

**Witless Dupes or Peoples' Revolt? A Closer
Look at the Rise of 'Ford Nation'**

Major Essay Proposal: FYSM 1502.B
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1. PROPOSED THESIS

My essay will explain how the rise of “Ford Nation” unified conservative citizens against influential players in Toronto (from, as I point out, the political right and left). I will challenge those who contend supporters of Ford Nation are “ witless dupes”, and link the movement’s contributions to similar actors that have shaped American politics (i.e.: the Tea Party movement).

The rise of Ford Nation, I argue, is linked to disenchantment with the political status quo, and the failure of progressive movements to campaign effectively in suburban areas. It has channeled the frustrations of people into a powerful voice, one critical of government spending in tough economic times.

2. WHY I CHOSE THIS SUBJECT

I chose this subject after becoming frustrated with the common narrative among progressive thinkers about Ford Nation. Typically, this involves claims the movement is mindless, or a surrogate for powerful groups who generally support the Conservative Party of Canada. Some liken Rob Ford himself to a kind of cult leader who manipulates followers from his weekly pulpit on talk radio.

Such claims, in my view, raise a more significant problem: progressive thinkers must take Ford Nation (and similar conservative movements) more seriously. Doing so requires acknowledging the left’s lack of influence in suburban areas (which are often

working-class, and racially-diverse), something conservative strategists have targeted as a source of political strength. And given studies reveal the context of Canadian politics is shifting to a suburban norm, this is a conversation progressives should not ignore. Doing so will ensure their irrelevance to politics, and the enduring strength of neoliberal ideas in our society.

3. RESEARCH CHALLENGES AND CONCERNS

The most obvious challenge I face in writing this paper is identifying the subject, a movement that has little structure beyond its political allegiances. There is no set of foundational documents or party literature that documents the vision and objectives of Ford Nation.

Nevertheless, Mayor Ford does have his own website and Facebook page, and many social media spaces have been created by devotees of Ford Nation. Plenty of material is available debating the merits of the movement from journalistic sources, all of which can be linked to academic discussions about conservative populism.

I also intend to engage, and contribute to, social media discussions with Ford Nation supporters. My hope is this will allow a grassroots perspective to understand why this movement has been resilient in the face of significant obstacles.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper will be researched in the classic social science format, with extra effort to include social media sources. As already explained, I intend to link contemporary discussion of Ford Nation to academic works on conservative populism. Doing so will force me to examine the larger context giving rise to this movement, and assess its contributions against a longer appreciation of history.

5. ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

NB: I will cite, as appropriate, from social media sources detailing comments from Ford Nation supporters and detractors, but these will not count towards my bibliography as bonafide sources.

Journalistic / popular sources

Bolen, Michael. "Rob Ford is the Ugly Truth About the Suburbs." *The Huffington Post*. November 5, 2013. www.huffingtonpost.ca

This article is a classic example of the narrative I challenge in my essay. The author alleges Ford represents an insidious "suburban mentality", a claim that is made with little persuasive evidence. I intend to use this source to demonstrate why generalities about Canadian suburban life are unwarranted.

Cook, Maria. "Canada's New Identity: A Suburban Nation." *Postmedia News*. September 6, 2013. www.canada.com.

This is a useful look into the demographic trends which reveal suburbs hold the fastest growth rate in the Canadian context. The author cites academic research

to support this claim which questions whether Canada is prepared for this shift, or even taking related infrastructure concerns seriously. My intention is to use this source to support my contention that suburban trends be taken more seriously by progressive thinkers and movements.

Elash, Anita. "Canada's Leader of the 'Tea Party North'", *Public Radio International*. June 12, 2011. www.pri.org.

This source offers an early view on the meaning of Rob Ford's election as Mayor of Toronto. It details the conservative sentiment Ford was able to exploit in a city hailed as a preserve of progressive or left-leaning politics. Elash explores the contradictions of Ford's victory in this context.

Lapham, Lewis. "Tentacles of Rage - The Republican Propaganda Mill: A Brief History." *Harper's*. September, 2004.

This source documents the rise of conservative think tanks and organizations in the United States. Lapham documents the strategies and tactics used by far-right Republicans (who would later sponsor the Tea Party) to impact American politics. He makes a convincing case that crucial decisions were made (which must be understood by progressives) to facilitate this process.

McDonald, Marci. "Wierdest Mayoralty Ever: The Inside Story of Rob Ford's City Hall." *Toronto Life*. May 15, 2012.

This source details the misadventures of the Ford Administration during its first year, and the reactions from critics across the political spectrum. McDonald gains access to Ford insiders, and powerful lobbyists both for and against the

Mayor. It is a worthwhile source to appreciate the tensions he has faced while presenting a radical approach to conservatism.

Smith, Jessica. "Ford Nation: Three Takes on Why They've Been so Loyal to Toronto's Troubled Mayor." *Metro*. November 5, 2013. www.metronews.ca.

Smith attempts a brief survey of attitudes from Ford Nation supporters. It is a useful article that I intent to supplement with actual remarks and comments by Ford Nation supporters. The article gives some credence to the notion that Ford supporters are engaging the Mayor's challengers on a personal level, a sentiment that makes sense given the tenor of often heated debate.

Academic sources

Gibson, Diana. "Pushing the Envelope: The Overton Window and the Left", in Richard Swift, ed., *The Great Revenue Robbery: How to Stop the Tax Cut Scam and Save Canada*. Toronto: Between the Lines Press, 2013.

This source documents the rise the conservative populism in Canada, and strategies they have incorporated from the American context. It argues that progressive groups in Canada have been less ambitious than conservative movements, and will continue to be until more attention is given to emerging strategies of right-wing activists. The argument made is quite persuasive, and useful for the thesis I advance in this book.

Kirk, Russell. *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot*, [Seventh Edition]. New York: Regnery Publishing, 2001.

This is the definitive source, written four decades ago, that highlights the values and ideas informing conservative populism today. Russell traces the emergence of patriotism, familial protection, property ownership and the rule of law as key conservative themes in a long line of thinkers starting from the French Revolution. The source helps us grasp the appeal of conservative populism over a longer historical perspective.

Friedman, Milton. *Capitalism and Freedom*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962.

Like Russell's book, this source offers a historical sense of claims made by Ford Nation. Friedman takes aim at the largesse of government, the economic doctrine of Keynesianism, and endorses political action to dismantle much of today's social programs. The echo of Ford Nation's "gravy train" assertions are found in this book.

Skocpol, Theda and Vanessa Williamson. *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

This is the latest and most authoritative source that investigates the origins, growth, and influence of the Tea Party movement in American politics. The authors sought first-hand access to local activists, along with interviews with movement leaders. They conclude that the Tea Party has dramatically impacted US government, and shifted the balance of power in the Republican Party. Recent events concerning the US government "shutdown" would support this thesis, which offers inspiration for Ford Nation supporters.