time, individuals may hold dual identifications, simultaneously aligning with state or institutional actors as well as with oppositional movements. This coexistence can generate cognitive and emotional tensions, yet it also opens up a unique space for mobilization. As Simon et al. (1998) highlight, such ambivalence can serve as a powerful catalyst for dissent, particularly in moments when institutional trust weakens or the legitimacy of the state is questioned. This duality reflects the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of political identity. Moreover, the strength of group identification significantly influences political engagement. When individuals strongly identify with a group, they experience greater emotional investment and moral commitment, which in turn increases their readiness to participate in collective action, especially when faced with perceived threats or

injustices. In such contexts, group boundaries become more pronounced, and solidarity evolves from being a strategic choice to a moral imperative, compelling members to act in defence of their collective interests.

In other words, the combination of SIT, self-categorization theory, and the PCI framework offers a comprehensive lens for analyzing how individuals come to see themselves as political actors embedded within larger struggles. These theoretical tools are particularly valuable for understanding contemporary movements where identity, grievances, and action converge in complex and often contradictory ways.

The Steps to a Politicized Collective Identity

However, the salience of a collective identity alone does not make it politically relevant; it must be politicized to drive collective action. Politicization starts with the recognition of shared grievances and identifying an external enemy responsible. The group then makes demands for compensation, and if those demands are unmet, the struggle continues. When the group seeks support from external parties, such as authorities or the public, the identity becomes fully politicized. This process unfolds through a series of politicizing events, with identity shaping the group's tactics and relationship to the broader social environment. In other words, politicization occurs when collective identity moves from simply being a social connection to being a political force (Simon and Klandermans 2001). Politicized collective identity differs from collective identity in three keyways.

Step I: Awareness of Shared Grievances

First, PCI begins with a heightened awareness of shared grievances, which provides individuals with a meaningful worldview and a clearer understanding of who or what is responsible for their discontent. This foundational stage is concerned not only with the recognition of injustice but also with the willingness of individuals to expose and articulate their perceived grievances. Such willingness is deeply rooted in a person's value system, which shapes how they interpret the world around them. As Schwartz and Bilsky (1987) explain, values are “(a) concepts or beliefs, (b) about desirable end states or behaviours, (c) that transcend specific situations, (d) guide selection or evaluation of behaviour and events, and (e) are ordered by relative importance” (551). These values act as interpretive lenses, through which individuals perceive and make sense of

social and political events. In this way, specific grievances resonate more strongly when they align with an individual's core values, activating their awareness and emotional engagement.

Grievances, however, are not monolithic or straightforward; they are multidimensional phenomena. Drawing on Muliavka's (2021) framework, grievances are understood as comprising both structural conditions and cognitive perceptions. On the one hand, conditions refer to macro-level socio-political and economic transformations that produce negative outcomes for individuals or groups. On the other hand, cognitive perceptions are the subjective interpretations of those conditions, influenced by personal experiences, historical narratives, and cultural frameworks. This dual structure that is objective conditions and subjective meaning-making, helps explain why not all people respond to the same structural conditions in the same way. For some, economic marginalization may be seen as a temporary setback, while for others it becomes a profound injustice demanding collective action. The interaction between macro-level structural change and micro-level personal interpretation is what activates a shift toward collective identification and potential mobilization.

At this stage, emotional responses begin to play a critical role. Feelings such as anger, fear, and moral outrage emerge as individuals process their grievances through the lens of their values and lived experiences. According to Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta (2001), these emotions are not secondary to political reasoning but are integral to it. They act as motivational forces that bind individuals together in a sense of shared injustice and propel them toward collective action. Anger may stem from perceived violations of fairness or dignity; fear may be linked to the erosion of security or autonomy. These emotional responses do not merely reflect individual dissatisfaction, they rather foster a collective sense of solidarity, or what Goodwin et al. (2001) describe as "bonds of trust, loyalty, and affection" (9) among members of a movement.

Thus, in this first step of PCI formation, a convergence of values, structural conditions, subjective interpretations, and emotional intensification enables individuals to recognize their experiences not as isolated incidents, but as symptoms of broader systemic issues. As emotions build and grievances are reframed through shared values and narratives, individuals become increasingly willing to participate in collective action. This emotional and cognitive alignment lays the foundation for the transformation of individual identity into collective identity, marking the beginning of political mobilization and the potential for organized resistance (Schwartz and Bilsky 1987; Muliavka 2021; Goodwin et al. 2001).

Step II: Adversarial Attribution and Framing

This second phase of PCI is characterized by adversarial attribution and strategic framing, whereby individual grievances are politicized and collectivized through the identification of an external opponent and the construction of a unifying ideology. This phase begins as the group collectively identifies specific actors such as institutions, elites, or other dominant forces as responsible for their condition. This process not only provides a moral target for their discontent but also reorients their grievances into a political framework that invites action. By naming an adversary, the group clarifies its own moral position and reinforces a sense of injustice that can be mobilized for collective purposes.

Hence, SMOs play a central role in this stage, functioning as “carriers of meaning” (Klandermans and Mayer 2006, 9). On the supply side, SMOs are responsible for framing ideologies and grievances in ways that are meaningful and appealing to potential recruits. This involves transforming personal frustrations into collective political claims, essentially turning collective identity into a tool for political change. Political entrepreneurs within SMOs work to create consensus between their own definitions of societal problems and the lived experiences of members and new recruits (Stockemer 2013). This consensus becomes the basis of an internal group ideology, which motivates existing members while attracting new participants through a shared interpretive lens. Framing, in this context, refers to the deliberate filtering and organizing of social reality, offering definitions of situations “built up in accordance with principles of organization which govern events—and our subjective involvement in them” (Goffman 1974, 10–11). These frames construct narratives that help individuals label life events, identify allies, and assign blame. In doing so, SMOs reinforce symbolic distinctions between the in-group defined as the morally righteous “we,” and the out-group, seen as the culprits responsible for the community’s grievances (Taylor and Whittier 1992; Runciman 1966). This adversarial framing fosters intergroup polarization, solidifying internal cohesion and identity through a clear contrast with perceived enemies.

Through this dynamic, SMOs are not just framing problems but also offering strategies and solutions. They seek to legitimize their actions by clearly identifying the culprit and proposing concrete responses. The success of this approach depends on whether these solutions resonate with members and recruits. If framed effectively, this process can result in collective consensus and sustained participation in SMO-led activities (Snow and Benford 1988; Benford and Snow 2000).

However, while some individuals may join movements due to an alignment with core values or belief in policy change potential, others are drawn more by the sense of identity and belonging that SMOs offer. As Klandermans (2004) suggests, potential recruits may be motivated not only by ideological conviction but by the desire to connect with like-minded individuals and escape marginalization. This highlights an important dual function of SMOs. Beyond political advocacy, they serve as social spaces where personal and collective identities merge. As Klandermans (2004, 364) notes, “a collective identity is a place shared with other people,” implying that personal identity is always, in part, collective. This merging of identities is not static; contextual factors and the presence of competing identities may result in disengagement. To counter this, the strength of shared identity, here reinforced by close interpersonal bonds, acts as a buffer against attrition, making it more costly for individuals to defect (Stockemer 2013; Klandermans 2004).

Engagement within SMOs also offers a structured environment for political participation, where individuals can voice their concerns and work toward policy change. SMOs foster solidarity through organized activities such as conferences, workshops, and educational events, which deepen communal bonds and reinforce in-group ideology (Bouron 2017; Snow and Benford 1988; Benford and Snow 2000). Still, the degree of internal cohesion remains fluid. It evolves with leadership competence, organizational capacity, and the extent to which members feel genuinely accepted and represented. As new members enter the group, they reshape collective identities, making in-group dynamics an ever-evolving aspect of the movement. Ultimately, SMOs are indispensable to the politicization process, helping individuals translate personal grievances into actionable political demands, while simultaneously offering social belonging and a platform to challenge the status quo.

Step III: Societal Involvement or Triangulation

At the third step, PCI leads to distinct behaviours, as members are more likely to engage in collective action aimed at influencing the government or public to intervene or take sides (Simon and Klandermans 2001; Klandermans 2014; Simon 2004). This societal involvement (or triangulation) represents the point at which PCI becomes fully realized, as the group actively engages third parties such as the media, public opinion, and state actors, thereby compelling society to take sides (Simon and Klandermans 2001). This stage marks the critical transition from internal identity formation to outward strategic action. As the collective identity matures, members

are no longer content with simply being recognized, they demand intervention. PCI, at this stage, leads to distinct behaviours, as individuals are more inclined to engage in collective action aimed at influencing government policies or shaping public opinion (Simon and Klandermans 2001; Klandermans 2014; Simon 2004). Public confrontation becomes central, and depending on context, state response, and repression, it can either radicalize or reinforce the group's identity.

This strategic engagement is often driven by a perceived potential for policy change. As Stockemer (2013) notes, when individuals perceive a higher likelihood that their participation will be effective, and the cost of engagement is relatively low, they are more likely to join and remain active in a social movement organization. On the contrary, rational individuals tend to avoid joining SMOs when the cost of participation is high, and the probability of successful policy change is low. This logic echoes Olson's (1965) theory of collective action, which posits that rational actors will only participate when they foresee exclusive benefits, the group is small enough for individual efforts to matter, or the group possesses certain privileges that increase the chances of a positive outcome. Olson emphasizes that the attraction of group membership lies not in mere belonging, but in achieving something tangible through it. However, not all participants are driven solely by material incentives. The definition of "benefits" varies between individuals, and many are motivated by subjective concerns. If people perceive large-scale mobilization or sustained actions as beneficial, be it for expressive, emotional, or symbolic reasons, it can generate a bandwagon effect, encouraging others to join. As Marwell and Oliver (1993) point out, individuals balance subjective concerns through a personal cost-benefit analysis that often extends beyond material calculations. Collective action, therefore, becomes viable when individuals believe their participation has contributed to past success and will likely do so in the future (Marwell and Oliver 1993; Oberschall 1995).

From this perspective, their potential to effect policy change depends largely on timing and strategic responsiveness. Policy windows, moments when an issue gains prominence in the public or political agenda, offer critical opportunities. SMOs must capitalize on these moments by framing debates to their advantage and selecting strategies that align with their goals. Strategic choices are consequential. Adopting moderate tactics tends to attract moderate participants, whereas violent strategies may attract individuals more prone to aggression. Given their distrust of mainstream media, some SMOs turn to alternative media platforms to shape narratives, assert control over messaging, and recruit individuals with similar worldviews. Ultimately, a group with

shared grievances and an identified adversary is likely to demand corrective action or compensation. When these demands are met with resistance, persistent confrontation can escalate, fuelling further politicization. Not all confrontations, however, lead to politicized collective identity. True politicization occurs when the group situates its identity within a broader societal context, acknowledging that their specific identity (e.g., as students, workers, or conservatives) is embedded in a larger collective struggle. As Simon and Klandermans (2001) explain, politicized collective identity is always a nested identity. It relies on identification with a more inclusive social entity that contextualizes the group's grievances, defines its adversaries, and shapes its pursuit of social change. In this way, the group's struggle becomes emblematic of a broader societal tension, compelling others to choose sides and thereby solidifying the group's role as a legitimate actor in public discourse. This broader identity both enables and limits the politicization of their specific collective identity. "In more general terms, politicized collective identity is always also nested identity in that it presupposes identification with the more inclusive social entity that provides the context for shared grievances, adversarial attributions, and the ensuing power struggles for social change (or resistance to such change)." (Simon and Klandermans 2001, 326)

Table 2 Politicized Collective Identity Stages and Individual Participation Logic

Stage	Group Dynamics	Individual Logic
Shared Grievances	Recognition of common problems or injustices; emergence of collective identity	Individual realizes they are not alone; emotional or moral resonance develops
Adversarial Attribution	Identification of a responsible party or adversary	Sense of injustice intensifies; enemy attribution clarifies moral/strategic direction
Societal Involvement	Group engages third parties (media, public, state); demands recognition/intervention	Individual evaluates cost-benefit. For example, will participation be effective? What are the risks or benefits?
Politicization	Group's identity is situated within broader societal structures	If individual sees group as impactful and legitimate, continued commitment likely; possibility of bandwagon effect

In sum, the process starts when individuals become aware of shared grievances affecting their group, which fosters a collective sense of “we-feeling” or group identity. This is followed by the identification of an adversary or opponent who is held responsible for these grievances, further strengthening the group’s identity through opposition. At the third stage, societal involvement, the group actively engages external parties such as the media, public opinion, and state actors to demand recognition and intervention, shifting from identity formation to strategic action. During this stage, individuals decide whether to join the social movement organization based on a rational evaluation of costs and benefits. If the perceived chance of successful policy change is high and the cost of participation is low, individuals are more likely to join. Conversely, if the effort seems unlikely to succeed or is too costly, individuals may opt to free-ride and benefit without participating. This decision process reflects Olson’s theory of rational action and the importance of exclusive or collective benefits, which can be material or subjective. Finally, full politicization occurs when the group situates its specific collective identity within a broader societal context. This nested identity frames the group’s grievances and struggle as part of larger social power dynamics, enabling sustained engagement, strategic action, and the potential for meaningful social change. At this point, collective identity is solidified, and the group becomes a recognized actor within the wider political arena.

Conditions and Catalysts

However, PCI does not arise spontaneously rather, it is cultivated through a complex interplay of catalysts and conditions, as articulated in Simon and Klandermans’ model. In the end, the framework outlines three key stages in the politicization process that are the awareness of shared grievances, the attribution of blame to adversaries, and the involvement of broader society through triangulation. These stages serve as the backbone of how group identity becomes politicized, and they reflect a division of theoretical labour that distinguishes the model from others in the field. PCI is thus not an all-or-nothing event but unfolds gradually, moving from personal awareness to public engagement, making grievances part of a collective political struggle.

Political entrepreneurs play a central role in this transformation. Acting as “entrepreneurs of identity,” they interpret shared grievances, identify external enemies, and contextualize the group’s struggle within the broader social order (Stockemer 2013). These figures embody the collective “we,” legitimizing their framing strategies and influencing others to act. Much like firms

responding to consumer needs, political entrepreneurs offer platforms that allow people to articulate and act on their concerns. In doing so, they also contribute to the symbolic construction of in-groups and out-groups. Individuals are more likely to identify with a group when they share defining characteristics—boundaries that are socially constructed through group rituals, beliefs, and shared values, echoing the insights of Taylor and Whittier (1992) on identity formation through social networks. SMOs also function as institutional engines of politicization. They do more than coordinate events; they supply interpretive frames, emotional resonance, community, and strategic action. SMOs provide the communal infrastructure necessary to maintain and reinforce PCI by creating spaces for interaction such as conferences, online forums, and local gatherings (Snow and Benford 1988; Bouron 2017). These venues reinforce symbolic bonds among members and allow for the reiteration of group values. Moreover, SMOs often leverage alternative media channels to circumvent mainstream narratives, appeal to ideologically aligned individuals, and amplify dissenting perspectives. This helps shift personal grievances into politicized claims that can be acted upon collectively.

Hence, emotions and values form a third essential catalyst. They are shaped by socioeconomic background, prior experiences, and cultural expectations, and are activated by movement framing (Muliavka 2021; Schwartz and Bilsky 1987). When SMOs strategically frame issues in a way that resonates emotionally, they trigger latent moral commitments and predispositions. These affective responses reinforce the individual's identification with the group and generate a sense of duty to participate in collective action. Indeed, those who strongly identify with a movement are more likely to feel personally aggrieved and politically empowered, key motivational elements in sustaining protest participation. Importantly, PCI often manifests as a dual identity. Individuals may simultaneously identify with their movement and with a dominant social structure, creating a state of cross-pressure. Paradoxically, this tension can drive participation, especially when individuals seek to resolve the contradiction between personal values and systemic affiliations. For example, members of marginalized or low-status groups, often lower in social dominance orientation, may be especially motivated to politicize their identity as a means of contesting entrenched hierarchies. Conversely, individuals high in social dominance orientation may resist politicization due to their support for hierarchy-enhancing myths, which obstruct the recognition of structural injustice.

The model's strength lies in its ability to integrate cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions of identity formation. It shows how organized identities, those structured through leadership, framing, and institutions, are more likely to mobilize than unorganized ones. Once politicized, collective identity enhances behaviours typically associated with group membership, such as in-group solidarity, out-group hostility, and protest engagement. It also magnifies two psychological functions: understanding and agency. Politicized identities provide group members with a clearer self-understanding, shaped through adversarial attributions, and offer a meaningful role in broader societal struggles even when those struggles are ultimately unsuccessful. Overall, the Simon and Klandermans' model of politicized collective identity offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how shared identities are transformed into engines of political mobilization. It highlights the strategic role of leadership, framing, and organizational infrastructure, as well as the emotional and moral dimensions that energize participation. Most importantly, it emphasizes that politicized collective identity is not merely a label but a dynamic process, one that reshapes how individuals interpret their place in society and act upon that interpretation to effect social change.

Critiques and Limitations of PCI

Despite its explanatory power in understanding how social movements mobilize through shared political identities, the framework faces critiques and limitations that warrant careful consideration. A primary concern relates to the risk of essentialism inherent in the PCI approach. By emphasizing a collective, politicized identity, the framework tends to portray movement participants as a relatively uniform group united by common grievances and goals. This can oversimplify the complex and often contradictory experiences of individuals within movements, who may differ widely in terms of background, ideology, personal priorities, and social positioning. Such homogenization risks erasing important internal divisions and conflicts whether along lines of race, class, gender, or political orientation that shape how collective identity is actually negotiated and lived on the ground. Consequently, PCI may at times underappreciate the heterogeneous and dynamic nature of social movement communities. Closely related is the challenge posed by cross-pressure dilemmas, which arise from the multiple, overlapping identities that individuals hold. For example, a person may simultaneously identify as a worker, a parent, a member of an ethnic minority, or a citizen of a particular nation. These layered identities can pull

individuals in divergent directions, sometimes causing tensions or contradictions that complicate political engagement. Van Zomeren and colleagues (2008) have shown that such cross-pressures may result in disengagement, as individuals prioritize one identity over another or avoid activism to reduce conflict in their social or personal lives. However, this is not always the case; under some circumstances, the awareness of these multiple identities can motivate individuals to participate more actively, as they seek to reconcile or assert their complex social positions through collective action. Still, this ambivalence highlights how PCI must account for the fluid and sometimes conflicting nature of identity.

A further limitation concerns the potential for radicalization within politicized collective identities. As group boundaries become more rigid and identities increasingly sharpen, the framework reveals a tendency toward an “us versus them” mentality. While this polarization can strengthen internal solidarity, it also risks fostering antagonism, hostility, and exclusionary attitudes toward perceived out-groups. Scholars like Hogg (2000) have argued that this dynamic can lead movements down paths of extremism, intolerance, or sectarianism, which can alienate potential allies and escalate social conflicts. The dark side of PCI, therefore, is its potential to intensify social divisions and justify radical or even violent forms of protest under the guise of defending a threatened identity. Additionally, the PCI framework must grapple with the issue of strategic co-optation. Strong politicized identities may attract the attention of political elites, institutions, or mainstream actors seeking to channel, control, or neutralize social movements for their own purposes. This process of co-optation can dilute the radical potential of movements by absorbing their demands into established political frameworks or bureaucratic structures, often leading to compromises that undermine grassroots aspirations. The challenge for PCI is to explain how movements can maintain their transformative impetus and resist institutional capture, as well as to understand the conditions under which co-optation occurs.

Finally, the success of PCI in generating sustained mobilization is heavily dependent on the quality of leadership and the effectiveness of framing strategies. Strong leadership is crucial for articulating collective grievances, creating compelling narratives, and maintaining group cohesion. When leadership is weak, fragmented, or fails to resonate with the diverse experiences of members, the politicized identity may falter, leading to fragmentation, apathy, or declining participation. Similarly, framing, that is, how issues are presented and interpreted, must be credible, inclusive, and adaptable to the shifting political context. Poor framing can alienate potential

supporters or obscure the connections between personal grievances and broader structural injustices, thereby weakening the collective identity's mobilizing power.

In sum, while the PCI framework offers a powerful lens for understanding political identity formation within social movements, it must be applied with sensitivity to internal diversity, identity complexities, risks of polarization, vulnerability to co-optation, and the central role of leadership and framing. Recognizing these limitations enhances the model's explanatory depth and provides a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics shaping collective political action.

Integrating Gender into PCI

The PCI framework has long provided a useful lens for understanding how individuals recognize shared grievances, delineate adversaries, and mobilize collectively (Simon and Klandermans 2001). However, the framework's analytic strengths are tempered by its relative gender neutrality. In its original formulation, PCI assumes a broadly uniform process of politicization that applies across individuals, irrespective of social positioning. This abstraction risks overlooking how experiences of grievances, identification with adversaries, and willingness to take political risks are mediated by gendered social roles, embodied identities, and culturally patterned expectations. Emotional repertoires, relational ties, and conceptions of legitimacy are also structured along gendered lines, reflecting a long-standing tendency within social movement scholarship to treat women as marginal or symbolic actors rather than as fully politicized participants whose trajectories often diverge from those of men. Hence, feminist and intersectional scholars emphasize that gender is not merely an additive variable but a constitutive axis of power and identity that shapes the formation of collective identity, emotional repertoires, and the legitimacy of political claims (Ferree 1992; Taylor and Whittier 1992; Crenshaw 1989b; Collins 1990; Yuval-Davis 2006). Comparative studies of social movements further show that women and men often differ systematically in their modes of engagement, framing strategies, and repertoires of action across a variety of historical and cultural contexts (McCammon et al. 2001; Meyer and Staggenborg 1996; Snow et al. 2004).

Empirical evidence reinforces the salience of these limitations. In this study, interview data revealed gendered patterns in how participants articulated grievances and enacted politicized identities. Women frequently frame grievances in relational, moral, or care-oriented terms, emphasizing threats to family well-being, community cohesion, and the welfare of vulnerable

members (Blee and Deutsch 2012; Taylor and Whittier 1992). Such framing often reflects caregiving responsibilities and historically constrained access to formal power, channelling women's political engagement into community-based, grassroots, or digital activism (Kuumba 2001; Miller-Idriss 2020). Men, in contrast, are more likely to emphasize systemic or structural grievances, governmental illegitimacy, or defence of sovereignty, narrated through idioms of resistance, authority, and risk-taking (Connell 2020; Kimmel 2013). These patterns are not essentialist but reflect socially embedded repertoires and normative constraints that shape opportunities for political expression, consistent with broader literature on gendered mobilization in social movements (McCammon et al. 2001; Snow et al. 2004)

Hence, the framework can be enriched by incorporating insights from feminist social movement theory and scholarship on intersectionality. These perspectives underscore that gender is not simply a variable to be appended to existing models, but a constitutive axis of power and identity that fundamentally shapes how individuals and groups come to see themselves as political actors. In contrast to the relative gender neutrality of Simon and Klandermans' original formulation, feminist theory emphasizes that collective identity is always already mediated by gendered roles, expectations, and inequalities. Intersectional scholarship further deepens this perspective by highlighting how gender interacts with race, class, sexuality, and coloniality to create overlapping systems of domination and resistance (Acker 1990; 2006; Crenshaw 1989a; Collins 1990). PCI, viewed through this lens, is not a universal process but one that unfolds within the constraints and possibilities of gendered social structures.

Simon and Klandermans' model begins with the recognition of shared grievances and the formation of group belonging, which are cognitively and emotionally mediated processes that can lead to collective action. A gender-sensitive perspective complicates this framework by demonstrating that collective identification is embedded within socially constructed roles, responsibilities, and hierarchies of power. Feminist theorists have long emphasized that "the personal is political," showing how seemingly private issues such as domestic labour, caregiving, and sexual violence are politicized when understood as structural injustices (Taylor and Whittier 1992). Through this lens, group identification involves not only recognizing common grievances but also transforming gendered experiences into the building blocks of collective consciousness. Maternalist frames, for instance, mobilize women around identities of protection and caregiving, positioning them as moral guardians of the community. Conversely, men often draw on repertoires

of hegemonic masculinity, emphasizing strength, authority, and sovereignty, which produce gendered imaginaries of collective struggle (Ferree and McClurg Mueller 2004; Taylor and Whittier 1992; Kimmel 2013). In a right-wing context, these gendered differences become particularly salient. As Blee (2012) has shown, women often frame grievances through idioms of morality and family security, whereas men frequently mobilize narratives of threatened masculinity or elite betrayal. Consequently, the initial stage of PCI, awareness of shared grievances, is not neutral but mediated by gendered subjectivities and culturally shaped repertoires that delineate what counts as injustice and who is authorized to define it.

The second stage of PCI, the identification of an adversary, is also gendered. While adversarial attribution is central to the process of politicization, the perceived sources of oppression vary according to gendered and intersectional positions. Feminist and intersectionality scholars emphasize that adversaries are not abstract “others” but are relationally constituted through individuals’ lived experiences of domination and marginalization (Yuval-Davis 2006; Crenshaw 1991). For women, adversaries are often identified in patriarchal institutions that regulate bodily autonomy, perpetuate gender-based violence, or devalue reproductive labour. For men, adversaries are more likely to be constructed as elites, governments, or cultural forces perceived to undermine masculine authority or social status, reflecting what Kimmel (2013) terms “aggrieved entitlement.” These patterns highlight how gender can shape both the content and the affective intensity of adversarial framing, although individual experiences may vary across social and intersectional positions. Within right-wing movements, Blee and Deutsch (2012) note that women frequently portray adversaries in familial or moral registers, framing them as threats to children or community integrity, whereas men often invoke narratives of emasculation, betrayal, or lost social status (see also Kimmel 2013). Intersectional perspectives complicate this dynamic: women of colour, Indigenous women, and queer activists often confront adversaries across multiple, intersecting axes of oppression (Crenshaw 1989a; Yuval-Davis 2006). Consequently, adversarial attribution is not a universal recognition of injustice but is mediated by gendered and intersectional hierarchies of power that shape who or what is held responsible for oppression.

The third and final stage of PCI, engagement in collective action, also exhibits persistent gendered dynamics. Feminist scholarship highlights that structural constraints such as caregiving responsibilities, exposure to gendered violence, and reputational risks, disproportionately limit women’s capacity to participate in high-risk or publicly visible forms of protest (Ferree and

McClurg Mueller 2004; Kuumba 2001). Yet these limitations have often fostered distinctive repertoires of action: women's activism historically thrives in grassroots and community-based contexts, where care work and political engagement intersect, as well as in digital spaces, which offer greater safety and accessibility (Miller-Idriss 2020). These insights demonstrate that the forms and strategies of collective action are not gender-neutral, and that PCI must account for how structural and identity-mediated factors shape both opportunities and modes of engagement.

Such repertoires may include embodied forms of protest that contest gendered norms of visibility and propriety. Men, on the other hand, are more frequently valorized in confrontational, physical, or leadership-oriented repertoires that align with cultural scripts of protection, authority, and risk-taking (Connell 2020; Cockburn 2007). This bifurcation reflects broader organizational dynamics, where women's labour is often concentrated in relational, logistical, and communicative domains, while men dominate decision-making structures and symbolic authority (Acker 1990). Intersectional analysis further reveals that opportunities for action are stratified: women of colour and Indigenous activists, for example, often adopt hybrid repertoires that fuse anti-racist, anti-colonial, and feminist claims, yet their agency is frequently marginalized or delegitimized within both mainstream and oppositional movements.

Together, these insights demonstrate that the three stages of PCI cannot be understood without recognizing their gendered constitution. Awareness of grievances is mediated by maternalist, moral, or masculine frames; adversarial attribution is constructed in relation to patriarchal, colonial, or emasculating structures; and collective action is enacted through repertoires conditioned by gendered constraints, opportunities, and hierarchies of legitimacy. Politicized collective identity, therefore, is not merely a process of cognitive recognition and behavioural engagement but a profoundly gendered trajectory shaped by emotion, power, and intersecting structures of inequality. Integrating feminist and intersectional theory into PCI thus reveals that gender is not an auxiliary variable but a constitutive dimension of politicization itself, structuring how individuals recognize themselves as political actors and how collective identity is constructed, sustained, and legitimated.

Application

Hence, this framework serves as a powerful analytical tool that enriches our understanding of social movements and political mobilization beyond traditional approaches. One of its most

significant contributions is its capacity to explain why individuals become involved in collective action even when they do not receive direct material rewards or incentives. Unlike rational choice theories that prioritize tangible benefits such as financial gain or policy concessions, PCI centres on the social and psychological need for identity affirmation and group belonging. People mobilize because they see their individual identity as intertwined with a larger collective cause that reflects their values, grievances, or aspirations. This perspective helps explain engagement in movements that might otherwise seem “irrational” from a purely cost-benefit standpoint, such as protests where participants risk arrest, social ostracism, or personal hardship. Moreover, PCI provides important insights into how political identities are not static but continuously shaped and reshaped through interaction with social and political contexts. Collective identities evolve in response to internal factors such as leadership changes, debates as well as external pressures like state repression, media framing, or shifting cultural norms. For example, when authorities respond harshly to protests, participants may experience a heightened sense of threat that reinforces their identification with the movement and sharpens their collective identity. Conversely, broader cultural changes, such as increasing recognition of minority rights or environmental awareness, may enable movements to broaden their appeal or redefine their core demands. By emphasizing this dynamic and relational aspect, PCI allows scholars and activists alike to track the life cycles of movements, understand moments of expansion or decline, and anticipate how identities might adapt to new opportunities or challenges.

In addition to its focus on identity dynamics, PCI highlights the crucial role of emotions and symbolism in political engagement. Classic models of collective action often prioritize rational resource mobilization or structural opportunities, inadvertently neglecting how affective and symbolic elements sustain activism. PCI argues that emotions like pride in group membership, collective outrage at injustice, or hope for social change are central to fostering a politicized identity that motivates ongoing participation. Rituals, symbols, slogans, and narratives become vehicles for expressing and reinforcing these emotions, creating a shared cultural repertoire that binds members together. This emotional and symbolic dimension explains why movements persist even in the face of setbacks or repression, as these shared meanings offer participants a sense of purpose and empowerment beyond material outcomes. Consequently, PCI helps decode the rich cultural and psychological textures of protest, revealing why certain symbols resonate deeply and how collective meaning-making fuels sustained political commitment.

In sum, PCI's application potential spans multiple levels of analysis that is from individual motivation and identity formation to broader cultural and political processes. It equips researchers with a nuanced framework to interpret why people act collectively, how identities develop and change over time, and how emotions and symbols sustain movements. This makes PCI an indispensable tool for both scholars seeking to understand political activism and practitioners aiming to build resilient and meaningful social movements. That is why this framework is particularly well suited for analyzing contemporary protest movements such as the Freedom Convoy, climate justice campaigns like Extinction Rebellion, and student-led demonstrations against austerity, authoritarianism, or systemic inequality. These movements often emerge in complex social and political contexts where traditional models focused on material incentives or rational choice fall short. Instead of treating mobilization as an outcome of calculated benefits, PCI emphasizes the emotional, symbolic, and identity-based dynamics that drive collective action.

One of the core strengths of PCI is its ability to explain how collective identities are constructed within movements. Participants begin to see themselves as part of a political "we" through shared symbols, narratives, and experiences. In the case of the Freedom Convoy, for instance, participants are often identified as "sovereign" or "freedom-loving" Canadians, bonded by shared opposition to government mandates and a deep sense of alienation from mainstream institutions. This collective identity was reinforced through rituals like convoying, camp buildings, and the circulation of emotionally charged media. Similarly, in climate justice movements, activists develop a shared sense of identity as moral agents acting to protect the Earth, grounded in intergenerational ethics and global solidarity.

The PCI framework also highlights how grievances are politicized. In contemporary movements, personal frustrations, whether related to public health mandates, environmental degradation, or student debt, are reframed as political injustices that demand systemic change. This politicization is not automatic; it involves framing processes that highlight shared suffering, point to structural causes, and articulate demands in terms of broader values like freedom, justice, or dignity. For example, student protests often originate in concrete issues like tuition increases, but quickly evolve into critiques of neoliberalism, social inequality, or authoritarian governance. PCI captures this shift from personal concern to political engagement, revealing the mechanisms by which individual discontent is transformed into collective struggle. Moreover, PCI offers a valuable lens to analyze how contemporary movements frame societal power struggles in ways

that recruit and mobilize supporters. Movements often construct emotionally resonant narratives that depict a clear conflict between opposing forces such as the people versus elites, or truth versus corruption. These frames help simplify complex realities, direct anger, and inspire hope, making participation meaningful even for those not directly impacted by the core issue. For instance, climate justice campaigns often frame environmental destruction as a form of violence against future generations and Indigenous communities, creating a powerful moral narrative that draws in a wide range of supporters. Similarly, the Convoy's populist framing centred on betrayal, censorship, and resistance, enabled it to attract a coalition of truckers, vaccine skeptics, and alienated citizens united by a shared sense of injustice.

In other words, the PCI model enables scholars to unpack the symbolic, emotional, and political mechanisms at work in contemporary mobilizations. It sheds light on how collective identities are formed, how grievances are transformed into political claims, and how narratives of power and resistance serve to recruit and sustain activist engagement. By focusing on the subjective and cultural dimensions of protest, PCI offers a more nuanced understanding of modern social movements than models that prioritize rational incentives or structural conditions alone.

Chapter 3 - Empirical Approach to Uncover the Socio-Political Trajectories of Freedom Convoy Supporters

This study investigates the Freedom Convoy as a contemporary form of contentious collective action, emerging at the intersection of pandemic-era grievances, political distrust, and digitally mediated mobilization. Initially framed around opposition to vaccine mandates and public health restrictions, the Convoy rapidly evolved into a broader expression of perceived exclusion from mainstream political and institutional life. It must be emphasized that these elements interact, influence, and evolve according to each other, affecting the internal (and external) structure of the movement. For example, a slight change of the internal framing of objectives can lead to the exodus of participants. The way actors interact within the network, and outside the network, affects the nature of one's trajectory as it may mediate their opinion on specific issues such as health-related measures. Consequentially, the population studied combines a set of features pointing to, and around, marginalization.

Methodologically, this project adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach centred on life-history interviews and field observations. These methods allow for the reconstruction of individual trajectories capturing not only how people come to participate, but how they make sense of their own political subjectivity over time. This perspective is particularly valuable in studying decentralized and extra-parliamentary movements like the Freedom Convoy, which rely less on formal membership and more on emotional resonance, peer networks, and alternative forms of political expression. This chapter outlines the methodological design of the study. It introduces the theoretical framework and epistemological stance, explains the rationale behind case selection (Ontario and Quebec), details the sampling and data collection procedures, and reflects on ethical and practical challenges encountered in the field. Together, these elements support an in-depth analysis of how marginalized individuals construct meaning, develop politicized identities, and participate in protest as a form of resistance and belonging.

Socio-Political Trajectories and Politicized Collective Identity

To date, studies have not explored whether the socio-political trajectory of joining anti-vaccine or anti-COVID movements differs. This study aims to examine the socio-political context in which individuals decide to engage with anti-COVID 19 movements. My objective is to deepen our

understanding of how Canadians structure their social networks and to explain the diversity of socio-political trajectories. Specifically, I seek to explore the individual journey of an anti-COVID 19 protester and identify the socio-political backgrounds from which they come. To explore this diversity, it is essential to investigate the interdependencies within these groups. I aim to analyze the sequence of events and thought processes that shape these trajectories. Socio-political trajectory analysis reflects causality tied to how individuals experience the unfolding of events over time. As Mrozowski et al. (2019) note, “their life stories, the way of telling and justifying life decisions, let us better understand the narrators’ worldviews and reasons for supporting right-wing movements” (217). I believe that focusing on micro-level mobilizations, particularly socio-political trajectories, will provide insights into individuals’ motivations that are not captured by survey data alone. This approach will offer a more nuanced understanding of why Canadians were drawn to anti-COVID movements. Given that the Freedom Convoy has not yet been classified as a social movement in the traditional sense, the decision to join related groups may result from an internal struggle, influenced by various push and pull factors. This study will explore these factors and investigate whether they differ.

In addition, I also focus on analyzing the internal gendered perspective of social protesters. Socio-political trajectories are not simply a reflection of beliefs or macro socio-structural conditions, but reflect anti-COVID protesters’ individual agency, and subjective expression. I thus define the term socio-political trajectory as a (long- or short-term) thinking process leading an individual to join similarly minded social groups. More precisely, the socio-political trajectory of an individual, I believe, corresponds to a complex chain of decision-making processes over a longer period of time. Regardless of the chosen predictors, I also believe that trajectories are not simply determined by economic or cultural factors. Socio-political trajectories are the result of an individual’s life projects, where participants consider their life as a whole; they are contingent of a sequence of events, which might be influenced by cognitive processes, societal conditions, and the people surrounding us.

Hence, at the core of this study is the concept of the socio-political trajectory, which refers to the individual pathways through which people come to perceive political grievances, align with collective identities, and participate in contentious action. These trajectories are neither linear nor purely reactive. Rather, they are shaped by the interplay between life history, emotional experiences, social context, and available interpretive frames. In the context of the Freedom

Convoy, tracing socio-political trajectories enables us to understand how participants transition from private dissatisfaction to public protest, and how their identities are transformed in the process. To analyze these transitions, this study draws on the Politicized Collective Identity (PCI) framework developed by Simon and Klandermans. PCI conceptualizes collective identity formation as a three-stage process: (1) recognition of shared grievances, where individuals come to see their personal discontent as socially rooted; (2) adversarial attribution, in which blame is assigned to a perceived out-group (e.g. the government, media, or global elites); and (3) societal triangulation, where individuals act collectively to advance an alternative vision of justice, autonomy, or recognition. This model is particularly useful for understanding how movements like the Freedom Convoy, which attract ideologically diverse and sometimes politically inexperienced participants, develop internal coherence and mobilizing power.

To complement the PCI lens, this study also employs the push-pull-personal typology to categorize the types of factors influencing participants' engagement. Push factors refer to external pressures such as perceived government overreach, economic uncertainty, or erosion of civil liberties. Pull factors relate to the attractive elements of the movement itself that are emotional solidarity, shared values, or the sense of belonging fostered through community and digital networks. Personal factors encompass the subjective, biographical components that inform political activation: experiences of loss or transformation, moral convictions, or spiritual awakenings. This typology enables a more granular understanding of individual-level motivations and how they align with broader collective dynamics. Together, PCI and the push-pull-personal model provide a robust theoretical scaffolding for examining the Freedom Convoy. They illuminate how protest participation is not merely a reaction to policy but often the result of deeply embedded life experiences, shifting political subjectivities, and identity work. These frameworks also guide the design of interview protocols and thematic coding strategies used in data analysis, ensuring coherence between conceptual orientation and empirical inquiry. Ultimately, this theoretical approach allows for a nuanced exploration of how collective identities are constructed and mobilized in times of crisis, uncertainty, and perceived exclusion.

Moreover, while the framework developed by Simon and Klandermans (2001) has been widely applied to study processes of politicization, its original formulation does not explicitly incorporate gender as an analytical category. At the outset of this research, the study design and interview protocols did not include a priori hypotheses about gendered differences in PCI

processes. However, during the process analyzing of interviews, gendered patterns began to surface across participants' narratives. These patterns became evident in three ways. First, there was consistent divergence in the framing of grievances: women more frequently situated their politicization in relational and caregiving contexts, while men more often invoked narratives of autonomy, resistance, and sovereignty. Second, the metaphors, archetypes, and self-identifications used to describe movement participation were frequently gendered, with women embracing maternal or protective identities and men aligning with warrior or soldier identities. Third, the affective repertoires, how participants expressed and justified their engagement, showed consistent gender-specific tendencies. The decision to treat gender as an emergent analytical category reflects the inductive and reflexive nature of qualitative research. This approach allowed gendered dimensions to emerge organically from the data rather than imposing a predetermined theoretical lens. As such, the integration of gender into the PCI model in this thesis constitutes an empirically grounded extension of the framework, rooted in participants' lived experiences rather than in prescriptive theoretical assumptions.

Epistemological Commitments

The research is grounded in an interpretivist epistemology, which posits that reality is socially constructed and context-dependent. Rather than seeking objective truths, this study prioritizes meaning-making processes and subjective experiences. This approach is particularly suited to marginalized populations who are often misrepresented or pathologized in dominant discourses. The goal is to centre participants as active agents in constructing political meaning, rather than as passive subjects. This research adopts an interpretivist epistemological stance, grounded in the view that reality is not a fixed, objective entity but is instead socially constructed through language, interaction, and meaning making (Given 2008). From this perspective, knowledge is not discovered but constructed, shaped by the culturally and historically situated experiences of individuals and the interpretive lenses through which they understand the world. Interpretivism challenges positivist assumptions of neutrality and objectivity, emphasizing instead that all inquiry is value-laden and embedded within power-laden social structures. Individuals' experiences are shaped by intersectional social identities such as race, gender, immigration status, language, and disability, and by the institutional logics and power relations that govern access to opportunity. As such, understanding these experiences demands an approach that is sensitive to nuance, fluidity,

and social embeddedness. Hence, this stance is particularly well suited for exploring the experiences of those who were often portrayed in the media and public discourse as homogeneously white, right-wing, or extremist. The Convoy actually attracted a more ideologically and demographically diverse range of participants. For these individuals, participation was often driven by a complex set of grievances, including long-standing experiences of exclusion from formal labour markets, skepticism of state institutions, and a desire for alternative forms of community, autonomy, and recognition. From an interpretivist perspective, these forms of participation must be understood not through the lens of ideological conformity, but as deeply contextual acts of resistance, identity construction, and political expression (Ashe et al. 2020). A top-down approach to this research focuses on understanding protest activity not as pathology, misinformation, or irrationality, but through a broader, institutional lens. It emphasizes the following guiding questions: What do societal structures define as freedom for individuals who feel excluded? How are their experiences of marginalization framed and understood within these structures? What institutional visions of justice, work, and belonging do they resist or reimagine?

This approach prioritizes the investigation of how marginalized individuals, whose voices are often ignored or undermined in dominant policy frameworks, navigate meaning-making during periods of crisis and social upheaval. It involves examining how these groups' experiences interact with, challenge, or reflect the dominant narratives of legitimacy and governance. The researcher, adopting a top-down lens, must maintain heightened reflexivity, particularly when dealing with politically charged topics. The interpretivist paradigm insists on a critical awareness of how the researcher's own institutional positioning such as biases related to legitimacy, extremism, or progress, shapes data collection, interpretation, and representation. This is especially crucial when engaging with groups that challenge or subvert dominant political ideologies.

Some questions have guided this research based on this approach. For example, *What do individuals who feel structurally excluded understand as freedom? How do they narrate their own marginalization? What visions of justice, work, and belonging do they hold?* These questions reflect the core ideas illustrated by Simons and Klandermans. Hence, these questions probe how marginalized individuals create and maintain a collective identity that challenges the dominant institutional narratives. According to Simon and Klandermans, this process involves individuals coming together around shared experiences and grievances, forming a sense of solidarity and collective purpose in response to perceived injustice and exclusion.

Moreover, PCI theory underscores the importance of collective action as a means of expressing and reinforcing this identity. The study, through its focus on understanding how marginalized individuals engage in meaning making during times of crisis and social disruption, can be seen as investigating the mobilization of these collective identities. As Simon and Klandermans (2001) argue, when individuals feel their identity is threatened or marginalized, they are more likely to engage in collective action, and in doing so, they not only challenge external structures but also reimagine their relationship to the state and society. The researcher's reflexivity, as called for in the top-down approach, aligns with Simon and Klanderman's assertion that political identities are shaped not only by the group's experiences but also by the broader political environment. In a similar vein, understanding how the researcher's own positionality and assumptions about legitimacy and progress influence the interpretation of data is crucial when analyzing movements that challenge the dominant liberal-democratic paradigm. PCI theory emphasizes the importance of recognizing how external power structures impact the ways in which collective identities are formed, represented, and acted upon.

In other words, the study uses in-depth interviews and thematic analysis to uncover how participants' collective identities are constructed and how they interact with broader political structures. This method mirrors PCI's focus on understanding the subjective experiences of individuals and groups, allowing for the emergence of contextually rich insights about how marginalized communities reimagine and resist institutional structures of governance, citizenship, and belonging. Thus, the study extends PCI theory by exploring how protest movements, like the Freedom Convoy, serve as platforms for the articulation of collective identities that resist exclusion and push for alternative visions of justice and freedom. In other words, by privileging the voices and perspectives of participants, this research seeks to centre the agency, knowledge, and interpretive frameworks of marginalized individuals, resisting dominant narratives that often pathologize or individualize systemic exclusion. Rather than treating participants as passive subjects of research, this study views them as active meaning-makers whose insights are essential to producing valid, relevant, and transformative knowledge. This commitment aligns with critical qualitative methodologies, which seek not only to understand the world but also to expose and challenge social injustices within it.

Hence, what is next? Although this thesis formulates five hypotheses derived from the PCI framework, these hypotheses are treated as variables to be deductively tested in a positivist sense.

Rather, they function as analytical starting points or sensitizing concepts that guide the qualitative inquiry. In line with interpretative and constructivist approaches to qualitative research, the hypotheses serve to orient attention toward key dimensions of politicization such as grievance construction, adversarial framing, emotional investment, and trajectories, without presupposing linear causality or uniform outcomes across cases.

The purpose of articulating hypotheses at this stage is therefore heuristic rather than confirmatory. They provide a conceptual scaffold for engaging with the interview material while remaining open to inductive insights, contradictions, and unexpected pathways of politicization. Throughout the analysis, hypotheses are refined, nuanced, or problematized in light of participants' narratives, allowing theory and data to interact iteratively rather than hierarchically. This abductive logic is consistent with the approach adopted in this study, which privileges meaning-making, temporal sequencing, and subjective interpretation over hypothesis testing in the conventional sense.

As a result, this section presents the key hypotheses that guide the empirical investigation into the processes of identity transformation and mobilization observed during the Freedom Convoy. These hypotheses are theoretically anchored in the PCI framework developed by Simon and Klandermans (2001), which offers a dynamic and interactionist perspective on how individuals come to define themselves in explicitly political terms. Rather than viewing political engagement as merely the outcome of structural grievances or rational cost-benefit calculations, the PCI framework emphasizes how personal identity content such as values, beliefs, emotions, and moral commitments, becomes politicized through interaction with social movements, adversaries, and allies. In this sense, the PCI model enables us to move beyond deterministic or static explanations and instead trace the qualitative transformation of identity that occurs when private discontent is reframed as part of a collective cause. It also allows us to consider the complex interplay between cognitive, emotional, and relational factors in shaping participation. By grounding the hypotheses in this model, we aim to examine not only why individuals joined the Convoy but how their identities evolved through the process of politicization.

The Convoy provides a particularly compelling and contemporary case through which to examine the PCI process. While it originated as a protest against vaccine mandates and public health restrictions, it quickly evolved into a broader political and cultural movement, bringing together individuals with varied ideological backgrounds but shared grievances related to freedom,

bodily autonomy, and government overreach. Many participants were not activists but rather “ordinary” individuals, often with no prior history of political engagement, who experienced a profound shift in self-perception and social alignment as a result of their involvement. The heterogeneity of participants, the moral and emotional intensity of the mobilization, and the role of digital communication platforms in shaping collective identity make the Convoy an ideal case for testing and refining the PCI framework.

The following hypotheses thus operationalize key dimensions of PCI theory which are grievance politicization, adversarial framing, emotional and moral mobilization, social reinforcement, and long-term identity change, within the empirical setting of the Convoy. They serve as the analytical scaffolding for the study, guiding both data collection and interpretation.

Theoretical Reminders

The model developed by Simon and Klandermans (2001) offers a multi-dimensional framework for understanding how individuals come to see themselves as political actors engaged in collective struggle. At its core, PCI is not merely about affiliation with a cause or movement; it involves a deep transformation of identity content in which political beliefs, moral values, and emotional investments become integral to one’s sense of self. This transformation unfolds through a set of interrelated processes, each of which is essential to the emergence and consolidation of a politicized identity.

The first key component of this model is the awareness of shared grievances. Individuals may initially experience discontent as personal or individual frustration, but this dissatisfaction becomes politicized when it is interpreted as a common condition rooted in broader structural injustice. According to Simon and Klandermans (2001), these “grievances must be experienced as widely shared among in-group members [...]” (325) serving as the foundation for collective identity. In the case of the Freedom Convoy, vaccine mandates, restrictions on mobility, and perceived limitations on bodily autonomy were reframed as collective threats, enabling a wide spectrum of participants to relate their private concerns to a shared political struggle. Second, the process of identity politicization requires the identification of a common adversary, an external agent perceived as responsible for the group’s grievances. This adversarial framing is crucial for mobilization, as it draws a clear line between “us” and “them.” As Simon and Klandermans note, politicized collective identity is defined not only in terms of who “we” are, but also in terms of

who we are not. In the Freedom Convoy, this adversary was often symbolized by the federal government, Prime Minister Trudeau, and public health authorities, all of whom were accused of overreach, censorship, or moral failure. The externalization of blame helped solidify in-group solidarity and moral opposition. The third pillar of PCI involves the development of affective and moral engagement. The transformation of identity is not simply cognitive; it is also emotional and ethical. Individuals are not only convinced that injustice has occurred; they feel that it must be addressed. Simon and Klandermans (2001) emphasize that emotion and morality are central elements of politicized identity; people are morally outraged, not just objectively disadvantaged. In the context of the Convoy, many participants perceived themselves as morally obligated to act, not just for their own sake, but also for the protection of children, bodily autonomy, and national values.

Finally, politicized identity is reinforced and sustained through communication and networks. Social networks, both online and offline, serve as mechanisms for constructing, expressing, and validating politicized identity. Through ongoing interaction, individuals exchange symbolic resources (e.g. flags, memes, slogans), build a sense of community, and construct shared narratives that deepen their commitment to the cause. In the Convoy, digital platforms played a crucial role in sustaining engagement, especially for geographically dispersed participants who relied on social media to stay connected and reaffirm group belonging.

The hypotheses that follow are directly derived from these core components of the PCI framework. Each hypothesis is designed to operationalize a specific aspect of identity politicization, using the Convoy as a contemporary and complex case through which to trace these dynamics. Hypothesis 1 centres on the role of shared grievances as a starting point for politicized identity formation. Hypothesis 2 addresses the importance of ideological alignment and adversarial framing in fostering an in-group/out-group distinctions. Hypothesis 3 focuses on moral and emotional catalysts that intensify political identification. Hypothesis 4 examines how social media and symbolic communication amplify and stabilize identity content. Finally, Hypothesis 5 explores longitudinal identity transformation as individuals shift from passive observers to active political agents. Together, these hypotheses serve not only as empirical propositions but also as conceptual lenses through which to understand the nuanced and often non-linear processes that bring ordinary individuals into contentious collective action. By linking theory to case-specific patterns, the

hypotheses provide the groundwork for assessing how PCI unfolds in real-world mobilizations and what this tells us about the broader dynamics of identity, politics, and protest in the digital age.

Hypothesis 1 – Politicization through Shared Grievances

At the core of Simon and Klandermans' model is the idea that identity becomes political when individuals' personal grievances are reframed as part of a shared collective experience. This first step in politicization hinges on the recognition that what feels like a personal problem such as frustration, exclusion, violation, is not isolated but widely experienced and rooted in systemic conditions. In this process, identity becomes politicized not only through individual perception but also through the attribution of blame and the development of a common narrative of injustice. This recognition fosters a sense of collective fate and creates the motivational base for engagement. Importantly, the PCI model differentiates between objective conditions and the interpretive work required to link personal experiences to collective causes. Grievances become politicized only when they are framed as unjust, attributable to an external source, and resolvable through collective action. As individuals begin to see their grievances mirrored in others, and as social movements articulate these grievances into a coherent ideological narrative, a political identity begins to form. This step in the PCI process reflects the merging of personal discontent with collective meaning-making, a transformation that is emotionally resonant and identity-altering. Individuals do not merely adopt political goals; they begin to view their personal struggles as inherently political, and thus become more willing to act upon them.

Hence, the Freedom Convoy offers a vivid real-world case of grievance politicization. While it originated as a protest by long-haul truckers against cross-border vaccine mandates, the movement quickly evolved to encompass a wide array of grievances. Participants included individuals with concerns about bodily autonomy, distrust of government authority, anger over perceived censorship, and frustration with pandemic-era economic instability and social isolation. In fact, one element central to the identity of Convoy activists is a strong belief in individual freedoms and opposition to government mandates. This anti-authoritarian stance became deeply integrated into activists' personal and collective identities. Many of these individuals had not previously engaged in organized protest or political activism. Crucially, what transformed this discontent into a mobilized collective identity was the movement's ability to frame these grievances as shared and politically consequential. Through slogans such as "We Stand for

Freedom,” or “My Body, My Choice” and with the aid of social media amplification, the Convoy presented individual frustrations not as isolated concerns but as symptoms of a broader political crisis, one rooted in state overreach and the erosion of fundamental rights. Moreover, many activists framed their protest as a patriotic defence of “true” Canadian values, which they saw as being undermined by government overreach. Symbols like the Canadian flag were frequently displayed, signifying a strong attachment to national identity, now politicized through the lens of protest. The movement fostered a sense of belonging and moral urgency by promoting the idea that participants were not alone in their frustrations. For example, interviews and testimonials circulated online frequently began with statements such as “I thought I was the only one who felt this way” or “I finally found others who see what’s going on.” This demonstrates precisely the mechanism Simon and Klandermans describe the reframing of private pain into public grievances, and the discovery of a collective identity through shared interpretation of injustice. Furthermore, the relatively low cost of entry to the protest such as honking from a car, displaying a flag, or simply attending a rally, made it possible for “third wave” participants (those not previously involved in politics or social movements) to participate without significant risk, reinforcing the PCI claim that opportunity structures and low entry thresholds support the initial formation of politicized identity. In other words, *individuals who perceive their personal grievances such as opposition to vaccine mandates or distrust of government institutions as shared and politically meaningful are more likely to experience identity politicization and to engage in collective action as part of the Freedom Convoy.*

Hypothesis 2 – Ideological Resonance and Adversarial Framing

An essential mechanism in the formation of a politicized collective identity is the process through which individuals identify a common adversary perceived as responsible for their group’s grievances. This adversarial framing helps clarify group boundaries by distinguishing between “us” and “them,” reinforcing a sense of solidarity and shared fate among group members. As politicization deepened, participants increasingly viewed themselves as part of an “in-group” fighting for freedom, with the government and those who supported mandates as the “out-group.” As time evolved, this distinction became a defining part of their politicized identity. Hence, when individuals recognize that their values, beliefs, and frustrations align with those of others in opposition to a powerful external actor such as a government, institution, or elite, this creates a

fertile context for identity politicization. In this context, individual predispositions matter. Those who already possess strong ideological commitments (e.g. toward liberty, individual sovereignty, or national autonomy) are more likely to interpret political conditions through a lens of moral opposition. These individuals are often already primed to respond to grievances with a high degree of cognitive resonance, especially when collective action frames echo their personal convictions. As a result, they are more likely to undergo politicization and act upon that identity. The PCI model emphasizes that politicized identity does not arise in a vacuum. It must be constructed through interaction and meaning-making, which includes identifying those perceived as responsible for injustice. When these adversaries are clearly framed and emotionally charged whether they are political leaders, institutions, or ideological opponents, they become focal points for mobilization and identity consolidation.

In the case of the Freedom Convoy, it effectively utilized adversarial framing to unite a broad and ideologically diverse group of participants. The federal government, and in particular Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, were portrayed as symbolic representations of systemic control, overreach, and moral failure. This framing resonated with individuals who already held anti-authoritarian sentiments, libertarian beliefs, or suspicion toward mainstream institutions. Participants who were ideologically motivated whether due to concerns about constitutional rights, bodily autonomy, or distrust of global institutions, found in the Convoy a narrative that confirmed their worldview. The movement's messaging positioned the government not just as a policymaker but also as a coercive force actively infringing on basic freedoms. For individuals with pre-existing ideological orientations toward freedom and justice, the movement offered not only validation but also a political home where their identity content, previously personal or latent, could be activated and politicized. Moreover, this adversarial framing did not merely appeal to hardened ideologues. It also attracted individuals who had recently begun to question institutional authority due to the pandemic's impacts. These participants may not have had a fully developed political identity prior to the Convoy, but through exposure to its ideological narratives and moral polarizations, they began to see themselves as part of a broader resistance against a threatening "other." The clarity and emotional intensity of the adversarial framing accelerated the process of identity transformation. Hence, *individuals with strong ideological commitments related to liberty, autonomy, or opposition to institutional authority are more likely to develop a politicized identity*

and participate in the Freedom Convoy when their grievances are framed in opposition to a clearly identified adversary, such as the federal government.

Hypothesis 3 – Moral and Emotional Catalysts

The process of identity politicization is not driven solely by cognitive recognition of shared grievances or adversarial structures; it also depends heavily on emotional and moral engagement. The PCI framework underscores that the emergence of a politicized collective identity involves a moral interpretation of one's experiences, where perceived injustices are not just unfortunate or harmful, but fundamentally wrong and in need of redress. This moral interpretation often leads to emotional responses such as outrage, pride, fear, or empathy, which energize individuals and motivate participation in collective action. The emotional and moral dimensions of identity content are critical for transforming passive discontent into active political subjectivity. When individuals come to see their participation in a movement not just as a strategic choice but also as a moral imperative, the boundaries between personal values and political identity begin to blur. In this transformation, the sense of "who I am" becomes tightly linked to "what I must do." Individuals may see their actions as expressions of a higher ethical commitment to truth, justice, or protection of others, which further solidifies their politicized identity. Moreover, movements that effectively activate moral narratives and emotional appeals are more likely to mobilize new supporters, particularly those who might not have previously identified as political actors. The moral framing of injustice makes inaction feel complicit, while emotional solidarity deepens bonds with fellow participants. Together, these affective and ethical components play a central role in the internalization of politicized identity.

The Freedom Convoy actively invoked moral language and emotional rhetoric to mobilize support. Participation was often framed not simply as protest, but as a stand for fundamental human values of freedom, bodily sovereignty, children's welfare, and resistance to coercion. Such framing resonated with participants on a deeply affective level, encouraging them to view their involvement as morally necessary. For many, refusal to comply with mandates or attendance at Convoy events was described as a form of moral resistance, not merely political disagreement. Emotional intensity was also evident in the narratives shared among participants' feelings of betrayal by government, fear for one's family or children, pride in taking a stand, and a sense of dignity restored through collective action. These emotional responses were not incidental; they

were central to the process by which individuals began to see their personal values as part of a larger political cause. The Convoy's emotional messaging helped individuals reinterpret their identity as not only affected by state policy but as morally obligated to respond. In many cases, individuals who had previously remained silent or disengaged felt emotionally "called" to act not because of political ideology per se, but because they believed a fundamental moral line had been crossed. This sense of emotional urgency and moral duty played a pivotal role in reshaping self-conceptions, catalyzing a transition from passive citizens to active protesters. This aligns with the PCI insight that emotional and moral content strengthens politicized identity by making participation a reflection of one's ethical commitments. As a result, *individuals who experience strong emotional responses and interpret their grievances through a moral lens such as viewing mandates as violations of fundamental rights, are more likely to develop a politicized identity and engage in the Freedom Convoy as a form of morally motivated collective action.*

Hypothesis 4 – Social Media as an Identity Amplifier

In contemporary movements, digital communication technologies, particularly social media, play a pivotal role in facilitating the formation and reinforcement of politicized collective identity. While the PCI framework emphasizes interpersonal communication and social interaction as essential to identity construction, these processes increasingly unfold in online spaces that allow for rapid dissemination of symbols, narratives, and emotional expressions. These platforms serve as identity environments, where individuals not only consume political content but also perform and negotiate their collective identities. Social media can intensify the politicization process in three interrelated ways. First, it enhances the visibility of shared grievances by exposing users to the experiences and interpretations of others. Second, it facilitates symbolic expression and narrative framing, through which identity content such as beliefs in liberty, victimhood, or national pride, is codified and ritualized. Third, it fosters a sense of in-group solidarity and moral community by creating echo chambers that validate particular views while reinforcing boundaries with perceived out-groups. Through these mechanisms, social media contributes to the internalization of politicized identity by repeatedly affirming the meanings, values, and goals associated with the group. It also reduces isolation by allowing individuals to connect with like-minded others, even in the absence of formal organizational structures or face-to-face interaction. Thus, digital platforms are not simply tools for communication, they are arenas of identity

construction, affirmation, and escalation. In other words, online communities allowed individuals to share experiences, grievances, and symbols, fostering a sense of collective identity that transcended physical space. In that sense, social media platforms acted as echo chambers, where the core values of the movement which are related to liberty, resistance, and patriotism, were constantly reiterated and reinforced. This environment contributed to the consolidation of identity content around a specific political narrative. Online discussions often framed the movement's goals in moral terms, such as fighting for what is "right" and opposing government "tyranny." This moralization of identity content provided participants with a sense of moral legitimacy and purpose, deepening their commitment to the cause.

The Convoy was characterized by an extensive and strategic use of digital media, particularly Facebook, Telegram, X (then Twitter), TikTok, and livestreaming platforms. For many participants, engagement with the movement began not on the ground in Ottawa, but online through watching viral videos, reading testimonies, joining digital communities, or encountering hashtags and symbols that expressed their own discontent. These digital encounters provided an initial sense of belonging and often served as the entry point into politicization. Within these online spaces, core identity content such as personal freedom, opposition to mandates, distrust of elites, and pride in Canadian identity, was continuously reiterated. Users shared personal stories of perceived injustice, images of convoys and rallies, and emotionally charged commentary that constructed a clear narrative: participants were righteous defenders of liberty standing against authoritarian overreach. This narrative was symbolically reinforced through the widespread use of Canadian flags, slogans like "True North Strong and Free," and icons representing bodily autonomy. These symbolic expressions circulated broadly and helped frame participation as a patriotic and moral act. Moreover, social media created a feedback loop in which emotional validation and collective storytelling deepened identification with the movement. Participants often described feeling "seen" or "understood" for the first time, as digital interactions confirmed that their frustrations were shared and legitimate. The supportive environment of like-minded peers enabled individuals to move from passive sympathizers to active participants, and in many cases, to enduring advocates for a politicized worldview. This transformation illustrates the capacity of digital networks to accelerate identity formation and collective action outside traditional mobilizing institutions. In that case, *individuals who engage with Freedom Convoy-related content*

on social media are more likely to develop a politicized collective identity, as online interactions amplify shared grievances, foster symbolic expression, and reinforce in-group solidarity.

Hypothesis 5 – Socio-political Trajectories as Outcomes of PCI Transformation

The framework posits that the politicization of identity is not merely a situational reaction to grievances, but a qualitative transformation in how individuals understand themselves and their role in society. This transformation entails a shift from personal identity content such as beliefs about fairness, autonomy, or loyalty to a politicized collective identity, in which these values are integrated with a broader political narrative and sustained commitment to action. Once this identity is internalized, it becomes a guiding force in future decision-making, social affiliations, and worldview construction. This process implies a temporal dimension; politicized identity is not static but evolves across time, influenced by prior experiences, emotional turning points, social interactions, and cognitive interpretations of events. As a result, individuals who undergo politicization often experience a reorientation of their socio-political trajectory. They begin to perceive their past through a new lens, reinterpret their position within society, and adopt a more active, oppositional stance toward political institutions or dominant norms. Moreover, politicized identities tend to become self-reinforcing, as participation in collective action reshapes one's self-concept, social networks, and moral commitments. This process contributes to the formation of long-term political subjectivities, even among individuals who previously had little to no involvement in activism. The PCI model thus captures how identity change is embedded in biography and how seemingly “ordinary” individuals can become sustained actors in contentious politics through a series of affective and interpretive shifts.

Our case study catalyzed profound identity changes among many participants. Numerous individuals, particularly in the so-called “third wave” of mobilization, reported having no history of political engagement, protest, or affiliation with social movements. Yet their involvement in the Convoy marked a decisive shift in how they viewed themselves, their values, and their relationship with Canadian institutions. For some, participating in the Convoy was described as a “wake-up call” or “crossing a line” after which return to political disengagement felt impossible. These changes were not limited to short-term protest behaviour. Many participants became more vocal on social media, more critical of traditional media sources, more connected to alternative information networks, and more committed to ideological positions around sovereignty, bodily

autonomy, and resistance to state control. Others began participating in local political events, supporting alternative parties, or joining online activist communities. These actions reflect an evolving identity that was no longer defined by passive citizenship but by active opposition and a desire to remain politically engaged. Furthermore, the shared experience of protest especially in an emotionally charged, high-risk context like Ottawa, created bonds and memories that reinforced the new identity content. The Convoy became a narrative turning point, through which participants reinterpreted their personal biographies and began to see themselves as part of a broader political and historical struggle. This deep identification with the movement suggests that their involvement was not just episodic but transformative, initiating a longer-term socio-political trajectory shaped by politicized identity. As a result, *the process of politicized collective identity formation in the Freedom Convoy will vary according to gender, with women more likely to articulate politicization through emotional and relational dimensions, and men more likely to frame it in cognitive and action-oriented terms.*

This section has presented a series of five interrelated hypotheses grounded in the framework developed by Simon and Klandermans. Together, these hypotheses offer a robust theoretical scaffolding for exploring the central research question guiding this study: **How do individuals transform their identity leading to their participation in a contentious social movement, and what social, emotional, and biographical factors shape their socio-political trajectories?** This thesis is also guided by two (2) specific research questions that are (a) *How do participants in the Freedom Convoy come to recognize their personal grievances as collectively shared, and how do they construct oppositional identities in relation to perceived political and institutional adversaries?* and (b) *What structural pressures, relational incentives, and personal life experiences motivate individuals to transition from passive discontent to active involvement in the Freedom Convoy?* By situating identity transformation at the intersection of personal meaning, moral engagement, and collective dynamics, the hypotheses operationalize the mechanisms through which politicization unfolds.

Hence, the Convoy, as a case study, provides a compelling empirical terrain to investigate these processes. As a movement composed largely of “ordinary” individuals, many of whom lacked prior political involvement, it offers unique insights into how politicized identities emerge, intensify, and solidify in the absence of traditional organizational structures. The PCI framework enables this inquiry by highlighting not only why individuals mobilize, but how their self-

understanding and worldview shift through interaction, emotion, narrative, and participation. Each hypothesis captures a key stage, or dimension, of politicized identity formation: the recognition of shared grievances, the framing of an external adversary, the activation of moral and emotional convictions, the role of social media in amplifying identity content, and the long-term transformation of personal and political self-conception. These hypotheses are designed not only to isolate causal mechanisms but to illuminate the trajectories of politicization, the slow, affectively charged, and interpretive processes through which individuals come to see themselves as members of a political collective.

Framed this way, socio-political trajectories are not simply reactions to structural conditions or ideological predispositions. They are shaped by agency, narrative, and lived experience. These trajectories reflect a complex chain of decision-making, deeply entangled with emotion, biographical contingencies, and social influence. They unfold across time, often catalyzed by key events or perceived turning points, and are deeply embedded in the cultural and historical moment in which they occur. By engaging with this conceptualization, the hypotheses advanced here recognize that joining a social movement is rarely a spontaneous or isolated act. Rather, it is part of an evolving life project, a dynamic interplay between whom individuals are, what they feel, what they believe, and the worlds they inhabit. In this way, the PCI framework, applied to the Freedom Convoy, enables a deeper interrogation of how macro-level discontent becomes personalized, politicized, and acted upon. The hypotheses, therefore, serve a dual function: they translate the abstract dimensions of PCI theory into testable propositions and simultaneously ground the research in the lived realities of Convoy participants.

Case Selection: Ontario and Quebec

Over the years, the field of research on the Canadian far right is developing, but a work on mapping oppositional movements is still ongoing. Indeed, the entire field had yet to be cleared. A number of publications have enriched our knowledge and established some benchmarks. Nevertheless, my thesis had to be carried out in an exploratory perspective, and this has necessarily tinted my research questions as well as the results I obtained. First, I wanted to be able to draw a portrait of the ecosystem of the contemporary Canadian far right. For this reason, a part of my research – more descriptive in nature – is focused on the Freedom Convoy. The second part, which constitutes

the analytical core of the thesis, focuses on the question of individual paths of engagement and the activists' relationship to politics.

Hence, the decision to focus on participants from Quebec and Ontario in the Freedom Convoy was based on several methodological and practical considerations. These two provinces played a central role in the Convoy, both in terms of participant numbers and historical relevance within far right and populist movements in Canada. This focus allowed for a more manageable and representative study while ensuring a depth of analysis that would have been difficult to achieve with a broader scope. First, Ontario and Quebec are the two most populous provinces in Canada, and they geographically encompass Ottawa, the capital and the epicentre of the Freedom Convoy. The logistical convenience of studying participants from these provinces provided a unique opportunity for direct observations, interviews, and access to primary sources such as local media coverage and community discussions. Many Convoy participants originated from or travelled through these provinces, making it easier to engage with them. Moreover, both provinces have historically been key regions in Canadian political movements, including those aligned with populist, nationalist, and far-right ideologies (Perry et al. 2022). Ontario, particularly through its rural and suburban communities, has been a hub for conservative and libertarian activism, fostering a climate where movements like the Freedom Convoy could gain traction. Quebec, despite its distinct linguistic and cultural identity, has also witnessed the rise of nationalist and anti-establishment sentiments, particularly within certain sovereigntist and libertarian circles. The overlap between these historical trends and the Convoy's ideology made these provinces ideal for studying the movement's underlying motivations and regional variations.

Even so, reports and data on the Freedom Convoy indicate that a significant proportion of its organizers and supporters were based in Quebec and Ontario. These provinces provided the bulk of financial contributions, logistical support, and media attention. The high concentration of participants ensured that data collection through surveys, interviews, and observational studies were more efficient and statistically significant. So, given the prevalence of convoy-related activism in Quebec and Ontario, there is a greater access to a rich pool of primary and secondary sources, including social media posts, alternative media outlets, and local community networks. This availability of information facilitated a more comprehensive understanding of participant motivations, grievances, and ideological leanings. Furthermore, language accessibility was a key factor. By focusing on Quebec and Ontario, the study could account for both English and French

discourse, ensuring a bilingual analysis that captured the Convoy's diverse narratives. Despite their geographical proximity, Quebec and Ontario have distinct political cultures and histories. Examining participants from both provinces allowed for an analysis of similarities and differences in their motivations, strategies, and ideological framing of the Freedom Convoy. This comparative approach enriched the study, offering insights into how regional identity, language, and historical political movements influenced participation in the Convoy.

Hence, from a comparative perspective, examining participants from both provinces allows for an analysis of how regional identity, political culture, and historical grievances shape individual trajectories and collective protest logic. The Ontario-Quebec axis enables a richer understanding of how the same mobilization was experienced, justified, and enacted across different social contexts. It also permits reflection on cross-provincial similarities in framing processes, mobilizing structures, and identity work, while accounting for divergence in emotional tone, political symbolism, and movement objectives. Finally, from a methodological standpoint, focusing on these two provinces facilitated access to a broad and diverse pool of participants due to proximity to protest sites, bilingual data collection capacity, and the high density of Convoy-related activity. This case selection thus supports both analytical depth and comparative insight, in line with the study's broader aim to uncover the socio-political dynamics of extra-parliamentary mobilization in Canada.

The fact that a majority of interviewees in this study are based in Quebec is not incidental nor does it constitute a methodological limitation to be minimized. Rather, it reflects both the empirical realities of mobilization during the pandemic and the research objective of tracing identity transformation in contexts of perceived moral and institutional rupture. Quebec provides a particularly revealing case for examining politicized collective identity precisely because widespread acceptance of state intervention coexists with intense backlash among a minority who experienced pandemic governance as illegitimate or traumatic. Focusing on Quebec-based participants thus allows for an in-depth exploration of how dissent emerges not only in traditionally anti-statist environments, but also within political cultures historically oriented toward collective solidarity and state responsibility.

Sampling and Recruitment

Recruiting participants for interviews among sympathizers of the Freedom Convoy required a multifaceted approach, integrating both digital outreach and in-person engagement. This method was designed to ensure access to a diverse range of participants while maintaining authenticity and trust throughout the process. Hence, the sampling strategy is non-probabilistic and purposive, designed to select information-rich cases that illuminate the research questions through depth rather than breadth. In the context of this study, participants were recruited based on their direct engagement with the Convoy movement, either through active participation in protests, involvement in organizing or communications, or through supportive roles in affiliated networks. Selection criteria emphasized individuals with sustained involvement and reflective capacity, as these participants are well positioned to articulate both personal motivations and broader ideological frameworks driving the movement. Attention was also given to diversity in geographic location (urban vs. rural), gender, and occupational background in order to capture a range of perspectives across the movement's social base.

Recruitment Procedure and Sampling Strategy

Participant recruitment for this study was conducted between 2023 and 2024, and relied on a strategy adapted to the sensitive, distrustful, and highly mediated nature of the Convoy. Recruitment combined online outreach, in-person engagement, and snowball sampling, with the goal of accessing a heterogeneous group of participants while maintaining transparency and minimizing coercion. Importantly, recruitment procedures were analytically and ethically distinct from participant observation. While informal interactions and immersion in Convoy-related spaces informed contextual understanding, formal recruitment and interviewing only occurred following explicit disclosure of the research purpose and informed consent.

Online Recruitment: Engaging Sympathizers Through Digital Platforms

A significant portion of participants was recruited through digital platforms that continue to function as hubs for the Convoy discourse. These included Facebook, Telegram, and X. These spaces were selected because they host sustained interaction among Convoy supporters, sympathizers, and adjacent communities well beyond the events of 2022. Online recruitment unfolded in three stages. First, I engaged in non-intrusive observation and participation in public

discussion, allowing me to familiarize myself with the movement's language, norms, grievances, and symbolic references. This phase was essential for understanding how Convoy supports framed their experiences and for ensuring that recruitment messages would be intelligible and appropriate. No data from this phase was treated as interview material.

Second, potential participants were contacted through private, direct messages. These messages clearly identified me as a doctoral candidate/researcher and emphasized that the study sought to understand personal trajectories, lived experiences, and meaning-making rather than to evaluate or judge political positions. Recruitment messages were intentionally framed in accessible and respectful language, reflecting the communicative norms of the communities being approached. This approach was designed to reduce skepticism toward academic research which many participants associated with delegitimization or surveillance. Third, I posted carefully worded invitations in selected Convoy-affiliated groups, inviting individuals to voluntarily participate in confidential interviews. These invitations explicitly stated that participation was optional, uncompensated, and independent. No targeted advertising or deceptive practices were used. Throughout online recruitment, particular care was taken to respect privacy and avoid pressuring individuals in politically sensitive environments.

In-Person Recruitment: Field Engagement and Trust-Building

In addition to online outreach, recruitment occurred through in-person interactions at Convoy-related rallies, and informal gatherings in Quebec and Ontario. These settings provided opportunities for direct engagement and contextual understanding, particularly among individuals less active online. In-person recruitment took two distinct forms. Overt recruitment occurred when individuals expressed interest in discussing their experiences. In these cases, I clearly introduced myself as a doctoral candidate/researcher studying the Convoy, explained the purpose of the project and invited voluntary participation in a later interview. Contact information was exchanged only when participants explicitly consented.

Alongside overt recruitment, I also engaged in informal, non-recruitment field interactions that did not immediately involve disclosure of research intent. These interactions were not used to solicit interviews or collect interview data but served to observe everyday language, emotional registers, and interactional norms within the movement. This form of immersion was limited to public settings and did not involve deception or misrepresentation. If asked directly about my

presence or interests, I disclosed that I was seeking to better understand the perspectives of Convoy participants and that I was a graduate student. Crucially, no interviews were conducted, recorded, or analyzed without full disclosure and informed consent, and covert engagement never substituted for formal recruitment or interviewing.

Snowball Sampling and Network-Based Recruitment

Snowball sampling constituted a key mechanism for expanding the participant pool. After interviews were completed, participants were invited, without obligation, to share information about the study with others in their networks who might be interested. Participants were never asked to provide names or contact details; all subsequent contact was initiated voluntarily by prospective interviewees. This approach proved particularly effective in a context marked by institutional distrust, as peer-mediated recruitment helped reduce suspicion and facilitated access to individuals who would otherwise have been reluctant to participate. While snowball sampling carries risks of homogeneity and network bias, it was combined with purposive recruitment across platforms, regions, and engagement levels to mitigate these effects.

Sample composition and Inclusion Criteria

The final sample consisted of 42 participants aged between 21 and 85, with the majority between 35 and 65 years old. Participants were drawn from both Quebec and Ontario and included individuals from urban centres (e.g. Ottawa, Montreal) as well as rural or semi-rural communities. Gender representation leaned slightly male, particularly among individuals identifying as core organizers though the inclusion of women, especially mothers, healthcare workers, and spiritually oriented participants, were intentional, given their central role in shaping emotional and moral narratives within the movement. Participants came from diverse occupational and educational backgrounds including truck drivers, nurses, teachers, farmers, small business owners, mechanics, self-employed workers, and former civil servants. Several had exited formal employment due to vaccine mandate or pandemic-related disruptions, while others pursued alternative livelihoods such as holistic healing, homeschooling groups or e-commerce.

Inclusion was based on self-identification as having participated in or actively supported the Convoy either directly or peripherally. No ideological test was applied, reflecting the study's

focus on subjective identification, politicization processes, and narrative meaning-making rather than formal organizational membership. Importantly, most participants were not previously affiliated with far-right organizations or formal political parties. Instead, their engagement reflected a gradual process of politicization catalyzed by the pandemic, vaccine mandates, and a broader sense of institutional betrayal. Several participants described the Convoy as a moment of “awakening” or “empowerment,” where they finally felt seen and heard by a like-minded community. Others framed their involvement in spiritual or moral terms, highlighting themes of justice, freedom, and personal sovereignty. This variation across age, profession, ideology, and place enables a detailed examination of the push-pull-personal dynamics influencing participation.

Methodological Coherence and Analytical Relevance

This recruitment and sampling strategy was designed to capture the heterogeneity of Convoy engagement while remaining consistent with the study’s theoretical framework. By accessing participants through multiple pathways (i.e. digital, relational and situational), the research avoids privileging only highly visible or institutionalized actors. Instead, it foregrounds the lived trajectories through which individuals moved from private discontent to politicized collective identity in line with Simon and Klandermans’ PCI model. Overall, this approach balances access, ethical integrity, and analytical depth allowing the study to examine not only who participated in the Convoy, but how participation was embedded in broader biographical, emotional, and relational processes.

Hence, the SSM and direct contact were useful methodological tools to gain access to sympathizers and interview these activists. To illustrate the complexity of gathering participants, here is a brief overview of P39, a woman from a small town in Quebec. Her case exemplifies the trajectory-based complexity of Convoy engagement. Formerly a primary school teacher and mother of two, P39 experienced a profound personal crisis after the death of her husband in 2019. Struggling with grief, she became increasingly skeptical of mainstream institutions, especially following the introduction of COVID-19 mandates, which she saw as a direct violation of bodily autonomy and parental rights. Initially hesitant to speak out, P39 found validation in online communities where vaccine-critical discourse overlapped with New Age spirituality. She began identifying as a “sovereign citizen” and adopted a new name to mark her spiritual rebirth. When the Convoy gained momentum, P39 travelled to Ottawa with her children, not just to protest

mandates, but to affirm a broader vision of collective freedom. She described the movement as a “sacred convergence” of people seeking truth, healing, and divine justice. P39’s narrative weaves together push factors (grief, institutional disillusionment), pull factors (emotional solidarity, symbolic community), and personal motivations (spiritual meaning-making, identity transformation). Her story exemplifies how participation in the Convoy was not merely oppositional, but constitutive of a new political and spiritual self, a key dynamic explored throughout this study.

Once again, the goal is to explore how individual trajectories of politicization unfold within the lived realities of Convoy participants. By tracing the evolution from private discontent to public engagement, the fieldwork operationalizes key dimensions of PCI: awareness of shared grievances, adversarial attribution, and societal triangulation. These dimensions informed both the interview guide and the thematic coding process. In doing so, this research seeks to uncover how individuals constructed, negotiated, and ultimately politicized their identities within the context of the Convoy.

Data Collection Methods

This study employed a multi-method qualitative approach to capture the complexity of individual socio-political trajectories within the Convoy movement. Central to this approach were semi-structured interviews, and supported by participant observation. This combination enabled me to access participants’ lived experiences, emotional narratives, and identity constructions across both physical and online spaces of mobilization.

Interviews

The primary data collection method consisted of in-depth, semi-structured interviews. This design allowed participants to narrate their social, political, and emotional development over time, emphasizing the biographical events and turning points that led to their involvement in the Convoy. This method was selected for its capacity to expose narratives that reveal how politicized identities are constructed, challenged, and reimagined. Interviews were guided by themes drawn from the framework and typology. Questions explored the recognition of shared grievances (e.g. “When did you begin to feel that your concerns were part of something larger?”), adversarial attribution (e.g. “Who or what do you believe is responsible for the situation you oppose?”), and collective belonging (e.g. “When did you start feeling connected to the movement or its people?”). Additional

questions probed structural pressures (push), movement-based attractions (pull), and personal motivations such as spiritual transformation or moral awakening. Most interviews lasted between 60 and 120 minutes and were conducted either in person or via digital platforms, depending on participant availability and comfort. With consent, interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Participant Observation

To complement interview data, I conducted participant observation at convoy-related events, including protests, and informal gatherings. These observations provided context for participants' narratives and offered insight into movement rituals, group dynamics, emotional atmospheres, and symbolic repertoires. While maintaining ethical boundaries and a low profile, I engaged in informal conversations and noted recurring themes and behaviours, particularly around community-building, distrust of outsiders, and in-group solidarity. In overt settings, my purpose was disclosed and explained; in covert moments, I adopted a "moderately committed" stance, prioritizing immersion and rapport building without disrupting the group dynamic.

Interview Analysis and Analytical Procedure

Interview analysis followed an iterative, multi-stage qualitative process combining thematic, narrative and theory-guided interpretation. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and read multiple times in their entirety before any formal analytic categorization was applied. This initial immersion phase aimed to preserve narrative coherence and to identify key life events, emotional turning points, and self-described moments of politicization.

In a second stage, transcripts were analyzed using a flexible, non-mechanical coding strategy. Rather than applying a fixed codebook, I relied on sensitizing concepts drawn from the PCI framework (i.e. shared grievances, adversarial attribution, in-group identification, emotional investment, and societal involvement) as well as inductively emerging themes such as loss, betrayal, awakening, moral duty, and spiritual transformation. Codes were treated as provisional and overlapping, reflecting the recursive and non-linear nature of politicization described by participants. Particular attention was paid to narrative structure: how participants organized their stories temporally (e.g. before/after the pandemic), how they framed causality and responsibility, and how personal experiences were reinterpreted through collective and moral lenses. This

narrative analysis made it possible to trace socio-political trajectories over time, rather than reducing accounts to isolated opinions or attitudes.

Coding followed a hybrid logic. Deductive coding was guided by the core dimensions of PCI while inductive coding was used to capture themes not explicitly anticipated by the framework such as gender expressions of dissent or references to a spiritual awakening. This approach ensured theoretical coherence without imposing rigid categories onto participants' lived experiences. For example, with P28, the participant mentions that "I felt like the government was just taking away our freedoms. When they closed schools and told us how to live, it was like they didn't see us at all. I got so angry, but I also started talking with friends who felt the same way, and it felt like we were all in this together."

Text segment	Code (open/inductive)	Code (deductive/theory)	Notes
"I felt like the government was just taking away our freedoms"	Frustration with government	Threat to autonomy/Perceived injustice	Cognitive dimension: recognition of grievance
"When they closed schools and told us how to live, it was like they didn't see us at all."	Feeling ignored / marginalized	Alienation from institutions	Cognitive/emotional dimension
"I got angry"	Emotional response	Anger as politicization trigger	Emotional dimension
"I started talking with friends who felt the same way"	Social connection / shared experience	Collective identification	Cognitive & emotional dimension
"it felt like we were all in this together"	Sense of collective identity	Emergence of politicized collective identity	Action-oriented / collective identity formation

In a third stage, cases were compared across interviews to identify recurring patterns and meaningful variations. This comparative process informed the distinction between early and late joiners, as well as the identification of gendered pathways into politicization. Hypotheses were revisited at this stage not as a criterion for validation, but as analytical reference points against which empirical patterns could be assessed, refined or contradicted. Finally, interpretation proceeded through an abductive logic, moving back and forth between theory and data. Empirical findings were situated within the broader PCI literature while also highlighting points where

participants' narratives exceeded or challenged existing theoretical expectations, particularly with respect to emotion, gender and identity formation.

Software and Data Management

All interviews were managed and analyzed using NVivo. NVivo facilitated systematic organization, coding, and retrieval of textual data, allowing for the comparison of themes across interviews and the visualization of patterns over time and across cases. The software also supported analytic transparency by preserving coding histories and enabling iterative refinement of categories. At the deductive level, parent nodes reflected the PCI framework: Cognitive Dimension, Emotional Dimension, and Action-Oriented Dimension. Within these, inductively derived child nodes captured more specific expressions such as perceived injustice, institutional alienation, distrust of government, anger, fear, collective identification, and mobilization intent.

Parent nodes	Cognitive dimension	Emotional Dimension	Action-Oriented Dimension
Child nodes	Perceived injustices; Institutional alienation; Distrust of government	Anger; Fear; Anxiety	Collective identification; Mobilization intent; Peer discussion

Theoretical integration

The PCI framework served as an interpretive lens throughout the analytic process rather than as a rigid template. It structured attention toward key processes of politicization while allowing empirical material to nuance, extend, or complicate theoretical expectations. In addition, findings were examined in relation to differences between participants in Quebec and Ontario or between men and women. These were used to assess how gender or region contexts mediated politicized identity formation.

In sum, the interview analysis was theory-informed, iterative, and interpretive. It balanced analytical structure with openness to participants' lived realities, enabling a nuanced examination of how personal grievances, emotional experiences, and social interactions converged into politicized collective identities within the Freedom Convoy.

Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive and potentially controversial nature of the topic, ethical considerations were paramount. Informed consent was obtained for all overt interviews. Covert observation was conducted only in public or semi-public settings, and no identifying data were recorded without consent. I adhered to the principle of “do no harm,” prioritizing participants’ safety, anonymity, and autonomy. Reflexivity was maintained throughout, acknowledging my positionality and potential biases. Hence, as stated, this research employed a combination of overt and covert data collection methods posed several ethical considerations. While the approach was designed to minimize observer effects and obtain genuine responses, care was taken to uphold ethical standards. Given the centrality of identity in PCI theory and the contentious nature of the Freedom Convoy, particular attention was paid to my positionality and access. I was perceived at times as an outsider to the Convoy’s in-group identity. To mitigate this and preserve the integrity of data collection, effort was made to adapt language, tone, and presence in both digital and physical spaces without misrepresenting intent. This reflexive stance also informed ethical decisions around covert versus overt data collection. In environments where revealing academic intent might stifle honest expression, rapport building and shared cultural references (e.g. speaking of “freedom,” “community,” and “choice”) were used to gain trust. At all times, care was taken to prioritize dignity and safety over data extraction.

Throughout the research process, ethical considerations were carefully upheld to ensure the respectful treatment of participants. Privacy was respected by not recording any personal identifiers without explicit consent, thereby safeguarding individuals’ anonymity. Although full disclosure of the research intent was not always provided at the outset, interactions were conducted in a respectful manner and avoided any form of deception that could potentially cause harm or distress. Furthermore, the focus remained on publicly shared views; discussions were limited to opinions and beliefs that participants willingly expressed in public or semi-public settings, avoiding the collection of private or sensitive personal information.

On potential ethical limits, the first is related to participation activities that seemingly look illegal or criminal. While planning my fieldwork, I had to think of the possibility that individuals, or groups, could be engaged in these types of activities as well as potentially being activities conducted by “known” Convoy figures. Because I was unaware of which individuals, or group of individuals, would be interviewed, I had to refer to the material available to me – from social media

pages, websites, and newspaper interviews. As observed, it seems like members themselves did not allow to overstep the law in order to protect the group and its image (i.e. exclusion of Pat King from the Convoy's core committee). However, the RWE is generally known for its violent tactics and there is often a gap between public discourse and private practices. Material from the press and anti-fascist organizations indicated that some of its members were involved in violent attacks. In this respect, I preferred to be prepared for any eventuality: besides not taking part in clearly illegal activities, I also avoided going to events (demonstrations or others) where it was foreseeable that antagonistic groups would be present. In this way, I wanted to avoid being involved in situations where there was a risk of violence.

A second ethical limit was that I would not allow myself to participate actively in spaces where the actions and internal policies of the committee, a group or individual were deliberated and decided. I was aware that in certain situations, the posture of a simple observer could prove untenable. A “moderately committed” observer posture should be adopted; as far as I could, I would try to never take a position other than by participating in public actions allowed/organized by the Freedom Convoy. In the deliberative spaces, he refrained from speaking or expressing his opinion on the decisions. I will try to remain as discreet as possible and avoiding as much as possible to disturb the way events turn out. Finally, a principle that I considered inviolable was that the main responsibility of the researcher is to do no harm (to the participants; to the discipline and to the population in general). With this in mind, I paid particular attention to the privacy and safety of the participants by taking great care to ensure that the security of the participants by conscientiously ensuring their anonymity.

Limitations and Reflexivity

While the study provides in-depth insight into the experiences of Convoy participants, it is limited by its qualitative scope and regional focus. Findings cannot be generalized to all far right or populist movements in Canada. My researcher's position as an outsider may have affected access or interpretation, despite efforts to build trust and maintain neutrality. Nevertheless, the study offers a robust, context-rich account of political identity formation in contemporary Canada. Hence, this chapter has outlined the methodological and epistemological foundations of this research, which seeks to understand how individuals construct politicized identities and come to engage in contentious collective action through the Convoy. Through a qualitative, interpretive design

grounded in interviews, and participant observation, the study favoured depth, subjectivity, and emotional resonance over representativeness or generalizability. The methodological choices that are purposive sampling and interviews are aligned with the study's conceptual focus on socio-political trajectories and the frameworks of PCI and the push-pull-personal typology. These tools enable a nuanced analysis of how grievances are articulated, adversarial attributions are formed, and collective belonging is experienced among individuals who often feel excluded from mainstream institutions and narratives.

At the same time, the research is shaped by inherent limitations and critical reflections. The regional scope, the selective access to participants, and the ethical constraints surrounding trust and privacy place boundaries on what could be observed and analyzed. Researcher positionality which is navigating between empathy, analytical rigour, and ethical responsibility, played a crucial role in shaping the contours of fieldwork, especially in a context marked by institutional distrust and ideological diversity. Rather than undermining the study, these limitations highlight the complexity and necessity of reflexive qualitative inquiry into politically sensitive movements. They underscore the importance of approaching social movement actors not as monolithic or pathological, but as situated individuals whose political engagement emerges through personal histories, affective experiences, and evolving worldviews. Ultimately, the methodology presented here establishes a rigorous, ethically grounded framework for analyzing the Freedom Convoy as a site of identity formation, emotional investment, and political meaning-making. It sets the stage for the empirical chapters that follow, where the voices and trajectories of participants are explored in detail to better understand the dynamics of contemporary protest and the lived experience of dissent in Canada.

Temporal Distance and Retrospective Biases

A key limitation of this research concerns the temporal distance between the events of the Convoy (primarily 2022), and the period during which interviews were conducted (2023-2024). Conducting interviews after the peak of mobilization introduces potential biases inherent to retrospective qualitative research, particularly when studying emotionally charged and politically contentious events.

First, retrospective interviewing entails processes of narrative reconstruction rather than direct access to experiences as they unfolded in real time. Participants do not simply recall events;

they actively reinterpret them in light of subsequent political developments, personal trajectories, and social feedback. In the case of the Freedom Convoy, this includes the federal government's invocation of the Emergencies Act, criminal and civil proceedings against organizers, shifting public opinion, and the movement's fragmentation or institutional decline. These developments may retrospectively shape how participants interpret their own actions, motivations, and emotions, often leading to accounts that emphasize moral coherence, foresight, or inevitability. As a result, early uncertainty, confusion, or ambivalence may be downplayed in favour of more stabilized narratives of conviction, awakening or resistance.

Second, the emotional intensity of the Convoy introduces additional memory and affect-related distortions. Emotionally charged events suggest that participants remembered such experiences through heightened affective frames while specific details become blurred or selectively emphasized. In this study, participants described the Convoy using language associated with moral shock, spiritual revelation or existential rupture. While these narratives are meaningful and analytically important, they may also compress time, exaggerate coherence or retrospectively amplify emotional clarity. Moments of doubt, internal disagreement or interpersonal conflict within the movement may therefore be underreported, not necessarily due to intentional misrepresentation, but because later meaning-making processes have reordered these experiences into morally intelligible stories.

Third, conducting interviews after the decline of the movement raises the issue of post-mobilization identity consolidation. Participants' accounts often reflect identities that have already stabilized rather than identities in formation. From a PCI perspective, this means that interviews are more likely to capture individuals who have already completed (or believe they have completed) the stages of politicization: awareness of shared grievances, adversarial attribution, and emotional commitment. Those who briefly flirted with the movement, disengaged early or experienced disillusionment may be less present in the sample. This introduces a form of survivorship or durability bias, whereby narratives of sustained commitment are more visible than narratives of exit or retreat. Fourth, temporal distance may blur distinctions between different phases of participation, particularly in participants' own accounts. Early joiners may retrospectively attribute to themselves a level of ideological clarity or strategic intent that was not fully formed at the time, while late joiners may reinterpret their delayed entry as cautious discernment rather than situational

constraints. This has implications for the analysis of timing, thresholds for action, and perceived risks.

Importantly, these limitations are not treated solely as methodological weaknesses but as epistemologically consistent with the study's aims. This thesis does not seek to reconstruct the Convoy as a chronological sequence of tactical decisions, or does it aims to measure attitudes at a fixed point in time. Rather, it investigates how individuals make sense of their participation, how they integrate contentious action into their broader life stories, and how politicized identities endure, mutate or stabilize after moments of peak contention. From a narrative and interpretivist standpoint, retrospective sense-making is not noise to be eliminated but a central object of analysis. The very act of remembering, justifying or reframing participation reveals how politicized collective identities are maintained beyond mobilization.

To mitigate the risks associated with retrospective bias, a few strategies were employed. Interviews were designed to encourage temporal reflexivity, prompting participants to differentiate between what they felt at the time and how they interpret those feelings now. In addition, the analysis distinguishes between experiential claims ('what I felt then') and interpretive claims ('what it meant'), treating these as analytically distinct rather than interchangeable. Finally, attention to post-Convoy trajectories allows for a more nuanced interpretation of how retrospective narratives are shaped by present identities.

In sum, while the post-event timing of interviews limits the ability to capture real-time mobilization dynamics and spontaneous decision-making, it strengthens the study's capacity to analyze identity consolidation, storytelling and the effect of politicization. This trade-off is deliberate and theoretically grounded, aligning the methodological design with the thesis's central concern: not merely why individuals joined the Convoy, but how participation became meaningful, durable, and transformative in their lives.

Chapter 4 - Who Joined and When? Analyzing the Stages of Engagement in the Freedom Convoy

The Convoy brought together a diverse group of individuals, all united by a shared opposition to government mandates and a deep concern for personal freedoms. While their specific motivations varied, common themes emerged. Many participants viewed pandemic restrictions as government overreach, believing that such measures infringed on civil liberties, restricted personal choice, and set a dangerous precedent for state control. Others were driven by the economic consequences of these policies, having faced job losses, business closures, or severe financial hardship, which fuelled growing frustration with government intervention. Beyond political and economic concerns, the movement also provided a powerful sense of community and belonging. For many, it was an opportunity to connect with like-minded individuals who felt ignored or dismissed by mainstream institutions. The Convoy became more than just a protest, it was a unifying force that gave participants a renewed sense of purpose. This analysis categorizes participants into two main groups – early joiners versus late joiners – to highlight differences in motivations and urgency. Additionally, it examines gender-based perspectives, exploring how men and women engaged with the movement and the distinct roles they played.

The Journey to Activism: How Early and Later Joiners Shaped the Movement

For the early joiners, the Convoy was about more than just protesting mandates; it was a fight against what they perceived as a dangerous shift toward authoritarianism. Their motivation stemmed from both personal and ideological concerns. The economic impact of restrictions was immediate and tangible, as they struggled with job losses and financial insecurity. Yet beyond personal hardship, they saw the mandates as a fundamental threat to individual freedom, fearing that compliance would set a precedent for even greater government control in the future. Their sense of urgency was palpable, they believed that resistance had to happen now, before more

liberties were stripped away. Once involved, early joiners remained deeply committed to the movement, seeing it as both a validation of their long-standing concerns and a rare opportunity to take meaningful action. Many found in the Convoy a strong sense of community, where they were surrounded by like-minded individuals who shared their frustration and distrust of authority. The movement provided them with not only solidarity but also a renewed sense of purpose. Some stepped into leadership roles, helping to organize protests, share information, and mobilize support. Beyond their own participation, they saw their role as messengers, believing it was their responsibility to “wake up” others to the dangers of government overreach. For them, the Convoy was not just a temporary demonstration, it was part of a much larger struggle for personal autonomy and a redefinition of the relationship between citizens and the state.

Early Joiners: The First Wave of Protesters

Who Are They and Why They Stayed?

High Sensitivity to Push Factors

The first wave of participants in the Freedom Convoy shared a deep-rooted skepticism toward government authority, mainstream media, and global institutions. In fact, early joiners were among those most severely impacted by government policies, particularly COVID-19 mandates and economic restrictions. Many individuals lost their jobs, faced social ostracization, or witnessed the collapse of their industries. Unlike passive observers, these individuals actively resisted policies they perceived as unjust. In other words, these early joiners have a high sensitivity to push factors which refers to individuals who are deeply affected by the grievances that sparked the Convoy, particularly those who experienced personal losses or felt threatened by certain policies. More importantly, these individuals tend to be highly attuned to and significantly impacted by the push factors in their lives. They may have experienced profound personal losses that stem directly from the grievances they face, such as the loss of a job or financial instability due to mandates or forced lifestyle changes. Their sensitivity to these factors goes beyond simple frustration, it feels like a direct attack on their personal identity, values, and sense of security. For example, they have lost their job or faced financial uncertainty due to vaccine mandates or restrictions, resulting in feelings of helplessness, anger, or betrayal. The emotional toll can be severe, as many of these individuals may have experienced not only the practical impacts of such events but also the social and psychological consequences, including alienation from family, friends, or colleagues who do

not share their perspectives. In some cases, these losses trigger a deepened sense of injustice and may lead to feelings of being oppressed, resulting in a strong urge to break free from systems they perceive as controlling or harmful. For these individuals, the external pressures they experience are often intertwined with an internal emotional and existential crisis, making their resistance or pushback more intense and motivated by a profound need to reclaim autonomy, dignity, and their place in society. Their responses may be driven by a desire for personal liberation or the search for new communities where they feel supported and understood.

For instance, P18, a college professor, exhibits a strong sensitivity to perceived threats to freedom and liberties. Though her personal losses are not explicitly mentioned, her focus is primarily on critically assessing the government's implications and policies which suggests a strong reaction to what she saw as government overreach. Her dedication to her students is reflected in almost all of her statements. When asked why she initially wanted to join the movement, she states the following:

J'ai vu l'impact de l'isolement, de l'anxiété, du sentiment d'impuissance sur mes étudiants. Je me souviens d'une étudiante en particulier, une jeune femme brillante. Elle était tellement stressée par la situation, elle avait peur de tomber malade, peur pour ses proches. Elle a fini par développer des problèmes de sommeil, des crises d'angoisse. Je me sentais tellement impuissante face à sa détresse. Et puis, il y avait aussi les étudiants qui se sentaient étouffés par les restrictions. Ils avaient l'impression qu'on leur volait leur jeunesse, leurs expériences. Ils étaient privés de leurs interactions sociales, de leurs activités. C'était difficile de les voir aussi désabusés, aussi en colère. Moi aussi, je dois l'avouer, j'ai commencé à ressentir un certain malaise face à ce que je percevais comme un excès de pouvoir des autorités. Au début, j'étais d'accord avec les mesures sanitaires, je comprenais leur nécessité. Mais rapidement, j'ai eu l'impression qu'on sacrifiait un peu trop nos libertés au nom de la sécurité. Le Convoi de la liberté, pour moi, c'était une façon de dire que trop, c'est trop. C'était l'occasion de dénoncer ce que je considérais comme une dérive autoritaire, tout en défendant les libertés individuelles, qui sont à la base de notre société démocratique³⁶

³⁶ Translated by the author: "I've seen the impact of isolation, anxiety and feelings of powerlessness on my students. I remember one student in particular, a bright, committed young woman. She was so stressed by the situation, she was afraid of getting sick, afraid for her loved ones. She ended up developing sleeping problems and anxiety attacks. I felt so helpless in the face of her distress. And then there were the students who felt suffocated by the restrictions. They felt their youth and experiences were being stolen from them. They were deprived of their social interactions, their activities. It was hard to see them so disillusioned, so angry. I too, I must confess, began to feel a certain unease about what I perceived as an excess of power on the part of the authorities. At first, I agreed with the health measures, I understood their necessity. But I soon got the impression that our freedoms were being sacrificed a little too much in the name of safety. For me, the Freedom Convoy was a way of saying that enough is enough. It was an opportunity to denounce what I saw as an authoritarian drift, while defending individual freedoms, which are the foundation of our democratic society."

She, later on, continues on this sense of perceived threats on freedoms and the younger generations: *“Cela dit, je crois qu’il y a aussi une prise de conscience qui s’opère chez les jeunes. Ils commencent à réaliser que les libertés ne sont pas acquises, qu’elles peuvent être remises en question. Ils sont de plus en plus nombreux à s’interroger sur les conséquences à long terme des mesures sanitaires, sur les atteintes aux libertés individuelles.”*³⁷ Her reflection and her critical stance toward the government’s approach to COVID-19 are also echoed in other interviews.

Similarly, P16 had been researching and advocating against what she perceived as ideological drifts long before the pandemic. Hence, her frustrations, which had been building for years, found an outlet in the Convoy. For P16, she sees the Freedom movement as a reaction to the progressive loss of fundamental rights, exacerbated by how the government managed the health crisis. She sees this period as a moment of “collective awakening,” where many Canadians became aware of government and media manipulation. She stresses the importance of civic engagement, particularly through participation in municipal meetings and local elections. In a sense, P16 expresses deep resentment toward institutions that, in her opinion, betray the fundamental values of society. She speaks of “lies,” “manipulation,” “corruption,” and “destruction.” This perception of a world in crisis strengthens her commitment and feeds her sense of urgency. Moreover, her rejection of cultural transformations can be interpreted as a reaction to uncertainty and loss of bearings. Her opposition to new educational and political norms reflects a need for stability and control in a world she perceives as chaotic. As she mentioned, “I’ve been banging my head against the wall for about 10 years, trying to get everything out... I’m a Christian believer, but the Church has just been absolutely, overall, silent over this area of sexuality. So, for me, the Freedom of movement, the freedom of speech, the freedom of religion, the freedom of expression, all of those things are very important.” As highlighted later on in the interview, P16 joined the movement because she “was already very invested on...in informing people and so I just kind of decided that I would go anywhere that people would listen to truths.” Throughout the interview, P16 keeps on emphasizing her long-standing dissatisfaction with policies and actions taken by the Canadian government, and that the Convoy offered her a way to channel this sense of injustice.

Another example is participant P11, a former music host. P11 became actively engaged in activism as a direct response to the COVID-19 restrictions, highlighting her sensitivity to the “push”

³⁷ Translated by the author: “Having said that, I believe that there is also a growing awareness among young people. They’re beginning to realize that freedoms can’t be taken for granted, that they can be called into question. More and more of them are asking questions about the long-term consequences of health measures and the infringement of individual freedoms.”

factor. P11 states that “Be bold, the universe rewards boldness and courage. Be someone who elevates others, encourage others. You just never know what a person might accomplish when they receive the right guidance and words of encouragement. So be an encourager of others, elevate others.” Her statement demonstrates the urgency and conviction driving her participation, emphasizing the importance of standing up against what she perceived as a threat to her values. In fact, P11 describes her involvement in the Freedom Convoy as a response to feeling ignored by government authorities after numerous protests pre-COVID. She then viewed the Convoy as a necessity for displaying her frustrations. Her perspective is that the Freedom Convoy was a celebration of community and freedom, contrasting sharply with media portrayals of violence and unrest. P11 also adds later on that: “I wasn’t doing so just to receive words of encouragement, and I wasn’t doing this just so that I can receive money. That was not my motivation. My motivation is I want to ignite people. I see myself as an igniter, my job is to help make people aware of the situation we’re in, help them get hope, and inspire them to take action.” This statement further accentuates her desire to rally and unite in times of adversaries. It also highlights the emotional toll of feeling powerless against government policies and how it can lead to mental health challenges, including anxiety and depression. P11 shared her experience of stress and depression due to government restrictions and ticketing for rallies. Hence, the act of rallying served as a coping mechanism, providing her with a sense of agency and purpose.

Finally, P28, a single mother, felt the direct impact of the restrictions on her ability to manage work and family. As someone working two jobs, she experienced a significant personal loss of freedom and control. Here is what she had to say on the matter:

Tu vois, la pandémie, les confinements, les mesures, tout ça a changé ma vie. Au début, j’ai cru que ça allait être temporaire, mais ça s’est éternisé. Ça a affecté ma capacité à travailler, la vie de mes enfants, leur école, et au final, ça a bouleversé notre quotidien de manière énorme. Je me suis retrouvée coincée entre mes deux emplois, gérer les enfants à la maison, et j’avais l’impression qu’on m’imposait tout sans pouvoir vraiment choisir. Ça a été dur, vraiment dur. Quand les restrictions sont devenues de plus en plus sévères, j’ai eu le sentiment qu’on me privait de mes droits, que ma voix ne comptait plus. J’ai vu des gens perdre leur emploi, des commerces fermer, des enfants souffrir de l’isolement et du stress. J’ai ressenti une profonde injustice, comme si ceux qui prenaient ces décisions ne voyaient pas ou ne comprenaient pas notre réalité. J’ai commencé à m’informer, à écouter des témoignages, et plus j’en apprenais, plus je me disais que ce n’était pas normal. Alors, j’ai pensé que c’était le moment de me faire entendre. Participer au convoi, c’était pour dire que ça ne va plus. Qu’il faut retrouver un équilibre entre la liberté individuelle et la responsabilité

*collective. Il ne s'agit pas d'être contre la sécurité, mais de retrouver la possibilité de choisir, de travailler, de vivre librement. Je voulais aussi montrer à mes enfants qu'on a le droit de se lever et de lutter pour ce qu'on croit être juste.*³⁸

As she stated, the restrictions directly affected her livelihood, making this push factor a key reason behind her decision to participate in the Convoy. For P28, the health restrictions were perceived as an attack on her personal and family autonomy. Throughout the interview, she describes feeling suffocated by decisions imposed by the government without dialogue. Her involvement in the Convoy represents an attempt to regain power over her life. In the end, those who opposed mandates found themselves marginalized, prompting them to seek alternative communities that aligned with their perspectives.

Strong Pre-existing Beliefs

While the pandemic acted as a catalyst, many early joiners already held views that predisposed them to opposition. Their skepticism made them particularly receptive to narratives that framed pandemic policies as authoritarian overreach. In fact, individuals with strong pre-existing beliefs were more receptive to the Convoy's message and quicker to take action, as they already held views that aligned with its ideology. Individuals in this group often come into the movement with deeply entrenched views that align closely with the ideology being promoted. These beliefs may have developed over years or even decades and could be influenced by personal experiences, upbringing, social circles, or previous exposure to certain ideas. Their convictions could range from a fundamental distrust of governmental authority to a deep commitment to individual rights, personal sovereignty, and self-determination. These pre-existing beliefs make them especially receptive to the movement's messages, as they already resonate with the core principles being articulated. For example, someone with a strong belief in the importance of

³⁸ Translated by the author: "You see, the pandemic, the confinements, the measures, all that changed my life. At first, I thought it was going to be temporary, but it dragged on and on. It affected my ability to work, my children's lives, their school, and in the end, it disrupted our daily lives enormously. I found myself stuck between my two jobs, managing the kids at home, and I felt like everything was being imposed on me without really being able to choose. It was hard, really hard. When the restrictions got tighter and tighter, I had the feeling that I was being deprived of my rights, that my voice didn't count any more. I saw people lose their jobs, businesses close, children suffer from isolation and stress. I felt a deep sense of injustice, as if those making these decisions didn't see or understand our reality. I started asking around, listening to testimonies, and the more I learned, the more I thought this wasn't right. So I thought it was time to make my voice heard. Taking part in the Convoy was a way of saying that things weren't going well anymore. We need to strike a balance between individual freedom and collective responsibility. It's not a question of being against security, but of regaining the possibility of choosing, working and living freely. I also wanted to show my children that we have the right to stand up and fight for what we believe to be right."

personal freedom and autonomy may find the movement's advocacy for less government intervention and more personal sovereignty highly appealing.

As a result, these individuals are more likely to embrace the movement's ideas quickly and passionately. Their pre-existing convictions act as a filter through which they interpret new information, often reinforcing their resolve and commitment to the cause. This strong alignment means they are not only more open to receiving the movement's message but are also more willing to take immediate action, whether that means joining protests, spreading the message to others, or becoming actively involved in advocacy efforts. Their deep sense of ideological agreement with the movement can also increase their sense of urgency, as they view the issues at hand as not just political but as a matter of personal or moral significance. For some, the movement offers a way to validate their worldviews and feelings of being misunderstood or marginalized, creating a powerful sense of belonging to something larger than themselves. These pre-existing beliefs can act as a catalyst, motivating them to take swift, decisive action as they feel their values are under threat or that an opportunity for change has arrived.

For example, P16 exemplifies this with her decade-long engagement in social and political issues. Her research into "Marxism" suggests a well-established ideological framework that shaped how she interpreted the events surrounding the Convoy. This deep-rooted perspective made her particularly attuned to the Convoy's aims. She expresses skepticism about the possibility of reforming the current political system, believing that traditional parties are too rooted in a progressive ideology. She mentions that the emergence of a new political party based on ethical and moral values would help invigorate the Canadian political landscape. In that sense, she believes it could represent a viable alternative for many Canadians dissatisfied with the current parties. She sees this initiative as an opportunity to refocus political debate on principles of freedom and sovereignty. On that system, she is highly critical of Justin Trudeau's Liberal Party, which she accuses of promoting excessive progressivism and maintaining overly close ties with organizations such as the WHO. She also criticizes the Conservative Party for its lack of firmness and complicity with the current system. In P16's words,

So, I'm not sure as with the education system, I don't think the political system of Canada can recover. It's been so infiltrated. If you think of, you know, you're putting a...what's called...oh food colouring in a glass of water, if you put food colouring just one drop of food colouring in a glass of water, it came to change the whole colour of the glass, and depending on the size of the glass. But when you add more and more food colouring, which is what we're doing with our

culture, we're clouding, we're not just clouding the waters, we are...we are so darkening them. And so, the more you do that, the less pure...less purity you're gonna get. So, our provincial and federal governments' mindset are so progressive.

Hence, in her view, educational and media institutions serve above all to propagate a leftist ideology, thus helping to perpetuate a democratic system that she deems too corrupt to be reformed. For P16, "[t]his is really why I have been saying for the last years, don't send your children to public education facilities! Hum, because it...there is a spiral of confusion, and so deep upon...and the children walking into the classrooms, and they are presented with foreign things. Here, are these young 4-5 years old and they're being presented with ideologies and critical race theory, and so, things that no child at that age should ever have to deal with or contend with." P16 also adds that "[b]ut they [children] are being lied to constantly. So, I don't know how you feel about being lied to, but it creates something within your heart, like who do you trust. So, they're taught not to trust their parents, only the teachers and other people that come in to tell them about different things such as critical race theory. They are to trust these people and yet, there is an inner...well, we all have this inner spirit that's saying this doesn't make sense." As a result, faced with this situation, she believes it is necessary to act outside traditional structures. She defends the idea of a parallel network of education and information, relying on private schools and alternative media to counter the influence of official institutions. She also raises the possibility of the emergence of a new political party, the bearer of a genuine alternative. This would be based on morality inspired by Judeo-Christian values, a nationalist approach favouring sovereignty and independence from international organizations, and an economic policy emphasizing localism and reduced dependence on multinationals.

Similarly, P18 demonstrated a predisposition toward questioning authority and defending individual liberties. She expresses strong criticism of government actions, viewing them as an abuse of power. This reflects a broader trend of questioning the authority of elites and institutions, especially amplified by the handling of the health crisis. As she states

Quand j'ai vu l'ampleur que prenait le mouvement, j'ai senti qu'il fallait que je sois présente, que je témoigne de mon soutien. Je me suis dit que ma présence, même si elle était modeste, pouvait faire une différence. Je voulais montrer que le Convoi de la liberté n'était pas seulement un mouvement de quelques extrémistes, mais qu'il rassemblait des gens ordinaires, des citoyens préoccupés par l'avenir de notre société. Et puis, il y avait aussi l'idée de rencontrer d'autres personnes qui partageaient mes préoccupations, de créer du lien, de se

*sentir moins seuls. Je crois beaucoup à la force du collectif, à la capacité des gens à se mobiliser pour défendre leurs droits.*³⁹

Her stance can be seen, as well, as a form of active citizenship, where she refuses to passively accept decisions made by the state. The core of her criticism is surrounding the conflict between freedom and security. When P18 is asked “how far are these measures truly justified,” she argues that the restrictions have crossed the line. Lastly, P20, a lawyer and single mother, was driven by concerns about parental rights and medical freedom. These issues, which align closely with the Convoy’s focus, resonated deeply with her due to her professional and personal circumstances. As a lawyer, she saw the Convoy as a means of addressing the violations she perceived in these areas. Hence, P20’s involvement in the Convoy reflects a growing mistrust of elites and experts, especially regarding the authoritarian imposition of health measures without sufficient citizen consultation. She critiques a system that, in her view, stifles citizen debate and imposes top-down decisions, signalling a crisis in participatory democracy. As stated by P20,

The restrictions on schools and activities were harming kids, and I saw too many families struggling under policies that didn’t seem to make sense. I care deeply about parental rights, medical freedom, and government accountability. That’s why I got involved in the Convoy. It wasn’t just about protesting mandates, but about standing up for fundamental freedoms. I want my kids to grow up in a society where they can think for themselves, make their own choices, and not be afraid to question authority. I think society is at a crossroads. On one hand, we have incredible technology, more access to information than ever before, and opportunities to connect in ways that past generations couldn’t have imagined. But on the other hand, I see a growing push toward control, more government interference, more restrictions on speech, more division between people. That worries me. I value freedom, personal responsibility, and community. I believe people should have the right to make their own decisions, especially when it comes to their families and their bodies. I also think we need to rebuild a sense of real community, where people help each other instead of just relying on government institutions to solve problems. What excites me about the future is the potential for people to wake up, to push back against systems that don’t serve them, and to reclaim their autonomy.

Moreover, a central issue for P20 is the tension between individual freedom and the common good. She questions how far personal liberty should extend when it conflicts with collective interests. Her stance also includes the belief in parental sovereignty, asserting that parents should have the

³⁹ Translated by the author: “When I saw the extent of the movement, I felt I had to be there, to show my support. I told myself that my presence, however modest, could make a difference. I wanted to show that the Freedom Convoy was not just a movement of a few extremists, but that it brought together ordinary people, citizens concerned about the future of our society. And then there was this idea of meeting other people who shared my concerns, of creating links, of feeling less alone. I’m a great believer in the power of the collective, in people’s ability to mobilize to defend their rights.”

final say in medical decisions for their children, challenging public policy authority. In the end, many of these individuals linked governmental actions to broader ideological frameworks, including theories related to the Great Reset, Agenda 2030, or deep-state influence, reinforcing their perception that resistance was essential. Unsurprisingly, the movement aligns with new populist movements, where ordinary citizens challenge what they see as a detached technocracy. Similar to France's *Gilets Jaunes* and the U.S. Tea Party, the Convoy seeks to empower individuals and reject centralized state control.

Early Exposure to Pull Factors

In addition to responding to external pressures, early joiners were drawn into the movement by strong pull factors, such as community, leadership, and a renewed sense of purpose. The Convoy was frequently described by participants as a "love fest," emphasizing the deep communal bonds it fostered. In that case, these individuals are often among the first to encounter the pull factors that draw people into a movement. Whether through social media or initial grassroots efforts, they become exposed to the sense of community, the allure of belonging to something greater than themselves, or the compelling nature of charismatic leadership that often defines early movement dynamics. This early exposure not only sparks curiosity but also triggers a deeper emotional and psychological connection to the cause. They may be captivated by the vision, the energy, or the powerful sense of purpose exuded by the leaders, making them feel like they are part of a pivotal moment in history. The appeal of being part of the initial wave often adds an element of exclusivity and excitement, fostering a sense of urgency to act before the opportunity passes or becomes "mainstream."

This early involvement can foster a sense of camaraderie, where individuals feel they are joining a tight-knit group of like-minded people who share their frustrations, aspirations, and beliefs. The social bonds created in this phase can be profound, as these early joiners often experience a sense of unity and support that may have been missing in other aspects of their lives. Additionally, the personal validation they receive from aligning with the movement during its formative stages can enhance their commitment and conviction, reinforcing their sense of identity within the group. This early exposure often positions them as trendsetters or pioneers within the movement, making them feel important and integral to the cause's growth and success. Moreover, being among the first to embrace the movement can trigger a desire to contribute meaningfully to

its early momentum. They may feel an internal push to not only support the cause but to actively recruit others, share the message, and advocate for the movement's principles. This desire to be part of the "founding" stage can be driven by a mix of idealism, ego, and the excitement of being involved in something perceived as revolutionary. It creates an emotional investment in the movement, making them more likely to defend it fiercely, even when faced with skepticism or opposition, as they feel deeply attached to its early formation and potential for success.

As an example, for P37, the Convoy represented more than a protest; it was a spiritual awakening and an opportunity to connect with like-minded individuals who valued sovereignty and truth. For P37,

The Convoy wasn't just about protesting the mandates; it was a call to action against the systems that restrict our freedom on all levels—physically, mentally, and spiritually. [...] I helped organize and mobilize people who shared my perspective, helping to spread the message that the Convoy was not about politics but about freedom, individual rights, and spiritual awakening. I made connections with people who were just beginning to see the truth about the system, and I shared with them the tools I had learned about sovereignty consciousness, and how we can begin to step outside the system's control.

In this way, early joiners like P16 and P37 were not merely participants but catalysts for the movement's expansion, forging deep emotional and ideological commitments that solidified their roles as both advocates and architects of its growth. Their initial engagement, fueled by a sense of purpose and belonging, laid the foundation for a movement that transcended protest, evolving into a broader quest for freedom, sovereignty, and collective awakening. What should also be noted is the presence of charismatic leaders further shaping the movement's trajectory. Figures such as Tamara Lich played a vital role in establishing early momentum, providing direction, and amplifying the movement's message.

Lower Threshold for Action

Unlike later participants, early joiners were willing to act despite significant legal, financial, and social risks. Many had already lost their jobs or experienced alienation from family and friends, which lowered their perceived cost of participation. Hence, these individuals have a lower threshold for taking action, meaning they are more willing to act quickly and decisively, even when the movement is in its infancy or still uncertain in its goals and outcomes. Their personal factors make them more prone to taking risks or embracing bold actions. They are less likely to

wait for the movement to gain widespread acceptance or to become fully organized before getting involved. This readiness to act stems from an intense desire for change or a need to address what they perceive as immediate and pressing issues in their lives or society. These individuals may feel a heightened sense of urgency, viewing their participation as not just a personal choice but as a moral or existential imperative. The movement may feel like a last opportunity for them to take control, express their grievances, or assert their autonomy. As a result, they are often willing to act despite potential social risks, such as alienating friends, family, or colleagues who might disagree with their stance. For some, this willingness to act comes from a deep conviction that the stakes are too high to remain passive or wait for the movement to gain wider momentum. Their personal motivations, whether they are driven by ideals of freedom, justice, or a desire to protect their livelihood or health, override concerns about social repercussions or public opinion.

Additionally, these individuals are less likely to be deterred by the uncertainty surrounding the movement's success or the potential consequences of their actions. While others might hesitate due to fear of failure, legal repercussions, or reputational damage, those with a lower threshold for action often see these risks as secondary to the immediate need for change. They may perceive participation as a form of self-expression or an act of defiance against what they view as a system that has wronged them. The emotional and ideological pull to take action in the face of adversity makes them more resilient in the face of obstacles, as they are often motivated by a deep-seated belief that they are fighting for something greater than themselves. This lower threshold for action can lead them to take significant steps early on—such as joining protests, speaking out publicly, or engaging in acts of civil disobedience—without the hesitation that might hold others back. Their willingness to act in the face of uncertainty also makes them more likely to serve as catalysts within the movement, sparking others to follow suit and contribute to its momentum.

This can be seen with P3 and P11. For P3, it began with attending rallies as early as April 2020, distributing informational materials, engaging in street-level activism, and eventually assuming a leadership role within a political organization. For P3,

But then, COVID hits and it seems pretty apparent to me very quickly that...maybe because of the research that I was already doing on *industry X*, that it just didn't make sense fairly quickly for me. So, I started going to marches, getting involved with a very small group at the time, and going to marches and rallies every Saturday like starting in April of 2020. I did that for a couple months and I continue to do that, but I just felt it wasn't enough. We needed to find a way. I felt personally that we have to find a way to get this out, so people weren't

just being sled...you saw what the mainstream media were saying and like “wow people are really believing this”... I really actually, at first I didn’t really believe that many people would kinda fall for everything, but they did...laugh.

As for P11, she described her personal “awakening” in February 2021, a moment when she believed that inaction was no longer an option, leading her to actively organize events and spread awareness. In fact, P11 states that she “was active politically somewhat, and there were times in my life where I disagree with policies at a municipal, provincial or federal level, but I didn’t do anything. I didn’t get engage, and all I did was complain to my friends and family. It was not until February of 2021 when I realized that things only change if we make the change. We, the people, have to push and make the change happen. And so, February of 2021 was a real awakening for me.” As seen with P3 and P11, their primary concern was not public perception but rather the need to take a stand against perceived governmental overreach.

Late Joiners: The Expanding Wave

On the other hand, we have the late joiners, individuals whose participation in the Convoy was not driven by an immediate sense of urgency or an inherent alignment with its core beliefs at the outset. Unlike early joiners who were quick to engage based on strong pre-existing beliefs or a direct personal connection to the grievances, late joiners came to the movement later, often after seeing it gain more momentum and visibility. Their decision to join was less about an instinctual response and more about the gradual accumulation of pressures from various aspects of their lives. Over time, they found themselves increasingly drawn to the movement as their personal circumstances and the broader societal context shifted.

For these late joiners, the economic, social, and political pressures they faced began to build up, slowly but steadily, until they could no longer ignore the growing dissatisfaction within themselves and their communities. Perhaps their financial situation worsened due to continued government restrictions or policies they perceived as unjust. Or they may have witnessed the social and psychological toll on their peers, feeling the strain of social isolation, mental health struggles, or loss of personal freedoms. At the same time, the political climate, shaped by rising debates over government overreach and individual rights, became harder to ignore. In parallel, the Convoy itself grew in visibility and legitimacy. As more people participated and the movement gained media attention, it became harder for those on the sidelines to dismiss it as a fringe or extreme reaction. The increasing numbers and more diverse backgrounds of participants lent the movement an air of

credibility, transforming it from a small protest into a larger, more organized cause. This visibility, combined with growing discontent, eventually convinced the late joiners that the Convoy represented not just a vocal minority, but also a broadening, legitimate movement that echoed their own concerns.

Thus, late joiners did not rush into the movement out of a pre-existing alignment with its ideals, but rather came to view participation as a necessary response to the mounting pressures they were facing. The gradual accumulation of these factors, paired with the movement's expanding influence, eventually compelled them to take action.

Gradual Increase in Push Factors

For some individuals, the decision to join activism was delayed until the pressures of the pandemic became unbearable. Economic struggles, prolonged restrictions, and growing disillusionment with government responses played a key role in mobilization. For some individuals, the push factors that led to their involvement in the Convoy did not come all at once; rather, they became more pronounced and difficult to ignore over time. As these push factors gradually intensified, individuals began to feel a growing sense of urgency or desperation. This gradual increase might have been linked to worsening personal or economic situations, as well as a mounting awareness of the broader societal consequences of the grievances at hand.

For example, as the economic impact of government policies or restrictions started to hit harder, some individuals found themselves facing financial hardship or job insecurity. This could have led to increased frustration and feelings of being cornered, especially if their livelihoods were directly affected by restrictions or mandates. As they struggled to make ends meet, their sense of personal autonomy and control may have felt further eroded, making the Convoy's message of resistance to government overreach more appealing. Similarly, for others, witnessing the impact of these issues on their community may have made the push factors more salient. Observing neighbours, friends, or loved ones struggling with the same grievances—whether due to job losses, health concerns, or the social and psychological toll of the pandemic—have catalyzed a shift in their perspective. Seeing the broader societal effects have deepened their belief that action was needed. It was no longer just a matter of personal inconvenience; it was a matter of collective suffering, and the Convoy provided a vehicle for expressing discontent and calling for change. In this way, the gradual accumulation of push factors created a tipping point for many, where the

accumulation of personal losses, economic hardships, and community-wide struggles made participation in the Convoy seem like a necessary and urgent step. The frustration that had been brewing over time transformed into active resistance, spurred by both personal and communal experiences.

As an example, we have P29, an accountant based in Quebec City. P29 mentions that he has been an accountant for over 20 years and,

Je suis aussi père de deux enfants, un garçon de 14 ans et une fille de 10 ans. Comme beaucoup de parents, j'ai ressenti une grande inquiétude ces dernières années face aux restrictions, aux impacts économiques des fermetures et aux mesures qui ont bouleversé notre quotidien. J'ai vu des clients perdre leur entreprise du jour au lendemain, des familles s'endetter pour survivre, et tout cela m'a profondément affecté.⁴⁰

P29 later on emphasis his desire to join the movement because he could no longer stand the restrictions, but also how passive he was until March of 2023.

Au début, comme tout le monde, j'ai suivi les consignes sans trop me poser de questions. Mais avec le temps et beaucoup de temps est passé avant que je me décide. Pendant ce temps-là, j'ai vu des choses qui ne faisaient pas de sens. J'ai vu des décisions incohérentes, des restrictions qui semblaient arbitraires, et surtout, j'ai constaté les dégâts économiques et humains causés par ces mesures. Mais encore là, je choisisais de rester passif. Et, c'est là que quelque chose a changé en moi. Pour la première fois, j'ai ressenti un sentiment d'injustice profond. Ce n'était plus juste une question de politique, c'était une question de liberté, de droits fondamentaux. J'ai commencé à poser des questions, à remettre en doute le discours officiel. Et plus j'en apprenais, plus j'étais convaincu qu'on allait dans la mauvaise direction. Après des mois, j'ai décidé que c'était assez, et en mars 2023, je me suis investi dans le mouvement.⁴¹

Similarly, we have P22, a stay-at-home mother. She initially remained uninvolved but later became engaged as she observed the negative impact of pandemic policies on children and families. For P22, she simply “want[ed] to see some peace and stability. It’s been a tough few years, and I think it’s time we focus on healing. I want our kids to have a normal childhood, one without so much

⁴⁰ Translated by the author: “I’m also the father of two children, a 14-year-old boy and a 10-year-old girl. Like many parents, I’ve felt a great deal of anxiety in recent years about the restrictions, economic impacts of closures and measures that have disrupted our daily lives. I’ve seen customers lose their businesses overnight, families go into debt to survive, and all this has affected me deeply.”

⁴¹ Translated by the author: “At first, like everyone else, I followed the instructions without asking myself too many questions. But as time went on, well a lot of time passed before I made up my mind. During that time, I saw things that didn’t make sense. I saw inconsistent decisions, restrictions that seemed arbitrary, and above all, I saw the economic and human damage caused by these measures. But even then, I chose to remain passive. And that’s when something changed in me. For the first time, I felt a profound sense of injustice. It was no longer just a question of politics, it was a question of freedom, of fundamental rights. I started asking questions, questioning the official narrative. And the more I learned, the more convinced I became that we were going in the wrong direction. After months, I decided enough was enough, and in March 2023, I became involved in the movement.”

tension and division. I hope we can move beyond the conflicts of the last few years and find common ground.” Hence, the Convoy was a concern for all that is for the older generations, families, parents and the younger generation. As a result, over time, the persistence of job losses, inflation, and prolonged mandates pushed more individuals toward participation.

Increased Visibility of Pull Factors

As the movement gained traction, later joiners were influenced by growing exposure through social media and increased legitimacy. In other words, as the Convoy movement gained momentum, the pull factors, those elements that attracted people to join, became increasingly visible and accessible, drawing more individuals into its orbit. Initially, the movement may have been seen as a fringe or niche protest, but as it grew in size and influence, the appeal became much clearer to a wider audience. Media coverage played a significant role in amplifying these pull factors, as news outlets began to report on the Convoy’s actions, events, and messages. The increased exposure made it difficult for people to ignore the movement, as it appeared more legitimate and widespread, offering a sense of solidarity and a platform for expressing shared frustrations.

At the same time, social media platforms acted as powerful tools for spreading the message of the Convoy. As posts, videos, and memes circulated, more people encountered the ideas and narratives surrounding the movement. Social media allowed for real-time updates, and viral content served to make the Convoy’s message more relatable and accessible to a broader, often younger audience. These platforms also provided spaces for individuals to connect with like-minded people, creating a sense of community and belonging. Online discussions and grassroots campaigns on Facebook, X, Instagram, and other platforms helped mobilize participants by fostering a sense of urgency and offering a space for individuals to rally behind a cause they felt was gaining traction.

Moreover, word-of-mouth played a crucial role in expanding the Convoy’s visibility. As individuals who were already involved began to share their experiences with family, friends, and coworkers, the movement reached new audiences. Personal testimonies and stories of how participation had affected their lives or helped them connect with others experiencing similar challenges encouraged more people to join. This organic spread of information made the movement feel more grounded and relatable, rather than something imposed from the outside.

Hearing from trusted sources, people within their immediate social circles, was often more persuasive than distant news reports or online content. As these pull factors became more visible through media coverage, social media activity, and word-of-mouth, they created a snowball effect. The more people saw others engaging with the Convoy, the more legitimate and appealing it seemed. What started as a movement on the margins began to take on the appearance of a mainstream cause, offering not just an opportunity to resist perceived injustices, but a sense of purpose, community, and identity for those who felt disconnected or alienated from the broader societal narrative. For many, the pull factors became hard to ignore, as the Convoy increasingly appeared as a powerful, visible vehicle for expressing their discontent and calling for change.

As P24 noted, the movement's success in spreading awareness played a significant role in convincing more people to challenge government narratives and to join the movement. For P24, who is a student, he first identified himself as a skeptic, but became increasingly involved with the movement after researching about the virus on alternative media outlets, and witnessing the censorship of dissenting voices. As he mentioned, the Convoy "definitely served as a wake-up call. It drew attention to alternative perspectives and forced people to ask tough questions. I'm hoping that this is just the beginning of a broader movement where more people start questioning the narratives they're being fed, and demand more transparency from the government." Moreover, P24 adds that:

I've spent the last few months digging into independent sources of information. I don't trust mainstream news outlets anymore because I feel like they're often controlled by large interests that push certain narratives. As I learned more about global power structures and government control, I became convinced that the Convoy was about something bigger than COVID or vaccines. For me, it was a movement against growing authoritarianism. The government, through mandates and restrictions, was trying to force people to comply, and I saw the movement as a way to stand up against that. Even though a lot of people were focused on the mandates, I saw it as a chance to fight back against what I view as a systematic attempt to control our lives.

A statement that was also supported by his friends P23 and P34 who had a similar experience in joining the Freedom Convoy. Similarly, P35, a police officer, admits that while the movement became polarized, it provided individuals with the confidence to resist coercion and assert their rights. For him,

cette polarisation était palpable. Vous aviez d'un côté des manifestants qui se sentaient marginalisés, rejetés par la société et les autorités, et de l'autre, des contre-manifestants ou des citoyens inquiets qui percevaient le Convoi comme

une menace pour l'ordre public. Les médias sociaux ont en quelque sorte exacerbé cette situation en permettant à ces groupes de se renforcer mutuellement. Quand vous êtes dans une manifestation, il n'est pas toujours évident de distinguer les individus pacifiques des éléments plus radicaux, et les médias sociaux ont tendance à focaliser sur les images les plus choquantes ou les actions les plus extrêmes, au détriment de l'image globale. Au finale, la perception du Convoi était largement façonnée par ces moments extrêmes, et non par l'ensemble de la foule. Cela a conduit à un effet de « binaire » : si vous étiez avec eux, vous étiez un « patriote », un « défenseur des libertés », mais si vous n'étiez pas d'accord, vous étiez rapidement étiqueté comme « un ennemi de la liberté ». [...] En réalité, la situation était beaucoup plus complexe que ce que les images ou les tweets pouvaient véhiculer. En plus de ça, l'approche des autorités en matière de gestion de la situation a aussi joué un rôle dans cette polarisation. Il y a eu une sorte de « comportement de force », où l'on a mis l'accent sur la dissuasion à tout prix. De nombreux policiers, dont je faisais partie, étaient dans une position difficile. La décision de recourir à l'option de la force dans certains cas, l'utilisation de la loi et des restrictions pour dissoudre la manifestation, a renforcé la division. C'était comme si on voulait réduire au silence une voix collective, celle de milliers de Canadiens qui s'étaient rassemblés pour défendre ce qu'ils considéraient comme des droits fondamentaux.⁴²

P35 joined the movement later on in September of 2023 knowing the consequences such involvement could have on his career. Some of his colleagues joined the movement while concealing their identities and avoiding cameras, lives or any other elements that could help the public identify them and report them to their superiors. In the end, both mainstream and independent media coverage contributed to the Convoy's broader appeal, making it more accessible to those who were initially hesitant.

⁴² Translated by the author: "The polarization was apparent. You had on one side protesters who felt marginalized, rejected by society and the authorities, and on the other side, counter-demonstrators or worried citizens who perceived the Convoy as a threat to public order. Social media has somehow exacerbated this situation by allowing these groups to strengthen each other. When you're in a protest, it's not always easy to distinguish peaceful individuals from more radical elements, and social media tends to focus on the most shocking images or extreme actions at the expense of the bigger picture. In the end, the perception of the Convoy was largely shaped by these extreme moments, not by the crowd as a whole. This led to a binary effect: if you were with them, you were a "patriot", a "defender of freedoms", but if you didn't agree, you were quickly labeled as an "enemy of freedom". [...] In reality, the situation was much more complex than what the images or tweets could convey. On top of that, the authorities' approach to managing the situation has also played a role in this polarization. There was a kind of "force behaviour", where the emphasis was on deterrence at all costs. Many police officers, including myself, were in a difficult position. The decision to use force in some cases – the use of law and restrictions to dissolve the demonstration – has reinforced division. It was as if they wanted to silence a collective voice, that of thousands of Canadians who had come together to defend what they considered fundamental rights."

Social Pressure

As momentum built, many later joiners felt a growing obligation to take a stand. The desire to be part of a historic moment influenced their decision to engage. For instance, as the Convoy movement grew in size and visibility, social pressure became an increasingly powerful motivator for individuals to join. When a movement gains momentum and large numbers of people begin participating, it creates a social dynamic in which those who are not involved may begin to feel like outsiders. This sense of being left out or excluded can be especially powerful in tight-knit communities or social groups where participation in a shared cause becomes a way of signalling alignment with widely held beliefs and values. For some, the fear of being judged or criticized for not supporting the cause becomes a compelling reason to join, as they don't want to be perceived as unsympathetic, disengaged, or unwilling to stand up for what they see as important. This social pressure can manifest in several ways. First, as more individuals in a social circle, whether friends, family, or coworkers, get involved, the movement starts to feel like the norm, creating a sense of obligation to participate. Individuals may begin to feel that their refusal to take part is a form of personal rebellion or defiance against the shared values of their community. The more people who speak about the movement positively, share their involvement on social media, or discuss it in everyday conversations, the harder it becomes to remain uninvolved without feeling like an outsider. The fear of being seen as apathetic or unwilling to fight for freedom and justice may prompt those who were initially on the sidelines to reconsider their stance.

Additionally, social pressure often creates a sense of urgency and a need to conform. When a movement or cause gain momentum, the collective energy and enthusiasm can be contagious. People may feel a strong pull to participate in order to avoid being perceived as passive or uninformed. In some cases, the fear of being left behind socially can make it seem like the movement offers not only a platform for voicing concerns but also a means of belonging. For individuals who might feel disconnected from their community or alienated by political or social divisions, joining the Convoy can offer a sense of unity, identity, and purpose that they may not find elsewhere. Moreover, the fear of being judged for not supporting the cause can extend beyond immediate social circles. In a highly polarized environment, where debates about government overreach, freedom, and personal rights are at the forefront, individuals may feel public pressure to align with the prevailing opinion. The Convoy, as it gained traction, became not just a movement but also a statement of identity. For some, to remain silent or passive in the face of such a

widespread cause felt like tacit approval of the status quo. As the movement gained more visibility, social pressure mounted, making non-participation feel like a refusal to stand up for the values many felt they were at risk.

In essence, social pressure acted as both an external motivator and an internal compulsion. The larger the Convoy became, the more individuals felt they had to act, not only to avoid judgment but also to affirm their place within a broader community that shared their growing sense of urgency and conviction. The fear of being left out or judged, coupled with the desire to belong and support a cause they began to view as vital, pushed more people to step forward and participate. P39 described how individuals who were initially skeptical eventually recognized the necessity of participation. For instance, she emphasized that what really pushed people to join

*c'est ce sentiment de ne plus avoir à rester silencieux. Si on ne faisait rien, on savait que personne d'autre ne le ferait non plus. Beaucoup de gens étaient terrifiés à l'idée de s'opposer, par peur d'être étiquetés ou d'être perçus comme irresponsables. Mais selon moi, c'était un moment où on devait choisir quel genre de personne on voulait être. Si on laissait passer cette occasion de s'exprimer, alors on serait complice de cette dérive vers un monde où nos libertés sont peu à peu étouffées.*⁴³

Likewise, P33 observed that as the movement grew, it attracted people who had previously dismissed it, but also enforced this feeling of solidarity. For P33, *“La solidarité entre les participants, malgré cette pression extérieure, était exceptionnelle. Cela m'a montré qu'il est possible de se réunir pacifiquement pour défendre une cause, même si les autorités ou les médias essaient de nous diviser. En fin de compte, c'est cette solidarité qui a fait toute la différence.”*⁴⁴ In the end, fear of missing out or being perceived as complicit in government overreach motivated some later joiners to take action.

Reduced Perceived Risk

The increased number of participants reduced the perceived risks associated with activism. Individuals who initially feared legal or social repercussions found reassurance in the strength of numbers. As the Convoy movement expanded and gained more visibility, the perceived risks

⁴³ Translated by the author: “It’s that feeling of not having to be silent anymore. If you didn’t do anything, you knew nobody else would either. Many people were terrified of opposing, for fear of being labelled or perceived as irresponsible. But, it was a time when you had to choose what kind of person you wanted to be. If we missed this opportunity to express ourselves, then we would be complicit in this drift towards a world where our freedoms are gradually stifled.”

⁴⁴ Translated by the author: “The solidarity between the participants, despite this external pressure, was exceptional. That showed me that it is possible to meet peacefully to defend a cause, even if the authorities or the media are trying to divide us. Ultimately, it is this solidarity that has the whole difference.”

associated with participation gradually diminished for many individuals. Initially, those contemplating involvement in the movement might have felt hesitant or uncertain, worried about the potential personal, professional, or social consequences of taking a stand. The fear of a backlash, whether in the form of public criticism, legal repercussions, or strained relationships, could have been a significant deterrent. However, as more people joined, the movement's growing numbers created a sense of safety in numbers, where the risks of standing out as part of a larger collective seemed less daunting.

When a movement begins to gather momentum and attracts a diverse range of participants, individuals often feel reassured by the sheer scale of support. As more people from various walks of life, whether teachers, parents, or workers, become involved, the sense that participating is risky or unusual diminishes. It becomes easier to see oneself as part of a larger, more legitimate movement, where individual risks are spread across the group. The fear of standing alone fades as the crowd grows, and the idea of being one of many voices calling for change reduces the sense of vulnerability that may have been present in the initial stages of the movement. The perception of reduced risk is further compounded by the visible success and organization of the movement. As more people engage with the Convoy, it begins to look less like a fringe or radical protest and more like a legitimate social movement with clear goals and widespread support. The presence of a well-coordinated structure, including established spokespeople, legal advisors, and media outreach, can make participants feel more secure, knowing that they are not acting in isolation. The logistical and strategic organization behind the Convoy reduces the likelihood of arbitrary or disproportionate consequences for individual participants, such as legal trouble or public shaming.

Furthermore, as the movement gains visibility and attracts more media attention, the risks associated with participating can appear less severe. If the movement is portrayed sympathetically in some media outlets or gains support from well-known figures, the fear of negative publicity or legal action can seem less likely. For some, knowing that the Convoy's cause is resonating with a larger segment of the population can make the risks feel less personal or more justifiable. People might begin to believe that the movement's size and legitimacy will shield them from the negative consequences they once feared. The idea of solidarity also plays a key role in reducing perceived risks. As more participants join, they start to feel part of a community united by common goals, where individual actions are seen as part of a collective effort. This sense of belonging can mitigate feelings of fear or isolation, as participants are no longer facing the consequences alone. The

potential for backlash, whether from employers, authorities, or the general public, may seem less threatening when shared by a large group of like-minded individuals. The risks of standing out are counterbalanced by the collective strength and visibility of the movement, making the idea of participating appear safer.

In other words, as the Convoy grew in size and prominence, the perceived risk of joining began to shrink. The sense of solidarity, the growing legitimacy of the movement, and the visibility it gained through media coverage all contributed to a climate where participation no longer seemed like a lone, risky act but rather a part of a widespread, organized effort that many others were undertaking. This shift in perception encouraged more individuals to take the step from hesitation to active involvement, as the consequences of their participation seemed less intimidating in the face of growing public support and collective action. P19 as well as P40 and P41 remarked that once the Convoy reached a critical mass, more people felt comfortable voicing their opposition. P4, P23, and P24 observed a shift in attitudes as skepticism waned and previously hesitant individuals became actively engaged. The large-scale nature of the protests provided a sense of protection and solidarity, making it easier for individuals to join without fear of isolation.

Concluding Remarks

In sum, early joiners were the backbone of the movement, emerging as its core organizers who acted swiftly out of a combination of immediate necessity and deeply held ideological conviction. These individuals were often the first to recognize the encroaching threat posed by government mandates, seeing them not just as temporary measures, but as a dangerous shift toward authoritarian control. Their response was driven by a sense of urgency, believing that resistance was crucial to preserving personal freedoms and preventing further government overreach.

Table 3 Factors to Consider for Early and Later Joiners

Factor	Early Joiners	Late Joiners
Push Factors	Immediate loss (job, business, social standing).	Gradual frustration (inflation, restrictions, shifting beliefs).
Pre-existing Beliefs	Already distrusted government & media.	Initially trusted the system but lost faith.

Pull Factors	Community & activism reinforced their stance.	Social influence, economic struggles, and movement legitimacy.
Threshold for Action	Low - ready to act despite risks.	High - needed time to assess before engaging.
Reason for Staying	Ideological commitment & leadership roles.	Sense of disillusionment & empowerment.

Late joiners, in contrast, took longer to engage with the movement. Initially hesitant or less affected by the early restrictions, they were gradually drawn in as conditions worsened and the scope of mandates expanded. Social networks played a significant role in this shift, with many joining after being influenced by friends, family, or online communities. As the risk perception changed, especially as protests gained momentum, the idea of resistance became more appealing and less intimidating. For these latecomers, the movement eventually felt like a necessary step to protect their own freedoms. Despite the differences in timing and motivations, both early and late joiners ultimately remained committed to the cause because they shared a common belief: they were fighting for something much larger than the immediate issue at hand. Both groups saw their participation as a stand for personal sovereignty, a defence of individual rights, and a broader struggle for national sovereignty in the face of perceived government overreach. Their unity, despite their different entry points, underscored the strength of the movement's underlying message of freedom and self-determination.

Additional Findings – A Gendered Perspective of Men versus Women in the Freedom Movement

Mothers, Workers, and Activists: The Varied Faces of the Convoy's Female Participants

The women of the Freedom Convoy represent different social, cultural, and economic backgrounds, but are united by a common goal which is to challenge what they perceive as government overreach and defend their personal freedoms. These women come from all walks of life—mothers, workers, and teachers—each driven by personal concerns for their families, communities, and the future of Canada. For many, the primary motivator is a concern for their children's future. Women like P20, P33, and P38, who emphasize their roles as mothers, are deeply concerned about the negative impacts of government policies on their children's well-being. The

pandemic's toll on children's education, social development, and mental health, compounded by mandates such as vaccine requirements and school closures, has left many women feeling the need to act. They see the Convoy as a way to protect their families from what they view as government overreach. For some, this has even led to homeschooling their children, as they perceive a growing intrusion into parental rights and educational freedom. In addition to mothers, many women in the Freedom Convoy are workers and professionals who feel the effects of government policies in their careers. Teachers, healthcare workers, retail employees, public servants, and small business owners are prominent among the Convoy's participants. Some women have lost their jobs or faced professional ostracization because of their opposition to vaccine mandates. Small business owners, who have struggled through lockdowns, feel particularly aggrieved, as they believe government policies have disproportionately favoured large corporations while devastating independent entrepreneurs. Spirituality also plays a significant role in the movement for many women. For some, their activism is motivated by religious or spiritual convictions. Women like P16 and P38 view their involvement in the Convoy as a spiritual calling, a means to defend Christian values against policies they believe are eroding morality. Others, such as P37, approach the movement from a New Age perspective, seeing it as part of a broader spiritual awakening and resistance to societal control mechanisms. These women view government mandates as part of a global agenda that undermines personal sovereignty and see their participation as a way to fight for truth, enlightenment, and self-determination.

Despite their varied backgrounds, these women share a core belief that the government has overstepped its bounds. Whether it is vaccine requirements, lockdowns, or restrictions on freedom of movement, they view these policies as violations of their personal autonomy and fundamental rights. They see the Convoy as a united stand against what they perceive as government tyranny and as a means of safeguarding freedoms for future generations. This shared belief in personal sovereignty and resistance to control has brought women from different walks of life together, creating a powerful collective voice. The movement also resonates with women who are frustrated by broader social and economic issues. Women like P28 point to the rising cost of living, inequality, and the lack of support for working families as key motivators for their involvement. For these women, the Convoy is not just a protest against mandates but a platform to voice their concerns about systemic pressures and the growing divide between ordinary Canadians and powerful elites. Some small business owners have expressed frustration that lockdowns favoured large

corporations while independent businesses were left to struggle. These economic grievances, combined with a sense of injustice over lost livelihoods and jobs, have fuelled their desire to join the movement and reclaim agency over their futures. The younger women involved in the Convoy, such as P34, bring their own unique perspectives to the movement. While they support the right to protest, they also grapple with the complexities of certain issues within the Convoy, such as inclusivity and LGBTQ+ rights. Many younger participants see the movement as an opportunity to redefine feminism, focusing on bodily autonomy and informed consent as essential components of women's rights. For these women, the fight against mandates is part of a larger struggle for personal sovereignty and self-determination.

The Convoy included both early and late joiners, each motivated by a different set of circumstances. Early joiners were driven by a concern for their children's future and a desire to protect their families from what they saw as a growing infringement on personal freedoms. Women like P16 joined early, motivated by the negative impact of pandemic policies on children's education and social development. These women remained involved because the Convoy provided them with a sense of community, validation, and hope. Women like P37, already involved in alternative health and New Age spiritual communities before the pandemic, saw the Convoy as a way to further their resistance to mainstream health policies. Their participation was driven by a deep mistrust of "big pharma" and a belief in the importance of personal sovereignty. The movement offered them a sense of empowerment and belonging, aligned with their values of self-determination and skepticism toward conventional systems.

Late joiners, often hesitant at first, were typically motivated by the growing momentum of the movement or by their own disillusionment with official narratives. Some, like P22, were mothers who initially hesitated to get involved but joined after seeing other like-minded women becoming active. The family-oriented messaging of the Convoy helped ease their concerns about potential social backlash, and they found confidence and solidarity in the movement. Others, such as P24, were cautious observers who became involved after witnessing media suppression and government overreach. These women found that the Convoy exposed them to alternative perspectives, helping them question the official narratives they had once trusted. What unites these diverse women is a shared commitment to fighting for freedom, whether motivated by family values, spiritual beliefs, or personal philosophy. They see the Convoy as a united stand against what they perceive as government control, offering them a sense of solidarity and empowerment.

Many women have become disillusioned with mainstream institutions, including the media and government, and have turned to grassroots networks for support and information. The Convoy has given them a platform to voice their concerns and connect with others who share their values.

The women of the Freedom Convoy are not a monolithic group, but rather a diverse collection of voices united by a common desire to reclaim their freedoms and stand up for what they believe in. From mothers and workers to activists and spiritual seekers, these women represent a growing segment of Canadian society seeking to challenge the status quo and advocate for a freer, more just future. Together, they are amplifying their voices, forging solidarity, and working toward a future where personal sovereignty, individual rights, and freedom are respected.

The Diverse Voices of the Convoy: Men United by Frustration, Family, and the Fight for Freedom

The men who joined the Freedom Convoy also represent a broad and diverse cross-section of Canadian society, united by a shared sense of frustration and a deep commitment to protecting personal freedoms. Though they come from different backgrounds, occupations, and upbringing, they are bound by a common cause: to resist what they see as government overreach and to safeguard the values that they believe define Canadian society. For many of these men, the Convoy was a reaction to what they felt was a growing disregard for their struggles. A profound distrust of government and frustration with pandemic-related mandates shaped their participation. P42, a white-collar worker, expressed the widespread sentiment:

Avant le Convoi, j'avais l'impression que peu importe ce qu'on vivait, personne nous écoutait. Mais là, on était des milliers à s'unir, à crier d'une seule voix : Ça suffit ! Je me souviens d'un moment en particulier. Une journée, y'avait un gars qui s'est mis à parler au micro sur une estrade improvisée. Il racontait comment il avait perdu son commerce à cause des restrictions, comment il avait mis toute sa vie dans son entreprise et qu'en quelques mois, tout s'était écroulé. Il pleurait en disant qu'il se sentait abandonné, oublié par son propre pays. Pis là, la foule s'est mise à l'applaudir, à l'encourager. Ça, c'était puissant. Ça montrait qu'on n'était pas seuls dans nos batailles personnelles. Peut-être qu'on n'a pas gagné cette bataille-là, mais on a prouvé quelque chose. On a montré qu'on est capables de se lever pis de dire ce qu'on pense, qu'on n'est pas juste des chiffres sur une feuille de statistiques.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Translated by the author: "Before the Convoy, I had the impression that no matter what we were experiencing, nobody was listening. But there, we were thousands of people coming together, shouting: Enough! I remember a particular moment. One day, there was a guy who started talking on an improvised platform. He told how he had lost his business because of the restrictions, how he put all his life in his company and that within a few months everything had collapsed. He wept as he said that he felt abandoned, forgotten by his own country. Even more, the crowd began to applaud and encourage him. That was powerful. It showed

His words echo the feelings of many who felt abandoned by leaders who prioritized abstract policies over the very real consequences faced by ordinary citizens. A strong belief in individual freedoms also defined these men's involvement. For them, the restrictions were not temporary inconveniences but dangerous precedents that could erode their rights in the long term. Professionals like P25, a lawyer, and P29, an accountant, brought an analytical perspective to the movement. P25 emphasized the potential risks to civil liberties, saying: "In my view, a large portion of the measures seemed to violate fundamental freedoms such as the freedom of movement, the right to protest, and the right to bodily autonomy. Given my background, I couldn't sit blindly by without offering my support to those who were speaking out against what they saw as an infringement on their rights." Similarly, P29 highlighted the economic impact of these measures, particularly on small businesses, and the increasing government control over individual choices, especially concerning bodily autonomy.

The frustration of these men was heightened by the perception that rural communities were being neglected. Many came from rural or small-town backgrounds, and they felt that government policies, crafted with urban populations in mind, had devastating consequences for their communities. P19 captured this sentiment: "You know, it's like we're on the edge of things, and people in the big cities forget about what life is like out here." For these men, the pandemic response was just another example of a long-standing pattern where the concerns of rural communities were dismissed in favour of policies catering to urban centres and corporate interests. Family concerns were also a central motivator for these men. They feared the kind of world their children would inherit, both in terms of social values and economic security. P29 shared these concerns, saying: "Our children were in the process of paying the price of a climate of fear and isolation, and no one in power seemed to care." Many were heartbroken over their children's struggles with anxiety, depression, and loneliness, and feared that the long-term economic instability caused by the pandemic would make it harder for the next generation to build stable lives. Retirees like P31 and P40, who had lived through times when they felt freedoms were more secure, joined the Convoy to defend the values they believed in, such as freedom and self-determination. P31, a retired trucker, lamented the increasing regulations in his profession, while P40, a grandfather, felt compelled to stand up for future generations.

we weren't alone in our personal battles. Maybe we didn't win that battle, but we proved something. We have shown that we are able to stand up and say what we think, that we are not just figures on a sheet of statistics."

Interestingly, many of the men who joined the Convoy were not previously politically active. P30, for example, admitted: “I’m not an activist guy. Before the Convoy, I had never participated in a protest, never carried a sign, never shouted slogans in the street. To be honest, I always told myself that it was useless, that it was people wasting their time shouting at a government that would never listen to them.” The Convoy, however, succeeded in mobilizing these individuals, drawing them in with a shared sense of frustration and injustice. Many felt that the pandemic had forced them to take a stand in a way they never had before. For these men, the Convoy represented more than just opposition to mandates, it was a fight for their families, communities, and way of life. P35 spoke passionately about the devastating effects of forced business closures: “When I saw clients losing their businesses because of the forced closures... it was no longer just a public health issue, it was a social and economic crisis.” The Convoy became a symbol of resistance not just to mandates, but to a government they felt had overstepped its bounds.

The early joiners of the movement were often politically engaged or economically affected, motivated by their existing skepticism toward government overreach. Many, such as P12, a truck driver, quickly redirected their activism to support the Convoy when COVID-19 restrictions threatened their livelihoods. These men had long been concerned about personal sovereignty and viewed the pandemic response as an attack on their freedoms. For them, the Convoy was an opportunity to fight for a broader political cause. Similarly, working-class defenders like truckers, oil and gas workers, and small business owners joined the Convoy because they saw their livelihoods threatened by the mandates. They became central figures in the movement, motivated by a personal sense of attack from the government. Security enforcers, often with law enforcement or survivalist backgrounds, also played a crucial role in the Convoy. These men viewed themselves as protectors of civil liberties, stepping in where they felt police and government institutions had failed. They joined the movement to protect freedom, believing that direct action was necessary to safeguard the rights of citizens.

Later joiners, on the other hand, were initially cautious or compliant but grew frustrated as the restrictions dragged on and economic hardships worsened. P42, for example, explained that he had initially supported government measures but became disillusioned as dissent was suppressed and the consequences of the policies became clearer. As P42 stated:

J'ai tout eu mes vaccins d'base pis au début du Covid, [...] ma blonde pis moi on écoutait les conférences de Monsieur Arruda pis on suivait tout ça [en parlant des mesures]...Écoute, on mettait notre épicerie...on lavait nos fruits pis nos légumes, j'te jure là,[...] on mettait ça dans l'garage pis on marquait la date, mettons, 12 mars pis là ça rentrait pas avant...y disait d'attendre 3 jours bon...pis tous les fruits et les légumes tout c'qui va dans l'frigidaire, on rinçait ça à l'eau savonneuse, on faisait tout ce qu'y disait. [...] Pis asteur, j'suis...j'ai complètement, y m'ont complètement stigmatisé...Là, c'était rendu ridicule. Fak moi, j'ai fait à peu près tout l'contraire après...quand j'ai switché, j'ai fait tout le contraire de c'qui disait. Ça veut dire, j'allais dans les magasins pas d'masque avec un faux papier d'médecin pis j'disais que j'avais une condition médicale...c'est pas vrai que j'vais mettre une guénille dans face [...].⁴⁶

Many of these men needed time to assess the situation before taking action. Once they were convinced, they felt a responsibility to stand up for civil liberties. Another group, the community-driven activists, joined after seeing friends or family members getting involved. These late joiners felt a social obligation to act, recognizing that they could no longer stay silent as the harm caused by government policies continued to mount.

In the end, the Freedom Convoy was a movement driven by a wide variety of men, each with his own unique background, concerns, and motivations. Whether early or late joiners, politically engaged or newly awakened, all were united by a common desire to defend their freedoms, their families, and their communities. For these men, the Convoy was not just about protesting mandates, it was about standing up for a way of life they believed was under threat, fighting for the values of freedom, self-determination, and individual rights.

⁴⁶ Translated by the author: "I had all my basic vaccinations and at the beginning of Covid, my wife and I listened to Mr. Arruda's conferences and all that and we followed all of that [referring to restrictions]....Listen, we put our groceries...we washed our fruits and vegetables, I swear, [...] we'd put it in the garage and mark the date, let's say, March 12, and it wouldn't come in until then...he'd tell us to wait 3 days...and all the fruits and vegetables, everything that went into the fridge, we'd rinse it with soapy water, we'd do everything he said. [...] Then, I'm...I've completely, they've completely stigmatized me...It was ridiculous. When I switched, I did the exact opposite of what they said. That is, I'd go into stores with a fake doctor's note and I'd say I had a medical condition...it's not true that I'm going to put a rag on my face."

Chapter 5 - Voices of Belonging and Resistance from the Convoy: Gender, Grievances, and the Making of a Politicized Identity

This chapter examines how individuals involved in the Freedom Convoy developed a politicized collective identity, focusing on the ways in which grievances, emotions, and participation were articulated, transformed, and mobilized. Drawing on life-history interviews with a diverse group of participants, the chapter addresses the following: **How do individuals transform their identity leading to their participation in a contentious social movement, and what social, emotional, and biographical factors shape their socio-political trajectories?** Specifically, this chapter explores the process of identity politicization among Freedom Convoy participants, analyzing how personal grievances became understood as collective and politically meaningful, how emotional and moral interpretations deepened engagement, and how different individuals came to see themselves as part of a broader movement against perceived state overreach.

Hence, this analysis is guided by the framework developed by Simon and Klandermans (2001), PCI, which offers a threefold model for understanding how individuals come to identify with a political group and act collectively: (1) the cognitive dimension, or recognition of shared grievances and adversaries; (2) the emotional dimension, including moral outrage and affective investment; and (3) the action-oriented dimension, which captures the threshold for an expression of collective behaviour. The PCI model is particularly useful for understanding how identity is not static, but actively constructed and reshaped through movement participation, allowing us to trace the dynamic interplay between biography, emotion, and mobilization.

While the PCI framework provides a robust tool for analyzing politicization, it does not explicitly address how gender influences these processes. Yet, gender emerged as a salient axis of differentiation in the interviews. Men and women expressed distinct motivations, emotional registers, and pathways into the movement, shaped in part by their social roles, moral vocabularies, and visions of sovereignty and care. The integration of a gendered perspective, therefore, is not

simply an add-on, but an empirically grounded extension of the PCI framework that reveals how politicized identity formation is socially and emotionally structured by gendered life experiences. As a result, this chapter tests and explores five hypotheses derived from the PCI framework, while attending to gendered dynamics at each stage.

Table 4 Hypotheses

- | | |
|-----------|--|
| H1 | Individuals who perceive their personal grievances such as opposition to vaccine mandates or distrust of government institutions, as shared and politically meaningful are more likely to experience identity politicization and to engage in collective action. |
| H2 | Individuals with strong ideological commitments related to liberty, autonomy, or opposition to institutional authority are more likely to develop a politicized identity when their grievances are framed in opposition to a clearly identified adversary. |
| H3 | Individuals who experience strong emotional responses and interpret their grievances through a moral lens are more likely to engage in collective action as a form of morally motivated protest. |
| H4 | Individuals who engage with Freedom Convoy-related content on social media are more likely to develop a politicized collective identity, as online interactions amplify shared grievances, foster symbolic expression, and reinforce in-group solidarity. |
| H5 | Individuals who participate in the Freedom Convoy are likely to experience a long-term transformation in their socio-political trajectory, as the politicization of their identity reshapes their self-conception and engagement patterns. |

The chapter proceeds as follows. The next sections examine how each dimension of the PCI framework (i.e. cognitive, emotional, and action-oriented) was expressed across participant narratives, attending to variations across gender and timing of mobilization (early vs. late joiners). Moreover, a section will synthesize gendered patterns that emerged across the data, proposing a gender-sensitive reading of PCI grounded in empirical findings. Lastly, the chapter concludes by revisiting the five hypotheses in light of the evidence and reflecting on the broader implications for understanding identity transformation in populist protest movements.

While the PCI framework offers a structured understanding of identity politicization through shared grievances, emotional investment, and action, its original formulation lacks explicit attention to gender. However, gendered life experiences emerged consistently in participants' narratives. Integrating gender into PCI is therefore not an optional add-on but a necessary analytical extension. Where Simon and Klandermans (2001) provide a framework for identity

politicization centred on shared grievances, emotional engagement, and collective action, this chapter extends the model by exploring how gendered social roles, emotions, and symbolic repertoires shape the construction and enactment of this new politicized collective identity. While the PCI framework offers powerful tools to understand why individuals come to see their grievances as part of a larger struggle, it does not explicitly theorize how these processes are differentially experienced and expressed by men and women. However, the interview data consistently revealed gendered patterns in how participants framed grievances, mobilized emotions, interpreted morality, and positioned themselves within the movement. This suggests the need to supplement PCI with gender-sensitive analysis.

Gendered life roles and social expectations profoundly shaped how participants interpreted their grievances. Women, particularly mothers and caregivers, frequently narrated their politicization through a lens of family protection, child development, and health sovereignty. Their discontent with pandemic mandates was often articulated through concern for their children's education, mental health, and future autonomy. Participants such as P20, P22, and P28 described feeling compelled to act not primarily out of ideological dissent, but out of a perceived moral responsibility to safeguard their families from state overreach. In contrast, men more often framed their grievances in terms of economic dispossession, loss of autonomy, and state betrayal. They emphasized job loss, rural marginalization, and the erosion of civil liberties as core triggers of their discontent. Their politicization was typically channelled through concepts like sovereignty, liberty, and national decline. This difference does not suggest that men were unconcerned with family or that women lacked ideological commitments. Rather, it reveals how socially inscribed roles and normative gender expectations shaped the entry points and interpretive frames for politicization. The result was a gendered divergence in the perception of harm: women tended to politicize care-based responsibilities, while men politicized autonomy and economic identity.

The emotional and moral dimensions of PCI also manifested in gendered idioms. Women often expressed grief, anxiety, and urgency rooted in their caregiving roles, mobilizing a care ethic and moral language centred on protection, nurture, and bodily autonomy. Many interviews reveal how women framed their activism as a maternal duty, with phrases like "I had to protect my kids" or "I couldn't let this happen to my family" appearing frequently. For participants such as P16 and P37, this was further embedded in spiritual or holistic worldviews, which fused emotional intuition with political awakening. Men, meanwhile, more frequently drew upon an emotional language of

anger, betrayal, and moral outrage, often emphasizing honour, rights, and resistance. Their moral reasoning reflected a justice ethic, rooted in classic ideals of state accountability and individual freedom. This emotional grammar aligned closely with populist discourses of disenfranchisement, state overreach, and rebellion. Despite these differences, both men and women interpreted their grievances through deeply moral frameworks. The divergence lies in the emotional coding of their narratives, suggesting that gender not only mediates emotion, but also the moral legitimacy assigned to protest participation.

The gendered division of labour within the Convoy also mirrored broader societal patterns of visibility, authority, and emotional labour. Men often occupied public-facing roles: organizing logistics, taking the stage at rallies, confronting authorities, or managing communications. Their visibility frequently conferred them the status of movement leaders, spokespeople, or protectors. Participants like P29 and P35 described themselves as initiators, defenders, or catalysts, and were more willing to accept legal or reputational risks in the name of principled defiance. Women, in contrast, were more often engaged in the relational infrastructure of the movement. They supported emotional well-being, nurtured solidarity through online networks, coordinated local actions, and maintained moral cohesion. Several women took on roles as connectors, encouragers, and narrative framers, helping others process trauma, disillusionment, or anxiety. While their work was less publicly visible, it was crucial for the sustainability and coherence of the movement's collective identity. In some cases, women were also the first to bring movement-related ideas into their households or communities, especially through wellness, parental rights, or spiritual circles. This gendered distribution of activism does not imply a binary split between ideology and emotion, or between leadership and support. Instead, it highlights how gender mediates the expression and recognition of politicized roles, affecting both internal dynamics and external representations of the movement.

While the original PCI framework provides a compelling model for understanding how individuals come to see their grievances as part of a shared political struggle, it lacks an explicit account of how gender shapes these processes. The preceding analysis demonstrates that gendered life roles and normative expectations significantly influenced how participants interpreted their grievances, mobilized emotions, and assumed roles within the Convoy movement. Women often framed their politicization through the lens of caregiving and moral responsibility, while men emphasized autonomy, economic security, and resistance. Emotional expression and moral

reasoning likewise followed gendered patterns, revealing distinct yet equally politicized pathways. Moreover, the division of labour within the movement reproduced broader societal dynamics of visibility, leadership, and emotional care. These findings highlight the necessity of integrating a gender-sensitive lens into PCI analysis, not as an auxiliary concern but as a core component of identity politicization. The following section builds on this foundation by examining the cognitive dimension of PCI specifically, how participants came to recognize their personal hardships as politically meaningful and collectively experienced. This cognitive shift was shaped not only by shared experiences and adversarial framing but also by gendered interpretations of harm, solidarity, and structural injustice.

Cognitive Dimension: Grievances and Adversaries

The cognitive dimension of politicized collective identity centres on how individuals come to perceive their personal grievances as not only shared but politically meaningful, often through the identification of an adversary. In the case of the Convoy, participants experienced a shift from individualized frustration to collective mobilization as they began to frame their grievances in ideological and adversarial terms. This transformation was neither uniform nor spontaneous; it was shaped by gendered worldviews, social interactions, and exposure to movement discourse.

H1 – Shared Grievances and Identity Politicization

Grievance formation among participants was deeply rooted in personal experience such as economic precarity, mental health decline, parenting stress, vaccine mandates, but what catalyzed politicization was the moment these experiences were perceived as collectively endured and politically structured. This recognition often emerged through social encounters, online forums, or participation in protest events where others articulated similar frustrations. For women, particularly those in caregiving roles, grievances were frequently framed through maternal and protective lenses. For instance, P20 and P22 described initial feelings of isolation and helplessness when navigating mandates for their children, but spoke of emotional transformation upon discovering networks of other mothers sharing their struggles. These women reported a strong sense of moral urgency and solidarity rooted in gendered responsibilities, leading to identity politicization through a “maternal activist” frame. Conversely, men like P25 and P29, many from blue-collar or entrepreneurial backgrounds, often expressed their grievances in terms of economic

hardship, bureaucratic intrusion, and professional delegitimization. Their politicization emerged through interaction with peers who mirrored their sense of being “pushed out” by the system. For example, P42 recounted a “collective emotional moment” at a protest, describing the shift from personal anger to a sense of being part of something larger. These narratives commonly followed a structure of “I felt alone, then I saw others like me,” indicating a relational process through which personal injustice was recast as structural and shared. This alignment across gendered lines through caregiving for women and professional pride or sovereignty for men, strongly supports H1, with gender shaping the affective framing of grievances and the pathways to politicization.

H2 – Ideological Commitment and Adversarial Framing

Once personal grievances were interpreted as collectively experienced, many participants moved toward ideological anchoring, often rooted in anti-authoritarianism, bodily autonomy, national sovereignty, and parental rights. This ideological lens was crucial in reinforcing the transition from shared suffering to mobilized identity. The adversaries constructed within these ideological narratives were strikingly consistent: the state, particularly under Trudeau’s leadership, the mainstream media, pharmaceutical companies, and global institutions like the WHO were portrayed as hostile to “the people.” Importantly, the symbolic and emotional valence of these adversaries varied by gender. Among men, adversary construction often emphasized the state as coercive authority, undermining personal autonomy, economic stability, and national integrity. For example, P16 invoked anti-Marxist rhetoric to characterize government mandates as signs of creeping totalitarianism, while P37 framed her participation through a spiritualized narrative of sovereignty and masculine self-rule. The adversary here is both political and symbolic, a force emasculating individual and national strength. Among women, adversarial framing focused more on the state’s intrusion into private, feminized spheres such as the home, the body, and child-rearing. P20 described mandates as a “violation of maternal instinct,” while others spoke of state interference as threatening their spiritual or moral authority as mothers. For many, adversaries like Big Pharma or the education system were coded not only as corrupt but as morally impure, justifying resistance as a form of protective and even sacred duty.

In both cases, ideological narratives were not only reactive but constructive, offering participants a sense of coherence, purpose, and belonging within a broader moral and political struggle. The presence of spiritual framing whether New Age, Christian metaphysical, or

naturalistic, added depth and emotional resonance to ideological commitment, especially among women who fused maternal ethics with spiritual purity. Together, these findings offer strong empirical support for H2. The intensification of ideological belief systems, coupled with clear adversarial identification, was crucial in transforming shared grievances into sustained political engagement. Gender shaped the contours of this transformation, influencing both the nature of the ideological expression and the symbolic meaning of the adversary.

In sum, H1 is supported by evidence that both women and men politicized personal grievances by recognizing them as shared and structurally rooted. Gender shaped how those grievances were framed and with whom participants identified. H2 is supported by the central role of ideological narratives and adversarial framing in reinforcing politicized identities. Gender influenced not only the content of ideological beliefs but also the moral-symbolic construction of adversaries. These findings demonstrate that the cognitive dimension of PCI is not abstract, but profoundly shaped by gendered life experiences, moral vocabularies, and relational contexts. They also suggest that the path to politicization is as much about narrative and emotion as it is about structure and ideology.

Emotional-Moral Dimension: Affective Investment

The emotional-moral dimension of PCI highlights how individuals interpret grievances through the lens of moral values and emotional intensity, which in turn deepens identification with a political cause. Emotions are not peripheral to political engagement; they are constitutive of it. Within the Convoy, politicization was frequently catalyzed by an emotional-moral interpretation of personal experiences, a process marked by the reframing of grievances as violations of sacred values such as freedom, health sovereignty, and the protection of children. These interpretations were profoundly gendered, shaping not only the affective tone but also the moral register through which politicized identities were constructed.

H3 – Emotional-Moral Interpretation of Grievances

Across interviews, emotional resonance was ubiquitous. Participants did not simply list grievances; they felt them deeply and interpreted them morally. For example, P18 described a prolonged sense of helplessness while caring for her students in lockdown, culminating in a moment of “moral disgust” at being forced to comply with institutional rules that felt

dehumanizing. P11 reported a sense of betrayal by institutions she had previously trusted (i.e. government, union, employer) turning what began as economic frustration into moral outrage. For others, such as P28, the turning point was protective rage, sparked by seeing her children psychologically harmed by school closures and mask mandates. In each case, it was not just the grievance itself, but the moral interpretation of that grievance, which produced politicization. Participants consistently framed their grievances as violations of deeply held, almost sacred values, bodily autonomy, children's well-being, freedom of speech, and the right to truth. These were not treated as negotiable political interests, but as moral imperatives, and this framing intensified emotional commitment.

While emotional-moral interpretation was common across the board, gender shaped the specific moral grammars used to process and express grievances. Women overwhelmingly used care-based moral frames. They interpreted grievances through roles as mothers, caregivers, and moral guardians. For instance, P22 described her activism as a "maternal duty" to protect her child's spirit and mental health from the corrosive effects of mandates. This care-based moral reasoning was often rooted in narratives of empathy, nurturing, and relational responsibility. For many women, emotional intensity took the form of protective love, sadness, and grief transmuted into moralized action. Men, by contrast, predominantly employed justice- or rights-based frames. Their narratives emphasized themes such as freedom of speech, bodily integrity, and betrayal by institutions. P42, for example, did not simply oppose mandates because they were inconvenient; he saw them as evidence of tyranny and a breach of democratic norms. The emotional register here was more frequently anger, moral indignation, and a call to reestablish justice.

While these gendered registers differ in tone (i.e. care and protection versus justice and retribution), they both function to activate high levels of affective-moral investment, reinforcing group identity and commitment to action. Crucially, they converge in their moral clarity and perceived legitimacy of resistance. Spiritual worldviews, whether Christian, New Age, or hybrid forms, further intensified moral and emotional resonance. These frameworks gave participants the language and emotional infrastructure to understand their suffering and to act with conviction. P37, for example, spoke of a "spiritual urgency" that accompanied his awakening to the "lies of the system." For her, the Convoy was not only political but part of a spiritual war between good and evil. Women frequently invoked the idea of divine intuition, sacred maternal roles, or energetic purity, adding metaphysical gravity to otherwise material grievances. These spiritual references

amplified affective commitment, allowing participants to experience their political action as both righteous and redemptive.

Spirituality thus served as a transcendent intensifier, reinforcing emotional investment and moral certainty. Hence, H3 is supported as politicization was deeply shaped by emotional resonance and moral framing. Emotions like helplessness, betrayal, rage, and spiritual urgency functioned not just as reactions, but also as mobilizing forces that redefined personal experience in collective, politicized terms. Gender structured moral reasoning, with women emphasizing care-based morality (children, health, protection) and men emphasizing justice- or rights-based morality (freedom, betrayal, institutional failure). Spiritual frameworks further intensified emotional-moral engagement by providing transcendent meaning to political grievances. This dimension shows that affective investment is not a by-product of politicization; it is a precondition and a driver, often anchored in gendered moral imaginaries and spiritual worldviews. Emotional-moral interpretation transforms grievances from private pain into public purpose, enabling durable collective identity and committed action. These emotionally and morally charged interpretations did not remain abstract but translated directly into concrete participation and risk-taking, as the next section explores.

Action-Oriented Dimension: Participation and Risk

The action-oriented dimension of PCI refers to the willingness of individuals to engage in protest and assume associated risks, a process shaped by emotional investment, perceived efficacy, and social embeddedness. In this context, participants' pathways to action reveal both gendered differentiation and shared motivational frameworks. Entry into the movement was not only shaped by ideological alignment but also by the intersection of acute personal experiences, relational obligations, and digital engagement. Early participants frequently exhibited a low-threshold/high-urgency model of mobilization. They were galvanized by events interpreted as intolerable injustices such as job loss due to mandates, children's educational disruptions, or broader existential anxieties about government overreach. These grievances were affectively charged and often narrated in moral terms: "defending freedom," "protecting children," or "standing up for the voiceless." For such participants, action became a civic and ethical imperative. Importantly, this willingness to assume reputational, legal, or financial risks was interpreted not as recklessness but as fidelity to core values.

These empirical patterns align closely with how individuals evaluate the costs and necessities of protest action. The action-oriented dimension emphasizes the translation of cognitive and emotional alignment into concrete protest behaviours. Central to this transition is the question of what enables individuals to cross the threshold into public participation, particularly in high-cost, high-risk movements like the Convoy. PCI theory posits that strong emotional identification with a cause, coupled with moral urgency, lowers the psychological and social barriers to action. This study finds that such threshold-lowering mechanisms were particularly salient among participants whose identities were mobilized around caregiving, sovereignty, and moral duty.

Crucially, participants often described reaching a “breaking point,” a moment in which inaction became morally untenable. This aligns with what McAdam (1986) describes as a “high-risk/low-risk activism,” where individuals weigh the personal costs of activism (job loss, social sanction, legal risk) against the perceived moral and emotional rewards (defending one’s children, acting on truth, spiritual duties). For many interviewees, particularly early joiners, the urgency of moral imperatives reframed participation as not only justified but necessary, even in the face of potential repercussions. Rather than being deterred by risk, participants interpreted risk-taking itself as a form of virtue (i.e. evidence of commitment to truth, freedom, or care). This moral reframing effectively lowered the threshold of activation, as the cost of inaction, betraying one’s values or endangering loved ones, was perceived as higher than the cost of engagement.

This dynamic was deeply gendered. For women, particularly mothers and caregivers, participation was often framed as an extension of relational responsibility and emotional labour. Engaging in protest was not an abandonment of familial roles but their fulfillment. These narratives correspond with Snow and Soule’s (2010) concept of biographical availability, which suggests that life circumstances such as employment status, family obligations, or social networks, mediate an individual’s capacity to engage in protest. However, in the case of the Convoy, biographical constraints were often politicized and reinterpreted as motivations rather than obstacles. Mothers, for example, spoke of sacrificing employment or enduring public censorship not in spite of, but because of, their caregiving roles. Their biographical position as mothers concerned about school closures, mental health, or bodily autonomy, became the very grounds for their political legitimacy and activation. The emotional urgency attached to these roles heightened their sense of moral responsibility, reducing hesitation and reframing risk as a necessary sacrifice for a greater good.

Men's pathways into action were similarly shaped by urgency, though often articulated through narratives of principled defiance, sovereignty, or justice. Here, too, McAdam's risk framework applies. Early male joiners often described a moment of rupture that is losing a job due to vaccine mandates, witnessing censorship, or experiencing a betrayal by previously trusted institutions that recalibrated their sense of acceptable risk. Participation was increasingly seen as a form of existential affirmation: to remain passive would be to relinquish one's role as a provider, protector, or citizen. In this way, traditional masculine scripts were repurposed in service of political action, with risk-taking becoming a gendered moral act aligned with duty, strength, and resistance. Moreover, the presence of other men undertaking similar actions created a feedback loop of social proof and solidarity, reinforcing the perception that participation was both rational and honourable.

In both cases, the convergence of emotional investment, moral framing, and biographical context created a potent mechanism for lowering the threshold of participation. The movement offered not only ideological justification but also emotional validation for entering the public sphere as political actors. The decision to participate was rarely portrayed as purely rational or instrumental; instead, it was narrated as an ethical obligation, deeply embedded in gendered moral economies and social identities. Gendered patterns of action were evident from the outset. Women often mobilized through caregiving and grassroots networks such as parenting groups, wellness communities, and spiritual circles, where protest was framed not merely as political, but as maternal or sacred duty. In this framing, risk-taking became both justified and valorized. Men, by contrast, were more visible in leadership and symbolic defiance, organizing convoys, addressing crowds, or engaging law enforcement, roles consistent with traditionally masculine scripts of public authority and protection. These distinctions shaped both the modes of participation and the perceived legitimacy of risk.

Yet beyond these gendered pathways, participants across the spectrum expressed a shared concern over government overreach and the erosion of personal autonomy. Regardless of gender, individuals were united by a belief that pandemic-era policies (vaccine mandates, lockdowns, travel restrictions) represented a fundamental violation of rights. These concerns were not abstract: participants spoke of lost jobs, shuttered businesses, educational harm to children, and state interference in medical decisions. The sense of alienation was deeply personal, rooted in a perception that official institutions had become detached from citizens' lived realities. Importantly,

initial engagement was often tentative. Some participants began as passive observers, skeptical or disengaged, only to reach a “breaking point” where continued silence was no longer tenable. At this threshold, action was reframed not just as justified, but necessary.

H4 – Social Media and Online Engagement in PCI Formation

Digital platforms played a pivotal role in transforming latent discontent into politicized collective identity. Social media served not merely as a tool for information-sharing but as a symbolic and emotional amplifier reinforcing shared grievances, legitimizing resistance, and fostering solidarity. For many late joiners, engagement was catalyzed by viral content such as livestreams, testimonials, or Convoy footage, that framed participation as courageous, morally upright, and socially validated. Participants like P23, P24 and P34 described their radicalization through exposure to alternative media they deemed “more truthful” than mainstream narratives. This sustained engagement recalibrated their perception of risk and solidified identification with the movement.

The gendered contours of online engagement were especially notable. Women often encountered Convoy material within nonpolitical digital spaces (e.g. wellness blogs, homeschooling forums, spiritual Telegram channels), where concerns about bodily integrity, children’s safety, and natural living became interpretive bridges into broader critiques of state power. These communities, while initially apolitical, evolved into radicalizing environments as convoy-related content became normalized. Men were more likely to access the movement through ideologically explicit media (libertarian podcasts, sovereignty networks, and anti-globalist platforms), which framed protest in terms of civil liberties, national autonomy, and institutional betrayal. These gendered entry points shaped both the meanings participants attributed to the movement and the kinds of actions they undertook. H4 is supported. Social media and online networks played a critical role in PCI formation by facilitating symbolic alignment, affective resonance, and perceived safety. Gender influenced not only the platforms of engagement but also the interpretive lenses through which protest was understood and justified.

These trends suggest that digital platforms did not merely reflect participants’ political interests, they actively structured how grievances were encountered, interpreted, and acted upon. A closer look at the distinction between passive and active digital engagement, and at how specific platforms facilitated gendered experiences, reveals how social media environments became

formative spaces of politicized identity development. Among late joiners to the Convoy, digital pathways served as a critical mechanism for political activation, but the nature of this engagement varied significantly along lines of intent, depth, and gendered experience. It is useful here to distinguish between passive online engagement activities such as viewing content, liking posts, or consuming livestreams, and active digital mobilization, which included organizing Telegram channels, creating content, coordinating logistics, and sustaining online networks. While both forms of engagement contributed to PCI formation, their dynamics and thresholds of participation differed, especially across genders.

Passive engagement often marked the entry point for late joiners who had not previously considered protest participation. Many reported encountering emotionally evocative Convoy footage, personal testimonials, or livestreams that reframed protesters not as extremists, but as ordinary citizens acting on moral conviction. This content, often distributed on TikTok and Facebook, functioned as a symbolic gateway: it lowered the affective and cognitive barriers to entry by portraying protest as relatable, moral, and legitimate. For example, short TikTok clips of children waving Canadian flags or mothers explaining why they left cities to join the protest offered emotionally resonant narratives that appealed to caregiving values and parental duty. For women, in particular, such content circulated within parenting groups, wellness communities, or natural living forums, served as both affective catalyst and moral justification for deeper involvement.

Conversely, active digital mobilization occurred where participants did not merely consume content but built networks, planned events, shared tactical information, and cultivated movement culture. Gendered patterns were again visible: men were more often involved in libertarian or sovereignty-themed channels that discussed legal tactics, convoy routes, or strategies for evading digital surveillance. These channels emphasized freedom, state resistance, and information warfare, appealing to masculine-coded values of self-reliance, strategy, and autonomy. Women, by contrast, were more active in digital communities that fused caregiving, spirituality, and resistance such as “mama bear” groups, holistic health threads, and anti-mandate circles. These platforms served not only as sites of information exchange but also as emotional support networks. Here, Convoy-related discourse was reframed through narratives of protection, maternal intuition, and divine responsibility. For many women, these online spaces allowed for the politicization of previously apolitical concerns such as homeschooling or natural immunity which gradually

became tied to broader discourses of bodily sovereignty and anti-authoritarianism. Importantly, many of these spaces predated the pandemic, suggesting that the infrastructure for mobilization was already in place, and the Convoy merely intensified their political salience.

The affordances of each platform also shaped the style and content of politicization. TikTok's short-form video format emphasized emotional immediacy and visual storytelling, often through music, humour, or symbolic imagery (e.g. flags, children, tears). It appealed particularly to younger users and women in caregiving roles, offering a low-barrier, emotionally rich mode of engagement. Facebook, with its group functions and algorithmic reinforcement of echo chambers, facilitated ongoing interaction and community validation, especially for those in wellness or parental networks. Telegram, in contrast, functioned as a radicalizing node, offering unfiltered access to conspiracy theories, sovereignty doctrines, and anti-establishment manifestos. It was here that digital engagement moved from affective resonance to ideological deepening and strategic planning, a transition especially visible among male participants. Across all platforms, the visual and narrative framing of protest as sacred or family-centred played a key role in lowering risk perception and increasing moral justification for engagement. The digital sphere thus acted as both mirror and engine of politicization, reinforcing gendered pathways through content, tone, and community design.

In sum, social media's role in PCI formation was not monolithic; it operated through tiered layers of engagement, from passive consumption to active mobilization, shaped by the emotional, symbolic, and functional logic of specific platforms. Gender was a key mediator of this process. Women more often encountered politicizing content in relational, caregiving-centred spaces, while men gravitated toward ideologically driven, strategic forums. These patterns reveal that digital engagement is not simply about access to information, but about how that information is emotionally processed, morally framed, and socially legitimated within gendered ecosystems of meaning. As such, digital pathways were not merely tools of communication, but constitutive elements of identity transformation and collective alignment within the movement.

H5 – Long-Term Transformation of Socio-Political Trajectories

Participation in the Convoy catalyzed enduring shifts in identity, worldviews, and political practice. For many, the movement marked not a singular protest but a rupture, an awakening that reshaped trust networks, institutional relationships, and life goals. Participants reported profound

transformations in how they consumed media, interpreted authority, and engaged in civic life. Some, like P16, reoriented their careers around alternative schooling; others, like P3, transitioned from quiet supporters to local organizers and spokespeople. These shifts often extended beyond political realignment to include lifestyle changes, such as adopting new forms of mutual aid, homeschooling, or community organizing. While trajectories varied, they were patterned by gender. Women often politicized caregiving practices recasting them as acts of resistance and collective care. Their long-term engagement tended toward communal forms of activism grounded in daily life. Men's post-Convoy paths often involved ideological deepening and institutional estrangement: distancing from electoral politics, embracing sovereignty discourses, or investing in alternative media ecosystems as primary sources of authority. These transformations reflect different orientations toward power and agency, maternal activism and protective nurturance in the case of women, versus ideological autonomy and systemic rejection among men.

Despite these gendered tendencies, participants of all genders described the movement as profoundly unifying. The Convoy fostered a strong sense of community and belonging, offering emotional validation, social reconnection, and even spiritual fulfillment. For individuals previously marginalized or isolated by their beliefs, the Convoy created a supportive counter-public where their views were not only accepted but celebrated. Many participants referred to it as a turning point in their lives, not only politically but emotionally and socially. Shared meals, prayer circles, group singing, and mutual aid practices reinforced solidarity, reframing protest as both celebratory and sacred. These experiences were described as transformative and life-affirming, imbuing participants with a renewed sense of purpose. However, the consequences were severe. Participants across gender lines experienced intense backlash (i.e. social ostracism, employment loss, familial conflict, and reputational damage). Some were deplatformed or surveilled. Others reported children being bullied at school or strained marriages due to political differences. The psychological toll was substantial, but for many, it only reaffirmed their convictions and deepened their estrangement from mainstream society. Hence, H5 is supported. Participation in the Freedom Convoy initiated long-term changes in socio-political identity and practice. While these transformations were mediated by gender, shaping both the form and focus of political reorientation, they were unified by a shared sense of rupture, purpose, and disillusionment with institutional authority.

Gendered Patterns of Participation in the Freedom Convoy Movement

The Convoy presents a unique opportunity to examine how gender mediates pathways into political mobilization, particularly within the framework of PCI as proposed by Simon and Klandermans. While the PCI framework identifies the cognitive, moral, and action-oriented dimensions of politicized identity, integrating a gendered analysis reveals how these dimensions are differently navigated by men and women, especially when considered in relation to timing (early vs. late joiners), roles within the movement, and perceived risks. Despite divergent trajectories and roles, both groups ultimately converged in a shared sense of politicized identity rooted in perceived state overreach and collective disillusionment.

Gendered Motivations and Timing of Mobilization

Hence, the motivations for joining the movement among men and women were shaped by their distinct concerns and priorities, although both groups were united in their distrust of government policies and perceived overreach. While men often viewed their participation as an act of political defiance, women were more likely to see their involvement as a means of protecting their families. These differences, in perspective, reflected broader societal roles and personal experiences, influencing how each group engaged with the Convoy. Early male joiners were predominantly driven by concerns over political freedom, economic autonomy, and institutional distrust. Their grievances were framed around violations of constitutional rights and threats to traditional livelihoods, particularly in sectors like trucking, construction, and oil which positioned the state as an oppressive adversary. For them, the pandemic response and the restrictions that followed represented a direct attack on individual liberties, and the Convoy was an opportunity to fight back. Their decision to mobilize aligned with a more confrontational, defiant stance, consistent with hegemonic masculine norms of resistance, independence, and leadership. Job loss, particularly in sectors that relied on free movement and trade, became a primary push factor for their involvement. Beyond the push factors, men also saw the Convoy as a chance for political activism, with many viewing it as a way to oppose a larger political agenda they felt was restricting their freedoms. The Convoy offered them leadership opportunities, where they could not only contribute but also take on roles that allowed them to organize, direct, and participate in the movement at the forefront. For some, the Convoy became more than just a protest, it was a platform to defy what they saw as an overreaching state. In this context, men were often driven by the notion

of taking a stand against a perceived injustice, using the protest as a form of resistance to government control over their lives.

Table 5 Gendered-focus Motivations

Factor	Men	Women
Early Joiners' Main Concern	Political freedom, economic survival, leadership	Family well-being, children's safety, health autonomy
Late Joiners' Main Concern	Economic hardship, social pressure	Emotional and social impact of mandates, peer validation
Primary Push Factors	Job loss, government overreach, economic crisis	Vaccine mandates for children, school closures, censorship
Primary Pull Factors	Leadership opportunities, activism, defying the state	Community support, maternal instinct, grassroots organizing

In contrast, early female joiners were motivated by the perceived harm that pandemic policies posed to their families, particularly children. The closure of schools, mandates affecting parental autonomy, and broader concerns over social-emotional development catalyzed a maternal politics of protection. Hence, many mothers viewed the mandates, including vaccine requirements for children and the closures of schools, as direct threats to their children's health, education, and emotional well-being. For them, the Convoy was not just a political act but a maternal duty to protect their families. The messaging of the movement, which highlighted family rights and the protection of children's futures, resonated deeply with these women. They were already concerned about the social and educational impacts of lockdowns and restrictions on children, which made the Convoy an appealing way to take action. These women were driven by a sense of urgency to prevent further harm to their children's mental, physical, and social development. Many women in this movement had already been following alternative health movements before the pandemic, including holistic medicine, anti-vaccine activism, or wellness communities. This prior engagement with alternative health views made them more likely to question mainstream narratives surrounding the pandemic. For women, the Convoy represented an opportunity to not only protect their families but also to advocate for personal health autonomy and resist what they saw as government overreach in healthcare decisions. As caregivers, women often felt that they had to bear the emotional and practical weight of decisions impacting their families, and joining

the movement was a way to act against policies they believed undermined their ability to care for their children and maintain a healthy family environment.

Late joiners exhibited a different pattern. For late female joiners, their motivations were shaped by both emotional and social pressures. Many of these women initially trusted government measures and complied with mandates, but over time, they became increasingly disillusioned as they witnessed the growing suppression of dissenting opinions in the media and the continued social and emotional toll the restrictions were having on their families. The social pressure to conform and the fear of being labelled a conspiracy theorist or an outcast often kept them on the sidelines in the early days. However, as the movement gained momentum, many women found themselves drawn to it after seeing their peers, other mothers, family members, and friends, getting involved. This social validation, along with the visible grassroots organizing, helped to ease their concerns about the potential backlash they might face for taking a public stand.

Moreover, the Convoy's focus on community support and collective action, as well as the strong sense of solidarity among participants, became a significant pull factor for these late joiners. They found comfort in the idea of joining a larger group of people who shared similar concerns and values. Women often spoke about how the movement provided them with a sense of belonging and a support system, something that was crucial during a time when many felt isolated by the pandemic. The Convoy became not just a political protest but also a space where women could rally around shared beliefs, form lasting friendships, and find emotional support. For late male joiners, the motivations were largely driven by economic hardship and the social pressure that came with observing the growing number of people in their communities and workplaces getting involved in the movement. As the effects of the pandemic continued to wreak havoc on industries and families, many men began to feel the weight of the economic crisis more acutely. Their initial hesitancy to join, driven by concerns about the reputation and the potential consequences of speaking out, gave way to a recognition that the Convoy was no longer just an isolated fringe movement, it was becoming a mainstream issue, with widespread support.

In both cases, the push factors for men and women involved a growing sense of urgency as the situation escalated. For men, economic crises and government overreach were the primary catalysts for their involvement, while for women, the emotional and social impact of mandates on their families, particularly their children, was the key driving force. Ultimately, both groups joined the movement because they saw it as an opportunity to fight against what they perceived as policies

that were threatening their personal freedoms, their families, and their communities. As the Convoy expanded, it provided men and women alike with an outlet for their frustrations and a platform to express their dissatisfaction with government policies. Whether motivated by economic survival, political freedom, family well-being, or community solidarity, the movement became a way for both groups to act and seek change in a time of uncertainty and division.

Division of Roles: Leadership, Labour, and Visibility

Gender also structured how individuals participated once mobilized. Men were disproportionately represented in leadership roles, frontline confrontations, and media-facing activism. Their actions symbolized the political defiance of the movement (i.e. organizing roadblocks, delivering speeches, engaging with law enforcement, and coordinating logistics). These roles aligned with traditional masculine norms valorizing public authority, assertiveness, and physical courage. Women, while less visible in leadership, sustained the movement through caregiving, logistical support, and community building. They coordinated food, supplies, accommodations, fundraising, and communication across social media platforms. Women's work was essential to the movement's day-to-day survival and emotional cohesion, yet it often remained undervalued compared to the more symbolic and confrontational actions led by men. These role divisions reveal how gender norms shape strategic engagement: men as protectors of public sovereignty, women as stewards of community welfare. Yet both were integral to the movement's functioning and legitimacy. Once individuals became involved in the movement, both men and women took on critical roles that aligned with their respective strengths, comfort zones, and societal expectations. These roles were shaped not only by traditional gender norms but also by their varying skill sets, personal experiences, and willingness to engage in high-risk activities. While the contributions of both men and women were indispensable to the movement's success, the nature of their involvement often reflected broader societal divisions, with men more frequently in the spotlight for direct action and leadership, while women focused on community building, support, and sustaining the movement on the ground.

Men tended to dominate leadership roles within the movement. They were often responsible for organizing the logistics of protests, securing the safety of participants, and formulating political strategies. Men, particularly those with backgrounds in business, or security, were heavily involved in coordinating the movements' physical presence. They made decisions

about when and where to organize protests, how to navigate potential confrontations with law enforcement, and how to manage the movement's resources. Many men took it upon themselves to give speeches, energizing the crowd with passionate calls to action, and were frequently the ones who confronted law enforcement, often in direct, physical ways. They were more likely to take risks such as engaging in public standoffs with authorities or blocking major roads as part of protests, seeing these actions as symbolic demonstrations of resistance. Their public presence was often the most visible, giving interviews, handling media relations, and articulating the political objectives of the Convoy.

The nature of men's strategic involvement was often linked to a broader ideological goal, which for many was rooted in defending political freedom or standing against what they perceived as government authoritarianism. Many men saw the Convoy as a means to advocate for the protection of their livelihoods and economic survival. They were deeply concerned about the long-term consequences of government policies, including mandates that restricted their ability to work or trade freely. The presence of these men at the head of the movement helped solidify the political narrative of the Convoy, framing it as a fight against government overreach and the erosion of individual rights. These men also established ties with other political groups, particularly those with nationalist or separatist ideologies, amplifying the political message of the movement and expanding its reach.

Table 6 Roles within the Movement

Role	Men	Women
Leadership	Organized logistics, security, protests, and political strategy	Built community networks, supported families, spread awareness
Public Presence	Gave speeches, confronted law enforcement, handled media	Organized local support, provided emotional support, assisted with supplies
Physical Involvement	Travelled in convoys, blockaded roads, patrolled protests	Cooked meals, housed protesters, managed communication channels
Strategic Impact	Advocated for political change, connected with separatist movements, structured rallies	Ensured sustainability of the movement, helped people resist isolation

On the other hand, women's roles, while equally important, often centred around maintaining the infrastructure and social fabric of the movement. Women played crucial behind-the-scenes roles, often stepping into the logistical and caregiving aspects of the protest. They were instrumental in organizing the daily functions of the protest camps, ensuring that food, shelter, and supplies were consistently provided to those on the ground. Many women took on the responsibility of managing donations, coordinating fundraising efforts, and ensuring the movement's physical needs were met. They were also the ones who organized care packages, helped supply medical kits, and made sure there were sufficient resources to keep protesters safe and comfortable. Women's contributions were also vital in sustaining the morale of the participants. Many women offered emotional support, ensuring that those involved in the protests felt cared for and motivated. As the protests extended over days or weeks, the emotional toll on the participants could be immense, and women played a pivotal role in preventing burnout by offering a sense of community and solidarity. In a movement that was largely driven by contentious political ideals and confrontational activism, women's caregiving role allowed the movement to maintain a human element, reminding everyone that they were there not only for political change but also for the well-being of their families and communities.

In addition to logistical tasks, many women were involved in spreading awareness about the movement, especially in local communities. They worked to ensure that people in their social circles (i.e. family, friends, and neighbours) understood the movement's aims and could be recruited to join. Women's efforts in this area were often focused on outreach, discussing the impact of mandates on families, children, and individuals' personal freedoms. Their emotional appeal was particularly effective in getting other women, especially mothers, involved in the movement. Women also took on important roles in managing communication channels, using social media platforms to share stories, connect like-minded people, and advocate for the Convoy's message. By helping to maintain the flow of information, they ensured that the movement's ideas reached beyond the core group of protesters and into the broader public consciousness. One of the most defining aspects of the role women played was their focus on community building. Women were often at the centre of creating networks of support, where participants could connect, share resources, and look after each other's needs. This communal approach was critical in a movement that required collective effort over extended periods of time. Women ensured that those who came to protest, particularly those from outside the local areas, felt welcomed and supported. They often

took it upon themselves to house protesters, especially when temporary accommodations were needed, and coordinated efforts to ensure that no one felt isolated or abandoned.

Strategically, women worked to ensure the movement's sustainability, addressing the emotional and social impacts of prolonged activism. They recognized that for the protest to be effective, it could not only be about political demands, but it also had to consider the mental and emotional well-being of the participants. Women helped people resist feelings of isolation and discouragement, which could easily arise in the face of intense government pressure, media scrutiny, and the physical demands of protesting. Many women were seen as emotional anchors in the movement, offering a space for others to vent frustrations, heal from exhaustion, and recommit to the cause. Their ability to keep the community cohesive and focused was one of the unsung yet vital elements of the movement's long-term effectiveness.

In sum, men and women both contributed significantly to the movement but in ways that reflected traditional gender roles and personal inclinations. Men were more likely to take on leadership positions, participate in direct action, and push the political agenda through confrontational methods. They helped guide the movement's strategic direction, organizing protests, handling logistics, and engaging with law enforcement. Women, on the other hand, played essential roles in sustaining the movement from within. They organized local support, provided emotional care, managed logistical operations, and ensured the well-being of those involved in the protests. Together, their contributions created a dynamic and multifaceted movement, one that was not only focused on political activism but also grounded in the care, support, and emotional strength necessary for any prolonged social struggle. However, despite the movement's inclusivity and resilience, participation was not without its challenges.

Barriers to Participation and Risk Perception

As we know, social movements are complex phenomena. In fact, social movements are shaped by a range of personal, social, and economic factors that influence an individual's decision to participate. While both men and women experienced hesitations before joining, their concerns were distinct. Men tended to be driven by economic and political considerations, whereas women were primarily influenced by social dynamics and concerns for their families. These differences highlight the varying ways in which gendered expectations and societal roles impact political

engagement. And, while both groups initially hesitated before becoming involved, their reasons for reluctance, and their eventual triggers for participation, differed significantly.

For men, one of the most significant barriers to participation was the fear of professional and legal consequences. Many worked in industries where visible activism could result in job loss, reputational damage, or legal repercussions. The potential to be labelled as conspiracy theorists or extremists were particularly concerning, as this could not only affect their careers but also their credibility within professional and social networks. As a result, most men chose to remain disengaged despite skepticism toward government policies. Although most men were distrustful of the government's handling of economic and social issues, this skepticism did not initially translate into action. Early on, most believed the economy would recover on its own and saw little need for direct involvement. However, as economic instability deepened, marked by job losses, inflation, and financial insecurity, participation became a more pressing concern.

Table 7 Barriers to Participation between Men and Women

Barrier	Men	Women
Fear of Consequences	Job security, legal risks, being labeled a conspiracy theorist	Social judgment, fear of alienation from family and friends
Trust in Government	Believed the economy would recover, skeptical but not engaged	Initially trusted health experts, relied on mainstream narratives
Social Acceptance	Hesitated until others joined, needed critical mass for legitimacy	Needed reassurance from other women, feared backlash from other parents
Trigger to Join	Worsening economy, censorship of alternative viewpoints	Children's mandates, emotional distress from isolation

Additionally, the increasing censorship of alternative viewpoints, particularly on social media and in mainstream discourse, heightened their perception of government overreach. For many, the suppression of dissenting voices signalled a fundamental threat to personal freedoms, ultimately motivating them to engage. Another critical factor influencing men's decision to participate was social acceptance. Many hesitated to join until a critical mass of participants had already mobilized, as they sought legitimacy through numbers. Public figures, influential voices, and widespread participation helped mitigate fears of reputational harm, making activism a more viable option.

The presence of other men within the movement also provided reassurance, reinforcing a sense of solidarity and reducing the perceived risks of engagement.

Women, in contrast, faced hesitations rooted primarily in social and emotional concerns. Unlike men, who feared professional repercussions, women were more likely to fear alienation from family, friends, and their local communities. Many were hesitant to engage due to concerns about social judgment, particularly within parenting networks, where adherence to public health measures was often framed as a moral responsibility. The potential for a backlash from other parents was a significant deterrent, as women risked being viewed as reckless or misinformed if they questioned mainstream narratives. Additionally, women initially placed greater trust in government institutions, public health authorities, and mainstream media. Many relied on institutional guidance to navigate uncertainty, believing that official policies were designed with public safety in mind. This trust delayed their participation, as questioning government measures was seen as counterintuitive to protecting their families. However, as the situation evolved, many women began to reassess their stance when they observed the negative impact of restrictions on their children and communities. The most significant trigger for women's participation was the effect of mandates on their children. School closures, mask mandates, and social isolation had profound consequences on children's well-being, leading to increased mental health struggles, academic difficulties, and emotional distress. Mothers, in particular, became mobilized as they witnessed the toll these policies took on their families. The breakdown of community support systems further fuelled their disillusionment, as women who had once relied on these networks for social and emotional stability began to feel disconnected and frustrated. Unlike men, whose participation was often driven by external political and economic forces, women's engagement was more deeply personal and emotional. Many only joined after seeing firsthand the psychological and developmental consequences of prolonged restrictions on their children. Additionally, women often sought reassurance from other women before participating, needing validation from like-minded peers to feel secure in their decision. This dynamic highlights the role of interpersonal relationships in shaping women's activism, as solidarity within female social networks played a crucial role in overcoming initial hesitations.

While both men and women faced significant barriers to participation, their concerns and motivations diverged along distinct lines. Men were primarily deterred by job security risks and political repercussions, with many only joining when economic instability and censorship became

undeniable. Their participation was often contingent on the presence of a critical mass, as legitimacy through numbers reduced the perceived risks of activism. Women, on the other hand, were initially constrained by social judgment and trust in institutional narratives, ultimately being mobilized by concerns for their children and the emotional toll of prolonged restrictions. These gendered differences underscore the complex interplay between personal circumstances, societal expectations, and political engagement, shaping the ways in which men and women choose to participate in social movements.

Table 8 Gendered Expressions of PCI

PCI Dimension	Men (Early/Late Joiners)	Women (Early/Late Joiners)
Cognitive	Grievances framed around political autonomy, job loss, censorship	Framed around children's well-being, maternal protection, health autonomy
Moral	Emphasis on individual liberty, resistance to authoritarianism	Moral duty to protect family, emotional integrity, and community care
Action-Oriented	Visible leadership, public defiance, strategic confrontation	Logistical coordination, emotional labour, digital and local outreach

Hence, building on Simon and Klandermans' tripartite model of politicized collective identity comprised of perceived injustice, in-group identification, and emotional engagement, this study identifies systematic gendered variation across all three dimensions. These differences are not marginal embellishments but are central to how participants entered, sustained, and made meaning of their movement engagement.

Convergence Through Divergence

Despite clear gendered divergences in motivations, emotional vocabularies, and participation styles, the Convoy ultimately fostered a powerful sense of shared identity among participants. This convergence did not emerge in spite of gendered differentiation but because of it through the complementary labour, moral visions, and symbolic roles that men and women brought to the movement. The dynamic interplay between public defiance and private caregiving, between ideological leadership and emotional sustenance, allowed the movement to generate a politicized collective identity that was both plural and coherent.

This shared identity was forged through rituals and practices that blurred the boundaries between care and protest, offering a common space for emotional resonance, moral affirmation, and embodied resistance. Participants regularly described joint activities such as communal cooking, group prayer, spiritual ceremonies, singing, and mutual aid as foundational to the cohesion of the Convoy. These practices created a moral infrastructure that allowed diverse participants to feel unified not just by grievance but also by belonging.

One particularly illustrative example comes from the experience of P21 and P22, a married couple who initially joined the Convoy for different reasons: P22, a mother of two, had become politicized through concerns about her children's mental health and educational future; P21, a tradesman who lost his job due to mandates, was motivated by a deep sense of political betrayal. While their pathways to politicization diverged (maternal protection vs. economic justice), they found common purpose in co-hosting a "healing tent" at the protest site in Ottawa. The tent served as a communal space where participants could pray, share stories, receive hot meals, and find emotional support. P22 coordinated a small team of women who organized tea rituals, distributed wellness kits, and offered spiritual counselling rooted in holistic and maternal care practices. Meanwhile, P21 helped build the tent's structure, organized firewood deliveries, and kept watch during overnight hours. Their collaboration exemplified how gendered roles (caregiving and protection, emotional labour and physical labour) interlocked to sustain the movement's relational fabric. These forms of co-creation were not exceptional but emblematic. Across the Convoy, men and women often co-produced protest spaces that blended symbolic resistance with collective care. For instance, in several locations, women who ran food preparation stations partnered with men who coordinated logistics and convoy routes. Prayer circles often featured women leading blessings or spiritual invocations while men stood guard nearby to prevent disruptions. These seemingly mundane acts carried deep political meaning: they enacted a shared ethic of sovereignty, nurturance, and mutual responsibility, allowing participants to express their grievances and commitments through both action and presence.

Crucially, such convergence was also emotional and affective. Participants frequently described moments of collective catharsis such as tears during songs, hugs between strangers, shared silences during memorials for "vaccine-injured" loved ones that transcended gendered scripts and forged a felt sense of unity. The affective resonance of these moments helped bridge the ideological and experiential gaps between men and women, early and late joiners, and even

between the politically radicalized and the spiritually awakened. In this sense, the Convoy functioned as a liminal space: a temporary yet powerful rupture in everyday life where divergent identities were reconfigured into a common political subjectivity.

In sum, while men and women entered the movement through distinct pathways shaped by social roles, emotional vocabularies, and biographical triggers, their experiences converged in shared practices that embodied the core tenets of the movement: autonomy, care, and resistance. These everyday rituals of solidarity were not ancillary but constitutive of politicized collective identity. They illustrate how difference does not preclude cohesion; rather, when structured through mutual recognition and shared stakes, gendered participation can deepen the moral, emotional, and symbolic coherence of protest movements.

Long-Term Identity Transformation

Participation in the movement catalyzed enduring changes in participants' political identities, daily practices, and broader worldviews. Rather than viewing the Convoy as a discrete or episodic protest, many participants described it as a watershed moment, a rupture that prompted the re-evaluation of prior assumptions, allegiances, and routines. This transformation unfolded across three interrelated domains: worldview, lifestyle, and political engagement, and was often articulated not only as a political awakening but also as a moral or spiritual realignment. These shifts, while broadly shared, manifested in gender-specific ways, shaped by prevailing cultural narratives around caregiving, protection, and political authority.

Worldview Reorientation

For many participants, the Convoy catalyzed a profound epistemic break; a reordering of how individuals understood truths, authority, and knowledge production. Trust in institutional pillars such as government, mainstream media, the public healthcare system, and formal education systems was not just diminished but actively inverted. Many participants reported coming to see these institutions not as flawed but as fundamentally manipulative, coercive, or captured by hidden agendas. This shift was often expressed in language of “awakening,” or “seeing through the lies,” reflecting a moral reorientation as much as a cognitive one. This rupture created a space for alternative epistemologies to take root. Personal experience, embodied intuition, and networked validation within digital and community spaces became primary sources of truth. Telegram

channels, livestreams, and independent media outlets (e.g. Rebel News, and True North) formed a parallel information infrastructure, offering not only news but also interpretive frameworks for making sense of political and social events.

Crucially, this worldview reorientation was not merely reactive but generative. Participants began actively seeking out new intellectual frameworks from libertarian political philosophy to holistic health, homeschooling pedagogies, and alternative cosmologies rooted in New Age spirituality or Christianity. These were not seen as “beliefs” but as tools of resistance, enabling a new sense of epistemic autonomy in a world perceived as morally and informationally compromised.

Lifestyle Reconfiguration

These epistemological shifts were mirrored in concrete, often radical, transformations in participants’ daily lives. Many restructured their routines and social worlds to align with the values crystallized during the Convoy. For instance, withdrawing children from public education was a frequent decision, driven by a belief that schools were indoctrinating youth into secularism, “gender ideology,” or government obedience. Homeschooling and unschooling were framed not only as educational alternatives but as acts of sovereign resistance in order to reclaim parental authority and reject state control over childhood development.

Others reoriented around localism and self-sufficiency, rejecting what they saw as fragile or corrupt state-managed systems. Participants spoke of joining local food co-ops, installing off-grid energy solutions, or relying on barter networks. These lifestyle choices reflected an ethic of autonomy and deinstitutionalization, where everyday acts from growing food to refusing vaccines, became politically meaningful and morally righteous. In this way, Convoy participation blurred the lines between ideology and habit. Individuals came to live their politics in embodied ways, transforming the political into the affective and material rhythms of everyday life.

Political Engagement and Movement Continuity

Hence, participation in the Convoy frequently marked the onset of long-term political engagement, but one that challenged conventional definitions of civic participation. Many participants did not pivot toward mainstream party politics or institutional advocacy. Rather, they pursued community-based, often anti-institutional forms of activism, such as organizing mutual

aid groups, leading local information sessions, distributing alternative media, or hosting wellness retreats and unschooling collectives. Some also continued participating in or organizing protests, forming Convoy spin-off networks (e.g. 1 Million March for Children), and amplifying their voices online through podcasts or TikTok. For these individuals, the Convoy served as a foundational narrative, akin to a rite of passage, through which political consciousness was forged and moral clarity was attained. Importantly, this transformation led to a redefinition of what counts as politics. Voting, petitioning, or party membership were often seen as insufficiently or irrelevant. Instead, acts of prefigurative politics (e.g., building alternative systems, withdrawing from corrupted ones, and reshaping social norms) became central. This signals a post-liberal mode of political engagement that seeks not reform, but exit and replacement.

Gendered Trajectories of Politicization

The long-term politicization trajectories of Convoy participants were profoundly gendered not only in who did what, but in how politicization was experienced, framed, and embodied. For many women, especially mothers and caregivers, the Convoy triggered a re-politicization of private life. Acts like homeschooling, challenging mask mandates, or questioning public health guidance were initially framed as maternal responsibilities (i.e., protecting children from harm), but came to be seen as forms of public resistance. In interviews, many women spoke of “waking up” through their children: noticing how their schooling changed, how they were treated at clinics, or how they themselves were dismissed when raising concerns. This fostered what can be termed as “maternal activism,” which is a blend of emotional labour, moral outrage, and relational organizing that drew on care ethics as a foundation for political action. Women took up roles in mutual aid, local organizing, spiritual healing circles, or unschooling pods. The politics they practised was relational, embodied, and affectively saturated, reflecting feminist traditions of activism while repositioning care as oppositional rather than compliant.

Male participants, by contrast, were more likely to articulate their transformation through ideological language and political theory. Initial disillusionment with pandemic mandates often escalated into interest in libertarianism, sovereign citizen theory, anti-globalism, or Christian nationalism. Some exited mainstream politics altogether, describing the entire system as illegitimate, corrupt, or occupied by globalist forces. Many of these men assumed symbolic or logistical leadership roles: organizing local chapters, producing digital media, or acting as Convoy

“captains.” The narrative emphasized principled defiance, and protection of civil liberties. Their politicization was often framed through language of betrayal and redemption; they had been “duped” by institutions and were now on a righteous path to restore liberty, protect the family, and “stand up” as men. Together, these trajectories illustrate how gender mediated the experience and expression of politicization, producing distinct but mutually reinforcing forms of identity work and action.

Durability and Reproduction

Crucially, these identity transformations were not confined to the individual but extended across relational and generational lines. Participants described efforts to educate children, influence peers, and create self-sustaining communities aligned with their post-Convoy values. In this way, the politicized identity was not only internalized but reproduced through discourse, rituals, and practice. Several interviewees framed their continued activism as a form of legacy-building, emphasizing the need to “wake up others” and “protect future generations” from the perceived encroachment of authoritarian governance. This intergenerational dimension speaks to the durability of PCI and its potential to evolve from episodic protest into a sustained political subculture. The Convoy did more than oppose pandemic mandates; it produced new subjectivities, reconfigured daily life, and planted the seeds for enduring political realignment. By applying a gender-sensitive PCI framework, we can see how collective identity was forged through shared grievances and symbolic confrontation, but expressed in gendered forms of care, resistance, and meaning making. Women redefined care as political, constructing support networks and nurturing relational forms of resistance. Men reimagined themselves as defenders of liberty and assumed roles in ideological leadership and symbolic protest. These complementary trajectories forged a multidimensional populist movement with significant staying power, capable of transforming individual lives and reshaping collective consciousness. In doing so, the Convoy moved beyond an episodic protest and became a cultural infrastructure for right-wing mobilization, providing the discursive, emotional, and moral scaffolding for Canada’s emerging populist realignment, one now channelled, amplified, and legitimized by political figures like Pierre Poilievre.

Discussion

This study offers an empirically grounded and theoretically generative contribution to the PCI framework, particularly through its integration of gender-sensitive analysis and its contextualization within the uniquely Canadian landscape of protest, populism, and sovereignty discourse. While Simon and Klandermans' original formulation of PCI provides a robust foundation for understanding how grievances, identity, and engagement converge in protest movements, the findings from the Convoy reveal important dimensions that the framework, in its conventional form, leaves underdeveloped, most notably, the gendered pathways to politicization and the interplay between private life, affective labour, and public resistance.

Expanding PCI Through Gender

One of the most significant contributions of this analysis is the demonstration that gender is not merely an independent variable that influences the likelihood or intensity of participation in contentious politics, but a foundational axis through which the very processes of politicization (i.e. grievance interpretation, identity formation, action orientation, and long-term transformation) are mediated. Drawing on the PCI framework, this study extends Simon and Klandermans' model by foregrounding how gendered subjectivities shape not only the motivational and emotional dynamics of mobilization, but also the forms of political meaning-making available to participants. Rather than viewing gender as a background condition, this analysis treats it as a constitutive logic that structures access to repertoires of action, the legitimacy of claims, and the moral narratives through which political agency is constructed.

Among female participants, politicization frequently emerged from affective and relational spaces (e.g. caregiving, community healing, wellness networks, and maternal concern). These ostensibly private domains became sites of politicization when participants reframed their roles not simply as caregivers or nurturers, but as protectors of bodily autonomy, defenders of children's well-being, and guardians of moral integrity. This reframing did not require the abandonment of traditional gender roles, rather it involved the politicization of femininity itself. Care work, previously construed as apolitical or even complicit in normative state functions, was reinterpreted as a form of civic engagement and spiritual resistance. Women often narrated their transformation not through the language of protest, but through the moral imperative to "stand up" for their families and communities, revealing how politicized identity can be deeply rooted in affective ties

and ethical convictions. Conversely, male trajectories into the movement often reflected a different narrative architecture. Many men entered through discourses of betrayal by the state, opposition to technocratic authority, and libertarian commitments to freedom and sovereignty. Their politicization was typically framed through traditional masculine scripts (i.e. the protector of the nation). These roles were often amplified by their visibility in leadership positions, public speeches, and confrontational acts that defined the symbolic contours of the Convoy.

Crucially, this analysis complicates binary understandings of gendered participation. Women were not limited to relational roles, nor were men confined to rational-ideological activism. Several female participants advanced into ideological and strategic leadership positions, contributing to discourse formation and public mobilization. Meanwhile, some male participants articulated their activism through emotionally expressive and community-based practices, such as healing circles, spiritual guidance, or wellness entrepreneurship. These fluid and overlapping trajectories challenge essentialist assumptions and instead call for a more nuanced understanding of how gender interacts with collective identity in dynamic and context-dependent ways.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the PCI framework benefits from a gender-sensitive extension that recognizes identity not as fixed or universal, but as embedded in sociocultural scripts, affective orientations, and power-laden norms. Politicization, in this view, is not only a cognitive shift but a culturally mediated process shaped by how individuals inhabit and rework gendered roles. Such an approach enriches PCI by integrating feminist insights into the relational, emotional, and embodied dimensions of collective identity, thereby broadening its explanatory reach for movements like the Freedom Convoy, where the boundary between personal transformation and political engagement is often blurred.

The Utility of Gender-Sensitive PCI

By incorporating gender as a cross-cutting analytic rather than a post-hoc demographic variable, this study tried to enhance the analytical precision and explanatory power of PCI. Rather than treating identity as a static or abstract attribute, the integration of gender reveals it as a dynamic, embodied, and relational construct shaped by lived experience, affective attachments, and socio-cultural expectations. This extension of PCI theory generates three key contributions.

First, a gender-sensitive lens clarifies how emotional triggers are differentially mobilized and interpreted across gendered subject positions. For instance, while both men and women

expressed grievances related to state overreach, the emotional registers through which these grievances were experienced and often articulated diverged. Women's entry into the movement was frequently catalyzed by fear for their children's health and autonomy, or anxiety over disruptions to caregiving routines and community cohesion. In contrast, men more commonly expressed anger over perceived violations of individual rights, economic dispossession, and threats to their role as providers or protectors. These emotional framings are not incidental; they are deeply embedded in gendered socialization and cultural scripts, which shape not only the intensity of politicization but also the affective tone and legitimacy of one's political expression.

Second, the study reveals that risk perception and protest framing are relationally embedded within gendered moral economies. What counts as "risky," "necessary," or "appropriate" political action is filtered through normative expectations surrounding gender roles. For many women, participating in the Convoy, especially in highly visible or confrontational ways, required a reframing of protest as an extension of maternal or moral duty, often invoking spiritual language or the rhetoric of protection. For men, public defiance and leadership were more easily aligned with dominant narratives of masculine heroism or sovereign dissent. These divergent thresholds for acceptable risk and engagement help explain not only participation patterns, but also how individuals justified their involvement to themselves and their communities, drawing on moral vocabularies that are deeply gendered.

Third, the study foregrounds the gendered dynamics of long-term politicized identity formation and reproduction. PCI theory emphasizes that collective identity must be sustained through continued cognitive alignment, emotional investment, and behavioural reinforcement. This analysis extends that insight by showing how these processes are deeply anchored in gendered practices, networks, and value systems. Women, for instance, often remained politically active by integrating resistance into their everyday caregiving routines, alternative health practices, and community organizing, thus embedding politicized identity within relational and affective labour. Men, on the other hand, often sustained their identity through engagement with sovereign discourse communities, symbolic performances of autonomy, or roles in strategic decision-making. In both cases, the reproduction of politicized identity is not merely ideological but culturally situated and materially enacted, often through labour that is unevenly recognized or valued.

These insights suggest that future applications of PCI theory—particularly in the study of complex, multi-issue movements such as the Convoy must move beyond abstract and disembodied

conceptions of identity. To fully grasp how politicization occurs and is maintained, scholars must attend to intersectional and embodied dimensions, including caregiving labour, emotional epistemologies, and the cultural scripts that render certain forms of political agency legible or legitimate. A gender-sensitive PCI framework thus provides a more nuanced and empirically grounded account of how collective identity is differentially constructed, experienced, and sustained across social locations.

Exceptions and Internal Tensions

While gendered patterns were evident across the data, they were not monolithic or static. Several women emerged as ideologically driven leaders, public speakers, and independent media producers' roles typically aligned with the outward-facing, assertive forms of protest more often associated with masculine-coded activism. These women did not merely participate; they shaped discourse and practice within the movement by framing grievances through constitutionalist, rights-based, or legalist lenses. In doing so, they navigated and, at times, deliberately subverted conventional gender expectations. Conversely, some male participants particularly those who spoke of emotional rupture or familial disruption, expressed their politicization in registers commonly coded as feminine, such as care, intuition, and vulnerability. These men were often drawn into the movement not through ideology or policy critique but through affective experiences of loss, dislocations, or a perceived moral calling to protect loved ones. Such exceptions are analytically significant. They reveal the fluidity and performativity of gender roles within protest cultures and caution against overly deterministic readings of politicized identity. Rather than being fixed or pre-given, gendered modalities of engagement were reworked within the specific cultural, emotional, and ideological spaces of the Convoy. This flexibility suggests that protest environments can function as sites of both reinforcement and transgression of normative gender scripts, offering participants new roles, identities, and affective vocabularies through which to articulate belonging and dissent.

Moreover, internal tensions within the movement including the coexistence of spiritual and political framings, libertarian and communitarian impulses, grassroots ethics of mutual aid and emergent hierarchical leadership, highlight the heterogeneous and, at times, contradictory nature of the collective identity forged under the umbrella of PCI. These tensions did not simply reflect organizational disagreement but revealed deeper ideological and emotional cleavages, suggesting

that the movement was not unified by a single coherent worldview but rather held together by overlapping, sometimes competing, logics of mobilization. The invocation of “freedom,” for example, could signify legal autonomy, divine sovereignty, bodily integrity, or national restoration, depending on the speaker and context. These internal contradictions do not undermine the utility of the PCI framework; rather, they point to its necessity for a more dialectical and dynamic understanding of collective identity formation. Protest identities are not formed in isolation or along linear trajectories but are shaped by ongoing processes of negotiation, contestation, and re-articulation. A more nuanced model of PCI must therefore be capable of accommodating ambiguity, recognizing that collective identity is not a settled category but a living, evolving construct, one that absorbs and reflects the tensions, aspirations, and ruptures experienced by its participants over time.

Situating the Convoy: Populism, Sovereignty, and Canadian Protest Culture

These findings contribute to wider debates on the evolving nature of populism and protest cultures in Canada, particularly by unsettling dominant portrayals of the Convoy as an exclusively right-wing or reactionary uprising. While many participants indeed voiced grievances that resonated with classic populist themes such as distrust of political and media elites, opposition to global governance structures, and defence of a morally pure “people” against perceived institutional overreach, the empirical data suggests a more complex and diverse picture. The motivations expressed by participants were not reducible to ideological dogma. Instead, they were deeply rooted in embodied experiences of disruption, disillusionment, and care: parenting under lockdown, navigating medical mandates, losing employment, or tending to loved-ones through prolonged isolation. This uneven landscape of grievance points to a form of populism that is not simply economic or ethno-nationalist, but affective, relational, and spiritually charged. The politicization of spheres typically seen as apolitical such as family life, wellness culture, or alternative education challenges the narrow framing of populism as either a backlash to multiculturalism or a symptom of economic precarity. Rather, what emerges is a distinctively Canadian variant of populism in which emotional sovereignty, bodily autonomy, and moral responsibility toward kin and community become central registers of dissent. These registers are often expressed through the language of care, protection, and healing terms more commonly associated with progressive or feminist movements, thus further blurring ideological boundaries

and demanding greater analytical precision. The findings suggest that Canadian populism, as expressed in the Convoy, is increasingly shaped by intimate domains of everyday life and deserves to be studied not only as a political reaction but also as a cultural and ontological reorientation.

In this context, the Convoy also reveals the emergence of a hybrid protest culture that is both deeply local and transnationally entangled. Participants operated across digital and physical terrains, weaving together in-person convoy routes, livestreaming, Telegram channels, and decentralized protest hubs. This form of engagement borrowed aesthetic, rhetorical, and tactical elements from global movements including QAnon, European anti-lockdown protests, and American constitutionalist rhetoric, while grounding them in uniquely Canadian tropes and symbols. The widespread display of the Canadian flag, the use of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms as a moral compass, and nostalgic references to peacekeeping or rural self-reliance served not merely as patriotic embellishments, but as efforts to reclaim national identity from what participants perceived as a corrupted or captured state apparatus. Through this rearticulation, foundational Canadian values such as freedom, multiculturalism, peace, and sovereignty were not rejected but reinterpreted. Freedom was cast less as a liberal-democratic right and more as a sacred duty; multiculturalism was invoked selectively, often to highlight the diversity of protest participants; and sovereignty was reframed not just in geopolitical terms, but as personal, bodily, and spiritual self-governance. This sovereigntist imaginary is central to the movement's affective force and explanatory power. It suggests that the Convoy functioned not only as a protest against specific policies, but also as a cultural text through which competing visions of Canadian nationhood and legitimacy were staged, negotiated, and performed. In this light, the Convoy's deeper significance lies in its capacity to contest dominant narratives about who constitutes "the people" and who gets to speak on their behalf in Canada. Rather than viewing the Convoy as a transient expression of discontent, it should be analyzed as part of an ongoing realignment in Canadian political culture; one that fuses anti-institutional populism, personalized sovereignty, and countercultural spirituality into a potent, if internally fractured, oppositional force.

Having traced the formation of politicized collective identities across the cognitive, emotional, and action-oriented dimensions, this synthesizes the central findings by hypothesis and reflects on the gendered and experiential pathways that led individuals into collective action. It further underscores the need for future research to explore how these hybrid forms of mobilization

evolve, how they negotiate internal contradictions, and how they reshape public discourses around freedom, authority, and belonging in Canada's contested democratic landscape.

Summary

In sum, this study offers a comprehensive analysis of the Convoy movement through the framework of PCI, with a deliberate and necessary integration of gender as a critical analytical lens. The findings not only validate key hypotheses regarding the cognitive, emotional, and action-oriented dimensions of PCI but also significantly expand theoretical understandings by revealing how gender fundamentally shapes the processes of politicization, participation, and sustained identity transformation.

Regarding the cognitive dimension (H1 and H2), the research highlights that grievances motivating participation in the Convoy were broadly shared across gender lines, centred on a perceived government overreach and the erosion of individual autonomy, but were experienced and articulated through gender-specific frameworks. Women's grievances were often grounded in relational and caregiving concerns, such as protecting children's education and health, as well as defending bodily autonomy. This caregiving lens framed the movement as a moral imperative to resist state interventions seen as invasive and unjust. Men, by contrast, tended to interpret grievances through an ideological prism, emphasizing themes of sovereignty, institutional betrayal, and civil liberties. This divergence in grievance framing reflects broader social patterns where gender informs both the content and expression of political discontent, demonstrating the importance of attending to gendered lived experiences in protest analysis.

The role of social media (H4) emerges as particularly pivotal, functioning not merely as a communication tool but as a dynamic environment where politicized collective identities were constructed, reinforced, and normalized. Gendered patterns of online engagement further nuance this finding. Women's politicization often unfolded within wellness, parenting, and spiritual communities; spaces that initially seemed apolitical but became sites for the dissemination of convoy-related content and the formation of collective grievance narratives. These digital enclaves provided affective support, symbolic validation, and pathways into action framed by maternal and holistic health concerns. Meanwhile, men's digital trajectories more frequently involved direct exposure to ideological content emphasizing sovereignty, anti-globalism, and libertarian principles. This bifurcation of digital experience underscores how gender shapes not only what motivates

individuals but also how they encounter, interpret, and embody politicized identities in mediated environments. The findings thereby extend PCI theory by incorporating the nuanced, gendered modalities through which social media mediates protest mobilization.

Long-term identity transformation (H5) was a defining outcome for many participants, marking the Convoy as a critical juncture in their socio-political trajectories. Women often reconfigured caregiving roles into forms of sustained community activism such as homeschooling, mutual aid networks, and natural health advocacy became overt political acts challenging dominant state narratives and institutional authority. This shift reflects a politicization of the private sphere and an expansion of what constitutes legitimate political action. Men's trajectories frequently exhibited deepening ideological commitments, a withdrawal from conventional political participation, and increasing affiliation with alternative political and media ecosystems, such as sovereign citizen movements and independent online forums. These gendered pathways of transformation underscore that political identities forged through protest are not monolithic but differentiated by gendered social roles and cultural scripts. This expanded understanding complicates traditional PCI models by demonstrating that politicized identity formation can simultaneously reproduce and disrupt existing gender norms.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that gender is not an ancillary or incidental factor but a foundational axis structuring the politicized collective identities that emerge within protest movements. Integrating gender-sensitive analyses enriches PCI by illuminating how protest participation and identity transformation are deeply entangled with social roles, emotional labour, and gendered cultural narratives. This approach offers a more textured and intersectional understanding of collective action, revealing the layered complexities of motivation, risk negotiation, and sustained political engagement.

Beyond its theoretical contributions, this research intersects with broader debates on populism, sovereignty, and protest cultures within the Canadian context and globally. The Freedom Convoy, often portrayed reductively in mainstream discourse, emerges here as a heterogeneous movement shaped by varied and gendered motivations, experiences, and identities. This reframing challenges simplistic narratives of extremism by foregrounding the nuanced and sometimes contradictory social realities that drive contemporary protest. It also highlights how contemporary claims to sovereignty and freedom are mediated through gendered lenses, connecting to wider discourses on citizenship, autonomy, and the state-citizen relationship.

Looking forward, this study suggests multiple avenues for future research and practical engagement. Scholars should further investigate how gender intersects with other axes of identity such as race, class, ethnicity, and regional difference, to produce differentiated experiences and meanings of protest. Comparative studies across different movements and national contexts could illuminate how cultural, political, and institutional factors mediate these dynamics. There is also a critical need to explore the implications of digital media ecosystems as gendered political spaces, particularly regarding radicalization, identity reinforcement, and community building.

From a policy and civil society perspective, recognizing the gendered dimensions of protest participation and backlash is essential for fostering inclusive dialogue and conflict resolution. Policymakers and community leaders should be attuned to how caregiving responsibilities, emotional labour, and relational networks shape political mobilization and how these factors influence individuals' responses to governance and regulation. Developing gender-sensitive frameworks for engagement can help mitigate polarization, rebuild trust, and create more responsive democratic institutions. More broadly, understanding the gendered contours of sovereignty and resistance within movements like the Freedom Convoy provides insight into the evolving nature of political identity and collective action in an era marked by social fragmentation, digital mediation, and contested legitimacy. It points to the importance of intersectional, contextually grounded analyses in unpacking the complexity of modern protest movements and the diverse ways individuals construct meaning and agency within them.

In sum, this study reaffirms the indispensable role of gender as a lens for decoding politicized collective identity and enriches our grasp of the political, social, and emotional fabrics that underpin contemporary protest movements. It opens new pathways for theory, research, and practice, inviting continued exploration of how gendered experiences shape and are shaped by collective struggles for autonomy, justice, and belonging in Canada and beyond.

Chapter 6 - Reclaiming the Self in the Age of Disruption: Identity, Belonging, and Meaning-Making in the Freedom Convoy

Rarticulating the Research Question: From Discontent to Dissent

This thesis began with a central question: *How do individuals transform their identity leading to participation in a contentious social movement, and what social, emotional, and biographical factors shape their socio-political trajectories?* The findings presented across the empirical chapters provide a clear and multi-layered answer. The Convoy emerged as a potent arena in which latent grievances, many of which predated the COVID-19 pandemic, were converted into politicized collective identities. This transformation was neither linear nor purely ideological. Instead, it was a deeply personal and relational process that unfolded through an interplay of structural conditions, life experiences, and affective connections.

For many participants, the journey began with a diffuse sense of dissatisfaction or distrust toward institutions, often rooted in formative life experiences such as family values emphasizing independence, religious teachings that framed authority in moral rather than legal terms, or economic precarity that bred skepticism toward political promises. The pandemic acted as an accelerant, heightening feelings of marginalization through job losses, social isolation, and perceived violations of bodily autonomy. Yet these individual grievances only became political when reframed as shared injustices. This reframing occurred in interactional spaces (i.e., convoys, rallies, social media groups) where participants encountered narratives that validated their experiences and offered moral clarity. The PCI framework proved instrumental in making sense of this process. Cognitive awareness emerged as participants recognized that their personal struggles were not isolated but connected to broader systemic failings. Emotional engagement deepened as they found solidarity with others who shared their sense of outrage and loss. Finally, readiness to act crystallized as participants redefined themselves not merely as victims of circumstance, but as agents in a moral and political struggle. This transformation was existential as well as political: it reshaped how individuals saw themselves, where they belonged, and what they stood for. In this way, the Convoy was not just a protest against public health mandates, but a crucible for the rearticulation of selfhood in a time of profound social disruption. This final chapter synthesizes these findings, connects them to broader scholarly debates, and outlines the

theoretical, methodological, and normative implications of the research. It also addresses the study's limitations and proposes directions for future inquiry into the evolving landscape of populist dissent, political identity, and digital mobilization.

Summary of Key Findings - Politicized Identity as Emotional, Gendered, and Narrative Work

The empirical analysis presented in this thesis generated findings, each of which advances our understanding of contemporary populist mobilization and identity transformation. First, the study revealed diverse biographical pathways into the movement. Many participants carried long-standing dispositions toward skepticism of authority, shaped by early socialization in environments that prized autonomy and distrusted centralized control. These dispositions interacted with more recent life events, pandemic-related hardships, political disillusionment, to create fertile ground for politicization. Second, the data highlighted the centrality of emotional catalysts. While anger at government overreach and grief over pandemic losses were prominent, participants also described feelings of hope, spiritual renewal, and joy in collective action. These emotions were not peripheral; they structured how participants interpreted events, chose allies, and assessed risks. The emotional intensity of the movement created strong bonds that, for some, eclipsed previous social attachments.

Third, the movement thrived on narrative hybridity. Participants seamlessly blended libertarian language of individual rights, religious rhetoric, conspiratorial claims about hidden elites, and wellness discourses about bodily sovereignty. This hybridity allowed for ideological inclusivity, enabling participants with disparate worldviews to find common cause. Rather than diluting the movement's coherence, this narrative pluralism functioned as an adhesive, uniting individuals under a shared moral umbrella while allowing them to maintain personal belief systems. Fourth, the findings underscored the transformative role of digital mediation. Social media platforms were not merely logistical tools; they served as stages for identity performance, spaces for emotional validation, and arenas for public witnessing. Livestreams, memes, and comment threads allowed participants to narrate their experiences in real time, creating a sense of immediacy and collective presence even for those physically distant from protest sites. Digital spaces also facilitated the rapid circulation of alternative narratives that challenged mainstream media framings, reinforcing participants' sense of epistemic autonomy. Finally, the study documented the post-Convoy outcomes. The Ottawa occupation represented a mark in terms of public visibility

and political pressure. However, sustaining momentum proved challenging in the face of internal fractures, leadership disputes, and shifting public attention. While some participants sought to institutionalize their activism through political candidacies or advocacy groups, others disengaged or redirected their energy into more localized causes. This decline in coherence reflects the structural challenges faced by movements that are horizontally organized, emotionally driven, and ideologically diverse.

Moreover, these findings also resonate with Alberto Melucci's (1996) conception of collective identity as a process rather than a fixed attribute. Far from being a stable category, collective identity emerges through ongoing meaning-making practices that help participants interpret personal disruptions as politically significant. The narratives of betrayal, protection, and awakening documented in this study illustrate how participants continually reconstructed their sense of self in relation to others, echoing Melucci's emphasis on identity as "work." At the same time, the Convoy case confirms Jasper's (1997; 2011) claim that emotions are not secondary to rational calculation but central to contentious politics. Feelings of grief, indignation, pride, and spiritual transcendence were not peripheral to mobilization; they were the very mechanisms through which grievances were politicized and solidarity was sustained. Moreover, these emotional registers operated in gendered ways: women's narratives were often embedded in caregiving and moral protection, while men emphasized defiance and sovereignty, reflecting patterns noted by Blee and Deutsch (2012). Taken together, these insights affirm that politicized identity in the Convoy was not simply about opposition to mandates but about an ongoing struggle for recognition, belonging, and moral clarity within a fragmented public sphere.

Taken together, these findings portray the Convoy as emblematic of a broader transformation in contentious politics: mobilizations that are networked rather than hierarchical, emotionally charged rather than purely strategic, and resistant to traditional ideological classification. In confirming, extending, and challenging existing literature on populism, social movements, and activism, the study demonstrates that the processes of politicization in the 21st century cannot be understood without close attention to emotion, narrative, and the lived experience of identity transformation.

Theoretical Contributions

This thesis advances the PCI framework by integrating a gender-sensitive lens grounded in empirical findings, while also expanding its scope to capture the recursive, affective, and digitally mediated nature of politicization. Simon and Klandermans' (2001) model offers a robust scaffold for understanding the cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions of politicization, yet its application has largely been gender-neutral, underemphasizing the non-linear and deeply emotional character of identity formation, as well as the ways in which gendered roles, emotional repertoires, and narrative structures shape political engagement. Drawing on life-history interviews with participants in the Convoy, this study demonstrates that politicization processes differ markedly between men and women, not only in the substantive content of grievances but also in the emotional grammars and identity archetypes through which those grievances are expressed. These differences are not incidental; they are constitutive of how politicized collective identity is formed, maintained, and performed. This insight, combined with a fine-grained analysis of participants' trajectories, reveals that the original PCI framework must be enriched in three crucial ways.

First, politicization must be reconceptualized as a recursive process of identity work rather than a linear progression from grievance recognition to collective alignment. Participants moved back and forth between phases of disillusionment, seeking, and reidentification, continually refining their sense of self and community through feedback, resistance, and reaffirmation. For both men and women, this cyclical process was real-time and emotionally volatile, reflecting the ongoing negotiation of personal and collective meaning in a digital-era movement. However, the triggers and trajectories of these oscillations were often gendered, shaped by social role expectations, familial responsibilities, and culturally specific scripts of masculinity and femininity. Second, PCI must be deepened through the explicit integration of affect theory. Emotions in the Convoy were not simply catalysts for mobilization; they structured the very content, intensity, and sustainability of political identity. Narratives of betrayal, spiritual calling, redemptive purpose, and protective love permeated participants' accounts. Grief and anger emerged not as peripheral affective states but as the scaffolding of meaning itself, a finding that aligns with Jasper's (1998, 2011) work on moral emotions. Crucially, these emotions often manifested in gendered ways: men's accounts leaned toward narratives of protective defiance and moral guardianship, while

women's accounts frequently centred on care, preservation, and spiritual renewal. Recognizing these differences is essential to understanding how collective identity is emotionally anchored.

Third, PCI must be situated within the digital infrastructures that increasingly mediate political engagement. Digital platforms provided the spaces where grievances became shareable, narratives viral, and identities performable. Through livestreams, short-form videos, and algorithmically boosted content, participants, both men and women, experimented with public selves, received affirmation, and became part of an imagined community of resistance. Yet the digital stage also reinforced gendered modes of self-presentation: for instance, women often framed their activism through familial protection and community care, while men tended toward imagery of defence, endurance, and confrontation. These digital performances blurred the line between political and personal, fact and belief, visibility and vulnerability, transforming PCI into a practice of digital self-making in a networked, emotionally charged, and post-institutional terrain. Beyond PCI, this thesis contributes to broader theories of populism by highlighting the significance of narrative hybridity. The Convoy's discourse departed from conventional populist binaries of "pure people" versus "corrupt elite" by amalgamating evangelical Christianity, New Age spirituality, alternative medicine, and sovereign citizen ideologies into heterogeneous and highly personal configurations. This hybridity did not weaken the movement's coherence; it broadened its resonance by enabling individuals to see their unique convictions reflected in the collective discourse. Such blending challenges rigid ideological taxonomies and resonates with postmodern identity politics, where truth claims increasingly rest on personal experience, testimonial authority, and moral emotion rather than institutional validation. In this context, gender again plays a role: the personal convictions woven into the collective narrative were often articulated through gendered storytelling tropes, such as the warrior-protector or the nurturing guardian, which reinforced emotional bonds within the movement.

Additionally, beyond Simon and Klandermans' framework, this study engages broader debates in social movement about the dynamics of contention. Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow (2015) remind us that contentious politics unfolds when ordinary people disrupt established routines in pursuit of political change. The Convoy illustrates precisely how everyday grievances can escalate into disruptive collective action, not through formal organizations alone but through the cultivation of shared identity and belonging. Doug McAdam's (1982) notion of "biographical availability" is also relevant here: the life-history interviews revealed how personal turning points

such as job loss, illness, or family rupture, opened pathways to mobilization by lowering costs and heightening urgency. Francesca Polletta's (2006) emphasis on storytelling further highlights how narrative frames shape identity formation, as participants' use of awakening, betrayal, and redemption tropes provided both coherence and resonance. By integrating these perspectives, the dissertation contributes to the growing recognition that identity transformation is both biographically situated and narratively mediated. At the same time, the findings point to the limitations of classical theories that foreground structural incentives and rational strategies. Resource mobilization and political opportunity perspectives (McCarthy and Zald 1977; McAdam et al. 2001) cannot fully account for the affective, gendered, and spiritual dimensions of mobilization seen in the Convoy. Here, affect theory (Goodwin et al. 2001) and feminist scholarship (Blee 1991; Crenshaw 1991) provide indispensable tools for understanding how emotions and embodied identities condition pathways to activism. By synthesizing these strands, the thesis reframes politicization not as a linear passage from grievances to protest, but as a recursive process of emotional resonance, narrative reframing, and biographical disruption.

Finally, the thesis makes a substantive contribution to digital movement studies by positioning the Convoy as an instance of affective publics: digitally networked communities formed through emotional resonance, narrative convergence, and performative co-presence. These publics are bound not by ideology in the traditional sense but by affective intensity and a sense of shared resistance. The Convoy's emotional spectacle, honking trucks, prayer circles, livestreamed testimonials, was amplified through social media, producing a translocal public that experienced the event as both symbolic and personal. Understanding the mechanics of these affective publics requires attention to how gendered performances of emotion and identity shape digital visibility, recognition, and solidarity. Taken together, these contributions establish that politicization is simultaneously cognitive, relational, emotional, digital, and gendered. The integration of gender into PCI is therefore not an optional refinement but a constitutive theoretical extension, one that has significant implications for the study of contentious politics, calling for models of politicization that foreground the intersection of identity, affect, and social role expectations.

Rethinking Political Subjectivity and Civic Belonging

The findings of this thesis have broad implications not only for the study of contentious politics, but also for our understanding of political subjectivity, civic engagement, and the

emotional architecture of contemporary social life. At their core, these findings call for a rethinking of how we define political identity in a time when conventional channels of participation are widely regarded as insufficient, unresponsive, or illegitimate by large segments of the population. First, the Convoy reveals the increasing significance of post-institutional identity formation. Participants did not construct their political identities through party affiliation, electoral participation, or formal membership in civil society organizations. Instead, they did so through informal networks, personal testimonies, affective storytelling, and community-building practices that existed largely outside institutional frameworks. This form of political subjectivity reflects a deeper transformation in civic culture: one in which trust in institutions has eroded, traditional authorities are viewed with suspicion, and authenticity is measured not by credentials but by lived experience and emotional resonance. The implications of this are profound. Political identity is no longer mediated solely by party systems or civic norms, but by peer networks, affective communities, and digital rituals.

Second, this research brings to the foreground the emotional infrastructure of dissent. The Convoy was driven by more than political ideology or economic grievance; it was sustained by emotional bonds, shared suffering, and mutual recognition. Participants found meaning in being seen, in having their pain acknowledged, and in standing together against what they perceived as systemic injustice. These emotional dynamics cannot be dismissed as irrational or peripheral. Rather, they constitute the very fabric of political engagement in contexts marked by institutional disenchantment. Anger, grief, love, fear, and hope all served as mobilizing forces. More than slogans or symbols, it was the experience of being together, whether in a convoy, on a livestream, or in a prayer circle, that provided participants with a sense of belonging and purpose. Emotions, in this sense, do not simply accompany political action; they are the terrain on which political meaning is built.

Third, the findings point to the importance of understanding populism as moral cartography. Populism is not merely a strategic or discursive style, but a way of interpreting the world through moral coordinates: the righteous citizen versus the corrupt elite, the sacred family versus the intrusive state, the truth-teller versus the manipulative media. These moral narratives offer clarity in a world perceived as disorienting and unjust. For Convoy participants, populism was not just about anti-elitism; it was about constructing a moral community in which their suffering was acknowledged, their values affirmed, and their actions valorized. Populist frameworks allowed

them to map their experiences onto a broader struggle between good and evil, freedom and control. This moral worldview rendered their actions not only justified but necessary. Recognizing this moral framework is essential for understanding the durable appeal of movements that, on the surface, may seem ideologically incoherent or politically marginal.

Fourth, the dissertation's findings shed light on the crisis of epistemic authority that defines the contemporary political landscape. Participants often described their journey into the Convoy as beginning with doubt, fuelled by conflicting media narratives, policy inconsistencies, and perceived censorship. Over time, they cultivated alternative epistemologies grounded in personal experience, embodied knowing, spiritual intuition, and peer testimony. These alternative knowledge systems were reinforced through digital networks that rewarded skepticism, valorized dissent, and constructed parallel truth regimes. This erosion of institutional authority and the rise of experiential epistemology have transformed how individuals determine what is true, what is real, and what is worth fighting for. In this sense, the Convoy was not just a political protest, it was a reclamation of sovereignty by individuals who felt excluded from dominant truth-making institutions.

Situating the Convoy within the wider populism literature highlights how struggles over identity and belonging are entangled with global currents of political discontent. Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) conceptualize populism as a “thin-centred ideology” that constructs politics as a moral struggle between “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite.” The Convoy exemplifies this logic: its rhetoric of sovereignty and betrayal expressed not only opposition to mandates but also deeper antagonisms toward institutional authority. Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart's (2019) theory of “cultural backlash” further contextualizes these dynamics by framing the movement as part of a wider revolt against cosmopolitan liberalism and perceived cultural displacement. These perspectives suggest that participants' identity claims were not isolated expressions of discontent but part of a transnational populist repertoire that linked personal grievances to broader struggles over cultural authority and legitimacy.

Yet the Convoy also challenges aspects of this literature by demonstrating the central role of spirituality, digital culture, and narrative hybridity in shaping belonging. Unlike the party-centred populism that Norris and Inglehart analyze, the Convoy was largely extra-institutional, thriving in digital ecosystems and alternative epistemologies. This aligns more closely with Benjamin Moffitt's (2016) emphasis on populism as a “style” that performs crisis and disruption

across multiple arenas, not just electoral politics. By fusing sovereign citizen legalism, evangelical prophecy, and wellness spirituality, participants crafted belonging in ways that complicate the secular, rationalist assumptions underpinning much of populism theory. The case thus suggests that civic belonging in an age of disorientation is increasingly produced through affective communities and moral storytelling, rather than through stable ideological cleavages.

Finally, the findings signal a broader transformation in the nature of civic engagement itself. Traditional conceptions of civic participation (e.g. voting, petitioning, deliberating) are increasingly being supplemented or replaced by practices of vernacular activism: witnessing, narrating, livestreaming, and communal caring. These practices challenge liberal models of citizenship that emphasize rational deliberation, institutional participation, and procedural consensus. In their place, they elevate embodied presence, emotional resonance, and direct action. The Convoy shows that civic belonging is now being constituted through shared narratives of struggle and liberation, often outside, and sometimes against, formal democratic institutions. This shift calls for a re-evaluation of how scholars and policymakers conceptualize political agency in the twenty-first century.

Democracy in an Age of Disorientation

The findings of this thesis carry significant implications for the health and resilience of democratic societies, especially in an era increasingly marked by polarization, institutional distrust, and the rise of populist. As much as the Convoy represented a specific response to pandemic-related restrictions, it also functioned as a diagnostic event which revealed latent tensions within Canada's political culture, media environment, and civic identity. These implications resonate beyond the national context, offering comparative insights for democracies globally. One of the most immediate implications concerns the fragility of liberal democratic legitimacy. Participants in the Convoy consistently articulated a deep sense of betrayal by institutions traditionally entrusted with protecting public welfare (i.e. health agencies, courts, media organizations, and elected officials). Public health mandates, while framed by authorities as rational and necessary, were often interpreted by participants as coercive, authoritarian, and morally illegitimate. This disjuncture between policy intent and public reception underscores the fragility of institutional trust in times of crisis. Liberal democracies depend not only on procedural integrity but also on a shared sense of legitimacy, a belief that institutions act in good faith on behalf of the public. When

that belief erodes, even the most justified policies can be experienced as acts of violence or betrayal. The Convoy thus reveals how legitimacy must be constantly renewed through dialogue, empathy, and narrative accountability. A second implication pertains to the reconfiguration of civic action. The traditional architecture of political participation centred around elections, party systems, and interest-group lobbying, is increasingly being supplanted by fluid, decentralized, and emotionally driven forms of engagement. The Convoy did not operate within a coherent organizational structure, nor did it articulate a unified platform. Yet it mobilized thousands across the country, leveraging digital tools to coordinate, narrate, and ritualize dissent. This points to a paradigmatic shift in how citizenship is practised. Rather than appealing to institutions, many now perform citizenship through acts of resistance, witnessing, and collective storytelling. This reconfiguration challenges normative theories of democracy that privilege deliberation, rational consensus, and procedural formalism. In their place, it elevates affect, embodiment, and moral positioning as new currencies of civic action.

Third, the Convoy underscores a broader crisis of common meaning. In a fragmented media environment, participants operated within epistemic silos that often bore little resemblance to mainstream public discourse. Scientific authority was challenged by anecdotal evidence; institutional facts were rejected in favour of personal truths. This epistemic divergence is not simply a function of misinformation or ignorance. It reflects deeper cultural divides over what counts as legitimate knowledge, who is entitled to speak, and how truth is verified. These divides are intensified by algorithmic media that reward outrage, amplify fringe content, and polarize debate. As the Convoy demonstrated, the collapse of a shared symbolic world makes democratic deliberation increasingly difficult. Without a common epistemic foundation, political disagreement risks devolving into ontological conflict, a struggle over the very nature of reality itself. The post-Convoy period further illustrates the instability of identity-based mobilization. While the occupation of Ottawa marked a high point in public visibility and political pressure, subsequent efforts to reignite the movement (e.g. Convoy 2.0) failed to recapture the same momentum. Internal divisions, leadership struggles, and competing narratives diluted the movement's coherence. As noted in earlier chapters, the absence of long-term strategy, institutional scaffolding, or cohesive ideology left the movement vulnerable to fragmentation. This highlights a key limitation of movements grounded primarily in affect and identity: they may mobilize quickly and intensely but are often difficult to sustain without organizational continuity.

or shared strategic vision. This instability also reinforces the value of the PCI framework, which emphasizes the importance of continuous identity reinforcement and narrative coherence in maintaining collective mobilization.

These findings also carry implications for how we understand democracy under conditions of epistemic crisis and affective polarization. James Jasper (2018) has argued that democratic life cannot be reduced to institutional procedures; it must also account for the emotional and moral universes through which citizens make sense of politics. The Convoy precisely revealed such universes, where political participation was driven as much by existential longing and spiritual belief as by material interests. Feminist scholars such as Blee (2012) have further shown that these moral worlds are profoundly gendered, shaping who is recognized as an agent of resistance and on what terms. Ignoring these affective and gendered dimensions risks misdiagnosing the sources of democratic disaffection and the appeal of populist movements.

Moreover, the case demonstrates what Nancy Fraser (1990; 2013) terms the “crisis of representation,” in which marginalized publics develop counter-discourses when dominant institutions fail to acknowledge their voices. The Convoy operated as a kind of counterpublic, albeit one often animated by exclusionary or conspiracist frames, in which participants sought to reclaim democratic agency outside institutional channels. This resonates with Chantal Mouffe’s (2000) call for an “agonistic democracy” that takes conflict and passion seriously, but also exposes the dangers of affective mobilization when it turns toward illiberal or exclusionary ends. Thus, the Convoy compels democratic theorists to confront the dual potential of affective populist mobilization: as a vehicle for reclaiming agency and belonging, but also as a threat to pluralist norms when identity becomes rigidified against perceived enemies.

Finally, the Convoy invites reflection on the ambiguous potential of populist mobilization. On one hand, the movement empowered individuals who felt voiceless, disenfranchised, or morally excluded. It provided a platform for alternative narratives, grassroots coordination, and symbolic resistance. On the other hand, it flirted with exclusionary rhetoric, conspiratorial thinking, and antagonistic populism. The line between emancipatory dissent and reactionary backlash was often blurred. This ambiguity complicates normative evaluations of the movement and underscores the need for analytical frameworks that do not pathologize dissent outright but also remain attentive to the risks of polarization, scapegoating, and democratic erosion. In short, the Convoy offers a window into the contradictions of contemporary democracy: the yearning for voice amid

institutional silence, the search for meaning in a fragmented media landscape, and the rise of moral citizenship in place of procedural legitimacy. It forces us to confront uncomfortable questions about the future of civic engagement, the boundaries of political community, and the role of emotion in public life.

Limitations of the Research

As with any study, this thesis is not without its limitations. While the findings offer valuable insights into politicized identity formation and populist mobilization in the context of the Convoy, methodological and conceptual constraints must be acknowledged to properly contextualize the scope and validity of the conclusions drawn. One of the most evident limitations concerns the composition of the interview sample. While efforts were made to ensure demographic diversity across gender, regions, and socioeconomic background, the sample lacked sufficient representation of racialized, and linguistic minority perspectives. Given the Convoy's overwhelmingly white, Anglophone demographic base, this may reflect the actual composition of the movement; however, it also limits the capacity of this research to speak to intersectional dynamics of race, language, and colonial histories in Canadian political mobilization. Future research would benefit from exploring whether and how racialized and Indigenous individuals engaged with or resisted the movement, and how these dynamics may differ from or challenge the dominant narratives captured here.

A second limitation is the temporal proximity of the research to the events it analyzes. Most interviews were conducted in the aftermath of the Convoy's occupation of Ottawa, meaning that participants were still in the process of emotionally and cognitively processing their experiences. While this immediacy allowed for vivid, emotionally charged narratives, it also risks producing accounts that are shaped by post-hoc rationalization, idealization, or selective memory. Retrospective coherence, the tendency to impose narrative order on complex and chaotic experiences, may have influenced how participants described their trajectories. Although this phenomenon is itself analytically valuable (as narrative construction is central to identity formation), it nonetheless raises questions about the accuracy and stability of the memories recounted. Third, the study was constrained by the nature of digital access. While extensive digital ethnography was conducted on public-facing platforms such as Facebook, X, Telegram, and TikTok, access to private, encrypted, or closed-group discussions was necessarily limited. As such,

certain subcultures within the Convoy movement, particularly those engaged in more radical, conspiratorial, or fringe activity, may not be fully captured in this analysis. This limitation is especially salient given the increasing migration of politicized communities to encrypted platforms, where norm enforcement is lower and ideological intensification is higher. A more comprehensive digital ethnography would require extended engagement and potentially participatory research within these less visible spaces, subject to appropriate ethical safeguards.

Another limitation stems from the narrative complexity and ideological hybridity of participant worldviews. While the blending of New Age spirituality, evangelical Christianity, libertarianism, and sovereign citizenship was a key finding of this dissertation, it also posed challenges for analytical coherence. Hybrid ideologies defy neat categorization and resist the use of conventional political typologies. While this dissertation embraced this complexity as part of its interpretive approach, it inevitably required abstraction and synthesis that may obscure some of the nuances of individual belief systems. Future work might delve deeper into comparative typologies of belief across similar movements to identify common patterns or divergences. Finally, the use of qualitative life-history interviews while appropriate for capturing rich, experiential data, limits the generalizability of the findings. The aim of this research was not to produce statistically representative claims but to generate theoretically and interpretively robust insights into the processes of identity transformation. Nevertheless, this methodological orientation means that certain patterns identified here may not extend to the broader population of Convoy participants, or to other populist mobilizations beyond the Canadian context. Despite these limitations, this dissertation provides a significant contribution to the understanding of how politicized identities are constructed, reinforced, and deployed in contentious movements. Acknowledging these constraints invites greater methodological reflexivity and sets the stage for more expansive, inclusive, and comparative research moving forward.

Recommendations for Future Research

Building on the findings and limitations discussed above, this thesis opens up to a few avenues for future research in political sociology, and populism studies. These recommendations reflect both the theoretical insights generated by the study and the empirical gaps that remain to be explored. First, future research should expand the comparative dimension of identity-driven populist mobilizations. While this dissertation focused on Canada and its Convoy, similar

movements have emerged globally in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond from anti-lockdown protests in Germany and the Netherlands to Convoy-style mobilizations in Australia, the United States, and France. Comparative, cross-national studies could help identify common mechanisms of politicization while highlighting how local histories, institutional trust levels, and media ecosystems mediate the shape and reception of populist protest. Such work could refine our understanding of how narrative hybridity, emotional mobilization, and digital infrastructures operate across different cultural and political contexts.

Second, there is a need for more sustained, longitudinal research on post-movement trajectories and the long-term impacts of politicized identity formation. As this thesis has shown, the transformation from private discontent to public activism is a powerful psychological and social shift. Yet little is known about what happens when the peak of mobilization subsides when convoys end, occupations are dismantled, and digital platforms quiet down. Do participants return to prior modes of civic disengagement? Do they retain politicized identities, shift ideologies, or radicalize further? Following participants over time through in-depth, repeat interviews or digital trace analysis would offer critical insights into how politicized identities endure, evolve, or dissolve. Third, future research should look at the intersections of race, settler colonialism, and white identity in populist mobilizations like the Convoy. While the present study noted the overwhelmingly white and Anglophone composition of the Convoy, it did not systematically explore how racialized exclusion, or implicit whiteness structured the movement's narratives, imaginaries, and affective appeals. Scholarship grounded in critical race theory could bring needed nuance to this question. How, for instance, does settler operate in the invocation of "freedom," "land," or "sovereignty"? In what ways do populist narratives co-opt or erase Indigenous epistemologies and sovereignties? These questions are crucial not only for ethical and political reasons but for a more comprehensive understanding of populist identity formation in Canada.

Fourth, the role of spiritual belief systems ranging from Christian fundamentalism to New Age cosmology, merits further scholarly attention. As documented in this study, many participants drew on spiritual narratives to frame their engagement as a divine mission, moral awakening, or cosmic battle between good and evil. While religion has long been a mobilizing force in social movements, its role in contemporary populist mobilization is increasingly complex, pluralistic, and individualized. Future work should explore how spiritual imaginaries intersect with digital media, mental health, trauma, and gender in shaping the affective architecture of mobilization.

Fifth, scholars should further investigate the organizational and institutional impacts of movements like the Convoy. While the present study emphasized the individual and collective experiences of participants, less attention was paid to how the movement influenced or interacted with formal political parties, media institutions, or civil society organizations. What forms of political engagement, institution-building, or strategic learning emerged in the aftermath? Did movement actors enter electoral politics, shift public discourse, or catalyze new advocacy networks? Understanding these effects would clarify the feedback loops between contentious politics and institutional transformation, an area ripe for interdisciplinary exploration.

Finally, methodological innovation is required to better study fluid, emotionally driven, and digitally mediated movements. Ethnographers and movement scholars must continue developing tools for capturing real-time narrative construction, ephemeral identity performances, and algorithmically shaped public spheres. Mixed-method approach that combines qualitative interviews, ethnography, and computational social science offer promising pathways. Furthermore, ethical reflection must keep pace with methodological advancement. As scholars enter spaces marked by distrust, surveillance, and political intensity, questions of researcher positionality, data security, and informed consent take on new urgency. In sum, the questions raised by this thesis are far from settled. As liberal democracies face growing turbulence, the study of political identity, narrative, and emotional belonging will only become more urgent. By extending, challenging, and building upon the insights presented here, future researchers can contribute to a more nuanced, empathetic, and theoretically rigorous understanding of contemporary dissent.

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Appendices

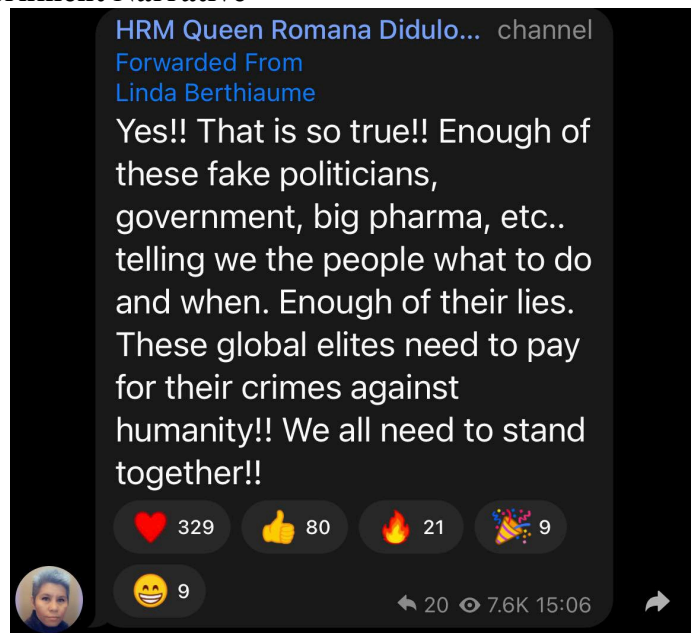
Appendix 1 – Narratives Highlights & Associated Key Figures

Figure 5 The Holocaust and Apartheid Narratives



Source: Calgary Walk for Freedom, B'nai Brith Canada (2021)

Figure 6 Anti-government Narrative



Source: Screenshot of Romana Didulo's Telegram channel, 15/09/2022

Radio-Québec

<https://rumble.com/ver7dv-covidpass-la-tyrannie-sanitaire-dvoile.html>

Rumble

Covidpass: la tyrannie sanitaire dévoilée

www.paypal.me/alexiscossette / Après l'imposition du masque et de la vaccination aux enfants, l'État mondial déploie le passeport sanitaire comme moyen de contrôle social absolu.



Source: Screenshot of Radio-Québec's Telegram channel, 17/03/2021

Figure 7 Identitarian Narrative

Here's your "bAsEd" Pierre Poilievre. He wants more immigrants than Trudeau's 400,000.

More immigrants, more of the LGBTQ agenda, more indoctrination, MORE GLOBALISM.

We need to put real Canadians FIRST. This means doing away with liberalism. Pierre is not a real conservative, nor is he a nationalist.

Source: Screenshot of CanadaFirst's Telegram channel 19/08/2021

Figure 8 New Age Narrative

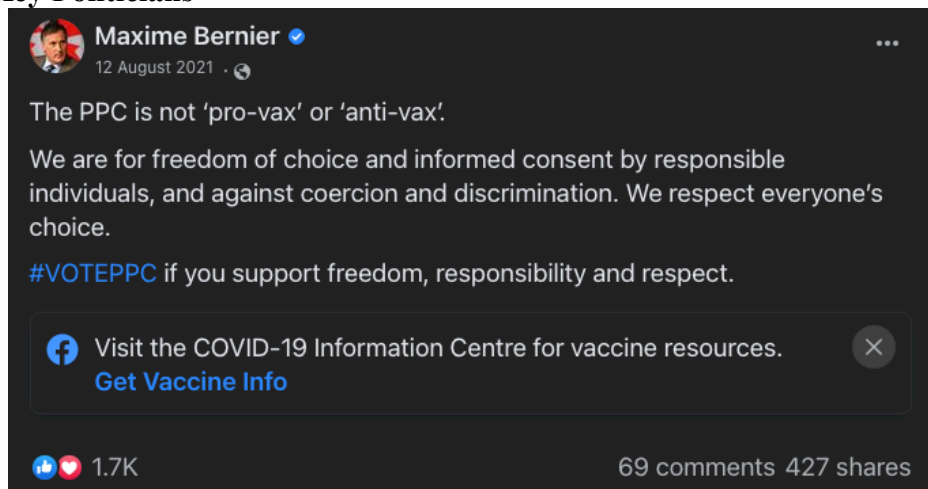


Source: Screenshot of Mel Goyer, Facebook, 09/05/2020

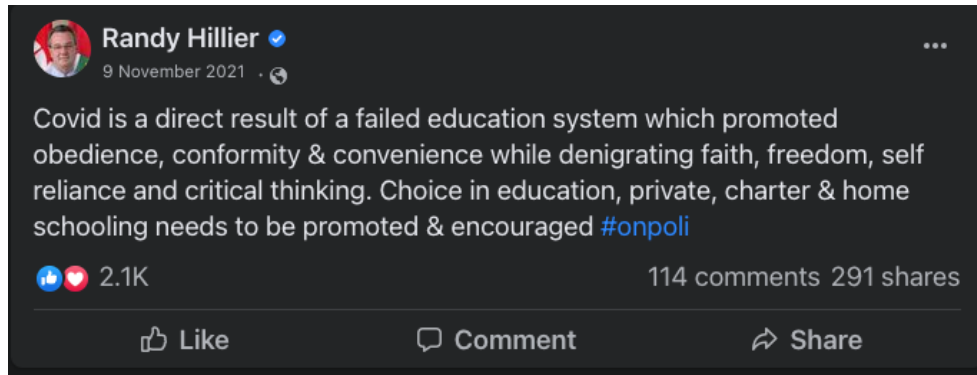


Source: Screenshot, Théovox interview, 22/04/2022

Figure 9 Key Politicians



Source: Maxime Bernier, Facebook, 12/08/2021



Source: Randy Hillier, Facebook, 09/11/2021

Figure 10 Freedom Convoy Figures



Freedom organizers (L-R): Chris Barber, Benjamin Dichter, and Tamara Lich

Source: The Epoch Times, 02/17/2022

Appendix 2 – Diagram of the different conspiracy beliefs regarding the COVID pandemic

Possible Conspiracies

- God, Allah, and reptilians
- Governments, entreprises, bilionaires, Bill Gates, Chinese government, Amercian army, Georges Soros, Jews, pharmaceuticals, ecologists

Virus origin

- Supernatural
- Fabricated and voluntarily diffused
- Unharmful
- Non-existant

Pandemic

- Possible treatments are hidden
- Voluntarily enhanced threat
 - Vaccination is unsafe
 - Health measures control

Objectives

- Evil win
- Population dissimulation
- Enrichement
- Population control
- Political destabilisation

Source: Chaire UNESCO-PREV 2022, Figure 23 (2022, 76)

Appendix 3 – Summary of conspiratorial points on COVID-19



Source: Chaire UNESCO-PREV 2022, Table 6 (2022, 84)

Appendix 4 – Potential Typologies for Early and Late Joiners

Table 9 Typology for Early Joiners

Profile	Description	Example	Motivation to Join	Reason for Staying
Ideological Veteran	Skeptical of government, media, and global organizations; follow alternative views.	P37, resistant to state control, saw pandemic as a platform	Pandemic confirmed fears of authoritarianism and globalist agendas.	Movement validated beliefs, offered a platform, and a mission.
Economic Casualty	Small business owners or workers in impacted sectors (oil, gas, hospitality).	P11, event coordinator, lost career to lockdowns	Livelihoods threatened by mandates, saw it as a fight for survival.	Gave purpose, agency, and community while fighting for work rights.
Political Organizer	Politically engaged, with prior involvement in local parties or campaigns.	P3, politically active, became more engaged post-2020	Offered structured resistance to a distrusted government.	Saw political potential and wanted to shape the movement's direction.
Social Outsider	Felt disconnected from mainstream society, rejected media and policies.	Many felt the Convoy was a “love fest” of support	Found a community that understood and supported them.	Became a new social network offering support and belonging.

Table 10 Typology for Late Joiners

Profile	Description	Example	Motivation to Join	Reason for Staying
Gradual Awakener	Initially trusted government, but grew disillusioned as policies negatively affected them.	P24, initially skeptic, later questioned government actions.	Felt betrayed by government and became deeply invested in exposing the truth.	Consumed alternative media and became committed to spreading the truth.
Socially Pressured	Joined due to pressure from	P16, joined as social circles	Didn't want to be left out or judged	Stayed for the community,

	friends, family, or colleagues who were already involved.	became more involved.	for not participating.	belonging, and peer validation.
Economic Realist	Affected by long-term economic consequences of pandemic restrictions.	P22, impacted by rising inflation and job market instability.	Economic hardships forced them to reconsider their stance.	Became an advocate for systemic change to address economic issues.
Perceived Safety Seeker	Initially afraid of government retaliation, but joined when the movement gained legitimacy.	P20, a lawyer, hesitant until the movement grew.	Felt safer once the movement gained visibility and legitimacy.	Gained confidence from the movement's growth and strength in numbers.

Appendix 5 – Interview Guide

Can you introduce yourself and tell me your story, what is your background?

Follow-up questions

Depending on what the participant answer, I can ask about his/her childhood, adulthood, what he/she liked, music tastes, neighbourhood, friends, family, relatives, special holidays, or events...Anything is possible.

Demographics

Age, gender, education, employment status/occupation, province, language, and neighborhood

Political socialization

(1) Going back in time, can you tell me what you remember about the role activism and participation in your life?

Follow-up questions

How important was activism in the family?

Who was involved?

What were your first opinions? On which themes?

How did your social thinking evolve? Did you abandon or add certain ideas?

(2) Tell me about the individuals who have influenced/transformed your perception of activism.

Follow-up questions

How did this feeling emerge, this desire to get involved, to become an activist?

Do you remember an element, a feeling, a place?

How did you become aware of it?

Trajectory

(3) How and why was the Freedom movement appealing to you?

Follow-up questions

What and how was your first direct contact with the Freedom movement like?

Who was present at that time?

What was the nature of the event that led you to join the movement?

Can you describe this organization to me? What are/were the aims, objectives?

What kind of actions or activities do you do/did and why those in particular?

What preconceptions (positive or negative) did you have about this movement before joining?

Follow-up questions

[No other involvement] Why the Freedom Convoy and not another movement? How did this come about?

[Other involvement] How do you reconcile these multiple engagements?

[Other involvement] In these other commitments, is it the same thing that you are looking for? Do you get the same thing out of them?

(4) What does it mean to you to be part of the Freedom movement, to be a member?

Follow-up questions

What do non-members get wrong about the movement?

How your involvement changed your perception of the [Canadian] or [Quebec] society?

Has your sense of belonging to the movement changed/evolved?

How have your roles (or tasks) within the Convoy community changed since you joined as an activist?

How do you feel about doing activities for the movement?

Do you think the movement has been successful in affecting public and policy opinion?

(5) What is your relationship with other Freedom movement activists?

Follow-up questions

In your first encounter with other activists, how did things go with the volunteers?

Regarding your network, do you have other socially active individuals in your circle of friends and acquaintances?
If so, what is driving their engagement? Does it differ from your engagement reasons?
Do you interact with people outside the movement?
Do you interact with those who are against the movement (antifa, police, etc.)

(6) Regarding your activism with the Freedom movement, have you ever discussed it with people around you?

Follow-up questions

If so, why and in which contexts? If no, why not?

Have you ever regretted joining the Freedom movement?

Do you feel that these people encourage you to maintain your engagement with the movement or on the contrary, discourage you? In what ways?

What importance do you generally attach to the opinions of these people?

Did it change anything in your life when you started to get involved socially? (*Referencing to new habits, new friends, new ways of looking at things...?*)

(7) What future do you see for the movement?

Follow-up questions

What does the Freedom movement mean for [Canadian] or [Quebec] society?

Do you think the organization will grow or decline in terms of either membership or political power?

What is the agenda the movement should have for its future?

What could the movement do to gain more activists?

(8) Have you ever thought of leaving the movement?

Follow-up questions

What would make you want to leave?

What would be the consequences?

Have you thought about joining other movements? If so, which one and why?

Appendix 6 – Consent Form

Participant Information and Consent Form



Project title

In the Name of Freedom: From Personal Grievance to Collective Dissent in the Freedom Convoy

Study investigator

Student investigator: Marie-Soleil Normandin

You are invited to take part in a research study. Deciding on participation or non-participation is completely your decision. If you choose not to take part, there will be no adverse effects. The details given in this form inform you concerning the components of the study, and your expected participation. Kindly review this form thoroughly, take as much time as necessary and feel free to ask any questions you have.

Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time during the research process. Consent is a process that lasts for the duration of your involvement in the study. If there are any changes during the research or if new information arises that might influence your decision to keep participating, I will notify you and ask if you still agree to take part in the study.

I am contacting you here to give you the opportunity to express yourself in an interview, either in French or in English, as part of my research project on the reasons that lead some individuals to become involved in a national movement. The purpose of this study is to better understand the socio-political trajectory of ordinary citizen into the Freedom Convoy. Through interviews, I am interested in how participants describe their involvement, their motivations, and what the movement mean to them. My project, *In the Name of Freedom: From Personal Grievance to Collective Dissent in the Freedom Convoy*, is led by myself, Marie-Soleil Normandin, a PhD candidate in Political Science at the University of Ottawa. You can contact me at any time via email. As well as my thesis supervisor, Professor Daniel Stockemer at 613-562-5800 ext.2698 or dstockem@uottawa.ca.

I am giving you the opportunity to speak and the freedom to express yourself in peace. I invite you to contact me by email so we can plan our meeting. You can choose the time, date, and place of the meeting (online interviews are also possible). I would like to hear about your personal experience and the



reasons that led you to become involved in the social sphere and more specifically in the Freedom movement. We will discuss your experience as an activist (or volunteer). We will also discuss how you experienced the COVID-19 pandemic and whether this has influenced your involvement with the Convoy. I would also like to know how those around you perceive your involvement in this social movement.

With your consent, the interview will be recorded. The audio recording will be kept in a secure location at the University of Ottawa for the duration of the project and all information collected, whether in the form of notes, transcripts, or audio recordings, will remain confidential. All documents and recordings will be kept under lock and key at the University of Ottawa and will be used only for the purposes of the research mentioned above. The data will be kept for a maximum period of five years, after which it will be destroyed.

Anonymity is fully preserved. For each individual, I will assign a pseudonym that will be used both for my personal notes and for the transcripts of the interviews. No real names (either yours or that of another person you might identify during the interview) will be revealed under any circumstances. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact Professor Daniel Stockemer at 613-562-5800 ext.2698 or at dstockem@uottawa.ca. This research study was reviewed by the Research Ethics Board of the University of Ottawa.

I thank you in advance for your time and participation. Your experience and impressions on this subject are of great importance. It will be a pleasure to meet you.

Yours sincerely
Marie-Soleil Normandin
PhD Candidate in Political Science
University of Ottawa