

The politicization of protected areas establishment in Canada

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Abstract

Environmental issues and related policy instruments are becoming increasingly politicized in the Canadian context, but it is unclear whether biodiversity conservation and protected areas are similarly politicized. Here, we suggest that the political characteristics of protected areas do not lend themselves easily to politicization, but data from the Canadian Protected and Conserved Areas Database indicate that at the federal level, and provincially in Alberta, the rate of protected areas establishment is becoming increasingly tied to electoral politics, suggesting some politicization. We situate these trends within federal electoral politics between 2006 and the present, outlining the differing approaches of the Harper Conservatives and the Trudeau Liberals and showing how both administrations instrumentalized the environment and protected areas for their own electoral benefits. We find similar trends in Alberta with the Progressive Conservative, New Democratic Party, and United Conservative Party governments. However, while there is increasing polarization in practice, there has been less polarization of the electoral rhetoric surrounding protected areas. This politicization represents a barrier to conservation in Canada as it can lead to greenwashing, poor accountability, or the creation of an anti-conservation constituency. At the same time, politicization can raise the profile of conservation in public discourse, leading to greater public interest and engagement.

Key words: Alberta, Canada, protected areas, politicization, conservation



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Introduction

There is a significant body of research concerning the increasing politicization of environmental issues and policy instruments in a Canadian and North American context ([Oreskes and Conway 2010](#); [Anderson and Stephenson 2011](#) [Schuldt et al. 2011](#); [Bolsen et al. 2014](#); [Pepermans and Maesele 2016](#); [Druckman 2017](#)), but it is unclear whether conservation and associated policy instruments like protected areas are similarly politicized. Politicization refers to processes through which issues become polarized and (or) instrumentalized by electoral elites such as politicians and elected officials. In other words, electoral elites leverage particular issues like climate change or contentious resource projects, like pipelines, to target particular key voting groups, attract more potential party voters, or attack their opponents ([Dufresne and Ouellet 2019](#)). In this sense, politicization is inherently linked to electoral politics.

Given their importance to conservation, it is important to understand the potential politicization of protected areas and the implications for their support by the government and the public. In this paper

we aim to assess whether, and the extent to which, protected areas establishment has become politicized over time as well as its implications for the success of conservation efforts in Canada.

This paper proceeds in four parts. First, we define politicization as the polarization and instrumentalization of protected areas establishment by electoral elites for electoral aims. While at first glance, the political characteristics of protected areas do not lend themselves to politicization, an analysis of data from the Canadian Protected and Conserved Areas Database (ECCC 2019) indicates that the rate of protected areas establishment in Canada and Alberta has become increasingly tied to electoral politics, suggesting some level of politicization. We then situate these trends within federal electoral politics. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of party platforms, throne speeches, and policy statements, we outline the differing approaches of the Harper Conservatives and Trudeau Liberals to conservation and the environment, identifying how both administrations instrumentalized the environment and conservation for their own electoral benefits. We note that unlike the practice of protected areas establishment, there has been less polarization at the level of electoral rhetoric. The paper concludes with a discussion of the potential for this mixed politicization of protected areas establishment in Canada to act as both a barrier and opportunity for conservation in Canada.

Context

Defining politicization

Broadly speaking, politicization refers to the process through which issues are brought into the political sphere, characterized by heightened communication and contestation (Checkel and Katzenstein 2009; Zurn et al. 2012). Thus, an issue that is politicized is one that increases in saliency in the public domain, becoming part of broader political debates, and is subject to greater polarization often provoking or involving conflict between different actors (De Wilde 2011; Bolsen et al. 2014; Druckman 2017).

Politicization can take place in a number of contexts and be wielded by a diverse range of actors including nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), interest groups, and electoral elites for a variety of purposes (Bolsen and Druckman 2015). Carter (2006, p. 748) most explicitly links politicization with electoral politics, defining politicization as “the process by which [an issue] ascends the political agenda to become electorally salient”. Both broader policy issues (e.g., conservation) and specific policy instruments (e.g., protected areas) can become politicized by electoral elites. Like Carter (2006), we focus on partisan modes of politicization undertaken by electoral elite in Canada. As such, we define politicization as the “polarization and instrumentalization of protected areas establishment for electoral aims (e.g., re-election or broadening/consolidating an electoral base)”. Assessing politicization involves not only looking at the rhetoric of electoral elites but also at their practice of protected areas establishment. As such, if protected areas establishment is politicized, we would expect to see a polarization in the rhetoric around protected areas as well as a polarization in the rate of protected areas between different political parties. We also consider the instrumentalization of protected areas—when electoral elites leverage protected areas for political aims—as another marker of politicization.

It is important to note that there are other modes of politicization that may be relevant for conservation in Canada. For instance, some scholars have discussed politicization as a process of contestation or conflict among implicated stakeholders, particularly around specific protected areas (Paudel et al. 2012; Bolsen et al. 2014; Kelboro and Stellmacher 2015; Youdelis 2018). This mode of politicization is increasingly evident, for instance, in marine protected areas in Canada and abroad (Agardy et al. 2003; Guénette and Alder 2007; Bennett 2014; Dehens and Fanning 2018). Critical policy scholars, on the other hand, define politicization as a rhetorical or discursive strategy as a means to lend or deny particular actors political agency (Jenkins 2011; Wood 2015). Jenkins (2011, p. 159) suggests that politicization “entails exposing and questioning what is taken for granted or perceived to be necessary, permanent, invariable,

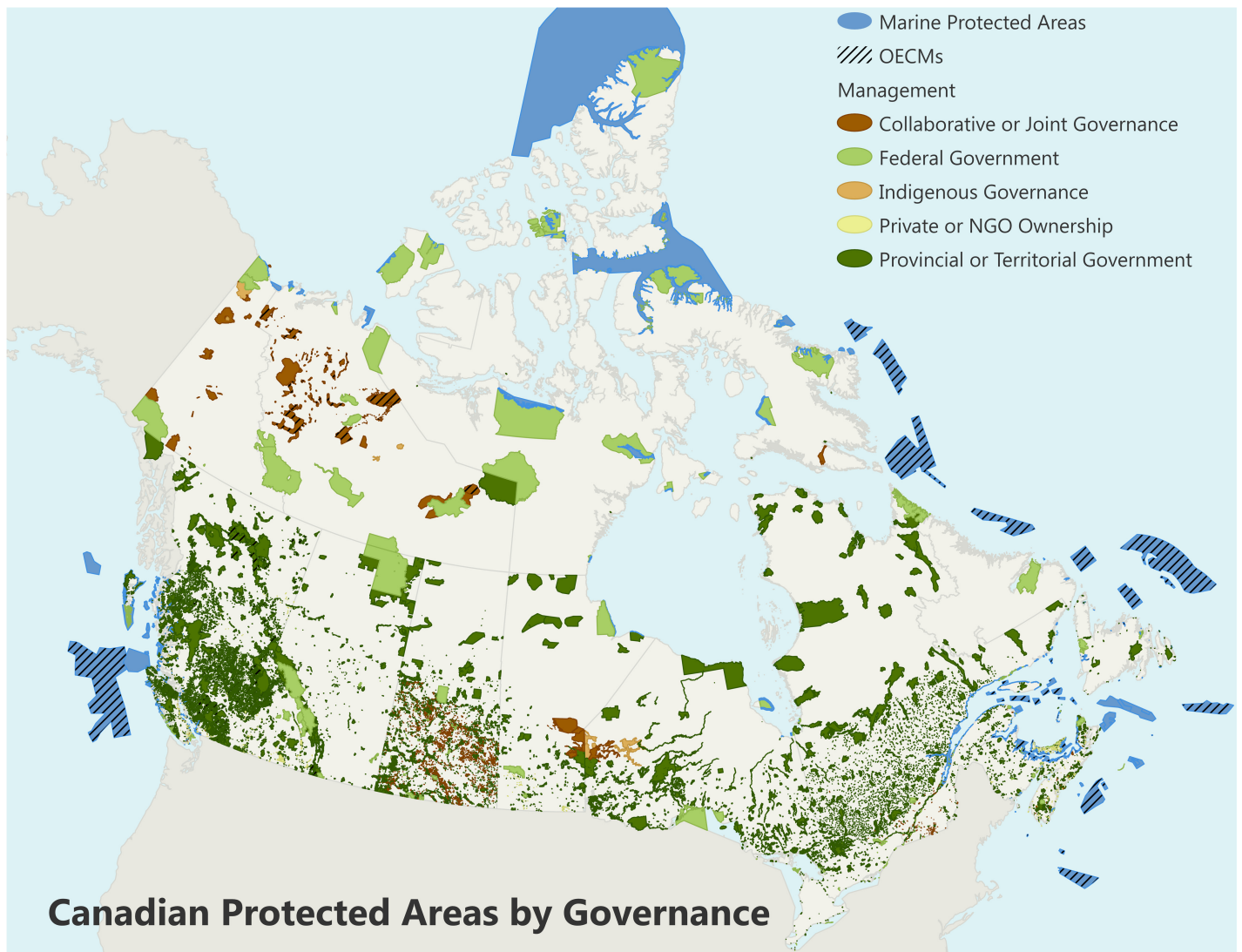


Fig. 1. Protected areas in Canada by their governance and identifying those that are Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures (OECM). OECMs are areas that are not designated through the same legal frameworks as protected areas, but they are managed in ways that achieve positive, long-term outcomes for the in-situ conservation of biodiversity (CBD 2018). Data Sources: Protected Areas: Canadian Protected and Conserved Areas Database (Environment and Climate Change Canada 2019); Basemap: Esri Inc.

morally or politically obligatory and essential.” These conceptions of politicization have important but different expressions and implications for conservation than one linked to electoral cycles, and as such the data used in this paper cannot assess trends in these other modes of politicization.

The political characteristics of protected areas in Canada

In this section, we lay out the political characteristics of protected areas and assess their potential for politicization. Although Canadian protected areas are also established by Indigenous Nations, NGOs, and private groups, here we focus on terrestrial protected areas established by federal and provincial governments, which represent 25% and 60% of the terrestrial protected area in Canada, respectively, as well as federally protected marine areas (Fig. 1).

Federal protected areas include National Parks, National Wildlife Areas, Migratory Bird Sanctuaries, Marine Protected Areas and Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures (OECM)¹ managed by Parks Canada, the Canadian Wildlife Service, and Fisheries and Oceans Canada. Establishing a new federal protected area is a complex process that can take years to complete, but the process can be accelerated by a government willing to provide funding for protected areas establishment (e.g., the current Quick Start funding program that provides the funds to expedite the completion of conservation initiatives) or by ensuring legislation related to protected areas establishment is passed quickly (ECCC 2019). However, some scholars have cautioned that these expedited processes are often focused on meeting area-based protected areas targets (e.g., Canada Target 1) and may compromise effective, quality conservation in the process (Lemieux et al. 2019; Lemieux and Gray 2020). Provincially, while each jurisdiction has their own legislative framework for establishing protected areas, in general, the process is like that of federally protected areas.

All major political parties in Canada, at both the provincial and federal level, have some form of environmental platform that includes approaches to conservation (Olive 2015). In these platforms, climate change mitigation policies (e.g., carbon taxes or increased regulations on industry) are quite prominent and highly politicized in Canadian electoral politics (Turcotte and Raynald 2021). Compared with other environmental policies (e.g., a carbon tax or increased regulations on industry), protected areas are politically easier to adopt (e.g., likely not to be subject to opposition) and less polarizing, as support for protected areas in Canada is broad and consistent across demographics and geographic regions (Wright et al. 2019). Protected areas are deeply embedded into the national identity of Canadians, viewed as being as important as the flag or the national anthem (Baker and Jedwab 2003), and Wright et al. (2019) found that 93% of Canadians agree that protected areas are necessary. They also found overwhelming support for the notion that more protected areas should be established across Canada, with respondents, on average, suggesting that 45%–50% of the country should be protected². A similar public opinion study of climate change in Canada estimates that only 60% of Canadians believe that climate change is a result of human activities (although 83% believe that the climate is changing), with an even more pronounced difference concerning the methods to address it (for instance Mildemberger et al. (2016) estimated only 58% and 54% of Canadians support cap and trade and carbon tax, respectively). Importantly, the establishment of individual protected areas can be contentious on the local level (e.g., the proposed national park in the Okanagan-Similkameen; Grego 2015); however, broadly speaking, they are a poor choice for politicization in the sense of polarization. Compared with more polarizing environmental policy options, the relative consensus around the importance of conservation and protected areas means that they are difficult to use as a political tool to inflame or attract an electoral base in a provincial or federal election. Nevertheless, while these characteristics may make it less likely, they do not preclude the possibility that protected areas could be politicized by electoral elites in Canada under the right circumstances, particularly if we analyse how different governments instrumentalize protected areas for electoral purposes. Indeed, unlike more densely populated nations, Canada has the capacity to meet its area-based conservation targets with land relatively free from development pressures (Wulder et al. 2018).

While protected areas may not be as polarizing as other environmental policies, the broad support in the electorate and ability to create protected areas away in resource insignificant areas increases the risk that protected areas might be instrumentalized by electoral elites either to woo voters or

¹Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures, or OECMs, are “geographically defined area[s] other than protected area[s], which [are] governed and managed in ways that achieve positive and sustained long-term outcomes for the in-situ conservation of biodiversity, with associated ecosystem functions and services and where applicable, cultural, spiritual, socio-economic and other locally relevant values” (CBD 2018).

²This support does not mean that protected areas establishment is immune to criticism and opposition, as individual protected areas are often disputed in the consultation stages, especially as borders are being drawn.

greenwash a poor environmental record, with implications for protection quality. A conservation strategy that focuses on areas away from development pressures, while it may have political benefits, can lead to an over representation of some ecosystems and an under representation of others (Joppa and Pfaff 2009). For example, while British Columbia protects more of its land than any other province (19.5%), it has received considerable criticism for its lack of protection in coastal old growth forests and interior grasslands, two ecosystems facing pressure from development and extractive resources (CPAWS 2018). The pressure to meet area-based conservation targets, particularly Canada Target 1³, has also meant that many jurisdictions, including the federal government, have increased protection through OECMs, which are easier and faster to implement than other types of protected areas. This move has been criticized for focusing on the quantity of protected areas, rather than the quality of the protected area network. OECMs are ambiguously defined, making them more vulnerable to changes in government priorities, which will impact the long-term success of a protected area network (Lemieux et al 2019). This of particular concern in the marine environment where over a third of the area reported as protected is an OECM (Fig. 1), most of which is the result of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans reclassifying fisheries closures as marine refuges (Lemieux et al. 2019; Lemieux and Gray 2020).

Nevertheless, the political characteristics of protected areas, including broad acceptance for this policy among the electorate and political ease of establishment, suggest that they lend themselves to at least one of our criteria for politicization—instrumentalization. The subsequent sections address whether, and the extent to which, protected areas have been politicized by electoral elites in Canada.

Methods

The Canadian Protected and Conserved Areas Database from Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC 2019) was used to determine the area of protected areas established by federal and provincial governments each year between 1960 and 2019. It was then determined which party was in power when the area gained legal protection. Z-scores were calculated for the protected area established for each year, legislature, and over the entire time a party was in power to identify the periods of abnormally high protected area establishment. To put these scores into context and to better understand the potential role that politicization played in them, spikes in protected area establishment were compared with the proximity of election years, as it enabled us to assess the proximity of protected areas establishment to election years.

Results

The results of our analysis indicate that there have been spikes in protected areas establishment throughout the entire study period, and they have occurred under governments of all parties and at all points in a government's mandate (See [Supplementary Material 1](#)).

Federal protected areas establishment pre-2006

As shown in [Fig. 2](#), a number of federal terrestrial protected areas were established in the 1970s (peaking in 1977, z-score 6.14; see [Supplementary Material 1](#)), following pressures from the environmental movement in the 1960s (Locke 2009). The focus on protected areas and environmental issues more broadly continued into the 1980s and crossed party lines with support from both Liberal and Progressive Conservative Prime Ministers. For example, Progressive Conservative Prime Minister

³Canada Target 1 is one of Canada's 2020 Biodiversity Goals and Targets that were based on the Aichi targets. Target 1 is based on Aichi Target 11 and states "By 2020, at least 17% of terrestrial areas and inland water, and 10% of marine and coastal areas are conserved through networks of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures" (Pathway to Canada Target 1 2020).

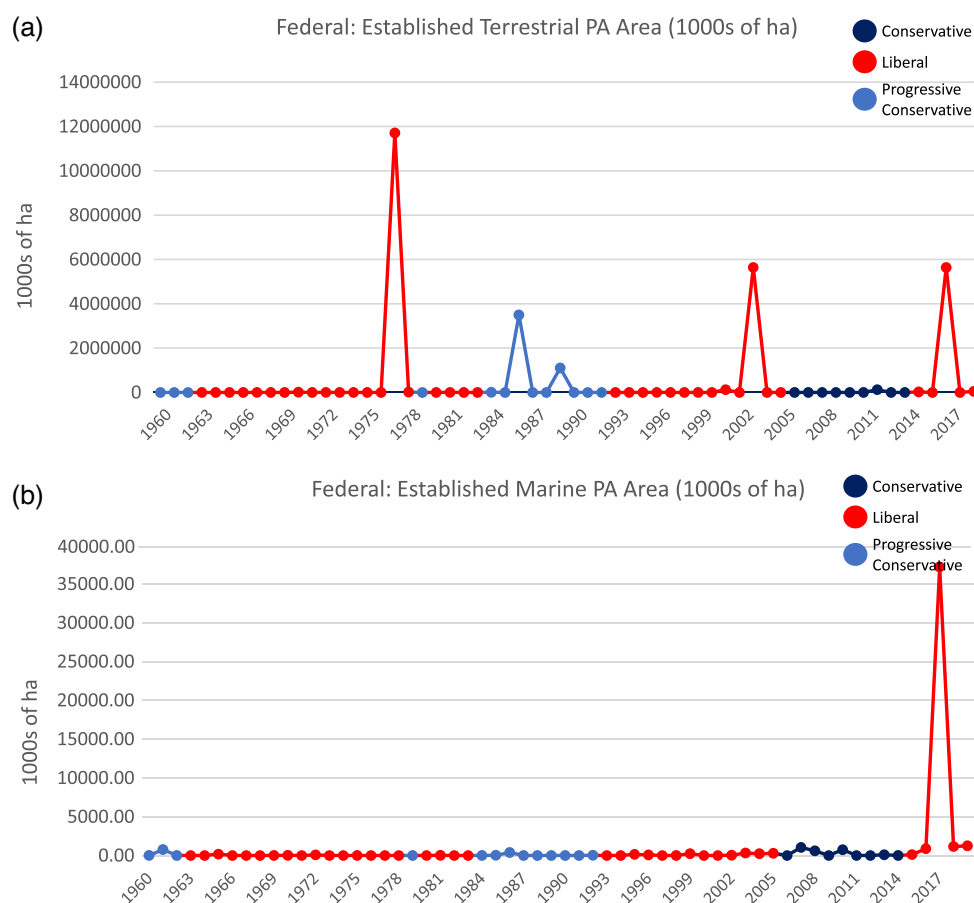


Fig. 2. Terrestrial protected areas establishment (in 1000s of ha) from 1960–2019 by Canadian federal government in the terrestrial (a) and marine (b) realms, showing which political party was in power over time.

Mulroney had an active environmental portfolio that resulted in the creation of several national parks and an amendment to the National Parks Act that established the maintenance and restoration of ecological integrity as the number one priority of the national parks system. Thus, prior to 2006 trends in the rate of protected areas establishment does not suggest polarization along left–right lines.

Federal protected areas establishment post-2006

Since 2006, protected areas establishment has become increasingly polarized along party lines, with a noticeable lack of protected areas establishment between 2006 and 2015 (overall z -score -0.85 ; see [Supplementary Material 1](#)), during the Conservative governments under Prime Minister Harper. Conversely, the Liberal Trudeau government oversaw “the largest and most rapid increase in declared protected ‘area’ in the history of the country” ([Lemieux and Gray 2020](#), p. 483) in 2017 (terrestrial z -score 2.82, marine z -score 7.67; see [Supplementary Material 1](#)). This was largely accomplished using OECMs, specifically by reclassifying 51 fisheries closures (amounting to about 5% of Canada’s marine territory), meant to protect socio-economic interests as marine refuges in 2017. This move created a five-fold increase in the marine area counting towards the government’s protected areas target virtually overnight (see [Fig. 2](#)). The 10% was achieved by the Trudeau government in August 2019, but the heavy use of OECMs and the case-by-case permitting of commercial

fishing and oil and gas operations in marine protected areas has led several scholars and NGOs to express concern about the quality of the protected area. They point out that just 0.11% of Canada's ocean territory is fully protected from extractive uses and express concern over how the government may work towards achieving its protected area target of 30% by 2030 (Jessen et al. 2016 ; Lemieux et al. 2019; Lemieux and Gray 2020). Where prior to 2006, protected areas establishment was undertaken by both Liberal and Progressive Conservative governments, post-2006 we see a stronger polarization in the rate of protected areas establishment between the Harper Conservative and Trudeau Liberal government.

Provincial protected areas establishment

Provincially, trends in protected area establishment vary, with all provinces going through periods of high and low establishment. In most provinces these highs and lows have occurred throughout our study period and under governments of all parties (See [Supplementary Material 1](#) and [Fig. 3](#)).⁴ However, Alberta presented a curious case, with a pattern of protected area establishment that mirrored that of the federal government. Prior to 2006, both the Social Credit and Progressive Conservative governments established protected areas. However, following the retirement of Progressive Conservative Premier Klein in 2006, there was a sharp drop in protected areas establishment that lasted until 2017 ([Fig. 4](#)) (z-scores for those legislatures were -0.47 and -0.49 ; see [Supplementary Material 1](#)). Following the 2017 election, there is a sharp increase in protected areas establishment. The New Democratic Party (NDP) government established more protected area than any other government in Alberta's history, raising the percentage of the province protected to 14.9% from 12.1% ([Fig. 4](#)) in 2018 (z-score 6.65; see [Supplementary Material 1](#)). Thus, like the federal level, there is the beginning of polarization in the rate of protected areas establishment between left-leaning and right-leaning parties at the provincial level in Alberta.

Discussion

The preceding analysis demonstrates an increasing polarization along Conservative–Liberal lines of rates in protected areas establishment. In this section, we situate and explain the results above within trends in federal and Albertan electoral politics. More specifically, we focus on the differing approaches of the Harper Conservatives and Trudeau Liberals to conservation and protected areas and how these approaches have influenced Albertan politics. This analysis is also useful in assessing the extent to which politicization is also occurring at the level of rhetoric. This contextual analysis draws on evidence from qualitative document analysis of election manifestos and other political documents (e.g., speeches, parliamentary debates, or legislation) and existing academic research concerning the politicization of environmental issues in a Canadian electoral context.

Protected areas establishment pre-2006

As previously mentioned, prior to 2006 protected areas establishment was not sharply polarized between different parties, reflecting the fact that conservation was supported across party lines. For instance, during the Mulroney Progressive Conservative years, Canada established itself as a global leader in protected areas and conservation and was the first industrialized nation to ratify the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), including its commitment to protect at least 12% of the country. In part, this was because of pressure and campaigning from environmental NGOs, like

⁴While not reflected in the data for this paper, it is important to note that the Progressive Conservative government in Ontario (2018–present) is increasingly rolling back environmental protections, including efforts to repeal the Far North Act and associated protections and limiting the mandate of conservation authorities (Scott 2019, CBC News 2020). As such, protected areas establishment may also be increasingly politicized in the Ontario context.

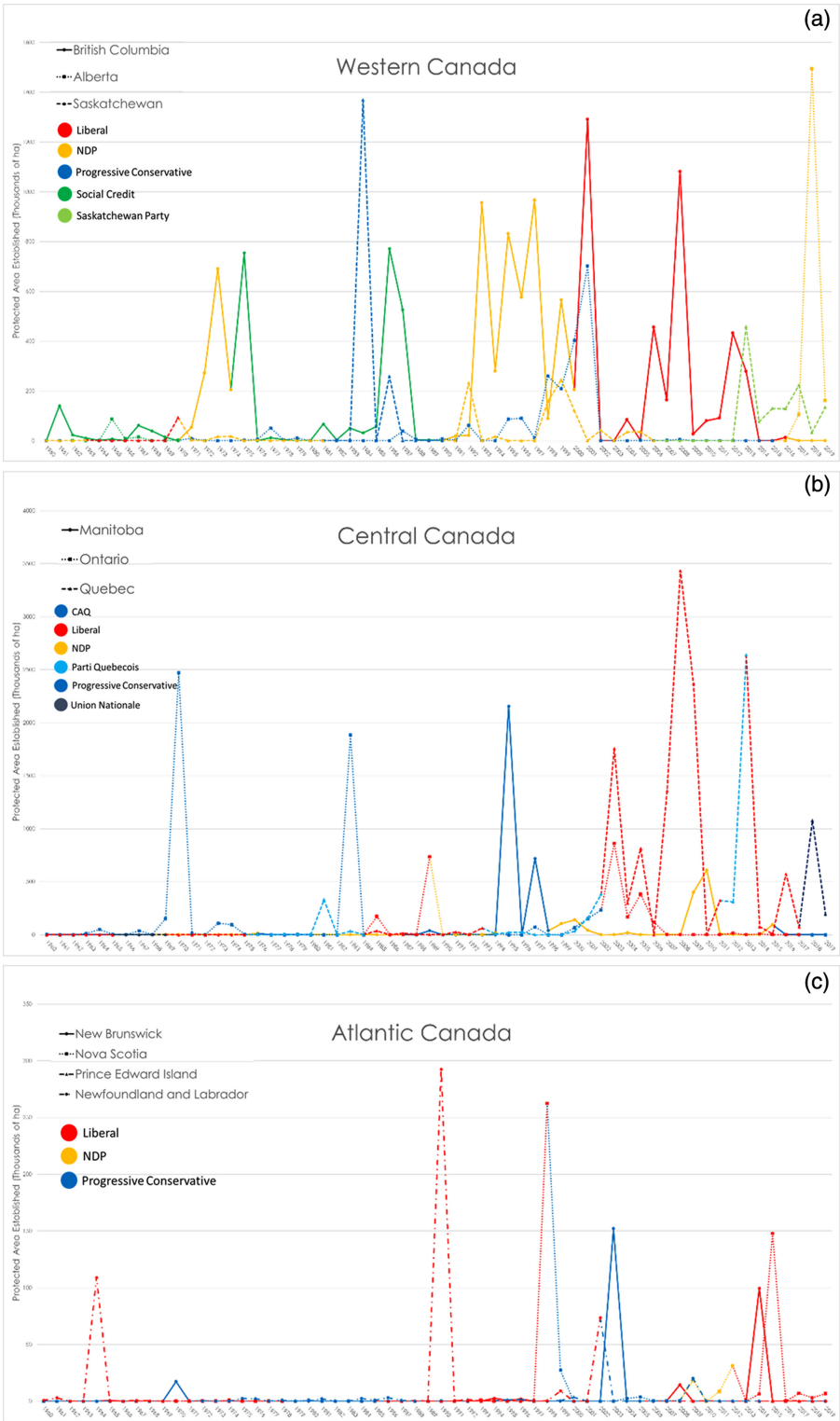


Fig. 3. Terrestrial protected areas establishment (in 1000s of ha) from 1960–2019 by provincial governments in Western (a), Central (b), and Atlantic (c) Canada showing which political party was in power over time

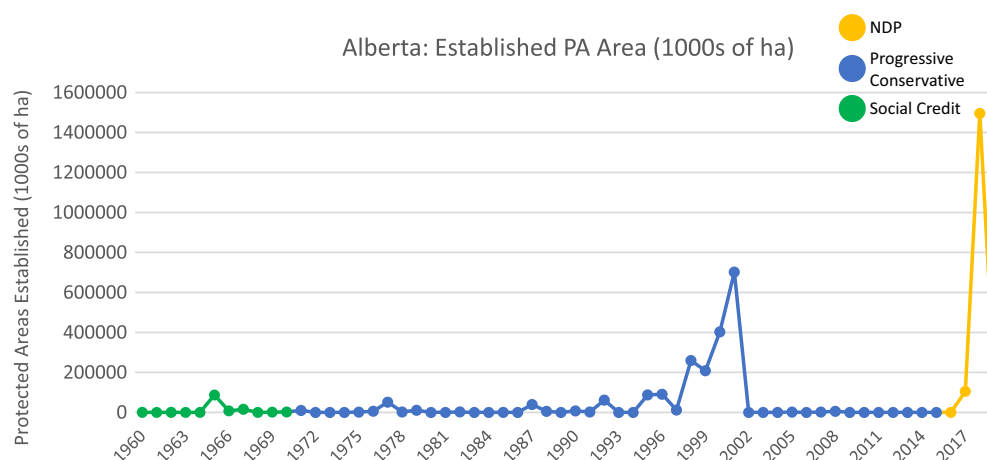


Fig. 4. Terrestrial protected areas establishment (in 1000s of ha) from 1960–2019 by the Alberta provincial government showing which political party was in power over time.

World Wildlife Fund, who raised the profile of protected areas and biodiversity among Canadians (McNamee 2002; Dearden and Dempsey 2004).

Mulroney's stance on the environment, and the importance of protected areas, was not out of step with the Liberal Prime Ministers who preceded (Pierre Trudeau) and succeeded (Jean Chretien) him, as all of those governments established a number of federal protected areas and sought to strengthen Canada's position as a global environmental leader. Further highlighting the similarities in policies on protected areas between the two major parties was the 1993 federal election where the Liberal's election platform included the promise to put commitments made by the Progressive Conservative government into action, including to more than double protected areas (Liberal Party of Canada 1993).

Protected areas establishment under the Conservative government (2006–2015)

The modern Conservative Party, created in 2003 out of a merger between the Progressive Conservatives and The Canadian Alliance (formerly Reform Party), marked a new era in Conservative politics, one that shifted away from the traditional brokerage and compromise politics that characterized previous Canadian parliaments (Martin 2010; Bittner and Koop 2013; Carty 2013; Lakanen 2018).⁵ Rather the Harper Conservatives followed a strategy of “wedge politics”, which involves “strategic political interventions that are purposefully divisive and polarizing” with an aim to galvanize the party's electoral base for fundraising and electoral support (Toner and McKee 2014, p. 109; Patten 2017, p. 20). The environment, and particularly climate action, became one of these wedge issues as the new Conservative party was especially pre-occupied with supporting resource-based industries like oil and gas, an industry notably located in Stephen Harper's electoral base of Western Canada (Adams 2012; Lakanen 2018).

⁵Under brokerage politics, political parties tend to avoid taking strong ideological positions on issues, rather focusing campaign efforts on issues where there is less polarization in the electorate (e.g., the economy) (Carty 2013)

The polarization of environmental issues and breakdown of environmental protections during the Harper era is well documented (MacNeil 2014; Toner and McKee 2014; Lakanen 2018). However, unlike other environmental policy instruments, the Harper Conservatives did not seem to oppose the establishment or expansion of protected areas at the level of rhetoric. Indeed, conservation through protected areas became a cornerstone of Conservative rhetoric around environmental protection, although as the subsequent discussion will demonstrate, this rhetoric did not match their conservation actions. Election platforms in 2008, 2011, and 2015 touted the Conservative government's record on conservation, claiming that the Party was "strongly committed to the conservation of Canada's magnificent natural heritage" (Conservative Party of Canada 2008, 2011, p. 40, 2015). In each of these elections, the Conservative party also made several pledges related to protected areas including completion of the national parks system (e.g., by expanding the Nahanni National Park and creating several protected areas like the Tallurutiup Imanga Marine Conservation Area⁶, Rouge National Park, and Mealy Mountains National Park) and creating a National Conservation Plan.

The Conservative government did make good on some of these platform promises. For instance, they did expand the Nahanni National Park in 2009 (CBC News 2009). Although, it is important to note that two mining companies were still allowed to operate in the area, leaving a "doughnut hole of unprotected land" in the middle of the park that potentially undermines the conservation effectiveness of this protected area (Riley 2019). In 2014, Prime Minister Harper launched the National Conservation Plan, as a pillar of the government's Economic Action Plan, focused around conserving Canada's lands and waters, restoring Canada's ecosystems, and connecting Canadians to nature (Government of Canada 2014a). The plan also included \$252 million over a five-year period for conservation efforts, framed as part of Canada's obligations to the CBD. The Conservatives also funded 85 conservation projects as part of the EcoAction Community Funding Program (Government of Canada 2014b).⁷ However, this plan was criticized by opposition parties and NGOs for lacking detail and a clear implementation strategy (Bissett 2014). Internationally, it was the Harper Conservatives who agreed to the Aichi biodiversity targets⁸, including the target to protect 17% of Canadian land and inland waters, though no implementation strategy was produced before the Conservatives were voted out in 2015.

The references to conservation and other environmental issues in the Conservative party platforms in part reflects shifting preferences among the electorate. When the Harper Conservatives came to power in 2006, polls indicated Canadians were more concerned with health and economic issues, rather than the environment (Harrison 2012). However, in the early years of Harper's first term, the environment increased in importance in terms of voters' concerns, with Harrison (2012, p. 397) suggesting that the 2008 election was the "first time environmental issues had ever been prominent in a Canadian federal election". However, given the looming financial crisis, environmental issues were still second to economic concerns. Indeed, the Liberal party running on an environmental platform lost the 2008 election (Harrison 2012).

Nevertheless, the Conservatives were cognizant that environmental protection was an important priority for Canadians and an issue they were perceived as being weak on. As argued Conservative commentator Preston Manning (Manning 2014):

⁶The establishment process for the Tallurutiup Imanga Protected Area is still ongoing as of August 2019, although there was a visible ramping up of activity post 2016 (Parks Canada 2019).

⁷The majority of projects funded by this initiative are relatively small ranging from to \$10,000 to \$100, 000.

⁸The Aichi Biodiversity Targets are a series of 20 goals agreed to in 2010 by signatories of the Convention on Biological diversity aiming to bolster global biodiversity conservation (Convention on Biological Diversity 2020).

“[Conservatives] continue to be seen as defensive and weak on the environment. In our Québec poll, for example, perceived weakness on the environment was given as the number one policy reason for not supporting conservative parties . . . this perceived weakness on the environmental front needs to be more seriously addressed if conservative support is to be broadened, especially among the young.”

MacNeil (2014, p. 175) argues that under the first two minority parliaments, the Conservatives’ approach to environment was electorally strategic, designed to present the Conservative government as “a responsible and trustworthy steward of the environment” to counteract claims to the contrary. To this end, they promoted a “Made in Canada Environmental Plan” and a “responsible resource development” narrative (Kirchhoff and Tsuji 2014; Toner and McKee 2014). Even during the Conservative majority parliament of 2011–2015, the government buried their sweeping changes to environmental protection in omnibus bills to “avoid the political fallout of hundreds of individual environmental bills in parliament” (MacNeil 2014, p. 175). The Conservative government also spent millions in advertising in an attempt to convince Canadians that their environmental policy was sound (Kirchhoff and Tsuji 2014). For instance, in 2013 the Conservatives set aside \$16.5 million for advertisements pushing the “responsible resource development” narrative (The Canadian Press 2013).

In some ways it is unsurprising that the Conservatives sought to leverage conservation through protected areas to bolster their environmental record. The Harper Conservatives’ approach to the environment and resource development was rooted in “classical conservative ideology that associates environmental regulation and management with dominion over and improvement of national territory” (Peyton and Franks 2016, p. 456). Moreover, protected areas can also be established in areas with little to no potential for resource development, meaning governments can score an environmental “win” without impinging on their resource development agendas (Joppa and Pfaff 2009).

Nevertheless, despite rhetorical commitment to protected areas establishment and conservation, as the quantitative results demonstrated, the rate of protected areas establishment decreased during Harper’s tenure. This dissonance between conservation rhetoric and practice became particularly evident following the 2011 election through which the Harper government won a majority. Emboldened by its majority status, the new government shed its more centrist orientation and attempted to bury all of its environmental rollbacks into omnibus bills such as Bill-C38 (2012) and Bill-C45 (2013) (Kirchhoff and Tsuji 2014; Lakanen 2018). Conservation relevant legislation was also targeted in these bills. Bill C-38, for example, made changes to the *Species At Risk Act* (SARA), the *Fisheries Act*, and the *Navigable Waters Act*, undermining conservation (Favaro et al. 2012; Hutchings and Post 2013). Between 2012 and 2015, the Harper government cut millions from conservation programs, including approximately \$84 million from the Parks Canada budget (Youdelis 2018; Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat 2020).

In this way, the Conservatives’ protected areas rhetoric masked policies that, in practice, undermined conservation goals. Rather, the Conservatives’ approach to most environmental issues sought to remove what they perceived as excessive environmental protections preventing resource extraction and economic development (Cargnello et al. 2014; Toner and McKee 2014; Doern et al. 2015; Peyton and Franks 2016; Lakanen 2018). Even with ideological synergies between protected areas and conservatism, as well as the relatively low political cost of protected areas establishment, conservation was not spared from the cuts and rollbacks that characterized environmental policy under the Harper Conservative government. At the same time, the Conservatives were aware of growing concern among the electorate for the environment—hence, they made rhetorical overtures to less

contentious and costly environmental issues like protected areas to greenwash a weak approach to environmental protection (Toner and McKee 2014; Lakanen 2018).

Returning to the definition of politicization investigated in this paper, we suggest that while the Conservatives did not pursue polarizing rhetoric around protected areas, they did engage in rhetorical instrumentalization through their use of protected areas establishment to soften their negative environmental image, given increasing voter concerns around environmental protection. However, as the preceding analysis demonstrated, this commitment was largely rhetorical, as in practice the Conservatives actually undermined and underfunded conservation during their time in power.

Protected areas establishment under the Liberal government (2015–Present)

While economic concerns and a desire to oust the Harper government were among the most significant voter concerns in the 2015 election, concern for the environment was also cited as an important issue, coming in second among voter concern polls (CBC News 2015). The environment, broadly speaking, was an area of “common interest and concern across the country” (Pammett and LeDuc 2016, p. 372). Indeed, the Liberals, NDP, and Green parties all attacked the Harper government’s environmental record, including conservation, during the election (McGrane 2016; Pammett and LeDuc 2016), speaking to the increasing saliency of the environment as an electoral issue in Canada.

In some respects, the 2015 election was essentially a competition between the Liberal party and the NDP, as 65% of the electorate wanted to replace the Harper government “at all costs” (Jeffrey 2016, p. 57). Early in the election, it appeared that the NDP would win this competition given their relatively higher polling numbers (McGrane 2016), placing pressure on the Trudeau Liberals to recapture left-leaning voters by presenting themselves as the genuine progressive alternative to the NDP. As such, Liberal policy pronouncements during the election, including commitments to progressive policies like legalizing marijuana, strong environmental protections, and taking a firmly feminist stance, aimed to cultivate this image of a progressive Liberal party to both consolidate the Liberal base and woo left-leaning voters (Jeffrey 2016).

Environmental issues were prominent in the Liberal’s 2015 election materials as they sought to disparage the Conservatives’ record on the environment and the economy (Liberal Party of Canada 2015b). Compared with climate change and “clean jobs”, however, conservation plays a relatively small role in these materials, but during the election Liberals did commit to: invest \$25 million per year to develop the National Park system, create the Rouge Urban National Park, reverse the Harper government’s cuts to Parks Canada, and respond more quickly to the advice of scientists in regard to endangered species.

Once elected, as our analysis demonstrates, the Trudeau Liberals ramped up protected areas establishment and reaffirmed the Conservatives’ commitments to the CBD, including protecting 17% of terrestrial and inland water areas, and 10% of marine areas by 2020. In 2017, a National Advisory Panel and Indigenous Circle of Experts was established to “develop a pathway, grounded in science and Traditional Knowledge” to achieve Canada’s CBD commitments (Pathway to Canada Target 1 2020), marking the first time the federal government convened all levels of government and Indigenous Nations to work together to develop a unified conservation strategy. Known as the Pathway to Target One, the work is supported by the largest investment in conservation in Canadian history (\$1.3 billion over five years), including \$500 million specifically earmarked for the establishment of protected areas and Indigenous-led conservation efforts.

The Trudeau Liberal's conservation policy may reflect a genuine commitment to environmental issues, but genuine ideological commitments do not preclude more strategic motivations. Protected areas establishment also offered the Liberal government a means to address several other policy ambitions such as advancing reconciliation through Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs) (Zurba et al. 2019) or improving Canada's international reputation, including on environmental issues, an aim clearly linked to the Liberal "internationalist" electoral base (Liberal Party of Canada 2015a; Brown 2018). Achieving commitments to the CBD, including its area-based targets, would be a means to demonstrate and lay claim to international environmental leadership.

Public policymaking can also be leveraged by incumbent governments for electoral purposes, particularly as Canadian politics and governance is increasingly characterized by the "permanent campaign" (Esselment 2014; Marland 2016), defined by Marland et al. (2017, p. 5) as "an approach to governance whereby partisan elites who control the government apply strategies and techniques usually found in a campaign setting to the process of governing itself". Hallmarks of the permanent campaign include: a centralization of decision-making, the politicization of the public service, and "heightened partisan-political policy agenda management" (Craft 2017, p.31). In other words, under the permanent campaign, policy issues become another tool in the governing party's electoral arsenal. This is relevant for the discussion here because it means that government policies (i.e., protected areas establishment), can be used by incumbent governments for electoral purposes (i.e., politicized) even outside specific election periods. During both the Harper and Trudeau governments, environmental policy, including conservation, was increasingly a partisan issue area and one that was deployed in service of their respective permanent campaign mentality.

The preceding discussion makes clear that both the Conservatives and Liberals instrumentalized protected areas establishment for electoral gain, albeit in different ways and with different outcomes for the rate of protected areas establishment at the federal level. The Harper Conservatives sought to use protected areas and conservation rhetoric to bolster their flagging environmental credentials. While protected areas establishment and conservation was less central to the Liberal's platform in 2015 (compared with the Conservative platform), the Liberals leveraged their environmental commitments to woo left-leaning voters. Where there was a mismatch between the Conservative rhetoric and conservation practice, this was less the case with the Liberals who did increase protected areas establishment, albeit not always with high protection quality, as seen by their use of OECMs. Considering the emergence of the "permanent campaign" in Canadian politics and governance, Trudeau's conservation policy can also be understood as another tool to consolidate the Liberal electoral base and meet other electoral commitments such as reconciliation. Thus, both governments instrumentalized both the practice and rhetoric of protected areas establishment for electoral aims in a way that previous Canadian government administrations had arguably not. It is also notable, however, that neither party singled out conservation as a contentious issue at the level of rhetoric. In other words, at the rhetoric level protected areas establishment has not become polarized, as both parties present the policy as a good thing to do.

Overall, at the federal level, we argue that the difference in the rate of protected areas establishment under Harper and Trudeau, compared to previous rates of establishment under Liberal and Conservative governments reflects an increasing politicization of protected areas establishment in Canada. As previously mentioned, a key marker of politicization in the literature is increasing polarization in both rhetoric and practice. Our results demonstrate that there has been a polarization of protected areas establishment in practice. An analysis of the protected areas policy commitments under both the Harper and Trudeau governments, on the other hand, suggests that this polarization has yet to manifest at the rhetorical level. However, we do observe an instrumentalization of protected areas establishment in the rhetoric of both the Harper and Trudeau governments, suggesting some level of politicization.

The curious case of Alberta

The politicization of protected areas establishment is less prominent at the provincial level in terms of polarization in rates of establishment, with one exception: Alberta. The province has long been an outlier in Canadian provincial politics, marked by decades-long political dynasties and tumultuous relationships with the federal government, at least in part caused by tensions over environmental issues. However, prior to 2006, the Progressive Conservative government under Klein made significant investments into protected areas, as the quantitative analysis demonstrated, suggesting that conservation did not invoke the same tension as other environmental issues.

The effects of the Harper government on politicization and environmental policy at the federal level are discussed above, but they also affected provincial politics and policy in Alberta. Emboldened by a Conservative federal government with strong support for the province's oil and gas industry, environmental concerns, including conservation, were even further deprioritized by the post-Klein Progressive Conservative provincial government. In every provincial election held since then (2008, 2012, 2015, and 2019), energy and the economy have been the major election issues. Conservation has barely featured in election platforms of the major parties, often not mentioned at all. In 2012, the environmental platforms of the Progressive Conservative, Wildrose, and NDP were all focused on environmental monitoring of the oil industry and energy efficiency; none mentioned protected areas establishment ([Alberta NDP 2012](#); [Progressive Conservative Party of Alberta 2012](#); [Wildrose Party of Alberta 2012](#)). The 2015 election platforms featured much of the same rhetoric around the environment, though the NDP did promise to protect the Castle Wilderness Area, which was something the conservation community in Alberta had been fighting for since the 1970s ([Alberta NDP 2015](#)).

The focus on energy and the economy in campaigning carried on to governing, and protected areas establishment in the province came to a standstill until 2017 following the election of an NDP government. In contrast to the post-Klein Progressive Conservatives, the NDP established a historic amount of protected area in the province. The NDP were also in-step with the federal government, endorsing their commitments to the CBD and co-chairing the Intergovernmental Pathway to Canada Target One process. However, like the federal Liberal government, it is unclear whether this reflects genuine ideological commitments or more strategic motivations.

Despite her record as establishing more protected area than any other Premier in Alberta's history, conservation did not feature prominently in Rachel Notley's re-election bid, which was instead centered on health care and economic diversification ([Alberta NDP 2019](#)). Conversely, the United Conservative Party (UCP) pitched "common sense conservation" to voters, promising to increase recreational opportunities in Alberta's wilderness and protect lands and waters through private partnerships ([United Conservative Party of Alberta 2019](#)). As at the federal level, "common sense conservation" was arguably a bid to appeal to voters' environmental sensibilities while masking an otherwise weak approach to environmental policy.

Once in power, the UCP created a disconnect between commitments to conservation and practice, mirroring the Harper Conservatives. The province has pulled away from national conservation commitments and has stepped down as the co-chair of the Pathway to Canada Target One process. In February 2020, it was announced that 164 provincial parks would have their legal park designation removed, reverting them back to vacant public land, open to resource extraction and commercial development ([Government of Alberta 2020a](#)). This announcement drew intense criticism, and in December 2020, it was announced that these parks would no longer be delisted as the government had found private partnerships for the management of the sites ([Government of Alberta 2020b](#)). However, it is unclear who exactly these partners are, nor what exactly they entail and what effect they will have on the quality of these protected areas.

Although the energy sector has generally been the major environmental issue in Alberta, protected areas establishment is becoming more polarized in the province. As was discussed above at the federal level, a key indicator of politicization is increasing polarization in both rhetoric and practice. As was seen at the federal level, our results indicate that there is increasing polarization in the rate of protected areas establishment in Alberta. Although this polarization has not yet translated into rhetorical polarization, there is, like the federal level, an instrumentalization of protected areas establishment, suggesting some level of politicization.

Politicization as a barrier and an opportunity

The politicization of protected areas establishment by political elites presents both an opportunity and a challenge for conservation in Canada. In this section, we outline potential barriers and opportunities presented by this mode of politicization. As the politicization of protected areas establishment is a relatively recent phenomenon, it is too soon to assess whether the consequences of politicization will outweigh the opportunities it presents.

The disconnect between the electoral rhetoric of the Harper government and their conservation policy in practice demonstrates that commitments to conservation through protected areas can be a form of greenwashing whereby governments with poor environmental records try to boost their environmental credentials. As suggested by [Doyle et. al. \(2016, p. 155\)](#), green commitments “will always be limited by political or electoral calculations. When the situation is propitious or demands it, these green moves will be dropped in favour of other policy initiatives.” The moves by the Conservative government to dismantle key environmental protections and tighten resources, including those relevant for conservation, is emblematic of this trend. Greenwashing can also mislead other decision-makers and voters about conservation progress or lull voters into complacency about conservation.

While the rate of protected areas establishment increased under the Trudeau government, claims to conservation leadership and commitments to protected areas establishment without true accountability or for the sole purpose of achieving political objectives can lead to sub-par conservation outcomes such as the establishment of protected areas with limited conservation value ([MacKinnon et al. 2015](#)). [Lemieux et. al. \(2019, p. 319\)](#) note that Canada will still “fall short of its biodiversity conservation goals and commitments irrespective of its declared area-based achievements”, as spatial gains in protected areas do not necessarily translate into gains in protection quality. Similarly, concerning Indigenous-led conservation through IPCAs more specifically, [Zurba et. al. \(2019, p. 15\)](#) warn that if IPCAs are leveraged solely to meet international area based targets, rather than Indigenous reconciliation, “this could undermine the meaningfulness of IPCAs and the IPCA process for Indigenous communities.” In this way, superficial engagement with protected areas establishment for political gain may be a barrier to conservation in Canada.

Above all, the linking of protected areas establishment and conservation to electoral cycles means that government commitments in these areas would be tied to electoral elites’ concerns with winning elections rather than conservation need. In other words, should voter preferences shift away from conservation and environmental issues more broadly, governments will have little incentive to continue to ramp up commitments around protected areas establishment and conservation. Thus, there is a need to divorce conservation policy from election cycles.

There is also a risk that if politicization also progresses to the polarization of rhetoric around protected areas between political parties, this could create an anti-conservation constituency, one that is actively opposed to protected areas establishment (rather than merely apathetic). To please this anti-conservation or anti-environment constituency, governments can actively try to undo conservation gains. Though it was reversed, the delisting of protected areas under the UCP in Alberta

demonstrates that governments can indeed undo progress for political aims if they choose. Nevertheless, given that the rhetoric around protected areas establishment does not yet appear to be polarized in the Canadian context, we have not seen the development of such a constituency.

On the other hand, politicization can help to raise the profile of protected areas and conservation in the public discourse. As argued by Krzyżanowski et. al. (2018, p. 4) “politicization of some matters (e.g., those related to civil, women’s, LGBT, ethnic, religious, or minority rights) has been vital in empowering various social groups and has become instrumental in increasing public visibility of their claims in the eyes of political actors and the wider public.” Furthermore, as shown by the increase in protected areas establishment post-2015, some governments who include protected areas establishment to electoral gain may increase the amount or size of protected areas. Relatedly, if conservation commitments and protected areas establishment are an election commitment, this could be another form of accountability whereby conservationists may hold governments to their commitments. However, as seen with the Conservative government, this accountability may be limited.

Conclusion

Our analysis suggests that protected areas have historically not been politicized in Canada. However, in the post-2006 period there has been a clear politicization of protected areas, as demonstrated by increasing polarization in rates of establishment between the two major political parties. This polarization is less evident at the level of rhetoric, but both governing political parties in this period instrumentalized protected areas establishment for their own political gain. In the Conservative case, this was a means to mask what many considered a poor environmental record, while the Liberals leveraged the environment, and conservation, to woo left-leaning voters.

This polarization in practice and instrumentalization in rhetoric around protected areas establishment holds different implications for whether politicization presents more of a barrier or opportunity for conservation in Canada. Politicization can lead to greenwashing, poor accountability and, at worst, undermine conservation aims and foster an anti-conservation constituency. At the same time, politicization can help to raise the profile of protected areas and conservation in public discourse, with benefits in terms of public interest and engagement.

While the rhetoric around protected areas is not yet polarized, the fact that only some political parties appear willing to ramp up protected areas establishment and conservation policy in practice is of concern, as this subjects conservation to the booms and busts of electoral cycles. Conservationists and policy makers should work to ensure that the rhetoric around protected areas does not become polarized or that this policy instrument becomes associated with one political party (in the same way the carbon tax has become synonymous with the Liberal Party).

Overall, our analysis suggests that conservation scholars should pay attention to the impact of larger political dynamics in Canada, including electoral politics, in driving or limiting protected areas establishment and conservation in Canada.

Author contributions

BSB and CC conceived and designed the study. CC performed the experiments/collected the data. BSB and CC analyzed and interpreted the data. BSB contributed resources. BSB and CC drafted or revised the manuscript.

Competing interests

The authors have connections to the guest editors of this collection. Brianna Scrimshaw Botchwey previously worked as a Research Assistant with Dr. Andrea Olive, and Dr. Karen Beazley is Caitlin Cunningham's PhD Supervisor.

Data availability statement

All relevant data are within the paper and in the Supplementary Material.

Supplementary material

The following Supplementary Material is available with the article through the journal website at doi:[10.1139/facets-2020-0069](https://doi.org/10.1139/facets-2020-0069).

Supplementary Material 1

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