

Populism has the potential to damage European democracy, but demonising populist parties is self-defeating.

by Blog Admin

Paul Taggart assesses the challenge of populism to European democracy. He argues that while populism can have significant negative effects on representative politics, the demonisation of populist parties is self-defeating. Rather than tackling populism as a concept, it is important to deal substantively with the issues raised by populist politicians, such as immigration, multiculturalism and European integration.



In Europe, the combination of long-term trends of increasing distrust towards politicians and politics and an economic crisis would seem to create a perfect storm for populism to sail through and establish itself as a significant force. And looking around, there are plenty of examples of populist movements, parties and politicians making hay at Europe's expense. From Wilders in the Netherlands with his anti-Islamic stance, to the Euroscepticism of UKIP in Britain, via Jobbik's anti-Semitic radical Hungarian nationalism, the anti-elitism of Die Linke in Germany, and the anti-politics of Beppe Grillo in Italy, Europe appears awash with populism.

But in reality populism is a limited force and what is remarkable about the current state of European politics is how little populism there is. These different examples don't aggregate into a wider populism and it is surprising how little mass populism there is in reaction to the economic crisis.

To deal with what populism there is, we need to be clear what we are talking about. The defining features of populism are threefold. First, populism exhibits an antagonism to the forms and practices of representative politics. It builds on a fundamental ambivalence towards politics in general, eschewing established forms of political parties and opting instead for the new and spectacular and celebrating its difference from the established forms of politics. Second, populism always draws on an implicit or explicit heartland – a version of the past that celebrates a hypothetical, uncomplicated and non-political territory of the imagination. From the imagination of this 'place', it tends to draw its values. And it is from this territory that it draws its own vision of its natural constituency – unified, diligent and ordinary. Third, populism always displays a Manichean tendency, viewing the world as divided between good and evil, and as 'us' and 'them'.



Nigel Farage, Leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party (Credit: Euro Realist Newsletter, CC BY 2.0)

Beyond these three core features there are also a number of secondary features, but these cannot be said to be part of the definition. One of these features is that it always fuses with other ideologies that are contextually generated. This means that there is no such thing as 'pure' populism and it also means that populism can vary dramatically in what form it takes and hence can range across the political spectrum. It means that what some take as defining features of populism, such as celebrating 'the

people' or seeing elites as corrupt are, in fact, secondary.

Redefining populism means understanding that there is nothing in appeals to 'the people' that is inherently populist. Implying a retrospectively constructed 'heartland' with occupants who are referred to as the people is a different matter. And identifying the elite as corrupt is not essentially populist – it is a consequence of viewing politics as corrupting that defines populism. Corrupt elites are the symptom, not the cause. We need to look at populism with an eye to the context in which it arises and to the form that it takes. We need to be clear what it is that is our primary concern. In contemporary Europe, populism has fused with agendas of anti-immigration, minority nationalism, Euroscepticism, anti-Islam and welfare chauvinism. Tackling those issues and tackling populism are different matters.

If we want to address populism, then we need to be clear that it can have a negative effect on politics. Its emergence into a context tends to bifurcate politics there. The 'us' and 'them' language of the populist becomes self-fulfilling as established forces often close ranks in attempts to draw *cordon sanitaires* around populist forces. More importantly, populism has the effect of closing down debate, of reducing it to binary oppositions. Hence the propensity for advocating 'plebiscitary' politics and referendums – and of often celebrating the most extraordinary of leaders to represent the ordinary people. Personifying politics is a way of by-passing many of the difficulties of complex issues and processes. And in these senses populism closes down the iterative functioning of representative politics. It feeds an anti-politics that reduces politics as an activity and further feeds distrust in the complexity of politics.

The other danger with populism is that, from the mainstream, we tend to lump populism in with extremism. But the essence of populism is that it is distinctively not an extreme position. At its heart lies an ambivalence about politics, but once stirred into action, populists have clearly overcome this political reluctance. As a political force, populism is self-consciously reformist rather than revolutionary. Populism makes a point of not challenging the fundamental rules of the political game and, in many cases, complains that the problem is that those rules are not being followed by the established politicians. It works within the framework of representative politics, adopting a position that allows it to redefine the meaning of the rules, but not to advocate a changing of the game. The 'danger' of populism is therefore that it works within existing politics while having the effect of changing the behaviour of other actors.

Looking across the array of populist politicians in contemporary Europe and assessing how to deal with the challenge of those we find distasteful, means we need to look closely at the context and address the issues that they champion as well as dealing with their populism and their effects. Tackling the agenda of anti-immigration, of xenophobia, of Euroscepticism and of anti-Islam means taking on those issues. If we are concerned with confronting the anti-politics of these forces' populism, then what matters is the way in which we acknowledge these issues.

To succumb to simple demonisation and to exclusion means falling prey to the dumbing down of representative politics. By doing so we are in danger of further closing down representative democratic politics and indeed of making reformist populists into *de facto* revolutionaries.

This article forms parts of the Policy Network/Barrow Cadbury Trust project on "Populism, Extremism and the Mainstream". It was presented by the author at an Amsterdam workshop co-hosted by the Wiardi Beckman Stichting on 22 November, 2012

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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