



"Fire the Gatekeepers!":

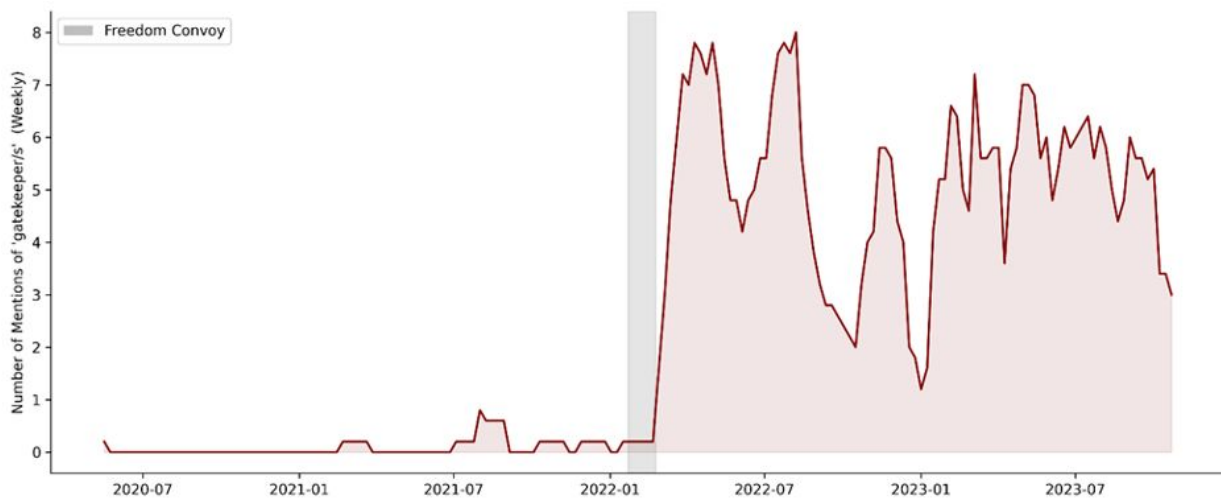
Measuring “Contagion Effects” in the Spread of Anti-Elite Discourse among Canadian Federal MPs

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The term “gatekeeper” has become increasingly popular among Canadian federal MPs, particularly since the 2022 “Freedom Convoy”. Figure 1 illustrates this sudden increase, using data from X (formerly Twitter). It shows that, prior to the Convoy (from April 2020 to January 2022), the term “gatekeeper” was cited just 8 times by federal MPs. In the period during and immediately following the Convoy (from February to October 2023), the term was used 452 times, an increase of 5,550 percent in approximately two years.

Figure 1. Weekly number of mentions of “gatekeepers” by federal MPs on X (Twitter): April 2020 to October 2023.



Defined by the Oxford dictionary as “a person, system, etc. that decides whether someone or something will be allowed”, the term “gatekeepers” is ambiguous in its connotation. It is sometimes used positively to refer to guarantors of democracy who protect institutions and citizens from undesirable threats and challenges, such as journalists who filter out misinformation.¹ In popular culture, by contrast, “gatekeeper” (or, more often, “gatekeeping”) is typically used pejoratively. The latter was one of Vogue magazine’s words of the year for 2022, and Google Trends shows a massive uptick in interest for both ‘gatekeep’ and ‘gatekeeping,’ beginning in 2021, peaking in 2022, and sustained to the present.²



Defining this contemporary, popular usage, the Oxford dictionary notes that the verb “to gatekeep” has come to mean “to restrict or discourage others' participation in, enjoyment of, or identification with” a certain activity. The term, then, is clearly in the zeitgeist, especially in its negative valence. In this research brief, we aim to clarify the meanings applied to, as well as the spread of, the term “gatekeeper” in Canadian federal politics. Specifically, we ask:

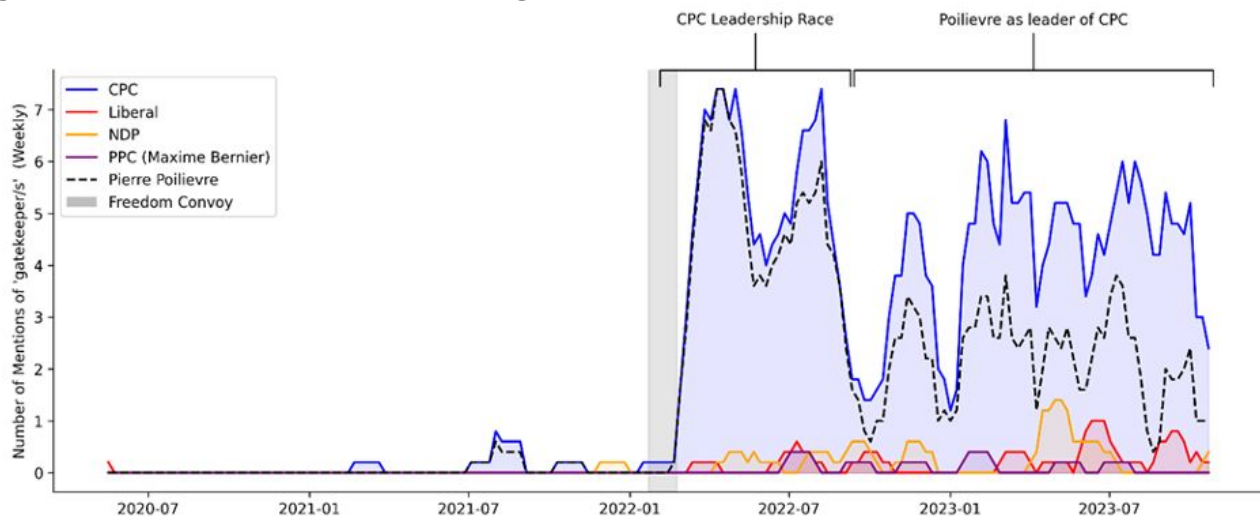
- What accounts, and who is responsible, for the sudden increase in the use of the term “gatekeeper” among Canadian federal MPs since the “Freedom Convoy”?
- Is this increase the result of a “contagion effect”, whereby politicians and parties appropriate the term “gatekeeper” from its original user(s) for political gain? If this is the case, what does the “contagion effect” look like and what are its implications for understanding the role of anti-elite discourse in Canadian politics more broadly?

We begin by quantifying mentions of “gatekeepers” by Canadian federal MPs from April 2020 to October 2023 on X (Twitter), with results broken down by political party. Only MPs from the Conservative Party of Canada, the Liberal Party of Canada, and the New Democratic Party referenced “gatekeepers” during the period in question, and therefore our sample is limited to representatives from these parties. However, we also examine “gatekeeper” references by People’s Party of Canada leader Maxime Bernier who, despite not having a seat in parliament, is widely labeled “populist” in academic and media commentary.³ The second section of the brief reports the findings of our qualitative frame analysis, which compares the meanings associated to the term “gatekeeper” by representatives of the various parties.

Who brought “gatekeepers” to the forefront of Canadian political discourse?

Figure 2 shows the weekly number of tweets that mention “gatekeeper/s” by political party from April 2020 to October 2023, offering several key insights.

Figure 2. Weekly number of mentions of “gatekeepers” on X, by party: April 2020 to October 2023



Notes: The CPC leadership race ran from February 2nd to September 10th, 2022. Poilievre joined the race on February 5th, 2022.



First, the dramatic increase in mentions of “gatekeeper/s” following the “Freedom Convoy” was driven almost entirely by Pierre Poilievre (represented by the dotted line), who launched his campaign to lead the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC) on February 5th, 2022, at the height of the “Convoy”. In a [previous brief](#), we showed that Poilievre’s endorsement of the “Convoy” significantly increased his popularity on X (Twitter). Here, we show that, with his newly expanded following, Poilievre began criticizing so-called “gatekeepers,” and “fire the gatekeepers” became a common slogan for his leadership campaign.



@PierrePoilievre ““We must remove the gatekeepers, so skilled immigrants earn bigger paycheques and Canada gets more doctors, electricians and other skilled workers.” March 14, 2022



@PierrePoilievre ““The “Just Transition” is another attack on our working people to the benefit of the global elites & the foreign oil dictators. Fire the gatekeepers. Make energy here. Ban overseas oil. Join me to make it so” April 19, 2022

Second, Poilievre’s use of “gatekeepers” noticeably decelerated once he became CPC leader, in September 2022. In fact, Figure 2 reveals a structural break between two key periods: the CPC leadership race, during which Poilievre referenced “gatekeepers” between 4 and 7 times per week, and the period following Poilievre’s CPC leadership win, when he referenced the term just 0 to 4 times per week. We can only speculate as to the precise causes of this structural break. However, one hypothesis is that, as the leader of a major federal political party, Poilievre stood to gain from a more targeted, as opposed to broad-based, criticism of “elites”.

Third, just as Poilievre was decelerating his use of the term “gatekeeper”, other politicians, particularly within the CPC but also in the other parties, were accelerating their use of the term. At face value, this suggests a “contagion effect”, whereby political parties and politicians strategically appropriated the term for their own political gain. Is this an accurate assessment? To answer this question, we take a closer look at the top users of the term “gatekeeper” before and after Poilievre’s leadership win.

A “contagion effect”?

Table 1 compares the top 10 users of the term “gatekeeper” during the two sub-periods following the “Freedom Convoy”: Poilievre’s CPC leadership campaign (February 5th to September 10th, 2022) and Poilievre’s CPC leadership (September 10th, 2022 to October, 2023). The results indicate, first, that the proportion of the top 10 users of “gatekeeper” represented by the CPC remained relatively stable in both periods, at 7/10 prior to September 10th, 2022, and 8/10 after. However, Poilievre’s relative share of mentions of “gatekeeper” declined markedly from one period to the next. During his CPC leadership campaign, Poilievre accounted for 84 percent of all (and 91 percent of CPC) uses of “gatekeeper,” while after becoming leader, he accounted for only 43 percent of all (and 50 percent of CPC) uses of the term.









Table 1. Comparing the top 10 MPs who use “gatekeeper” in each period, by number and share of tweets.

CPC leadership race (February 5 th – September 20 th , 2022)					Poilievre as CPC leader (September 11 th , 2022 – October 2023)				
MP	Picture	Party	Number of tweets	% share of total tweets	MP	Picture	Party	Number of tweets	% share of total tweets
Pierre Poilievre		CPC	139	84.24%	Pierre Poilievre		CPC	124	43.36%
Jasraj Singh Hallan		CPC	5	3.03%	Jasraj Singh Hallan		CPC	29	10.14%
Alistair MacGregor		NDP	5	3.03%	Brad Vis		CPC	12	4.2%
Scott Aitchison		CPC	3	1.83%	Scott Aitchison		CPC	10	3.5%
Mark Gerretsen		LIB	2	1.21%	Charlie Angus		NDP	7	2.45%
Maxime Bernier		PPC	2	1.21%	Shannon Stubbs		CPC	7	2.45%
Brad Redekopp		CPC	2	1.21%	Tim Uppal		CPC	7	2.45%

(Table 1 continues on next page)



Pat Kelly		CPC	2	1.21%	Lianne Rood		CPC	6	2.1%
Ryan Williams		CPC	1	0.61%	Ryan Williams		CPC	6	2.1%
Todd Doherty		CPC	1	0.61%	Maxime Bernier		PPC	6	2.1%

Other politicians and parties, meanwhile, increased their absolute and relative use of the term “gatekeeper” after Poilievre became CPC leader. Notable in this regard is CPC MP Jasraj Singh Hallan, who went from a 3 percent to a 10 percent share of all tweets mentioning “gatekeepers” following Poilievre’s leadership win. Notably, as we showed in a prior brief, Singh Hallan is also second-in-line to Poilievre in using the term “JustinFlation” to frame rising inflation in Canada as an “elite” measure inflicted by Justin Trudeau.

Finally, although not shown in this table, we found that the total number of MPs using the term “gatekeeper” increased substantially following Poilievre’s leadership win: while only 13 MPs used the term before September 2022, 51 used it after, including 35 CPC MPs, 10 Liberal MPs, 6 NDP MPs, as well as the leader of the PPC, Maxime Bernier.

This comparison of tweets mentioning “gatekeeper/s” by specific federal MPs during and after Poilievre’s leadership campaign suggests that a “contagion effect” may be at play, particularly within the CPC. Yet, comprehending the nature and impact of such an effect requires qualitative assessment of the meanings attached to the term “gatekeeper” by its users. Do politicians across the political spectrum address the same or different kinds of “gatekeepers”? We address this question in the next section, through a qualitative analysis of key frames applied to “gatekeepers” by federal MPs across parties.

Who are the gatekeepers?

We identified 35 distinct frames used by federal MPs to characterize the term “gatekeeper”. However, the top 10 most frequent frames accounted for the vast majority of mentions, at 83 percent of the total. Table 2 summarizes these 10 frames in terms of the number of occurrences, the percentage share by party, and the percentage share of the total sample, revealing several key insights.



Table 2. Top 10 frames used to characterize “gatekeepers”, in terms of number of tweets, share by party, and share of total sample: April 2020 to October 2023

Description of frame	Number of tweets	% share and number by party	% share of total sample
Gatekeepers cause housing unaffordability	136	100% CPC	29.57%
Gatekeepers block immigrants' economic contributions and opportunities	69	100% CPC	15%
Gatekeepers are general obstacles to production and prosperity	40	100% CPC	8.7%
Poilievre/CPC as the gatekeeper(s) or aiding them	38	47% NDP (18) 39% Liberal (15) 16% PPC (6)	8.26%
Gatekeepers block fossil fuels	35	100% CPC	7.61%
Gatekeepers block Indigenous development	19	100% CPC	4.13%
Gatekeepers censor free speech	14	100% CPC	3.04%
Gatekeepers cause inflation	11	100% CPC	2.4%
Gatekeepers as (or for the benefit of) big tech and telecoms	10	90% CPC (9) 10% Liberal (1)	2.17%
Mocking or critiquing the gatekeeper discourse	10	50% NDP (5) 40% Liberal (4) 10% PPC (1)	2.17%



First, the top three frames, which were used exclusively by the CPC, attribute blame to “gatekeepers” for primarily economic challenges facing Canadians: housing unaffordability (30 percent), obstacles to immigrants’ economic contributions and opportunities (15 percent), and obstacles to production and prosperity (9 percent).



@PierrePoilievre “Thank you to the fine folks at Surrey's Guru Nanak Niwas Assisted Living for the tour earlier today. As PM, I will remove the gatekeepers blocking immigrant nurses and doctors from working so our seniors can get the care they deserve.” July 14, 2023

Second, with the exception of the 9th most popular frame, the non-CPC parties are clustered into two frames, which involve derivative uses of “gatekeeper/s” to challenge the authenticity of the CPC’s anti-elite discourse. Accounting for 8 percent of all tweets in the sample, the “Poilievre/CPC as the gatekeeper(s) or aiding them” frame aims to discredit Poilievre and the CPC by alleging that they themselves undermine the people’s interests. In the following example, NDP MP Alistair MacGregor critiques Poilievre and the CPC for “gatekeeping” Canadians from universal pharmacare and dental care, two well-known NDP policy positions:



@AMacGregor4CML “Pierre is the gatekeeper against working and low-income families getting dental care. He is also the gatekeeper against Canada getting its first Pharmacare Act so that working and low-income families can finally afford their medication.” April 24, 2022

The Liberals, for their part, use a similar tactic when attacking what MP Ahmed Hussen described as the “Conservatives’ housing gatekeepers,” which he critiqued for opposing several Liberal housing measures. The PPC’s Maxime Bernier takes a comparable tack in framing Poilievre as protecting the interests of “supply management ‘gatekeepers’” in the dairy industry.

A second derivative frame used by non-CPC MPs and appearing in just over 2 percent of tweets in the sample, mocks or critiques the “gatekeeper” discourse. Once again, this frame is aimed at Poilievre and the CPC, as when NDP MP Heather McPherson tweeted “Pierre talks about gatekeepers - which is pretty rich considering he has groundskeepers!”; or when Liberal MP Mark Gerretsen tweeted, “Who is the gatekeeper that controls @PierrePoilievre’s hashtags? 🤔” – a reference to reports that Poilievre’s YouTube account strategically used misogynistic tags to attract individuals who traffic in the male supremacist “manosphere” online.⁴



Only in a very small number of cases did non-CPC MPs reference “gatekeepers” in a non-derivative way, i.e. without mentioning either Poilievre or the CPC. In two such instances, the tweets in question targeted big tech, with the Liberals’ Chris Bittle characterizing online streaming platforms as “new gatekeepers in the age of cord-cutting and the rise of online streaming”, and the NDP’s Alistair MacGregor framing “corporate gatekeepers on social media” as purveyors of misinformation. Being very few in number, however, these non-derivative uses of “gatekeeper” by non-CPC MPs were the exception, rather than the rule.

The above results provide a mixed answer to the question of whether or not Canadian MPs’ use of the term “gatekeeper” is subject to a “contagion effect”. On the one hand, the growing number of MPs using the term, including outside the CPC, since Poilievre’s leadership win indicates a clear expansion in the prevalence of “gatekeepers” as a recognizable term used in Canadian political discourse to challenge elites. On the other hand, our framing analysis shows that most non-CPC references to “gatekeepers” are derivative in nature: they cite the term to criticize and discredit its original users, Poilievre, and the CPC.

Conclusion

This brief set out to examine the origins, prevalence, and spread of the term “gatekeeper” among federal MPs as part of an ongoing investigation into the role of populist anti-elite discourses in Canadian politics. In particular, we sought to estimate how and when this term gained popularity on X (Twitter) and to assess whether its expanded use across parties is the result of a “contagion effect”. Our analysis produced three main takeaways:

- First, although increasingly prevalent, use of the term “gatekeeper” by Canadian federal MPs emanates from, and primarily serves, the Conservative Party of Canada’s engagement in anti-elite discourse. The term’s initial popularization was principally driven by Pierre Poilievre and the sloganeering of his leadership campaign, which began at the height of the “Freedom Convoy” in February 2022.
- Second, after Poilievre secured the CPC leadership, in September 2022, “gatekeepers” became the subject of a partial “contagion effect”, becoming referenced by a larger number of MPs, particularly within the CPC. This illustrates the strength of Poilievre’s discursive leadership over the party, with more CPC MPs beginning to sound like Poilievre.
- Third, although use of the term “gatekeepers” has accelerated outside the CPC, its use by opposing parties is largely derivative, reflecting an effort to discredit the anti-elitist discourse projected by Poilievre and the CPC.

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Table A1. Total number and share of tweets that mention “gatekeeper,” by party, from April 2020 to October 2023.

Party	Total		CPC Leadership Race		Post-CPC Leadership Race	
	Number of tweets	% share of total tweets	Number of tweets	% share of total tweets	Number of tweets	% share of total tweets
Conservative Party of Canada (CPC)	406	88.26%	153	0.927272	246	0.860139
CPC (without Poilievre)			14	0.091503	122	0.426573
New Democratic Party (NDP)	25	5.43%	6	0.036363	18	0.062937
Liberal	21	4.56%	4	0.024242	16	0.055944
People's Party of Canada (PPC)	8	1.75%	2	0.012121	6	0.020979

Notes: The CPC leadership race ran from February 2nd to September 10th, 2022. Poilievre joined the race on February 5th, 2022.