

Disproportionate media focus risks elevating radical right insurgent parties to the status of serious contenders

By Democratic Audit UK

*While right-wing populism is certainly one expression of democratic discontent, disproportionate media focus risks reinforcing these parties as serious contenders and adversaries of the status quo, and alienating those who do not believe that the Le Pens and Farages are a viable solution to their political and democratic demands. A more ambitious democratic discussion is needed, argues **Aurélien Mondon**.*



The French far-right leader Marine le Pen addresses a rally (Credit: Blandine Le Cain, CC BY 2.0)

One of the most obvious and potentially serious political shifts in the past twenty years in Europe has been the surge in right-wing populism, and yet, as this piece argues, this phenomenon is widely misunderstood and misinterpreted with potentially dramatic consequences. Year on year, the media warns of new waves of (right-wing) populism crashing against the defences of the liberal democratic status quo. The most recent example was the 2014 European elections which, according to [much of the media](#), witnessed an 'irresistible' rise of populist parties from the right side of politics. From UKIP, French Front National and Danish People's Party victories, to the shocking results of the more extreme Jobbik and Golden Dawn in Hungary and Greece, it would seem that right-wing populism has become inescapable.

Early on, Hans-Georg Betz in his [formative work](#) on radical right-wing populism argued that this surge was part of the corrective function of democracy (what [Margaret Canovan](#) called its 'redemptive function'). In this understanding (simplified for this short piece), right-wing populism acts as a counterpoint to the pragmatic side of democracy, that is the technocratic forms of government which have become increasingly central to what Colin Crouch has called '[post-democracy](#).' By voting for these parties, the 'people' (be they workers, the losers of globalisation etc.) can express their discontent and frustration towards policies and politics from which they feel alienated. This vote acts as a reminder to politicians that the mob may not want the advance of (neo)liberalism and that a step back or a reframing is at times necessary.

While there is certainly much to gain in terms of readership in front-paging the impending catastrophe of a right-wing populist push, or even a victory, in a major election, and while Betz and Canovan's assessments of the limits

of the pragmatic side of democracy undeniably have some merit, it is possible to argue for a different understanding of the rise in right-wing populism in which the so-called success of these parties is only part of a deeper problem.

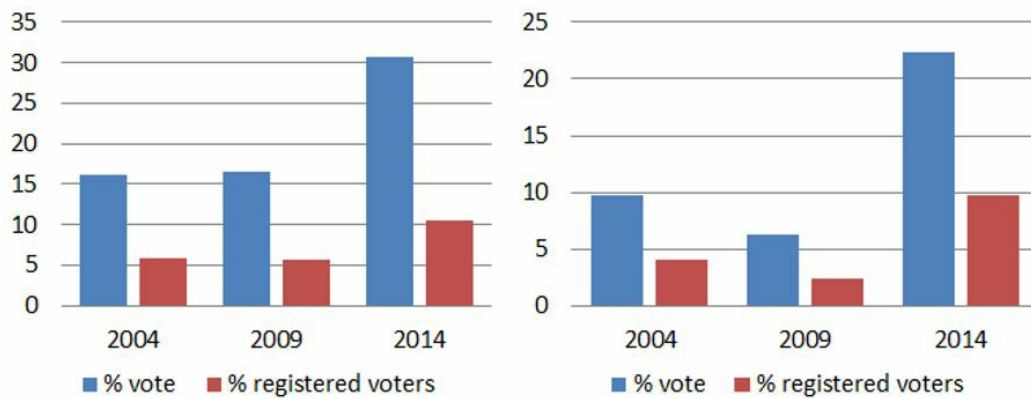
What is populism?

This may seem a potentially useless question. After all, the term 'populism' is so commonplace in the media that we must all know what it stands for. Yet the debate around its meaning remains crucial to understanding its appeal and potential impact on democracies. Populism can be understood either as an ideology (be it a thin one) or as a style or discourse. My own research sits firmly within the latter understanding, wherein populism is a political style or discourse whereby the populist creates her/his 'people' according to her/his ideological goals. The 'people' therefore can take many shapes and forms and be used in both inclusive and exclusive ways (i.e. against global injustice, against minorities, for democracy, for discriminatory purposes etc.). The term 'populism' connotes various ideas and meanings, both positive and negative. One of these, central to the term, is the idea of the people to which the populist becomes intrinsically linked. However, in most of the present cases, this representation is not ideological but strategic: giving power to the people is not what modern right-wing populists seek to achieve, contrary to the [Narodniki](#) movement in late 19th century Russia. Instead, they appeal to a people in order to install an ideological programme. This allows the populist to change its definition of the people (whoever is included and excluded) depending on who they are talking to. This is particularly striking with contemporary right-wing populism, where Marine Le Pen and Nigel Farage, for example, can appeal to extremely diverse groups using the same populist rhetorical tools (i.e. promoting a strong welfare state while offering to lower taxes etc). Finally, because of its strategic and opportunistic essence, it is crucial not to consider populism as an ideological feature as it would provide the populist with a semblance of democratic legitimacy by reinforcing his/her image as the 'voice of the people'.

Is right-wing populism THE alternative to a much-decried political situation?

It is clear that right-wing populist parties have played a key role in European politics in the twenty-first century as they have [forced the mainstream to move rightward](#) on issues of immigration and security. This impact is partly the result of media coverage of these parties. Across Europe, they are commonly portrayed as the alternative to the elitist governance of our societies. Even in the case of Greece where the left-wing alternative SYRIZA tops the polls, the media regularly refers to Golden Dawn as the real shock to the system. Yet this right-wing populist push across Europe can and should be nuanced. As shown by [Cas Mudde](#), the results of the broad and diverse right-wing populist family in the European elections paints a much less successful picture than that which has appeared on front pages. Further, even where parties employing a right-wing populist strategy have won in the elections in France and the UK for example, this victory can only be considered partial, despite [propitious conditions](#). While the FN and UKIP have certainly improved their electoral results, their performance becomes much less impressive when the entire voting population is taken into account.

Table 1. 2014 European elections results in the UK and France



The real winner in France and the UK, as well as in many other European countries, continues to be abstention. While parties such as the FN and UKIP have appealed to part of the working class (most of which was originally conservative), the bulk of the former moderate left support within this part of the population has decidedly shifted towards refraining from participating, adding to those feeling alienated from the electoral process or powerless to effect change through their vote. The point here is not to say that abstention carries a particular political message or agenda, or that there is one reason behind people turning away from what is commonly considered the most emblematic democratic symbol in liberal democracies. However, what is crucial here is the disproportionate coverage given to the right-wing populist alternative in all its forms at the expense of other symptoms of the deep political crisis engulfing liberal democracies in the post-democratic age.

Across Europe, the parties which have led governments since the Second World War no longer manage to convince, despite their stronghold on mostly bipartite systems. While right-wing populism has certainly been one of the outlets for the discontentment of this part of the population, it is only one of them, and it has so far only appealed to 10% of the registered vote in both France and the UK. Needless to say that such performances signify a serious warning, but it is also important to consider the appeal these parties have had with voters expressing a protest, rather than an ideological vote. Therefore, at a time when 8 out of 10 Europeans declare their lack of trust in politicians (be they right-wing populist or not), focusing solely on that alternative runs the risk of further alienating all those who do not believe that the Le Pens and Farages are a viable or appealing solution to their political and democratic demands. This lopsided coverage not only risks the reinforcement of these parties as legitimate contenders and respected adversaries of the status quo, but will more importantly prevent a more ambitious and necessary democratic discussion.

This post originally appeared on Policy Exchange's Populism Observatory under the title '[Nuancing the right-wing populist hype](#)'. It represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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