

Painting in primary colours: political populism and the muted mainstream

By Democratic Audit UK

*Has the rise of radical populist parties across Europe led to the opening up of a gap between what is feasible politically and good governance? **Nick Pearce** argues that understanding our current political situation is helped by the work of Max Weber and Peter Mair, but that the challenge of squaring this dilemma looks difficult for all the political parties in the UK.*



Credit: [Euro Realist Newsletter](#), CC BY ND 2.0

‘Traditional parties are left contesting the electoral terrain, pulled in different directions by a splintered, febrile electorate and overshadowed by populist antagonists who paint in the primary colours of the insurgent, not the muted palette of the mainstream.’

The financial crisis and its aftermath have delivered major shocks to the party systems of continental Europe: witness the rise of new left parties such as Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece, and the surge in support for far-right populist parties such as the Sweden Democrats and the Front National in France. Even Germany, home to the most successful Christian democratic party in Europe, has seen a splintering of support towards Eurosceptic, socialist left and techno-urbanist parties in recent years.

Britain’s first-past-the-post system has immunised it to these convulsions in the past, but now it too is experiencing a major political re-composition. A new, multiparty system is being created, forged from the twin processes of the secular decline of the main social class voting blocs, which has steadily reduced the vote share of Labour and the Conservatives over a 50-year period, and the more recent territorial realignment sparked by the rise of civic Scottish nationalism and Eurosceptic Englishness, and given expression by the SNP and Ukip respectively.

Austerity, and the longer-run rise in inequality, can explain some of these changes, but not all of them. The mass political party as we knew it in the postwar era has largely disappeared. As the late Peter Mair put it rather brutally in his final work, [Ruling the Void](#):

'The age of party democracy has passed. Although the parties themselves remain, they have become so disconnected from the wider society, and pursue a form of competition that is so lacking in meaning, that they no longer seem capable of sustaining democracy in its present form.'

Mair's work is an indispensable guide to navigating this terrain. In [his later writings](#) Mair argued that two critical roles assigned to political parties in the 20th century understanding of democratic government had broken down: parties had ceased to *represent* the interests of the people, and were no longer able to govern *responsibly* on their behalf. Instead of making representations on behalf of citizens to the state, they had moved to 'making representations on behalf of the state to the citizen'.

The mass membership parties of postwar Europe not only represented the political demands of their core constituencies, they helped to frame and organise their social lives and civic engagement. They were often in a literal sense 'family' parties, deeply embedded in civil society, as well as active in the polity. Voting for a party was not just a rational choice but an expressive act through which ties of loyalty and belonging were given meaning.

Increasingly, however, as the communities of social class fractured, parties came to lose these moorings. They became more professionalised and narrowly composed, with recruitment and promotion mechanisms increasingly focused on access to, and advancement within, the hierarchies of public office. As the realm of the state became more important, the special adviser took over from the shop steward.

Conversely, parties in office have found it increasingly difficult to be responsive to their electorates. Their spending choices are constrained by weaker tax revenues, accumulated obligations to spend resources on particular public services and welfare entitlements like pensions and the NHS, and debt servicing. At the same time, increased accountability to supranational bodies like the European Union and the WTO have constrained their ability to respond directly to the demands of their citizens on issues like immigration and trade – demands which they have difficulty deciphering or aggregating, let alone meeting. Meanwhile, politicians' ability to persuade – and thence to demonstrate their responsiveness to their voters – has waned as trust in them had fallen.

Into this gap have stepped populist parties, political actors who are prepared to offer an apparently unmediated representation of voters' demands without any pretence that they will try to respond to them in office. Populists buy an 'authenticity' precisely by eschewing the 'slow, strong drilling through hard boards' of which Max Weber famously spoke. Yet in responding to them, mainstream parties face the dilemma that they are unable to hold together the demands of representation and responsibility. They have cleaved to an 'ethic of responsibility' but at a price of denuding themselves of a claims to democratic representation.

Even that commitment to responsible government is under pressure in contemporary political culture. Our hollowed-out, elite-driven party politics, besieged by populist forces and an insatiable media, finds itself responding ever more frenetically and tactically to the fickle electorate, so that politicians are increasingly unable to take hold of the major long-term structural challenges that advanced societies face, such as climate change and ageing. Responsible governance becomes harder to exercise, falling victim to the structural contradiction between politicking and governing well.

Mair viewed the gap between responsive and responsible government as potentially unbridgeable. The situation was 'pathological, not conditional', he argued, and in the contemporary political scene, we can see different attempts to break out of the terms of his dilemma. One response has been to join the populists in eschewing the practice of responsible government, even to dispense with politics as the exercise of power through the state. This is [one reading](#) of the 'gridlock' Tea Party strategy and the 'asymmetric polarisation' of US politics. The party retreats to its core and justifies its withdrawal from government on the basis of an antistate libertarianism. Echoes of this suffuse Eurosceptic politics on the right in the UK. Conversely, the new left challenges the terms of 'responsible government' and urges the unshackling of fiscal constraints, supranational obligations and the political dominance of the '1 per cent'.

Where does this leave the mainstream parties? They have experimented with primaries for candidate selection, community organising and other means of re-establishing organic connections with civil society. But these have been fitful rather than programmatic. There is nothing in European social or Christian democracy to compare with

the extra-parliamentary organisations and popular cultural ties of, say, Latin American parties. And so they are left contesting the electoral terrain, pulled in different directions by a splintered, febrile electorate and overshadowed by populist antagonists who paint in the primary colours of the insurgent, not the muted palette of the mainstream.

—

This post originally appeared on [Nick Pearce's blog on the IPPR website](#). It represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit UK or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

—

Nick Pearce is the Director of IPPR. He previously worked as head of the Policy Unit at 10 Downing Street.

