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What's an Elite to Do? The Threat of Populism from Left, Right and Centre

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Defining populism

'Populism' is a classic example of a stretched concept, pulled out of shape by overuse and misuse. In everyday vernacular it is often a simple synonym for 'popularity'; for academics it can denote a wide range of political positions—anything from violent racism to agrarian socialism. In a new report published by Policy Network, *Democratic Stress, the Populist Signal and Extremist Threat*, Anthony Painter[1] gives a useful and theoretically grounded definition of populism as a 'democratic argument'. It is 'democratic' in the sense that it appeals to common conceptions that the rule of the people is a good thing, and it is an 'argument' rather than a particular ideology or set of policies. So it is possible to have far-left as well as far-right populists, and mainstream political parties can (temporarily) use populist arguments.

Populism, then, is essentially a rhetorical posture. At the root of this posture is a distinction between the good and morally pure 'people' and a corrupt, self-serving 'elite'. This caricature, in its various forms, has become increasingly common in general political discourse, and not just in Britain. The financial elite are thought to have filled their pockets at the expense of the people; European technocrats and bureaucrats are accused of ignoring the people's wishes and blithely pursuing a project which has left several European economies in a state of total disrepair; and, above all, political elites are perceived to be incapable of rising to meet the needs of the people because they have their snouts plugged so firmly in the money trough, or because they are simply incompetent. These are crass generalisations, but they form the basis for high levels of support for all sorts of different types of populism around the world.

Populism today

Painter's report is therefore very timely. In Britain, UKIP, a party that trades on people's distrust of the political elite, has delivered outstanding performances in this year's by-elections and council elections; our membership of the EU—a question dominated by populist overtones—remains at the centre of political debate; and in the past few years we have been subjected to a continual flow of elite scandals in politics (expenses; lobbying), the media (hacking) and the City (Libor). We are regularly encouraged to believe that elites are working against the interests of us, the people. This report is an attempt, through rigorous conceptualisation and secondary research, to understand the dynamics of that argument. It is also a sort of policy paper, providing suggestions for mainstream political parties on how to respond to populism.

The report focuses almost exclusively on the phenomenon which has come to be called 'the populist radical right'. There is a clear and sustained interest in xenophobic parties within political, academic and policy-making circles, and the issue remains salient across Europe thanks to the rise of parties such as Golden Dawn in Greece and the continued buoyancy of old hands such as the Front National in France. However, by concentrating on the far-right version of populism, Painter may have missed a trick. Populism is an argument that can be adopted by a wide range of actors across the scale of political ideology, a fact which Painter acknowledges. It is entirely understandable to focus on the type of populism which appears both most successful and most threatening to the mainstream. But what about the left-populists, typified by the Occupy movement and reflected in a wide range of progressive pressure groups? What about the centrist or liberal

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populists such as Beppe Grillo, whose brand of elite-bashing has transformed the political landscape in Italy? What about new entrants who trade almost exclusively on people's impatience with politics? Frank Stronach, an Austrian billionaire, founded a party last year called Team Stronach and peddles the argument that the political system in Austria is corrupt. Team Stronach is already polling at 15 per cent. Such populists are trading on the same distaste for and disengagement from mainstream politics as the radical right, but have little or nothing to do with xenophobia. Their increasing prominence—particularly among the young, the liberal and the middle classes—is a sign that populism may be developing in hitherto unforeseen directions.

Why are they successful?

The report acknowledges these developments in the populist canon but does not have space to explore them. A telling poll, cited by Painter, shows that one of the key indicators of demand-side support for the radical right—namely a desire to end immigration—is weighted heavily towards the old. This suggests that, as populisms go, the radical right may not have the brightest future. Painter assembles a convincing set of data to show that the success of the radical right across Europe is based on its ability to feed off anxieties around immigration, welfare and Islam. This is surely right, but the fourth piece of the jigsaw—'concerns about the body politic'[2]—is the one which crosses over into other, newer types of populism. And these have the potential to appeal to a much wider set of voters, including the young.

A greater focus on this key aspect of the populist audience—their distrust of political elites—would have perhaps yielded a wider set of explanations for the success of populist parties and movements. There are conceivably some longer-term reasons why people in developed democracies are losing their respect for mainstream politics. For instance, the rise of individualism and consumerism over a long period of time makes it ever harder for people to understand the collectivist nature of democratic politics. People are used to getting what they want; in politics, you cannot always get what you want. And what about supply-side explanations? Across the world, political discussion in the news media has become ever more acerbic and negative,[3] nurturing the impression that mainstream politics is corrupt. This surely prepares the ground for the populist message to take seed.

The greatest strength of this report is its respect for populism and the seriousness with which it is treated. Despite the negative connotations of the word 'populism' and the often cartoonish nature of populist rhetoric, Painter insists that we should not dismiss it out of hand. After all, it has its basis in the much-cherished promise of democracy. Margaret Canovan famously described democracy as having two 'faces'—the pragmatic and the redemptive. Pragmatically, democracy is a system of rules and practices which allow modern societies to handle social conflict peacefully. But couched within the concept is a more radical and ideological promise of 'salvation through politics'.[4] Populism thrives on the inevitable tension between these two faces of democracy. Wherever the redemptive vision of democracy appears ill-served, the populist argument becomes more salient. It is a shadow of democracy, following it wherever it goes.

This symbiosis between populism and democracy gives populism the quality of a 'signal'—the increased salience of populism demonstrates that the kettle is boiling over, and that mainstream politics needs to take account of new social pressures. Painter, perhaps unusually for a member of the very intellectual elite which should be most threatened by populism, is fairly positive about this process. He makes a distinction between populists and extremists: the former 'operate within the sphere of democratic politics', whereas the latter 'take a more instrumental view of democracy—it either serves their purpose or it does not'.[5] Populism therefore has enough to do with democracy for it to warrant being taken seriously by the democratic mainstream.

How to respond

Painter's suggestion on how mainstream parties should respond to populism reflects this accommodating stance. He demonstrates how some of the more arrogant approaches to the problem simply do not work. 'Cordon sani-

taire', whereby mainstream parties refuse to work with populist parties, reinforces the impression that the mainstream is out of touch. 'Absorption', whereby the mainstream seeks to co-opt populist parties and their issues, merely serves to legitimise the populists. For parties of the left, there are other options for tackling the radical right. 'Triangulation' would involve using social democratic solutions on populist problems. For instance, a centre-left party could argue that people's worries about immigration would be eased if there were better-paid jobs and more social housing. But this does nothing to address the genuinely experienced cultural anxieties of those concerned about immigration. And as Painter demonstrates, those who have these concerns usually form a large chunk of the voter base for social democratic parties. Finally there is the option for a mainstream social democratic party to 'fight fire with fire'[6] by becoming populist itself. But left-populism has a limited audience, and even if it is electorally successful it is liable to be undermined by the reality of government.

Instead, Painter recommends 'statecraft', which involves 'party management, developing a winning electoral strategy, political argument hegemony and governing competence'.[7] An easy criticism is that statecraft sounds a lot like 'being good at politics', which would rather hollow out the recommendation of the report. If the message to mainstream parties is 'just do better', then it is not much message at all.

But there is more to it than that. At the heart of the recommendation is reform of the way in which political parties interact with the wider populace. Painter urges parties to recognise the disdain in which they are held, to open up, and to seek 'contact' with those they represent. He cites a wide range of evidence to show that hard, prejudicial attitudes are softened by increased contact between different groups. In practice this means that parties—if they are serious about tackling populism—need to move away from the machine model of identifying supporters and 'getting the vote out' on election day. They need to campaign within communities and seek real, meaningful contact with those susceptible to the populist message.

A wide range of case studies illustrates the point: these include the Hope Not Hate campaign, which destroyed support for the British National Party in its Barking and Dagenham stronghold in 2010 simply by being there and talking to voters. Another fascinating case is Amsterdam West Council. The Dutch Labour Party are historically strong in this area, but their support had been drifting away due to growing cynicism, distrust and alienation from public institutions. The council's response was to start a co-operative model whereby citizens and councillors came together to discuss the most pressing issues and find solutions. The result was a series of initiatives aimed at providing young people with work experience, taking over unused space for community projects and offering care in the home. This is what Painter calls 'contact democracy', and it is his most important recommendation.

I have another recommendation. Populism is built on a huge and growing bank of distrust with political elites and dissatisfaction with politics. It is difficult for those very same political elites to address the problem, so discredited are they in the populist imagination. But they have to try, and they could start by thinking about the sort of language they themselves use to describe the business of politics. Focus groups encourage politicians to believe that people expect strength, certainty and leadership, and no doubt they do. But in seeking to deliver on this image of unwavering certainty, politicians are being disingenuous about what politics involves. In the ebb and flow of political negotiation, certainty is rarely, if ever, possible. Perhaps politicians need to find language which reflects the unpredictable nature of democratic politics. One of the chief complaints which people make about politicians is that they seem somehow abnormal, as if from another planet.[8] Perhaps a greater propensity to show weakness and uncertainty would help address this complaint. The Filipino politician Jun-Jun Sotto once campaigned under the slogan: 'I'll do my best, but I can't promise anything'. Politicians could do worse than take a leaf out of Jun-Jun Sotto's book.

Notes

1 A. Painter, *Democratic Stress, the Populist Signal and Extremist Threat*, Policy Network, 2013.

http://www.policy-network.net/publications/4357/Democratic-Stress-the-Populist-Signal-and-Extremist-Threat-

2 Ibid., p. 21.
3 G. Lengauer, F. Esser and R. Berganza, 'Negativity in political news: a review of concepts, operationalizations and key findings', *Journalism*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2012, pp. 1–24.
4 Margaret Canovan, 'Trust the people! Populism and the two faces of democracy', *Political Studies* no. 47, 1999, pp. 2–16, p. 10.
5 Painter, *Democratic Stress*, p. 25.
6 Ibid., p. 35.
7 Ibid., p. 36.
8 E. Wallis, *Another Planet*, Fabian Review, 2012. http://www.fabians.org.uk/another-planet/

