

What is “populism”? Some reflections on a commentary by Matthew Goodwin



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In a recent commentary⁽¹⁾, the political scientist Matthew Goodwin coined the term “national populist” to describe those behind recent electoral disruptions throughout the world (of which Brexit is just one). Whether the similarity to ‘national socialism’ is coincidental or deliberate, the rise of nationalism (and other political movements playing on identity) across the globe is surely of particular salience on the 100th anniversary of Armistice Day.

Presumably, the addition of the term ‘national’ is to distinguish examples such as Bolsonaro in Brazil or *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) from other movements routinely labelled as “left-

wing populists”, such as Spain’s Podemos, Italy’s 5-Star movement or Jeremy Corbyn in the UK. The distinction is important: the defining feature of many of these “national populist” movements is their nationalism. This is certainly visible in the example of Brexit. According to polling data², the top 3 reasons why Leave voters voted Leave were (in order):

1. The principle that decisions about the UK should be taken in the UK
2. The desire for the UK to regain control over immigration and its own borders
3. Remaining meant little or no choice over how the EU expanded its membership or powers

Leaving aside the dubious factual accuracy of the third point (the UK Government has a veto on whether new members can join and considerable influence over whether or how EU competencies should be increased), the same arguments can be heard again and again. In our own research with Leave voting communities, two themes come across: firstly that the EU is anti-democratic and secondly there is a desire to reduce immigration. These are expressed in myriad ways, a concern over the role and powers of courts in Europe, concern over the influence of the EU commission, the opacity of decision-making in EU institutions, worries over the provision of local services amidst a rising population, cultural insecurities, outright racism, and concerns about the integration of certain minority communities and many others.

The overwhelming majority of Leave Voters are well aware of the fact that regular elections to the European Parliament are held and that the UK Parliament ratified the 2009 treaty of Lisbon (as well as the 1992 Maastricht Treaty). Thus, although the language of being ‘anti-democratic’ is often used, it is not the necessarily the actual absence of democracy to which they are usually referring (although concern is expressed over the powers of the EU commission).

Rather, the allegedly ‘anti-democratic’ nature of the EU is the simple fact that EU legislation sits above UK legislation (whether directly via regulations or via directives that *require* the UK parliament to legislate to achieve a certain end). In other words, the objection is to the fact that irrespective of how the UK votes in a General Election, it can be

forced to implement certain legislation by virtue of being outvoted in the European Council and parliament. Of course, the difficulty of reversing legislation that a UK government has previously agreed to is another key facet of this.

This is a logical consequence of the effective functioning of a single market. The EU could hardly function effectively if a change of government in one state could unilaterally rescind things about previous treaties that they decided they didn't like. Nor is it any different to the granting of powers to independent arbitrators in many international trade and investment agreements. Nevertheless, because the European Single Market is unusually deep and well-developed (which has led to the economic benefits so prized by many Remain voters), it necessarily has led to much deeper political union than many Leavers are comfortable with.

The reasons for this are inextricably linked to the debate over immigration. Immigrants (whether from Poland or Pakistan) are not seen as part of the national *demos*. Leavers are very much "national" inasmuch as they have a very strong sense of *national* identity. In a previous post^[3], we noted that freedom of movement raised particular issues around this. This is seen in movements throughout Europe and the world, whether Marine Le Pen, Donald Trump, Geert Wilders, Viktor Orban, Vladimir Putin, Jair Bolsonaro, the AfD or UKIP. More surprisingly, similar sentiments are seen in Scotland and Catalonia (where, of course, the *demos* is seen as Scots or Catalans respectively). It is interesting to note in this context that in spite of the SNP's rather liberal stance on migration, Scottish voters appear remarkably in tune with their English counterparts^[4].

Brexit, then, is not the exception, it is the rule – these disruptive movements are the new normal. Identity and nationalism are important, for better or worse. Ironically, where Goodwin perhaps is on much shakier grounds is in his linking of this to the rather nebulous term "populism". What is a "populist"? This is a question that has concerned us at CBS, and its dominance in discussions seeking to explain Trump, Brexit and the resurgence of right-wing movements in general warrants some critical examination of the use and justification of this term.

That “populism” has almost overwhelmingly been used in a pejorative sense to describe phenomenon such as the above gives further food for thought over the validity of this term – can the rise of Jeremy Corbyn in the UK and Bolsonaro in Brazil really be combined under the rubric of such a phrase? That commentators in the public domain (e.g., Rafael Behr, Natalie Nougayrede, Andrew Rawnsley and others) who particularly eschew “populism” could more-or-less be described as “liberal-centric” in their views adds a further revealing dimension to this debate.

Traditionally, populism has been defined as a movement that purports to represent the “people” or “will of the people” against some imagined “elite” who are out of touch with the concerns of the everyday person[5]. The term is long-established in political science literature, dating back to the 1890s, with the then Populist Party in the US championing agrarian interests and anti-monopoly legislation (*ibid*), and the parallel *Narodniki* movement in the Russian Empire[6]. Of course, this raises rather obvious conceptual issues: isn’t the point of democracy to represent the will of the people? Don’t most politicians seek to be popular (at least insofar as it helps them get re-elected)?

In conventional modern discourse it has increasingly become defined along ethnic or cultural lines and is closely associated with the resurgent nationalism described. The problem here is that populism *also* is used to describe movements that have traditionally been seen as “left-wing”, including Corbyn but also *die Linke* in Germany, Syriza in Greece, Podemos and 5-star.

However, seeking to explain Brexit through the lens of “populism” (even if referred to as “national populism” to quote Goodwin) is highly problematic. Not the least because Brexit, as it has been pushed in the UK, has been led by individuals (Nigel Farage, Boris Johnson, Jacob Rees-Mogg etc.) who under any objective measure of status (income, education, wealth, social capital etc.) blatantly qualify as “elite” and are at the heart of “the Establishment”. In this situation, it might be better to interpret Brexit as the outcome of a conflict within elite circles between those who could be classed as market fundamentalists seeking to throw off the “shackles” of the EU regulatory framework c.f. those who have a *modus vivendi* with its operation (that is, the majority of the corporate community in the UK).

In this sense, the proponents of Brexit could only be considered as “populist” to the extent that they have self-identified against some (other) imagined “elite” in order to pursue leaving the EU for motives other than their stated ones of “freedom” and “taking back control” – and garnered support from a sizable proportion of the electorate in doing so. The same is true of Donald Trump, who is an extremely wealthy individual. In essence, like Trump, Brexit is might be seen not through the lens of populism, but rather as a much more traditional nationalist movement, enhanced by the press and supported by factions of the elite. That the process has been rather adroitly manipulated by those self-same elites should not go unnoticed, but fundamentally many of the processes at work are not new.

Hence, why now? This is the more interesting question and almost certainly *does* relate to many of the factors traditionally identified as being at play behind allegedly “populist” movements. It is no coincidence that such movements often seem to thrive during times of financial distress and rapid change and these are issues to which we will return in a later post.

1. Goodwin, M., *National populism is unstoppable – and the left still doesn't understand it*, in *The Guardian*. 2018: London.
2. Ashcroft, M. *How the United Kingdom voted on Thursday... and why*. 2016; Available from: <https://lordashcroftpolls.com/2016/06/how-the-united-kingdom-voted-and-why/>.
3. Hearne, D., *Freedom of Movement – people really are special...*, in *Centre for Brexit Studies*. 2018: [online].
4. Peterkin, T., *Scots and English hold similar views on immigration – poll*, in *The Scotsman*. 2017.
5. Mudde, C. and C.R. Kaltwasser, *Populism: A very short introduction*. Very Short Introductions. 2017, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
6. Fedotov, G.P., *The Religious Sources of Russian Populism*. *The Russian Review*, 1942. 1(2): p. 27-39.