

Hope vs. fear

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It is widely thought that electoral strategies fall into one of two camps. Either they play to fear of the alternative or they are based on the hope of a better tomorrow. This is simplistic but is nevertheless a useful frame of reference.

In the US, perhaps the best example of the politics of hope was Ronald Reagan, whose sunny demeanour and promise of 'morning in America' won the votes of millions. Bill Clinton similarly swept to power in 1992 to the soundtrack of Fleetwood Mac's "Don't stop thinking about tomorrow".

Here in the UK, Tony Blair won two of the biggest majorities in history on the back of hope and optimism that things would improve. "Things can only get better", remember? (With apologies to D:Ream!) Even after 4 years, the 2001 manifesto was full of promises of improvements to public services and particularly the NHS (largely predicated on increased public spending). To the credit of the then-government, many of these were fulfilled although this achievement was completely overshadowed by the war in Iraq.

More recent elections have increasingly seen a turn towards the politics of fear. In the US, this is epitomised by the remorseless rise of 'attack ads' and angry talk shows. In the UK, perhaps the most effective recent purveyors of the "politics of fear" were the Cameron/Osborne duo.

In 2010, they campaigned on a platform of deficit reduction (predicated on a popular fear of running out of money) and argued not on the basis of hope but rather played on fears that the incumbent government would "stamp out" any nascent economic recovery. The notion of a 'broken society' was similarly played upon, albeit more subtly.

Who, after all, is unafraid of crime? Meanwhile attack adverts (widely used by all parties) essentially accused the then-Prime Minister Gordon Brown of being beholden to the Unite trade union and taking "billions from pensions". That all parties played to the politics of fear in 2010 further underscored the primacy of this approach. The 2015 election campaign saw a reprise of some of these themes but was, if anything, even more vicious.

In each of the three referenda held by the Cameron government, fear again formed a central theme. In the 2011 Alternative Vote referendum it was suggested (contrary to the evidence) that this system would hand power to extreme and marginal parties (such as the British National Party). Fear of negative change saw the UK retain the status quo ante.

In 2014, the referendum on Scottish independence played on fears that an independent Scotland would suffer financially and be "kicked out" of the EU, an irony that is not lost on many Scots today.

The same playbook came into play in 2016: fear of being made poorer was a central theme. It backfired. What happened?

I posit that, in spite of the immense negativity that surrounded many aspects of the 'Leave' campaign (who can forget some of the more alarmist prognostications of its most ardent proponents?) its success ultimately lay in part due to a triumph of the politics of hope.

I am not making a comment on the desirability (or otherwise) of leaving the EU. Nor am I suggesting that the promises of the 'Leave' campaign were true (many were demonstrably false): hope can be misplaced and fear can be justified.

After all the bitterness and rancour that followed the campaign, many of us (whether we voted to remain or leave the EU) wish the whole problem had gone away. However, that does not change the nature of the vote.

How do we square this with polling evidence that suggests that those who voted 'leave' are typically much more conservative across a variety of socio-cultural domains than those who voted 'remain'? After all, surely unhappiness with modern society and a belief that the economy and society are full of threats rather than opportunities (this is what polls of leave voters consistently tell us^[1]) are associated with the politics of fear?

This is certainly true, but it misses something crucial: the hope that a better future is possible. That was the crucial difference between 1997 and 2010. In both cases the winning campaign was predicated on the notion that important things were wrong and getting worse. The key difference was that in 1997, Blair projected an optimistic vision of a better future.

Look at the rhetoric of 2016. Remaining in the EU was presented merely as "less bad" by a leader who only a year previously had campaigned on the basis of renegotiating the UK's membership – the unspoken corollary being that the *status quo* wasn't good enough. It didn't need to be this way: precious little was said of the myriad benefits of EU membership or of how it might evolve in future.

In contrast, whilst the campaign to leave heavily focussed on perceived 'negatives', they also presented a positive alternative (and I make no comment one way or the other on the feasibility or desirability of that vision). A world in which the NHS would receive hundreds of millions of pounds in additional funding at no cost to the exchequer.

A world in which the UK would be free to make the rules. A world in which trade agreements would be signed left, right and centre. A world in which inward migration would be more tightly controlled (interestingly, little was said about the potential impact on outward migration). A world in which law would be made by parliament and enforced by UK courts, unencumbered by the legal rulings of elsewhere.

Indeed, this is more generally true. Movements and parties labelled as 'populist' (of which Brexit is just one) thrive because they are able to offer an alternative vision of the future. Of course, this alone is not sufficient: fear of change and disruption is a powerful motivator. Nevertheless, politicians of all stripes take note: we neglect sunny optimism and a vision for the future at our peril.

[1] <http://lordashcroftpolls.com/2016/06/how-the-united-kingdom-voted-and-why/>