

Populism is dead, but the electoral system is its iron lung

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It started off as tense, but quickly became rather boring, like slowly watching the sun burn out and waiting for its inevitable impact. The pedestrian results of last week's US Presidential election quickly lost their lustre, even if the vote seemed to be turning the way of integrity. As I write this, the signs are Joe Biden will be President, and despite his rhetoric of unity will probably oversee a further period of civil unrest and instability for America. Especially in those southern states which have always had an uncomfortable relationship with the Union and Capitol Hill.

There has been plenty of discussion on whether Biden's performance represents a beginning of the end of 'Trumpism'. This to me seems a strange term; I don't actually know what 'Trumpism' is. Its core principle – similar to 'Borisism' – seems to be overdependence on bully and bluster to promote a platitudinous rhetoric offering hollow detail to address the challenging and complex problems of contemporary society.

The general feeling for several US commentators is in the short term, Trumpism is going nowhere. Bearing in mind his empowerment of disregarded voters – regardless how imagined – has been proclaimed a general success, and is similarly replicated in certain trends in Europe, there seems mileage in this campaign yet with or without its tangerine cheerleader.

My CBS colleague, David Hearne, shared his concerns about populism being here to stay in a recent blog^[1]. Considering Trump's performance, the swing to the Conservatives in 2019's UK general election, and showings in Hungary, Poland, and to a lesser extent France and Italy, populism it seems is alive and well in the West.

The concerns here are that more conventional forms of political discourse have failed to deliver requisite outcomes for a set of core constituents, often typified as the 'left behind' or some other

articulation of a victim class. This victim class seem strangely to get angrier the more enfranchised they become.

In response to David's arguments, I will take another line here. Populism does indeed look like it has gathered a head of steam. But in my view this is not the outcome of renewed significance amongst nationalist movements, but indicative of the failings of an ill-designed set of electoral systems and processes which were flawed at the outset, let alone in their attempts to deal with the complexities and adaptations of contemporary life.

Let's start with the obvious; our flawed electoral system. If by some minor miracle Trump does win a second term, this disregards the elephant in the room of the popular vote. Whilst Clinton in 2016 outperformed Trump by 3m votes, Biden increased this gap to 4m, or more as the count comes in (bear in mind California was called on only 77%). In what should be a first-past-the-post battle, to reward on two consecutive occasions a loser – and a loser by a significant margin – is unjustifiable. And this isn't just the Presidency. Both the Senate and the House of Representatives are elected through systems weighted in favour of more traditional, rural – and therefore Republican – areas^[iii]. Similarly, in the UK, the application of a FPTP electoral system in a multi-party environment ensures the hegemony of minority government, ripe for exploitation.

Second is the failure of political parties. Following last years' election I blogged about the failures of the left, fragmented in the UK across multiple parties, and their ability to hand the Conservatives power^[iii]. But the Conservatives are not blameless here, embracing principles of cronyism and centralisation where free markets and small businesses have conventionally sat. The continued patronage of Party by one-nation Tories such as Theresa May and Jeremy Hunt illustrates how malleable are principles for the right when power is concerned.

Third is a failure of message. The former Democratic Presidential candidate Andrew Yang last week commented on the failure of Democrats to engage with normal people and everyday Americans. Such accusations don't stack up against the distribution of the vote, the New York Times exit poll indicating the swing to Trump occurred singularly in the highest earning bracket^[iv]. There does however remain an ongoing issue in terms of the needs and representation of

urban versus rural working classes and white versus BAME groups. The question here, for both Democrats in the US and Labour in the UK, is how messages of hollow populism founded on platitudinous rhetoric of free trade gain traction over those of investment in support infrastructure.

Most prominently, however, is a failure of citizens. Let's be clear here that populism, despite its prolonged 15 minutes in the sun, has never taken the hold both we and it often proclaim. Authoritarian governments have emerged in areas with cultural tendencies toward authoritarianism (I'm looking at you, Poland and Hungary), and Italy's Five Star has become a major political player at the cost of the Centre-Left. But in France, Le Pen never seriously contested Macron in 2017, and the Greens outperformed the National Rally in this year's municipal elections. Austria in 2019 saw a 10% swing away from the FPÖ, AfD achieved only 12.6% of the national vote in Germany, and Geert Wilders' PVV only 13% in the Netherlands.

Where it has been successful, in the US and UK, is singularly through the appropriation of existing institutions and associated loyalty to these parties; had Farage's Brexit Party not stood down for the Tories in certain seats last year, we would have a very different Government now. The foothold is here not the result of any great swing toward populism, but the refusal of an embedded party faithful to look elsewhere.

There is no doubt here populists have played the system and played it well; this should not be confused with a cultural shift toward populist values. When scaled back beyond the rhetoric to consider political engagement, aside from the Brexit vote it is very difficult to see these signals of populism becoming a major force beyond Tufton Street's Twitter feed.

In the US, the Republicans – no strangers to electoral success before Trump came along – will soon realise there is more traction in a moderate conservative message to win back the key centre ground in a two-party system. Which largely leaves the UK alone with its populist problem. Here there is no short-term solution without electoral reform and whilst the fragmented left continues to fight a pointless ideological war. Populism however is not a value resurgent; it is

simply an effective representation of a catalogue of failures amongst outdated political processes.

[i] <https://centreforbrexitstudiesblog.wordpress.com/2020/11/06/disruption/>

[ii] <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/21/upshot/as-american-as-apple-pie-the-rural-votes-disproportionate-slice-of-power.html>

[iii] <https://centreforbrexitstudiesblog.wordpress.com/2019/12/16/progressive-but-strategically-naive-how-the-left-threw-away-another-general-election/>

[iv] <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/11/03/us/elections/exit-polls-president.html>