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Populist and extremist grievance politics: some reflections on policy responses

Experts analyse and debate recent developments across UK government, politics and policy

Blog Admin



Shamit Saggar presents ways in which policymakers could identify, then refine, priorities for action in combating far-right populism and extremism. He argues that we should be investing in strategies that help us navigate both the tensions on display, and those festering just beneath surface.

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The forces of populism and extremism normally show up as the unforeseen, unavoidable side effects of anger and disillusionment in and about the political process. That is to say, it is not something that policymakers ostensibly set out to fix or even ameliorate, save for an assortment of policy measures that are retrofitted to soften impacts or even disguise and confuse motives. In the past decade, there has been no shortage of populist and extremist forces at work.

On immigration alone, Western Europe is littered with examples of populist backlashes, some of them significant in shaping governments in Austria, The Netherlands and Denmark. Although less shrill in Britain, mainstream political parties operate according to the maxim that there are many, easy votes to be lost. Existing analysis shows that while some drivers are policy-oriented (immigration, minority rights) others are rather more characterisation of national mood (unresponsive elites, rampant liberal culture, downtrodden national identity). Even on the most policy sensitive front – immigration – the evidence should not be seen simply as anti-immigrant sentiment; there is evidence to show that voters are also willing to punish leaders who are unable or sluggish about delivering an immigration machine that is quietly competently and is driven objectively by labour shortages.

Britain, meanwhile, is also a large country in which extremism of other varieties has taken root and led to hatred and violence. In small pockets, there are local pockets that are reminiscent of sectarian strife of Northern Ireland, Bosnia or the West Bank. Although extremists of various kinds can be dated back many decades, today's politics of anger is much more serious. For example, with respect to violent far-right movements, the drivers are substantially connected global dynamics, making the policy responses that much harder to pin down. Furthermore, access to improvised weaponry and do-it-yourself, self-motivated know-how, means that those that are most hateful can immediately and devastatingly act on their grievances. This creates an important check on how policymakers approach supporters of non-violent extremism.

Responses in policy and politics

How should policy makers identify, then refine, priorities for action? Given that political capital is always limited, there are four main policy approaches that should take precedence. In their separate ways, each concentrates on tackling underlying problems upstream, taking the somewhat jaundiced view that policy boldness is best avoided once anger has become embedded – but a caveat about that latter.

(i) *Immigration politics*. The narrative of policy failure on the immigration system is the top priority. The Coalition administration have fundamentally understood the importance of this in setting and not yielding on the immigration cap – however much it has proved to be awkward or unworkable in practice. An independent regime to oversee visa categories, the calibration of the Point Based System, processing asylum claims, and protecting the interests of vulnerable users such as unaccompanied children, are all sound extensions of the same principle. Further extensions are possible and desirable. The rationale is clear – voters long for a system that they can trust and which broadly delivers on the periodic promises of

politicians. This is not unlike voter sentiment towards the NHS or management of the economy. Anything less risks damaging public confidence and scope for populist and extremist narratives that encourage a general scepticism and hostility towards much of what government does, often rather successfully.

(ii) *Cultural insecurities and grievances.* Whilst many poorly educated and economically fragile young men are generally angriest and most disillusioned by mainstream politics, it is important to remember that this is not solely about economic insecurity. They are significantly driven by cultural fears. Soft supporters of the far-right will typically see what they believe to be their culture under threat from Islamic cultures. Governments can do very little to these cultures of grievance directly. There is in fact not much that can be done indirectly. But there is wisdom in using policy to create the conditions for most positive cultural norms to take hold. For instance, by creating a counter-balance to angry young males through policies that connect communities in schooling, health, etc.

(iii) *Grievance politics and the public interest.* Political grievance can be tackled one complaint at a time or through a credible framework driven by the public interest. This enables various grievance dots to be joined together and also balances the detriment felt by any given group with the effects on society as a whole. A simple example is stop and search policing practices. This has to be eradicated not because of the harm it does to black communities but because it ends up undermining general confidence in the rule of law.

(iv) *Policies to stop the rot.* Governments always have to be sensitive to – by being informed about – the evidence as to who is angriest, where and why, sometimes if only to target containment policies. The really big policy levers remain in education, training, housing and mobility. The suite of policy measures developed under the last Labour government mostly included policy levers to target the economically weakest and disconnected. But there is mixed evidence that such targeting, however well intentioned, worked often enough to justify heavy expense and effort. The emphasis under the present government has shifted and is set to shift much further. The state must do less but what it does must also be better refined. For instance, investment in policies that create much clearer incentives to remain or regain connectivity with job markets; or measures to reward geographic mobility and the individual drive that that embodies; or policies that stimulate supply side innovation and competition in public services such as schools.

Many of these will scarcely impact on those locked into grievance politics, for sure. The overarching policy aim may therefore be to limit the stock of angry, disillusioned people, and instead focus on the flow of new recruits. Much of this involves tackling intergenerational disadvantage and hopelessness. But is also involves identifying early on the next community or place that is at risk. The guiding principle of policymakers might, therefore, shift to assessing whether, where and how far particular interventions can help to stop the rot.

Policies to help us live together

There are two contrasting views of how well Britain has navigated the challenge of far-right populism and extremism in the recent past. One is that a form of latent antipathy towards politics' shrillness combined with the moderating effects of Conservative electoral strategy to ensure that the far right did not succeed and that the party system remained intact. It is an almost celebratory view that hints that Britain managed this feat with government or policies as such. It also a perspective shared by part of the moderate right who have overcome the ghost of Powell and have genuinely accepted mass immigration and its effects. This outlook has been described as 'muddling through', with more or less elegance and more or less intelligence.

The alternative view is that, however much Britain has managed to muddle through, it has relied on government and policy to learn better ways to manage identities and the potential for conflict. Some of these policies have even been regularly criticised by centrists and the right as do-good inspired state

interference in everyday lives. Indeed, the equality industry, as its opponents have dubbed it, is even seen as part of the problem rather than the solution. Putting aside these jibes, starting in the 1980s, progressives have been responsible for building a layer of policies and with these, new and better social norms about equal treatment and respect in British society.

According to this latter viewpoint, the important thing is that managing relationships across communities and identities has not been left to chance. Avoiding getting things badly wrong has been one imperative for taking policy seriously; another is that efforts to get things right through policy is an iterative task, relying on trial and error and an openness to criticism where policies have not chimed with how people believe they live (or wish to) live their lives.

Moving ahead, the evidence clearly shows that the degree of backing for far-right narrative is spread across several issues rather than limited to mass immigration alone. Crucially it also shows that underlying disillusionment among far-right supporters and sympathisers is culturally embedded and not easily influenced by government. And the pressures driving splintering and hostility – ranging from rival nationalisms across the UK through to hardened hostility towards the EU – are growing rather than diminishing.

With this in mind, a laissez-faire approach that minimises the importance of government and policy is implausible. Instead, progressives should be investing in strategies that result in policies to help us navigate the tensions both on display and just beneath surface.

Avoiding nationalised grievance politics is the clear objective. Designing a way out that unwelcome future may come across as technocratic, even paternalistic, so this should be communicated in a more sensitive style. But it is exactly what is required given that the stakes involved are so high.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the author

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Charles Crawford says:

July 13, 2012 at 11:50 am

Where is the analysis on far-left extremism? No less dangerous and arguably more insidious since in some quarters it is seen as respectable or at least 'legitimate'.

'Mass immigration' is an insane policy on every possible level. Where is the evidence that any serious politician has 'genuinely accepted' it?

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