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Community Education, Populism and Deliberative Democracy

Gary Fraser, Lecturer in Community Education, University of Edinburgh.

Abstract

Politics have been transformed by populism in this past decade resulting in political culture becoming increasingly polarised and angry. This article aims to better understand populism by drawing on a range of perspectives in fields such as political sociology, psychology and psychoanalysis. The article accounts for populism's rise by exploring factors such as financial crises, changing demographics, especially in relation to education, and the transformative impact of social media on political culture. The article also considers the role of emotive reasoning in shaping populism and political persuasion more broadly. Drawing on ideas associated with Jurgen Habermas, the article argues that deliberative democracy, when applied to learning environments in community education, provides a way of making politics less polarised and angry and more deliberative and dialogical.

Key Words: Community Education, Populism and Deliberative Democracy

Introduction

This article explores the rise in recent years of political populism, arguing, that overall, a populist turn in politics has contributed to political culture becoming increasingly polarised and angry. Anger and rage have become the dominant political emotions of our time and which, I argue, have reduced the capacity of citizens to communicate rationally about contentious political issues through dialogue and deliberation. The deterioration in political discourse ought to concern community educators, especially those using dialogical approaches to explore

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contested political issues in their everyday learning environments. Drawing upon ideas in political sociology and also exploring themes in psychology and psychoanalysis, the article attempts to better understand populism. It considers a range of themes which help to explain the rise of populism, including financial crises, changing demographics, especially in relation to education, and the transformative impact of social media on political culture. It also considers the role played by emotive reasoning in shaping both populism and political persuasion, more broadly. The final section introduces the concept of deliberative democracy which, when applied to community education, offers a way of making politics less polarised and angry and more deliberative and dialogical.

The Populist Turn in Politics

Populism can be defined as a set of ideas which are focused on an opposition between a 'people' - who are typically constructed as inherently 'good' - who struggle against 'elites', who are framed as intrinsically 'bad' and 'out of touch' (see Heywood, 2021). The idea that a singular people exists is a piece of political fiction. The political sociologist Chantelle Mouffe argues that the concept of a 'people' is not an 'empirical referent but a discursive political construction' (Mouffe, 2019, p. 62). Whilst populism exists on the political left - in leftist narratives, the people are framed as struggling against greedy bankers, wicked corporations, and so forth - it has largely been forces on the political right who have most exploited the populist turn (see Rodrik, 2021). In the rightist imagination, the 'people' are often constructed in terms of indigenous (white) populations who struggle against wicked elites who come in a variety of forms: progressive governments pursuing a 'globalist' agenda, social liberals in the mainstream media especially public broadcasting, radical 'woke' lecturers in universities, and so on. Few countries in the West are immune from populism. Indeed, right-wing populists are

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in power both in the United States (US) and in Europe: in Holland, Italy and Hungary. Countries such as France and Germany have significant right wing populist forces, as elections in 2024/25 demonstrated. Whilst the election in the United Kingdom (UK) of a Labour government in the summer of 2024 could be seen as a deviation from the populist trend, it is important to note that Labour was elected on only 33.7 per cent of the popular vote (New Statesman, 2024). Moreover, the best example, of a right-wing populist party in the UK – Nigel Farage's Reform Party, won over 4 million votes in the 2024 election, turning Reform into a significant political force.

The reasons why politics have taken a populist turn are complex. The global financial crash of 2008, which the public intellectual, Robert Skidelsky, described as causing one of the 'most violent collapses in economic life seen in the last hundred years' (Skidelsky, 2010, p. 5), is probably an important factor. Across much of the West, the financial crash was followed by a decade of punishing austerity programmes that increased social inequality which, in turn, led to widespread resentment against "out of touch" elites, a key populist theme (see Mouffe, 2019). Lind argues that the populist turn is linked to neoliberalism, stating that populism represents a 'counter-revolution' from below against the half-century-long technocratic neoliberal revolution (Lind, 2021, pp. 69-70). Drawing its energy from the anger and rage of electorates, populism has qualitatively changed the nature of political debate in which an older politics, based around social class and economic redistribution, has given way to a new discourse that is shaped by identity (see Fukuyama, 2019). Identity politics influences both left and right of the political spectrum and, according to political sociologists, 'values' linked to identity now play a greater role than class in determining the political persuasion of voters (see McAndrew, et al, 2020).

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In political sociology, a body of literature has emerged in the past decade which suggests that educational background and levels of educational attainment are important factors in accounting for populism's rise. In their analysis of one of the great populist moments of the last decade - the UK's decision in 2016 to leave the European Union (EU) - the political scientists, Robert Ford and Maria Sobolweska produced data that linked the decision to vote 'remain' or 'leave' to levels of educational attainment (see Ford and Sobolweska, 2020). Dividing voters into two groups whom they termed 'conviction liberals' and 'identity conservatives', Ford and Sobolweska argued that, overall, conviction liberals were more likely to vote 'remain', and that being educated to degree level was a key characteristic of this group (p. 5). The data also suggested that when it came to values, conviction liberals were socially liberal, which made them comfortable in embracing political outlooks that were cosmopolitan, pro-migration, and pro-diversity, especially in relation to feminism and the rights of LGBT+ people (p. 5). On the other hand, 'identity conservatives' were more likely to vote 'leave' and belonged to those parts of the UK's population who typically left school at sixteen to pursue work or vocational training. Identity conservatives tended to live in towns rather than cities and, in terms of their overall political persuasion, leaned leftwards on economic issues (supporting greater economic redistribution and a more interventionist state) but tilted rightwards on cultural values relating to family, gender identity, law and order and immigration. Similar voting blocs, which are linked to educational attainment, also explain that other great populist moment of recent times - the popularity of Donald Trump in the US (see Lind, 2021).

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Populism emerges as a phenomenon which is not only rooted in economic divisions, but also in new cultural divides, which are linked to the expansion of Higher Education. According to Rodrik, these divides can be summed up in terms of social conservatives versus social liberals, traditionalists versus modernists and nationalists versus cosmopolitans (Rodrik, 2021, p. 134).

Social Media and Populism

The role played by the internet and social media is also important in terms of understanding populism. Most notably, social media has transformed how we communicate about political issues, resulting in a decline in social interaction, which research suggests is one of the factors making electorates angrier and more polarised (see Enikolopov, et al, 2020; Hong and Kim, 2016). The social psychologist, Jonathon Haidt, in an important book entitled *The Anxious Generation*, argues that new internet-related technologies like i-phones are altering human psychology in ways that we are only beginning to understand. According to Haidt, prolonged social media usage has a negative impact on the mental health of its users, especially pre-teen and young teenage girls who have been hit harder by mental health problems than any other group (Haidt, 2024, p. 31). With regards to politics, Haidt's data suggests that contemporary activists are more likely to experience depressive episodes than their generational counterparts, which Haidt puts down to spending significant amounts of their time engaged in online political activities (p. 38). Social media has also facilitated a rise in disinformation, hence the growth in the past decade of 'fake news', distrust of 'experts', and conspiracy theories (see Gatehouse, 2020), all of which fuel populist politics. Prolonged exposure to disinformation is radicalising significant sections of the population, most notably men, who are more likely to support right-wing populists than women (see Dietze and Roth, 2020). According to the political scientist, Michel Jacques Gagne, electorates are becoming increasingly susceptible to believing in

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'furtive fallacies', which he describes as emotive forms of reasoning which are based on 'the unjustified assumption that all events are guided by a hidden and malicious power'[1] (Gagne, 2022, p. 465).

Whilst the themes explored thus far - financial crises, changing demographics, the decline of class, the impact of social media, and so forth - offer satisfying sociological explanations, such accounts only take us so far in terms of understanding populism. In the next section, I draw on ideas in psychology and psychoanalysis in order to explore the role that emotive reasoning plays in shaping populism, and political persuasion more broadly.

Psychology, Psychoanalysis and Political Behaviour

American professor of psychology and psychiatry Drew Westen argues that a common mistake, when trying to make sense of political behaviour, is to overestimate the extent to which electorates behave in ways which are rational, whilst underestimating the role played by emotions in shaping political persuasion. In short, Westen argues that the role of the irrational needs to be understood when analysing political beliefs:

> 'The vision of the mind that has captured the imagination of philosophers, cognitive scientists, economists, and political scientists since the eighteenth century - a

[1] Examples of 'furtive fallacies' that are common amongst right wing populists include the following: 'The Great Replacement': A belief that there is a plan by 'globalist elites' to replace the European white population with minority ethnic groups. 'QAnon': A belief that a paedophile ring is being run by a global elite. This fallacy made inroads into the UK among some of the more extreme anti-vaccine activists during the pandemic (see Guardian, 2024). Anti-vaccine Movements: a belief that the 'truth' about the harmful effects of vaccines are being hidden from the public.

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> 'dispassionate mind', that makes decisions by weighing the evidence and reasoning to the most valid conclusions – bears no relation to how the mind and brain actually work' (Westen, 2008, p. ix).

Westen argues that 'what passes for reasoning in politics is more often rationalisation, motivated by efforts to reason to emotionally satisfying conclusions' (p. xi). In Westen's narrative, the political realm is not so much informed by a marketplace of ideas, as commonly understood, but by a marketplace of emotions. The social psychologist, Jonathon Haidt, quoted in the previous section, makes a similar point, arguing that when it comes to political persuasion, people's 'intuitions come first, strategic reasoning, second' (Haidt, 2012, p. 367). Personality traits, he argues, also play a role in shaping political persuasion. For example, those with personalities orientated towards 'neophilia', which means, 'openness to experience', are more likely to adopt liberal political positions whilst political conservatives are higher in 'neophobia', meaning in the words of Haidt, that 'they prefer to stick with what's tried and true, and that they care a lot more about guarding borders, boundaries, and traditions' (p. 172). The idea that voters are psychologically orientated towards particular political positions is a fascinating one and enables a better understanding of the psychological and emotional factors at play in shaping the mindsets of both 'conviction liberals' and 'identity conservatives', discussed earlier in the article.

The psychoanalytical movement in the twentieth century also made important connections between emotion and political persuasion, noting in particular the similarities between organised religion and political ideology. Indeed Sigmund Freud argued in his seminal text *The*

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Future of an Illusion, originally published in 1927 that, as societies grew more secular and moved away from traditional religion, that politics would replace religion in terms of how human beings understood and made sense of the world. New divisions would also emerge, which would be shaped by political ideology:

> 'If you wish to expel religion from our European civilisation, you can only do it through another system of doctrines, and from the outset this would take over all the psychological characteristics of religion, the same sanctity, rigidity, and intolerance, the same prohibition of thought in self-defence' (Freud, 2010, p. 20).

As a committed atheist, Freud often ignored religion's positive aspect and, according to Carl Jung, he had an inability to understand religious experience (see Jung, 2001, p. 119). Yet Freud's argument that another 'system of doctrines' would effectively take on the 'psychological characteristics of religion', making people rigid, intolerant and so forth, presciently describes the ways in which politics in the populist era often feels akin to a semi-religious struggle of good-versus-evil, the saved versus the damned. Whilst the focus of this article has been the populist right, it is also important to note that Freud's insights are equally applicable to the political left. Indeed, problematic practices which are associated with the contemporary left – for example, the policing of speech, the cancelling of opponents (heretics?), and the assumption that those who take a different view must be arguing out of bad faith - emerge out of a political framework, which the political sociologist, Catherine Liu describes as being 'pseudo-religious' in tone (Liu, 2021 p. 9).

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If the human capacity to engage in emotive reasoning is 'baked in', as it were, to our internal psychologies, then the extent to which we can ever be liberated from this state of affairs becomes questionable. This shouldn't imply, however, that we are stuck in this populist moment with no escape routes, or that progress in terms of how we discuss contentious political issues is not possible. In the final section, the concept of deliberative democracy is introduced which, when applied to community education, is a way of both lowering the political temperature whilst also improving political discourse.

Making Politics More Deliberative and Dialogical

The intellectual case for deliberative democracy is often associated with the political theorist, Jurgen Habermas, who has been described as modernity's, 'philosopher of democracy' (see Murphy and Fleming, 2009). Habermas certainly understood the role of emotive reasoning in influencing political discourse, arguing that an 'essential need' in society was to work towards 'the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion' (Habermas 1996, cited in Englund, 2009, p. 25). Habermas's view of the political realm was expansive and included citizens, not only voting in elections, but also engaging in public deliberation in the attempt to better understand and, where appropriate, to resolve contentious issues. This is a view which will resonate with community educators. Indeed, Bamber and Crowther argued that deliberative democracy lends itself well to community education's social democratic tradition, which emphasises the 'active involvement of citizens in decision-making in their social, economic and cultural life' (Bamber and Crowther, 2011, p 185).

In Haberman's terms, deliberative democracy involves 'communicative action' and a commitment to creating the conditions required for 'ideal speech situations', defined as

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offering 'the possibility of a rational consensual basis for interaction free of force, open or latent' (Murphy and Fleming, 2009, p. 7). Describing, 'ideal speech situations', Habermas noted:

> 'Communication is impeded neither by external contingent forces, or, more importantly, by constraints arising from the structure of communication itself. The ideal speech situation excludes systematic distortion of communication. Only then is the sole prevailing force the characteristic unforced force of the better argument, which allows assertions to be methodically verified in an expert manner and decisions about practical issues to be rationally motivated' (Habermas, cited in Bamber, 2009, p. 105).

Habermas also outlined five principles, which are important in nurturing authentic political encounters and ideal speech situations:

1. Different views are confronted by each other other and arguments for these different views are given time and space to be articulated and presented.
2. There is tolerance and respect for the concrete 'other' and participants learn to listen to the other person's argument.
3. Elements of collective will formation are present i.e. an endeavour to reach consensus or at least temporary agreements and/or to draw attention to differences.
4. Authorities/traditional views (represented, for example, by parents and tradition) can be questioned, and there are opportunities to challenge one's own tradition.

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5. There is scope for students to communicate and deliberate without teacher control, i.e., for argumentative discussions between students with the aim of solving problems or shedding light on them from different points of view.

(see Englund, 2009, p. 24)

The above principles can be applied to community education approaches, which are influenced by dialogical approaches to education. Moreover, they provide a scaffolding for educators to engage with learners in the intellectual exploration and understanding of contested political issues. The aim of such dialogical encounters is to work towards, in Habermas's terms, 'distortions of communication' being avoided whilst enabling the 'unforced force of the better argument' the space to develop. In these scenarios, the role of the educator is to safeguard participation and protect rationality (see Bamber, 2009). Deliberative methods enable both learners and educators to approach contested topics in ways which are analytical and intellectual, not moral or emotional.

It is important to note that Habermas argued that deliberative democracy also involves a commitment to reforming public institutions:

> 'The success of deliberative politics depends not on a collectively acting citizenry but on the institutionalisation of the corresponding procedures and conditions of communication, as well as on the interplay of institutionalized deliberative processes with informally developed public opinions' (Habermas 1996, cited in Englund, 2009, p. 20).

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In practical terms, the 'institutionalisation of corresponding procedures and conditions of communication' can take different forms: for example, establishing citizen assemblies, as a way of involving the public in the resolution of contentious issues in public policy. It could also involve participatory budgeting, whereby communities are given a greater say in the allocation of public funding. The challenge for public institutions is to move away from community engagement and participation being a managerial procedure, which is so often the case in Scottish local democracy, into adopting approaches which engage citizens in ways which are genuinely empowering. Community educators are well placed to make a contribution to this type of democratic work owing to their unique place in civil society at the intersection between the state, public policy and communities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article argues that populism has transformed politics in the past decade, resulting in political culture becoming increasingly polarised and angry. I argue that the populist turn in politics ought to concern community educators because the polarisation and anger which fuels populism has reduced the capacity of citizens to communicate rationally and deliberatively about contested political issues. The article argues to better understand populism by drawing on a range of perspectives in fields such as political sociology, psychology and psychoanalysis. The final section, argues that deliberative democracy is a method which, when applied to community education, is a way of lowering the political temperature whilst making the public realm less polarised and angry and more deliberative and dialogical.

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