

The median voter is dead – long live political moderation!

Ever since the financial crisis, centrist and establishment politics has been suffering a deepening loss of legitimacy and voter loyalty in Europe and the United States. The median-voter strategy of the Blair and Clinton years has been criticised for good reason, writes [Richard Bronk](#). But might political moderation be about to make a comeback as the world faces up to unprecedented challenges on multiple fronts?

The vote for Brexit and the election of Donald Trump in 2016 seemed to confirm the ascendancy of what Jonathan Hopkin calls '[anti-system politics](#)' – also reflected in the recent startling success of new challenger parties across the EU. But have we been too ready to read the last rites over political moderation?

Still dominant in Canada, New Zealand, Scandinavia and much of south-east Asia, political moderation has already made something of a comeback elsewhere with the election, for example, of President Macron in France (2017), New Democracy in Greece (2019), and Keir Starmer as the post-Corbyn leader of the UK Labour Party. Moreover, a [recent IPSOS poll](#) showed that significantly more UK voters identify with the 'centre' (34%) than with either the 'left' (24%) or 'right' (25%) of a notional political spectrum. In the US, the first week in November will confirm whether the greatest experiment in anti-system politics of recent years will end with the election of the quintessential conciliatory moderate, Joe Biden, as President. If it does so, are there reasons to believe that might be part of a growing trend?

In his [new book](#), Hopkin argues persuasively that anti-system politics has been a natural reaction to the 'market liberal consensus' shared until recently by all mainstream parties – a consensus that narrowed the range of political positions 'to the point where voters were left with little real choice at election time'. When the financialised version of global capitalism enabled by this consensus ended in the financial crash of 2008 and long years of rising inequality and insecurity, voters were primed to look for radical alternatives to the status quo. Parties pursuing a median-voter strategy – along with the main institutions of the state and most market participants – were locked into what Wade Jacoby and I have called an '[analytical monoculture](#)' that left them blind to problems that are not articulated in the language of standard economics and risk management.

In '[Angrynomics](#)' – an exploration of the positive role of moral outrage and the damaging effects of tribal anger in politics – Mark Blyth and Eric Lonergan argue that 'anodyne, identity-free, political centrism' created a 'vacuum' that was bound to be filled: anger was inevitable when (constrained by the apparently ineluctable logic of global capitalism) parties in power progressively abandoned previous commitments to protect their citizens from the uncertainty, anxiety, and costs associated with rapid economic change. Facing what [Zygmunt Bauman](#) calls 'liquid modernity' – the omnipresent uncertainty resulting from a compulsive obsession with modernisation and continual deregulation – voters became increasingly anxious. And, sensing that governments are trapped in [Dani Rodrik's 'trilemma'](#) – where they can deliver only two of three goals (national sovereignty, globalisation and democracy) – and have largely devolved decision-making to unelected and often supranational technocratic agencies, many voters turned against the whole political system.

In the '[Epistemics of Populism](#)', Jacoby and I argued that the economic indeterminacy implied by rapid technological change, deregulation, and complex interconnected global networks – and the correspondingly high levels of uncertainty and insecurity experienced by citizens – has also provided fertile conditions for the populist approach to politics that some anti-system parties have successfully adopted. In particular, the unpredictability and openness of the future have undermined the credibility of experts, while encouraging an 'arms race of rhetorical hyperbole' as political actors scramble to establish their narratives and 'facts' as key determinants of the beliefs and actions of the electorate. The difficulty of holding individuals responsible for the failures of a complex economic system has also allowed populists to blame whichever group of outsiders suits their political interests.



Joe Biden at a campaign event in Nevada on 9 October 2020, Credit: Joe Biden (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Given all this, why might the politics of moderation make a comeback at the very moment when the Covid-19 crisis is further highlighting and increasing the inequalities in society that leave many perilously vulnerable?

Part of the answer is the simple power of anti-incumbency politics. As [Hopkin](#) notes, the immediate reaction to the financial crisis was to vote out incumbent centrist parties in favour of alternative parties of the establishment centre – as for example, when the Conservative-Liberal coalition led by David Cameron replaced Gordon Brown's Labour government. Only when all elements of the political centre had failed to address their concerns did electors risk voting for 'anti-system' alternatives – such as Syriza in Greece or UKIP (and their Brexit policy) in the UK. By the same logic it may follow that, as anti-system (and often populist) governments are in turn seen to flounder in their management of crises, anti-incumbency may work against the new players themselves.

This is also true for several deeper reasons: first, the euro crisis, the Covid crisis, and the UK's Brexit divorce from the EU and Single Market have all presented enormous challenges to governments in safeguarding the welfare of their citizens and managing attendant economic shocks. For all the boosterism rhetoric of Johnson and Trump, these practical challenges are not easily met when the leaders involved are systematically denigrating and disrupting the very administrative institutions and bodies of experts that they must rely on to manage change. Attempts to replace the accumulated wisdom of established institutions with government by tweet or by the application of algorithms sponsored and championed by special advisers have not been notably successful. Voters have noticed that what works to win electoral campaigns does not necessarily solve practical policy problems.

Secondly, the functional need for anti-system parties was to provide a shock to a non-responsive political system that was unwilling or incapable of addressing the suffering and anxieties endured by much of the population. But the Covid-19 pandemic – combined with the growing climate crisis – is increasingly forcing even mainstream parties to think the previously unthinkable and refashion the rules of economic policy and markets to address burgeoning inequality and hardship.

At the same time, voters who are increasingly alarmed by existential threats from the pandemic and climate change may have a diminishing appetite for a mode of insurrectionary and revolutionary politics that further increases instability and uncertainty. As in wartime, or during post-war reconstruction, voters may crave stability, competence, and reassurance over revolutionary zeal.

[Hopkin](#) intriguingly compares anti-system parties to 'anti-bodies' that help build resistance to the inequalities and injustices of market liberalism. But to use a topical Covid analogy, the body-politic (or patient) can be killed by an over-zealous immune response. In the end, it is the system infected with market liberalism (and consequent pathologies of inequality and insecurity) that must organise a response to the pathologies if the patient is to survive.

Another reason why the sort of political moderation exemplified by Biden and Starmer may once again be appealing to voters (following years of increasingly raucous left-wing insurgency in their respective parties) can ironically best be explained by unpacking why the median-voter model of politics (personified by New Labour and the Third Way) was fundamentally misconceived. That model focused on a supposedly 'typical' or 'representative' voter, thereby ignoring the heterogeneity of preferences and interests. More, crucially, it assumed that political preferences could be placed on a single continuum (and that disparate underlying values could be converted to a single scale), so that governments could satisfy the preferences of a simple majority of the people and calculate the optimum set of policy trade-offs. Government became a technocratic enterprise.

This median-voter model of politics drained much of the significance from the cross-cutting value conflicts that underlie the complex preferences of voters. In particular, by assuming that different values or goals are commensurable (and can be placed on a single scale of value or single continuum of preference-bundles) it underestimated how contested and unstable are the trade-offs between different goals – such as freedom and security, efficiency and equality, medical health and economic growth. There is no one right and rational set of trade-offs for an individual or society. The political choices made define the identity of a body politic, and voters understandably care deeply about them and frequently change their mind.

The ultimate problem for – and glory of – any successful form of politics is then that it must articulate and mediate between a variety of values and interests, while allowing voters and their representatives to understand the practical implications of the trade-offs they choose.

Such articulation of – and mediation between – different and conflicting incommensurable values and interests was largely absent in the catch-all policy offerings of Third-Way consensus politics and no longer catered for by pre-2016 centrist political parties with declining memberships and voter involvement. But it is also inadequately catered for by the dialogue of the deaf that has characterised the recent polarised politics of the US and UK – where parties captured by ideologues speak only to their increasingly homogenous base (and in some cases actually expel their own members for disagreeing with their respective leaderships). If politics is to produce innovative answers to the novel challenges presented by concurrent crises, gain the support of a diverse electorate, and negotiate compromises and trade-offs between different interests and incommensurable goals, then it must enable respectful dialogue between different groups of voters.

Sensing this, voters in majoritarian (first-past-the-post) electoral systems may once again be favouring political parties that have the internal mechanisms and leaderships (arguably provided by Biden and Starmer) that enable negotiation and deliberative debate between a broad range of interests, values, and perspectives. In PR systems, by contrast, they may favour moderate parties that can help negotiate coalitions between ideologically diverse blocs. (For those unused to EU politics, think of Birgitte Nyborg in the TV series, [Borgen](#)).

The radical uncertainty implied by the complex and novel challenges now facing democracies in a fragile and interdependent world may also end up increasing the emotional appeal of narratives of political moderation, just as it did after World War II. Existential uncertainty may make voters wary once again of simplistic narratives and revolutionary policies and increasingly comfortable with the pragmatic politics of competence and the sort of 'piecemeal' social engineering championed by [Karl Popper](#). In other words, crisis fatigue may cause voters to shun grand solutions with unknowable consequences and prefer the sort of incremental reform traditionally associated with moderate political parties of left and right. Uncertainty may also increase the voter appeal of the decentralised and 'polycentric' approach that [Elinor Ostrom](#) argued has the best chance of tackling urgent shared problems – by encouraging diverse experiments in living that engage and involve ordinary voters. The Metro mayors of the North of England and the devolved administrations in the UK battling the Covid crisis certainly hope so.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Joe Biden \(CC BY-NC-SA 2.0\)](#)
