

It's Not Just the Economy, Stupid

Populism in a multidimensional political landscape

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A CHANGING POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

There are growing signs that political competition may become less about who gets what and ever more about ideational-cultural cleavages in society. In particular, the choice of voters to opt for radical and populist parties (as well as the choice of which such party to support) is increasingly influenced by their cultural-ideational dispositions and less by redistributive, economic concerns.

In the early 2000s, a conceptualisation of the 'cultural' political cleavage known as GAL–TAN began to gain popularity among scholars of political divides and electoral competition. Short for Green-Alternative-Libertarian/Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist, the concept sought to provide a 'vertical' description of the structure of political competition as an alternative to the traditional 'left versus right' dimension that articulated the struggle over 'who gets what'.

Empirical evidence indicates the GAL–TAN dimension has a stronger influence over the choice of radical parties at the ballot box than traditional redistributive attitudes. As radical, populist, and 'anti-systemic' parties' vote share grows, so does the tally of legislative seats determined not by 'distributive' politics but by the vertical 'new politics' dimension. Previous research tended to inspect this new cleavage of the electorate to explain Euroscepticism, but recent findings show that these factors can also affect the more fundamental issue of party choice.

Even controlling for opposition to the (currently) salient issue of immigration, evidence still points to the other ideational components of GAL–TAN as determinants in radical party support. This 'cultural' dimension is apparent in politics whenever conservatives rejoice at 'liberal tears'. It is played out when the ever more numerous 'Red-Pillers', right-wing outlets, or members of Pegida decry 'cultural Marxism' in Europe while at the same time, words such as 'fascist' and 'Nazi' are overused by the left as a poor substitute for 'conservative'.

KEY INSIGHTS

MAINSTREAM AND CENTRIST PARTIES MUST UNDERSTAND THE SHIFTING AND MULTIDIMENSIONAL NATURE OF THE PRESENT POLITICAL LANDSCAPE.

THERE IS MORE THAN ONE POPULIST WAVE—DECISION MAKERS AND POLITICAL LEADERS MUST CHOOSE THEIR BATTLES.

ONE AVENUE FOR REDUCING POPULIST APPEAL WOULD BE TO ROLL BACK THE EROSION OF THE WELFARE STATE IN ORDER TO UNDERCUT THE POPULIST TOOLBOX.

Cas Mudde's article "The Populist Zeitgeist" and Mark Franklin and Cees van der Eijk's 'sleeping giant' thesis—used as a metaphor for the growing importance of Euroscepticism as a political force after the turn of the millennium—have played with the idea of such a shift in western politics going forward in the new century. Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks's Post-functional theory on European integration follows the same line of thinking: that ideational arguments and factors are beginning to replace 'hard' economic and distributive factors as determinants of the political contest. Recent conflicts over immigration, gay rights, and vaccination speak to this shift in political paradigm.

It is not only the rise of radical left and radical right parties that describe the aforementioned paradigm shift, but also the rise of more moderate progressive parties

SOME VOTERS SUPPORT REDISTRIBUTION, BUT ONLY WITHIN A PRE-DEFINED IN-GROUP.

that contribute to this new political landscape. 'Radical centrist' political actors such as Emanuel Macron's En Marche and Spain's Ciudadanos also contribute to the diminishing political capital of the traditional 'Volksparteien' political centre.

THE VARYING FLAVOURS OF POPULISM

Cas Mudde, one of the foremost academic authorities on populist politics, has drawn attention to the perils of treating populism as a pathology or outlier which can be merely 'waited out' until rosier times. The same author draws attention to the fact that populism can be thought of as a 'hollow', thin-centred ideology. It can be adapted to suit either the left or the right, and both progressive and regressive discourse. Populism has become a catch-all term and is one of the most abused concepts at the moment. It is important to be aware of the differences between parties to which we attribute designations such as radical or populist.

Research into the composition of populist electorates has been increasingly looking into the personal characteristics of voters, part of an attempt to uncover the underlying factors that affect vote preferences. Recent work in the field has pointed to the lack of common traits among populist voters and the underlying, individual-level differences between the voters of radical-right and radical-left parties.

Significant differences have been found between supporters of various fringe or Eurosceptic parties. Those on the far left have been found to be better educated than supporters of the far right, and individuals at the two ideological poles tend to have significantly different concerns about the current structure of European governance, as well as different visions for the future of European politics. However, there is evidence that that ideological values and apprehension about immigration can interact to produce voters who demonstrate contradictory values.

An analysis of recent European Social Survey data conducted by the author revealed a subset of voters who scored high on measures of altruism and egalitarianism, but who were also highly exclusive from an ideational or cultural point of view. This runs counter to the expectation that altruistic voters would also be welcoming of 'outsiders'. This finding implies that some voters support redistribution, but only within a pre-defined in-group. The radical and populist right has capitalised on the emergence of this cohort by moving left on the economic scale while maintaining a hard-line stance against immigration and the pursuit of other culturally progressive ideals.

But radical right groups are not the only ones who have capitalised on the increasing acceptance of populist rhetoric and positioning among the electorate. A new brand of centrist parties sell themselves as above the old 'left versus right' squabble. En Marche, Ciudadanos, and the Feminist Initiative in Sweden represent the 'progressive' pole, pitted against radical right and religiously conservative parties at the other end of the spectrum. A large part of their pitch is pro-Europe and transnational in outlook. In Germany, the Greens recently scored their second-best electoral result ever, and, in a vote-intention poll conducted in the country on 11 August 2018, the Greens overtook the right wing AfD as the party with the third-highest support. More recent performances in local and regional elections tell a similar story.

It is hard to believe that all of these new (even if potentially temporary) supporters are motivated by environmental concerns or anti-systemic voting. It is plausible that such support is a result of a more centrist, social-liberal, pro-European constituency that feels alienated by the power-sharing, coalition of the large Volksparteien, but was uneasy with the more radical economic positions of far left parties such as Linke and other far-left parties.

THINKING AHEAD—IMPLICATIONS

1. UNDERSTAND THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE

It is important for the decision makers and leaders of liberal-democratic regimes to note that the main political competition may no longer be that between left and right, as it is supplanted by a 'cultural/ ideational' dimension that pits progressives against conservatives. Policymakers must understand that it no longer suffices to focus on economic policy formulation and implementation to win the electoral horse race. Candidates will increasingly be judged by how culturally progressive or conservative they are, and mainstream political actors must address this in their political strategy as well as outreach to the electorate. Bill Clinton's "It's the economy, stupid" holds less and less.

2. UNDERSTAND THAT THERE ARE SEVERAL POPULISMS TO BE FOUGHT

Mainstream political actors will have to make some tough choices in the near future. While concepts such as populism or anti-systemic parties are thrown around nigh on indiscriminately today as a monolithic explanation for present political struggles, Cas Mudde's insight points to the fact that there can be more than 'one populism'.

Consider for example the issue of the refugee crisis, wherein the 'thinning' centre of the political mainstream is struggling to find a balance in its humanitarian and deportation policy positioning. At the height of the refugee crisis, western Europe was gripped not only by a wave of apprehension towards the newly arrived, but also towards the large numbers of people welcoming them in train stations and sporting 'refugees welcome' t-shirts in increasing numbers. While such individuals are outliers in that they represent a small minority of people at one end of an ideological pole, they indicate the presence of a left-liberal movement that can exert its own pressure on policymakers.

Both the hard-line progressives and the radical right have become ever more vocal over the past decade. At the same time, different populist and radical electorates can have opposing policy preferences and orientations, especially in light of the cultural opposition between progressive and culturally conservative politicians and pundits. The 'Volksparteien' that still dominate the political scene have to choose which constituencies they would be willing to forgo in the formulation of new policy meant to win back defecting voters, as new cleavages in the electorate will make it impossible to appeal to all factions with the same policy approaches.

3. UNDERCUT THE POPULIST ARSENAL, RE-IGNITE THE SOCIAL ECONOMY

Although the 'vertical', cultural dimension is becoming more salient, economic considerations have by no means been rendered meaningless. The distributional issue can still be an arena for political contestation. Ironically, redistributive policy may be the political dimension that mainstream politicians face the fewest compromises.

While the 'culture war' has a stronger impact on radical right voting, debates about the distribution of resources (i.e. the old left versus right question) have been more pronounced on the left. The left still appeals to the lower and working classes—despite the growing proletarianization of the radical right—precisely because many voters have been alienated from the political centre by the failure of neoliberal policies to deliver the hoped-for outputs in terms of economic security and prosperity. The radical left has rallied against globalisation partly because of its association with the roll-back of the welfare state, and such policy positions appeal to those hardest hit by increasing economic interconnectedness.

THE MAIN POLITICAL COMPETITION MAY NO LONGER BE BETWEEN LEFT AND RIGHT BUT RATHER PROGRESSIVE AND CONSERVATIVE

If mainstream parties could re-formulate their policy in such a way as to appeal to those most apprehensive about the economic future, those most in danger of economic precariousness, this would greatly undercut the arsenal of populist parties of various colours. Without diminishing the wisdom of the aforementioned authors' arguments, the readiness of voters to support parties that promise radical social and economic reforms merits emphasis. As welfare policies are supported by progressive as well as conservative populist voters, mainstream parties could fight radicalism at both extremes.

Elites, decision makers, and policymakers must attempt to step outside the austerity focused paradigm that dominates at the moment, and dedicate some time and thought to the welfare state and social protection systems that for so long underpinned prosperity and social cohesion in western Europe. This need not mean only throwing money at the more vulnerable individuals and families in the form of wealth transfer, but also better attempts to increase the 'employability' of said individuals through training and skill updating. ■

FURTHER READING

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