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## Why is populism on the rise? How Brexit and Donald Trump gained support

*It's not the refuge of old white male racists. Trump and Brexit have plenty of young and affluent supporters, and they're here to stay. Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin demolish the myths peddled by comfortable elites*

**Roger Eatwell & Matthew Goodwin**

Myths about national populism are flourishing. From the US to Europe, populist movements are seen as a refuge for irrational bigots, jobless losers, Rust Belt rejects, voters who were hit hard by the great recession and angry old white men who will soon die and be replaced by tolerant millennials. In the shadow of Trump, Brexit and the rise of national populism in Europe, countless writers drew a straight line to an alienated white underclass in America's industrial heartlands, angry pensioners in England's fading seaside resorts and the unemployed in Europe's wastelands.

People tend to reduce complex movements to one type of voter or to one cause because they want simple and straightforward explanations. But when more than 62m people voted for Trump, more than 17m for Brexit, more than 10m for Marine Le Pen and nearly 6m for the Alternative for Germany (AfD), the idea that national-populist movements can be reduced to simplistic stereotypes is ridiculous. It also has real implications: misdiagnosing the roots of their support will in the long run make it harder for their opponents to get back into the game.

National populism is an ideology rooted in deep currents that have been swirling beneath our democracies and gaining strength over many decades. Its proponents prioritise the culture and interests of the nation, and promise to give voice to a people who feel they have been neglected, even held in contempt, by distant and often corrupt elites.

Foremost among the myths is the idea that national populism is almost exclusively powered by the unemployed and people on low incomes or in poverty. While there is variation from country to country, national populism has cast its net surprisingly widely across society, scooping up votes from full-time workers, middle-class conservatives, the self-employed, people on average or high incomes and even the young.

The tendency to portray Trump as a refuge for poverty-stricken whites, for instance, is deeply problematic. During the US primaries, the median household income of a Trump voter was \$72,000, compared with a national median of \$56,000. The dominant findings from nearly every study that has so far been done on Trump's electorate are clear: attitudes to race, gender and cultural change played a big role, while objective economic circumstances played only a limited role.

Or look at Brexit. Some traced the shock result to dire economic conditions, even though the vote occurred as Britain's unemployment neared its lowest rate since the 1970s. The idea of ending Britain's EU membership was certainly popular among people on low incomes, but even among those who lived on average or just-above-average incomes support for Brexit was 51%. Britain's departure was cheered on in struggling industrial towns, but it was also celebrated in affluent Conservative counties.

Another popular myth is that all this turbulence is rooted in the global financial crisis that erupted in 2008, the great recession and the austerity that was subsequently imposed on democracies in Europe. Seen from this point of view, national populism is driven by the financially disadvantaged who were battered by the post-2008 economic storm. Economists traced what they called "Brexit-Trump syndrome" to unregulated markets, harsh public-spending cuts and a loss of faith in economic orthodoxy. In their words: "It's the economics, stupid."

There is no doubt that the financial crisis created more room for national populists. Aside from exacerbating divides among voters, it contributed to a loss of support for traditional parties and record levels of political volatility in Europe, where people became much more willing to switch their allegiance from one election to the next. But the notion that it is the primary cause is not convincing at all. If all you needed was a crisis, then why did past crises, such as the oil-price shocks of the 1970s, not produce a similar reaction? And how can we explain the fact that the revolt against liberal democracy began long before the collapse of Lehman Brothers?

From left: led by Nigel Farage, Ukip's first success pre-dated austerity; Trump tapped into white concerns about being left behind; Marine Le Pen won 10m votes in France's presidential elections

It was actually in the 1980s that the most significant national populists in postwar Europe showed up. They included Jean-Marie Le Pen in France and Jörg Haider in Austria, who emerged while promising to slash immigration, strengthen law and order and take on a "corrupt" establishment. In Britain, although many writers would later trace Brexit to post-crisis austerity, they forget that it was back in 2004 that Nigel Farage and Ukip enjoyed their first big success, after 48 consecutive quarters of economic expansion.

A second myth is that national-populist support comes entirely from old white men who will soon die. This is a comfortable narrative for liberals because it implies that they do not need to engage with any of its ideas. Rather, they just need to wait for pensioners to slip over the horizon, at which point socially liberal millennials will take over, while the West's populations become ever more diverse. This view has won support from the Financial Times columnist Janan Ganesh, who argued that Brexit was "as good as things will get for traditional conservatives" because over time their support would be eroded by generational change.

Such voices point to big differences in outlook between the young and old. In 2018, for example, while 65% of pensioners thought Brexit had been the right decision, 68% of those aged 18-24 thought it had been wrong. But liberals routinely exaggerate both the pace and scale of

generational change. They gloss over the fact that, while the young generally tend to be less racist, quite a few of them are instinctively receptive to national populism.

Beneath these broad brushstrokes lies the fact that Brexit was endorsed by one in four British graduates, one in two women, one in two people from urban areas, around two-fifths of those aged between 18 and 34 and half of those aged between 35 and 44.

Brexit was also dismissed by senior liberal politicians such as Vince Cable as a vote by people who longed for a world where “faces were white” and the map of the world was “coloured imperial pink”. But this caricature does not sit easily with the fact that Brexit was supported by one in three black and ethnic-minority voters, some of whom felt that Britain’s liberal immigration policy was giving preferential treatment to immigrants from inside Europe at the expense of those from outside Europe, or who themselves felt anxious about the historically unprecedented rates of immigration that had taken place in the decade before the referendum. This non-white support was visible in cities and towns such as Birmingham, Bradford, Luton and Slough.

The age profile of these supporters also pushes back strongly against the narrative of angry old men. In Italy the national-populist League movement has drawn its support fairly evenly across the generations, while in France, Marine Le Pen won over more people aged 18-34 than any other candidate in the first round of the 2017 presidential elections. In Germany, AfD appeals most strongly not to old pensioners with distant memories of Hitler, but to people aged 25-50, who have no direct connection to the Nazi era.

In the US, no less than 41% of white millennials turned out for Trump; they worked full-time and were actually less likely than those who did not back Trump to be on low incomes. Contrary to the claim that the young are not bothered by issues such as immigration, these younger Americans were especially anxious about “white vulnerability” — the perception that whites, through no fault of their own, are losing ground to others in society. A poll in Britain last spring revealed that 41% of 18- to 24-year-olds and 58% of 25- to 49-year-olds felt that immigration was “too high”.

This brings us to one of the big fault lines that run through western society: the educational divide. Debates about national populism often focus heavily on income and jobs, but education is actually far more important. Whereas 80% of Brits under 34 with a degree voted for Britain to remain in the EU, only 37% of their peers without a degree did the same.

A further popular myth is that the people who support Trump, Brexit or the likes of Le Pen are voting against the system rather than for the national populists. This “protest theory” is popular because many writers, particularly those on the liberal left, struggle with the idea that people might actually want things such as lower immigration, stronger borders, fewer welfare benefits for recent immigrants who have not paid tax over the years and more powers returned from distant transnational institutions to the nation state.

Yet when eight in ten of Trump’s voters supported his idea of building a wall on America’s border with Mexico, or when three in four Brexit voters, worried about how immigration was

changing their country, voted for the offer to “take back control”, it is hard to accept that they did not know what they were voting for, or that they were just protesting against the Establishment. Certainly, many loathe established politicians, but they are also endorsing the message — **they are voting for it because they want it.**

Most people in the West are not giving up on democracy, although many are open to more “direct” forms of democracy that would give people a greater say in the decisions that affect their daily lives. But there is clear and overwhelming evidence of a rising tide of distrust and a strong belief among many voters that they are no longer even in the conversation. Among Brits who felt they were being listened to, the vote for Brexit was only 37%; but among those who felt that politicians “do not listen to people like me” it spiralled to 58%.

Both the Trump campaign and Brexit also tapped into a second concern about relative deprivation — a sense that the wider group, whether white Americans or native Britons, is being left behind relative to others in society, while culturally liberal politicians, media and celebrities devote far more attention and status to immigrants, ethnic minorities and other newcomers.

This sense of relative deprivation is absolutely central to national populism. It acts as a bridge between culture and economics. It is intimately bound up with people’s worries about the broader economic and social position of their wider group and how this compares with others in society. But it is also linked closely to people’s specific concerns about how they feel that immigrants, ethnic minorities and rapid ethnic change are threatening their group, not only economically but also socially and culturally. They worry: will their identity and ways of life fall further behind and perhaps eventually be destroyed for ever?

Such fears are not always grounded in objective reality, but they are still potent. In Britain, many leavers saw the Brexit referendum as a prime opportunity to voice their strong concerns about how immigration was changing the nation — concerns which had increased with the historically unprecedented flows of immigrants into Britain from the early 2000s onwards.

People who felt anxious about it were not only more likely to vote “leave”; they were also more likely to bother to turn out and vote. Remainers talked endlessly about economic risks while leavers were chiefly concerned about perceived threats to their identity and national group.

So strong was the desire among leavers to chart a different path that six in ten said that significant damage to the British economy would be a “price worth paying for Brexit”, while four in ten were willing to see themselves or their relatives lose their jobs if it meant that Brexit was delivered. The anti-Brexit remain strategists handled this badly. By deciding to completely avoid the immigration issue they sent voters a signal that “the elite” had no real interest in taking their concerns seriously.

Were we still in an era when their bonds with the people remained strong and robust, the traditional parties might have been able to fend off these challenges. But the classic era of the early-to-mid 20th century, when political allegiances were more stable and the dividing lines of politics fixed, has ended.

Trump, Brexit and national populists in Europe are by no means identical. There will always be differences from one country to another, as there are in all “political families”. But one point that has recurred throughout is that people who support national populism are not merely protesting: they are choosing to endorse views that appeal to them. And this revolt will not be disappearing any time soon.

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