

A Comment on Joppke:

The causes of populism and the problem of cultural majority rights

Daniel Ziblatt

Harvard University & WZB Berlin

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(For Ruud Koopsman volume)

Few topics have been more well-studied in the social sciences in recent years than the causes of populism. One central pivot of the debate is whether its roots are cultural or economic (see Gidron and Hall 2017). The implications of this debate are important. If, as Christian Joppke (this volume) contends, populism is a bottom-up reaction to globalization-induced socio-economic displacement, the call for majority cultural rights as a device to defeat the appeals of populism founders. In that case, as Joppke argues, such a strategy merely “deflects” from the deeper socioeconomic sources of populism.

This essay begins by agreeing with Joppke’s assessment of the socioeconomic roots of populism. But it departs company with him in the diagnosis of the precise mechanisms linking socioeconomic change to populism. A strictly “demand-side” bottom-up narrative of vulnerable voters tempted by the appeals of populism needs to be supplemented with a top-down political account of populism. Rather than assuming voters’ preferences autonomously drive politics, we can ask an alternative set of questions: what leads mainstream political parties, and ultimately radical right parties, to make nationalist appeals in the first place? And what is the effect of these appeals on voters’ preferences?

The answer offered here is that the strategies of political parties, especially center right parties, over the long run help *create* populist sentiment, in a kind of “boomerang effect,” unintentionally paving the way for the rise of their own radical right party challengers. Based on historical and contemporary cross-national evidence, this paper argues that the rise of populism does not simply reflect the autonomous preferences of voters shocked by the pressures of globalization. Rather, voters express right wing identity issues in some instances only after politicians—especially mainstream center right politicians-- have accentuated these issues in

their own electoral campaigns. Broadly speaking, then, the identity appeals of populism – including calls to defend a national “cultural majority”—emerge as a product of mainstream political parties’ efforts to cope with the contradictions of capitalism and democracy in an age of high socioeconomic inequality.

In short, I agree with Joppke that calls for protections for “the cultural majority” may be aimed at the wrong target. But this account here posits an additional point: the very notion of a cultural majority is itself a *politically constructed* category-- an imagined community of ephemeral democratic normative weight, crafted by center right political parties as they scramble to try win electoral majorities in an age of heightened socioeconomic inequality.

A top-down account of populism’s rage

There is no shortage of accounts seeking to locate the origins of the surge of populist parties, rhetoric, and candidates in advanced democracies. After all, few phenomena have been regarded as pressing democracy today than the over-decade long emergence of new and successful radical right political parties (e.g. the AfD in Germany), the renewed success of far right parties (e.g. the Freedom Party in Austria), or the capture of traditional center right parties by a radicalized right (e.g. the U.S. Republican Party). Most scholarship tends to focus on one of several factors: the economic roots of far-right success (e.g. slow economic growth, stagnant wages, inequality), the cultural roots of this same phenomenon (e.g. perceived threats of immigration) or some combination of the two (Gidron and Hall, 2017). Despite differences in emphasis, all of these approaches share two common presumptions. The first is that the drivers of the phenomenon are mostly bottom up emerging directly from the shifting preferences of

voters. The second is that illiberal nationalist right represents a “new” departure from some “normal” baseline.

The central claim here is different. The current moment is most usefully thought of as the outgrowth of the *return* of an old, and reoccurring dilemma of modern conservatism itself. It is a dilemma that was eclipsed from view for a variety of reasons in the last half of twentieth century (roughly 1950-2000) but has now, in the twenty-first century, returned with a vengeance. What is the dilemma?

In 2017, I wrote a book, [Conservative Parties and the Birth of Democracy](#) in which I explored the foundational period of modern democracy (1830-1933) in the North Atlantic World arguing that in that period, the forces of property, power, and privilege made peace with democracy by assuring that *could win elections, if not most of the time, at least a lot of the time*. In the concluding paragraphs of that book I asked,

“What ransom [must] the advocates of democracy pay to property for its willingness to accommodate itself to democracy?”

I gave a grim answer,

“In simplest terms, this study has argued that the price that advocates of democracy must pay is that the propertied and powerful not only have a diffuse but disproportionate influence on society all the time, but also that it be protected by organizationally strong and well-endowed political parties that have the chance of winning elections at least some of the time.”

This is--I admitted even then-- not where my only normative predilections led me but rather was where the evidence had led me: a relatively "dismal science" view of democracy's birth, in which property's relationship with democracy is conditional and contingent.

But this perspective, if correct, exposes a dilemma in the age of mass democracy. It is easy to explain how a conservative political party with a core founding constituency of affluence and privilege could win in the mid 19th century when suffrage was limited to the wealthy alone. But the democratic age opens a new challenge: how can defenders of affluence, power, and privilege win elections in the face of an expansive, more inclusive, and hence poorer electorate? This is the heart of what I called the conservative dilemma. And it is a dilemma, as Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson (2020) have noted in work on American democracy, that is exacerbated under conditions of extreme socio-economic inequality.

When 2012 U.S. presidential candidate Mitt Romney famously was caught on camera confessing in a closed-door fundraising event (in a losing election campaign) that he had no ambitions to appeal to the "47 percent...these are people who pay no income tax," this was more than an embarrassing gaffe. He was revealing a fundamental dilemma or tension that conservative politicians have felt at key moments in history, including in the last Gilded Age-- the late nineteenth century. In the 1860s, Tory British Prime Minister Lord Salisbury, presaging Romney's sentiments, warned about the perils of democracy when he quipped that democracy was the mere "right of eight beggars to govern seven Rothschilds, and what is more, to tax them!"

The enduring dilemma conservative political parties is this: under conditions of high socioeconomic inequality --of the sort that wracked the North Atlantic world both before World War II and that has returned since the 1980s--a political party cannot represent the wealthy

alone and hope for a secure path to electoral majorities. How, then to, win? There are multiple, alternative possible strategies for conservative or center-right parties, which represent different challenges for democracy: repress the vote of the poor; abandon the rich as a core constituency; or, what, it turns out, as I discovered in my account of early democratization, the option most often pursued in *stable* democracies: Economic conservatives figure out how to win elections by emphasizing non-class or non-economic issues in their electoral appeals to mobilize voters and activists,

In particular, the historical record makes clear that conservatives won middle class and even working-class Tory voters by inventing, or at least, highlighting cleavages that were powerful, enduring, and above all premised on *social identities* that sharply divide between "us" and "them". These sorts of social divisions include appeals to nationalism, religion, ethnicity, race, and patriotism. Historically, conservatives made appeals to empire, nation, monarchy, and establishment religion. Today, these appeals take a different form but frequently include patriotic calls to defend traditional values or calls to defend the national culture from immigrants and other "outsiders."

To put the point more directly, center right parties, under conditions of higher socioeconomic inequality are placed at an electoral disadvantage: if socioeconomic issues remain the central cleavage of politics, a basic one-dimensional spatial model of electoral politics predicts loyally parties representing upper-classes would lose elections repeatedly (Downs, 1957). Those voters at the lower income end of the income distribution—who constitute a majority of voters under universal suffrage—would find the socioeconomic programmatic appeals of center-left parties more and more attractive as inequality increases (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2006). So, to block the possibility of the formation of a new broader center-left

majority coalition, as socioeconomic inequality increases, the center right must find new issues. It is a classic “heresthetic maneuver, described by William Riker (1982) in these terms,

...[For] a person who expects to lose on some decision, [a] fundamental ... device is to divide the majority with a new alternative, one that he prefers to the alternative previously expected to win. If successful, this maneuver produces a new majority coalition composed of the old minority and the portion of the old majority that likes the new alternative better.

As a result, in the two-dimensional electoral space of modern democracies, where economic issues run at cross-purposes to “social identity” issues, center right politicians and parties, under conditions of high inequality, will find it tempting to make values-based or identity-based “talk” central to their campaigns and public appeals. The content of the appeal will vary from country to country but to hold together their increasingly fractious coalition, center right parties will find public discussions about race, immigration, religion, and national cultural values increasingly useful. While these appeals may have always been part of some voters’ genuine social identity, the core prediction here is that the salience and importance of these issues grow as socioeconomic inequality grows.

To be clear: This is not an argument about “false consciousness” nor is it an argument that the rich can “distract” the poor by *inventing* issues from whole cloth (e.g. Roemer, 1998). Instead, the argument contends that voters have multiple genuine preferences on multiple dimensions of politics. And, if a political party primarily represents rich voters, this creates a challenge—or a dilemma-- under inclusive, democratic elections, for which non-economic identity issues provide a useful solution

The question remains: what explains why the right radicalizes, or why *new* radical right parties emerge? A final step in the causal chain is necessary. Here, I follow in a tradition of political science that grants political leaders great consequence in their words and actions for voters’ mass opinion (Lippman, 1922; Zaller, 1992). While voter preferences shape politician strategies, the converse is also true. The strategic shift in the emphasis of elite discourse of center right politicians (and media) away from socioeconomic themes to identity-related themes, over time, leads to the growth in the salience in many voters’ minds of the issues of race, immigration, social identity, and national culture. That is, voters begin to rank identity issues as more important than socioeconomic issues. Naturally objective “facts on the ground” shape what issues voters rank as important issues, but so too, does the way in which politicians frame issues.

There is growing evidence that elite cues matter in exactly this way. As mainstream politicians talk about social identity issues—religion, nation, and race—all else equal, voters begin to list these issues as more important in surveys. In careful empirical work, Lenz (2012) makes clear, for example, that voters often don’t choose politicians based on policy stances but rather the opposite: once they choose a politician, they then adopt the politician’s policy stances. Similarly, empirical work shows that talk of extremist politicians alters respondents’ willingness to express previously stigmatized nationalist views (Bursztyjn et al, 2020) as does the electoral success of such candidates (Valentine, 2021). In other words, politicians’ own words and their electoral success can alter what voters *say* they think is important. For this reason, it is possible to regard voters’ stated attachment to a “national culture under siege” as an endogenous outgrowth of the mobilizational strategies of politicians themselves.

Some Tentative Evidence

To confirm this general proposition would require extensive and difficult-to-muster evidence—a project, I am just beginning. But consider the following tentative evidence as a first step. First, I draw on national election studies from Britain, the United States, as well as Germany’s more recent Socioeconomic Panel from the earliest date available to the present. The analysis uses self-reported income and party leanings of respondents to present a disaggregated picture of levels of income inequality within the voting base of major parties in Germany, Britain, and the United States from the 1950s to the present. Confirming the convention wisdom, Figure 1 shows that income inequality has broadly risen over the past forty years, in all parties, including center right parties between the richest and poorest voters of each party in Britain, the United States, and Germany has grown in the last thirty years.

Insert Figure 1.

The gap is in some instances greater in center left parties than center right parties, which poses its own challenges. But given the notion of a “conservative dilemma,” we can narrow our focus on the dynamics within center right parties, to ask: has this increase in within-party inequality within center right parties led to them to increase their emphasis on right wing social identity issues over time? Tavits and Potter (2015) in an earlier study note that heightened aggregate national levels economic inequality leads to greater reliance on identity themes in party manifestos across all parties, using the Comparative Manifestos dataset. I replicate that analysis here but, given the findings in Ziblatt (2017), I focus on how within-party income

inequality relates to changes in center right party programs over time. I follow the coding scheme of Abou-Chadi and Krause (2018) who categorizes party manifestos’ inclusion of positive assessments of “national way of life” or “traditional values,” and negative assessments of “multiculturalism” –all as “right-wing social identity” themes. With this as a basis of analysis, we can see in Figure 2 that over time the three center right parties under evaluation here (Germany, Britain, and the United States) have generally increased their reliance on such themes.

Insert Figure 2

But is this correlated in any systematic way with increases in income inequality among center right voters? Figure 3 shows that within party income inequality, as noted above, is associated with an increased emphasis on radical right identity themes in party programs. And Figure 4 shows this effect holds even holding constant time trend factors.

Insert Figures 3 & 4

Now, certainly part of this shift to identity themes is driven by politicians’ efforts to respond to where they think voters themselves are. But, as noted above, recent experimental work has bolstered the expectation from John Zaller (1982) and others that public opinion shifts in response to how politicians themselves talk. Politicians normalize certain attitudes and can certainly raise the salience of certain themes in voters’ minds. During campaign time, politicians

can distract or refocus voters' attention, and can in turn shape the agenda of what voters think is important.

The cumulative effect of these efforts over time can plausibly be linked long-run opinion shifts. Again, it is worth noting here that my argument is self-consciously theoretically modest: I am not suggesting that politicians' talk *creates* preferences among voters where they previously did not exist. Rather, I am making the less ambitious argument that multiple competing strands of beliefs and attitudes—about economics, identity, race, immigration, etc.—are always present in voters mind in what we can think of as a complex “primeval soup” of preferences. What politicians (and media) can do is activate how relatively *important* voters think issues are.

This account suggests that voters perception of a “culture under siege” may in part be political constructed. These sentiments furthermore may reflect the strategies of politicians in their effort to carve out winning electoral majorities. And if cultural majorities are “political constructed” in this way, then this suggests uncertainty about the normative significance of majority cultural rights.

Conclusion: What does this mean for the cultural majority rights agenda?

One reason the notion of “electoral majorities” has particular normative value in democratic theory is that majorities can be easily counted. A singular “public will” or “will of the people” is infamously inscrutable for a variety of reasons that democratic theorists have long identified. As Joseph Schumpeter long ago clarified, it is impossible discern a single coherent “will of the people” (Schumpeter, 1946). Additionally, mechanisms of translating preferences of voters into policy are always distorted if not biased by varying systems of electoral

representation (Achen and Bartels, 2017). But electoral majorities, however imperfect, with a real numerical value are nonetheless discernable via elections. Elections allow us to count-up preferences. Hence, they have a normative value; they give us a reasonably plausible approximation of the public will.

Even James Madison, famously alert to the dangers of majority tyranny was himself an advocate of the normative value of majoritarianism. In the 1830s, toward the end of his life, frustrated by John Calhoun's efforts to secure special rights for South Carolina in tariff disputes of the day, Madison wrote,

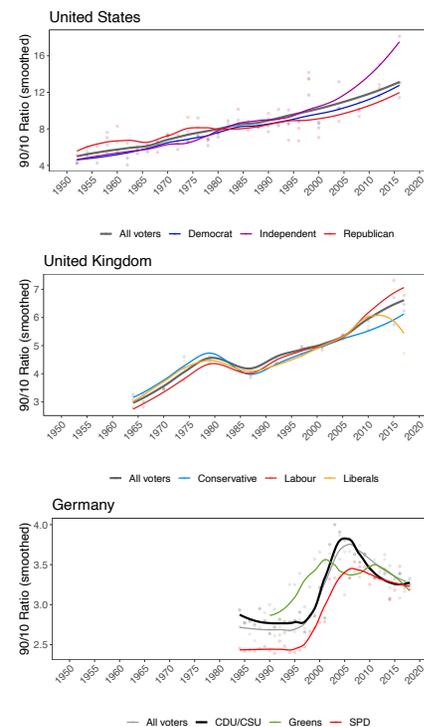
“The vital principle of republican government is the *lex majoris partis*, the will of the majority” (Meyers, 1973)

But the idea that electoral majorities have rights is different than the notion that a single “cultural majority” has rights. First, the size of the latter cannot be counted-up in any reliable way as part of a democratic political process. In this sense cultural majorities are -- unless one uses hard-to-justify ascriptive criteria-- “imagined communities” or fictive. There are undoubtedly citizens who intensely associate themselves with a particular cultural group that they imagine constitutes a “cultural majority.” But is very difficult to develop institutional mechanisms to “count” the intensity of preferences in modern democracies (Dahl, 1956; Hirschman, 1981). Hence, a smaller faction of a cultural majority may *claim* to speak on behalf of a self-perceived cultural majority, but with no electoral mechanism in place to assess this, their right to speak on behalf of the “majority” possesses a normative value that is difficult to sustain.

Additionally, Madison’s justification of the importance of electoral majorities runs at cross purposes to the notion of a singular cultural majority. A singular cultural majority is premised on the idea of a relatively fixed group; after all, there can, logically speaking, only be one cultural majority in a country. Madison’s notion of electoral *majorities* (note the plural) is premised on the opposite grounds: membership in majorities must be fluid for democratic stability to be achieved. In Federalist 10, for example Madison argues that majority rule can only avoid tyranny if the individuals and interests that constitute any temporary majority themselves regularly shift, rotate, break away, and realign themselves, from issue to issue. In short, the essence of pluralism as a mechanism of sustaining social order is that majorities are neither fixed nor essentialist. By contrast, the notion of a single cultural majority—itsself, as I have argued here, is a politically constructed category—and appears to be both fixed and essentialist in any way would seem to pose serious problems for political stability in Madison’s framework.

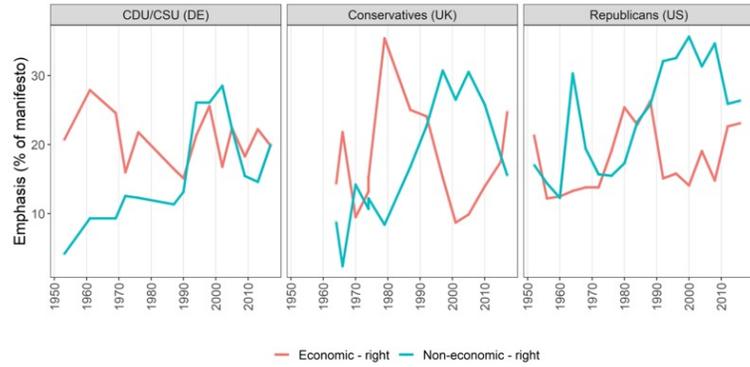
In sum, while the perception of “cultures under siege” undoubtedly fuels populism and its roots are found in shifting economic conditions, there is some reason for skepticism that granting rights to self-proclaimed “cultural majorities” offers a way out of our current predicament. In the realm of public policy, more promising—though themselves admittedly not unproblematic-- avenues include: 1) developing mechanisms of addressing underlying conditions of socioeconomic inequality, 2) constructing the definition of national communities in ways that are premised on a notion of *civic equality and rights*, no matter the background, ethnicity, religion, or race of a country’s citizens.

Figure 1: Income Inequality of Political Parties Voting Base, 1950-Present



Notes: National Election Study; British Election Study; Socioeconomic Panel (Germany)

Figure 2: Themes in Party Programs, by Share of Emphasis



Notes: Data from Comparative Manifestos Project (<https://manifesto-project.wzb.eu>)

Figure 3: Bivariate relationship of economic inequality and non economic right issues among center-right parties (Britain, Germany, and the United States)

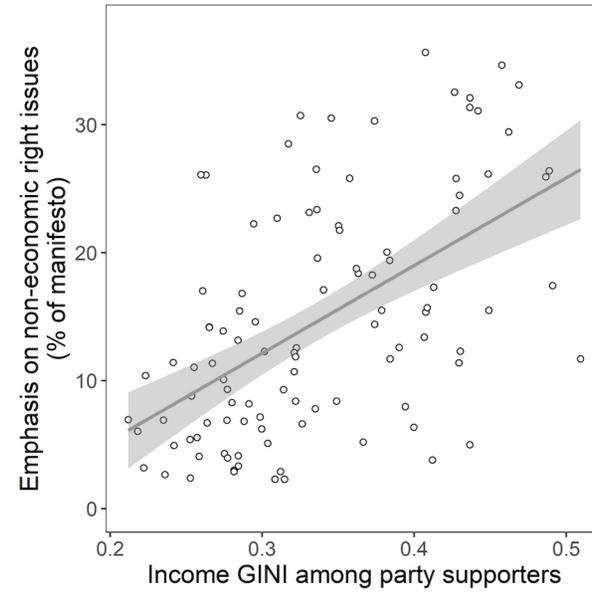
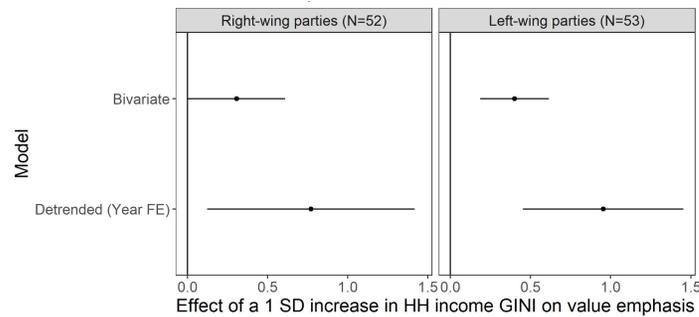


Figure 4: Relationship of Income Inequality and Emphasis on Right Identity Themes, 1950-to Present



Notes: The outcome is the standardized emphasis on values as measured in party manifestos, using the same coding as Tavits & Potter (2015). The first model is a simple bivariate OLS model, the second accounts for secular trends in both inequality and issue emphasis. The sample is major parties in the US, UK and Germany.

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