

4. PSYCHOLOGICAL MOTIVATIONS OF POPULIST VOTE

*Francesco Passarelli*¹

In this chapter I explore some psychological motivations leading people to support a populist party that proposes an anti-establishment platform. As a touch base I will start from recent literature connecting upsurge of populism with relative deprivation in socially cohesive contexts (Altomonte et al., 2019), with changing social identification patterns (Gennaioli and Tabellini, 2019; Grossman and Helpmann, 2018), and with contrast between local and universal moral values (Enke, 2018). My main argument is that populist attitudes can be directly related to loss of social status in local communities.

The great financial crisis of 2008 has deeply reshaped income distribution in many Western countries. Large shares of the population have been experiencing relative deprivation, i.e., a worsening in their income position compared to the richest part of the population. At the same time many people have been losing their confidence towards political establishment and the way democracy works. Recent surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center show that commitment with democracy has never been as weak as it has been in the last few years. In Europe, for example, more than four-in-ten Swedes and Dutch are dissatisfied with the current state of democracy, while in Italy, Spain and Greece the share of dissatisfied people is larger than sixty per cent. Across 27 countries polled, those who are dissatisfied with how democracy is working in their country are largely above those who are satisfied.

“Anger at political elites, economic dissatisfaction and anxiety about rapid social changes have fueled political upheaval in regions around the world in recent years. Anti-establishment leaders, parties and movements have emerged on both the right and left of the political spectrum, in some cases challenging fundamental norms and institutions of liberal democracy.”² In the US, about 8 in 10 Democrats think that the economic system gives an advantage to those already in power, and a third of Republicans share that opinion.³

The rise of populism has been linked to socioeconomic changes triggered by modernization, globalization, and economic deregulation (Autor et al. 2016;

¹ University of Turin, Baffi Centre, and CESifo.

² Wike, R., Silver, L., and Castillo, A. Many Across the Globe Are Dissatisfied With How Democracy Is Working, Pew Research Center, April 2019.

³ Kim, S.M., and Clement, S. Populist economic frustration threatens Trump’s strongest reelection issue, Washington Post, April 29, 2019.

Colantone and Stanig, 2018a, 2018b). Political response by the establishment has not dampened the effects of such process, and perhaps it has fueled them. For instance, Fetzer (2019) has shown that austerity and welfare cuts during the economic crisis have increased the support for populist party in Great Britain, precisely in those areas where welfare spending had been high in the past.

Economic insecurity and loss of social status are two social psychological mechanisms that fuel support for the new populist parties. Economic crisis has increased inequality, but also it has uncovered the impact of globalization and technology on unemployment. The populist rhetoric has been powerfully crafted to deflect dissatisfaction and anger away from the self and instead towards the political establishment. It has sustained the perception that “foreigners are stealing our jobs” and the idea that technology “favors the wealthier part of population”. Populist narrative has been specifically effective in instigating a feeling of affective identification, creating a delineation between “normal folk” and “the elite.” This divide is grounded on emotion and identity that stem from a sharp distinction between “friends” and “enemies”.

Populist leaders have been quite successful in instigating resentment, a typical emotional reaction to a situation which is subjectively perceived as unjust. Resentment is a negative moral-sentiment which presupposes a bold sense of justice. Social psychologists claim that individuals develop a subjective sense of justice by comparing their situation with the situation of others in the society. Resentment is directed towards the normative content of the social order. An individual develops resentment if she judges unworthy the position of someone else in the social hierarchy. She is prone to think that someone deprives her of chances or privileges that she deserves (Runciman, 1966; D’Ambrosio and Frick, 2007; Fiske, 2010; Smith et al., 2012). Social comparison and the feeling of losing social status may lead to envy and moral indignation (as in McClendon, 2018).

Individuals experiencing impoverishment lose their social status and prestige. These are important elements of individuals’ social identity. Relatively deprived individuals are more likely to develop hostility towards social change, compared to other individuals. They are likely to embrace values that are still perceived to be stable and resilient, such as nationality, ethnicity, tradition. These are also identities in which solidarity to other group members can still be experienced. But it is more likely that such an affective relation with the group is experienced at local level, with a local community. A recent research by Benjamin Enke (2018) on politicians’ rhetoric has shown that, compared to a traditional politicians, populist leaders put more emphasis on emotionally and morally relevant communal values (e.g., community, loyalty, and tradition), rather than universal values (e.g., justice, fairness, individual rights). Their narratives match voters concern about the decline of such values, especially in cohesive local communities.

It seems reasonable to conjecture that people identifying more strongly to a local community are also more sensitive to political leaders appealing to communal values and offering protection against cultural decline or economic insecurity (e.g., anti-immigration, anti-globalization). The interaction between communal values and relative deprivation experienced by local communities can boost the moral appeal of a populist leader because the relative impoverishment of community members is perceived as morally unjust by the entire community.

The cultural identification pattern is important also in Gennaioli and Tabellini (2019). They observe that recent economic shocks have changed the geometry of group identification. Individuals who have been exposed to foreign competition or immigration are more prone to identify with a nationalist or socially conservative group. Cultural differences with outgroups become more salient than economic differences. Thus a new conflict on culture and globalization replaces the traditional redistributive conflict. Grossman and Helpman (2018) discuss how shifts in patterns of social identification can lead to a raise in anti-globalization attitudes.

Social comparisons and blame attribution are fundamental elements of populist rhetoric. More specifically, the separation between the People and the Elite is instrumental to the goal of ascribing the responsibility to a particular external agent. Angry people view negative events as caused by, and under the control of, other agents. Not only is this essential to legitimate blame attribution towards the Elite and the political establishment, it is also a necessary condition to instigate political participation and mobilization. Rancor against the traditional parties and the elites is common to populist rhetoric (Mudde, 1999, 2004, 2007; Van Kessel, 2015; Muller, 2017).

Resentment, as triggered by social economic comparisons and relative deprivation, represents emotional opposition to a situation that is deemed unequal or unjust. This sentiment, as other moral sentiments like indignation and obligation, can be associated to empathetic emotions. Empathetic sentiments can be socially shared at group-level. They can also motivate and regulate intergroup attitudes (loyalty, solidarity) as well as intragroup behavior (mobilization, attack). Intergroup Emotions Theory (Mackie et al., 2000; Mackie and Smith, 2015) was advanced in an attempt to understand the nature of emotions that arise from group identification. According to this theory, when an individual identifies with a group, that ingroup becomes part of the self, thus acquiring social and emotional significance (Smith and Henry, 1996). This theory builds on traditional theories of social identity and inter-group behavior (e.g. Tajfel, 1974; Akerlof and Kranton, 2000) to study how identification leads to the emergence of collective emotions. Importantly, Mackie and Smith (2015) find that cohesive communities may experience group-wide resentment when they perceive a common threat. In

this case, emotional reactions are tied to the experience of the community more than the experience of the individual, and group members' anger toward an outgroup (the "others") can be a good predictor of the willingness to take action.

Resentment, due to the loss of social status, and group identification can be important predictors of populist attitudes. Starting from this premise, Altomonte et al. (2019) advance a behavioral theory of populism. They claim that individuals experience resentment when they lose income over time while others do not, or when they do not gain as others do. As mentioned above, this concept is related to the idea of relative deprivation. It has been widely explored in the literature of social psychology and sociology alike. Burgoon et al. (2018) recently find that relative deprivation is strongly correlated with support to radical populist parties.

In Altomonte et al. (2019) any worsening in the level of relative deprivation, with respect to the reference point, triggers an individual feeling of resentment. The reference point is the past level of relative deprivation. Relative deprivation is measured as the average distance between the individual's income and the income of wealthiest people in the population. This is consistent with theories in social psychology holding that individuals draw their subjective sense of justice by comparing themselves with the luckier ones, rather than the entire population, a sort of envy that triggers a feeling of injustice. Feelings like envy of the richer have also been recently associated to populist vote by Pastor and Veronesi (2018).

The basic idea in Altomonte et al. (2019) is that individuals have a taste for maintaining their social status. Any increase in relative deprivation implies a loss of social status, which is deemed unjust by individuals, and thus triggers resentment. But resentment is tied to the experience of the community, more than to the experience of the individual. The mechanism is social identification. Wuthnow (2018) interviewed Americans living in small towns across the country, finding a growing sense of resentment driven by the perception that "Washington" is threatening the way of life in small towns. This attribution bias fuels anger towards the outgroup (the 'others'), identified as the source of the threat, and consequently increases the likelihood of hostile behavior, including the emergence of protest vote.

In the model of Altomonte et al. (2019) individuals observe the change between their relative deprivation over two consecutive periods, as well as the change in relative deprivation within their local community. Their aggrievement increases if their relative deprivation increases, and the more so if relative deprivation also increases in their community. Community cohesion therefore amplifies the effects of relative deprivation in driving protest vote, a phenomenon of complementarity already observed in the political economy literature on protest (Passarelli and Tabellini, 2017). This is because, as suggested by the above mentioned literature

on Intergroup Emotions, there exists a strong relation between group cohesion, justification of ingroup misbehavior, and protest against the outgroup. Cohesive communities are more likely to attribute the causes of their bad performance to external factors. In other words, the more an individual identifies with a community, the more she “absorbs” the emotions of other members in the community. If a larger proportion of the community members have also experienced relative deprivation, that individual feels more aggrieved, in a sort of “emotional contagion” which can easily lead to abrupt explosion of collective anger. Such a mechanism, that hinges on group identification and emotional complementarity across community members, is subject to multiple equilibria. Either very few individuals experience resentment, or many of them do. Even small changes in the share of relatively deprived individuals can cause a shift from the former equilibrium to the latter one. Of course patterns of social identification can contribute to making the “explosive” equilibrium more likely. It is easy to think that a populist leader can successfully manipulate the mechanism, leading to explosive patterns of emotional contagion. His narrative can lead individuals to think that their situation is profoundly unjust, that the political establishment or “the others” are to be blamed for their situation. He can also manipulate social identification using the communal or the nationalistic rhetoric, and leading individuals to think they belong to a specific ingroup which is opposed to the outgroup of “enemies”.

In Altomonte et al. (2018) voters enjoy material (or ideological) utility when voting for traditional parties. However, if they vote for the populist party they also enjoy “emotional” utility. If the latter is strong enough, they might switch from their material/ideological first-best party, and vote for the protest party. They would do so in order to enjoy the emotional utility that only the protest party can offer. This emotional utility is exactly given by the feeling of relief of unseating traditional establishment, that voters deem responsible of their situation. Thus, their emotional utility is commensurate to their feeling of resentment, which is experienced at community level. A sort of revenge of traditional politicians who disappointed them.

The predictions of this theory are the following. Individuals experiencing higher degree of relative deprivation and identifying with a local community where the share of deprived individuals is higher should exhibit stronger support for the populist party. This higher support should translate into bigger voting share for the populist party, even in a three-party political system with plurality rule, where individuals may eventually vote strategically for their second-best if the latter is the front-runner. Moreover, support for the populist party should depend on the same variables that explain disappointment at the political establishment. Namely, dissatisfaction with traditional parties should be positively correlated with relative deprivation and social identification with local communities.

These predictions are tested by exploiting the unprecedented increase in UKIP vote shares between the 2010 and 2015 elections, when UKIP support quadrupled (raising from 3.1% to 12.6%). UKIP is largely acknowledged to be a protest or populist party (Mudde, 2004; Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel, 2018) whose policy platform is essentially identitarian, anti-European and anti-system in the tradition of the single-issue party (Betz, 1993; Mudde, 1999). Altomonte et al. (2019) use detailed longitudinal survey data within each British district (Understanding Society) over the five-year time period, and test the interaction between economic grievances and local cohesion on the vote share to the UK Independence Party (UKIP) in the 2010 and 2015 national elections, across the 380 Local Authority Districts (LADs). Besides individual self-reported support for UKIP, they also test their theory on actual electoral outcomes in the two general elections of 2010 and 2015.

They show that individuals self-reporting their sense of attachment to their local community are more likely to support for UKIP when a bigger number of individuals in that community have experienced a worsening in their income position compared to richer individuals in UK society. More precisely, provided an individual cares about her community, a one percentage point increase in the share of people experiencing higher relative deprivation yields a 3.5% increase in the probability that the individual reports support for UKIP. When an individual reports no attachment to her local community, the share of people experiencing higher relative deprivation in the community is not significantly associated to a higher probability she reports support for UKIP. In order to trigger the emotional mechanism leading to protest vote, an individual needs to identify with her community. The psychological reaction is triggered by a loss of income positions relative to the wealthier part of the population. Other measures of inequality do not trigger protest vote. What leads people to support the populist party is the worsening of ingroup members' position relative to richer people in the UK. Therefore, these results seem to be driven by a different mechanism than simple inequity aversion. The mechanism is similar to the one postulated by the theory. Individuals derive their subjective sense of justice by looking at the luckiest ones in the society. A kind of envy triggering resentment at group-level.

Altomonte et al. (2019) also find that the interaction between relative deprivation and group identification is strongly associated to dissatisfaction with political system. This means that these individuals lose their confidence in democratic institutions. Blame for the unlucky situation in their community is directed against traditional parties and political elite. Blame attribution and group-based resentment leads individuals to desire to get rid of the traditional parties, and support the populist party that promises to do so.

The psychological mechanism postulated by this theory is robust to the inclusion of economic shocks, as the ones postulated by existing literature on populist vote.

Relative deprivation within cohesive communities remains a strong predictor of UKIP vote even after controlling for trade or immigration shocks (Colantone and Stanig, 2018b) or cuts to welfare spending (Fetzer, 2019). This implies that resentment and collective emotional amplification have a significant role in protest vote, which adds up to material motivations and distributional effects of economic shocks.

As predicted by theory, the psychological motivation explains only voting for UKIP. The same mechanism does not play any significant role in Labour vote, while it seems to be negatively correlated with vote for the Conservative Party. The emotional channel seems to be draining votes away from the Tories towards UKIP. This confirms the idea the UKIP is a right-populist party.

The work of Altomonte et al. (2018) shows that the behavioral approach uncovers important drives of populism and protest vote. While pointing at psychological motivations, it bridges the gaps between different branches of social science, which study populism from their own specific perspectives. Protest vote is driven by the desire to take revenge against traditional politics, which is deemed responsible for the current situation. The higher the group-wide aggrievement, the higher the desire to take revenge, a mechanism that is consistent with the classical frustration-aggression hypothesis in psychology (Miller, 1941). Revenge against the traditional parties and the elites is common to populist rhetoric (Mudde, 2004; Van Kessel, 2015; Muller, 2017). Accounting for emotions adds new insights to the existing debate between economic and cultural motives driving protest vote and populism (e.g. Rodrik, 2018; Guiso et al., 2017; Inglehart and Norris, 2016; Margalit, 2019).

Recent papers have discussed how cultural factors, such as changing social identification patterns or displacement of traditional values, may have played a role in populist vote, especially in cohesive communities. Other papers have shown that economic shocks are crucial determinants of the upsurge of populism in established democracies. Perhaps the psychological factors discussed in this article are part of a broader picture in which segments of Western societies develop widespread feelings of discontent and resentment both for changing economic status in their communities, but also for changing cultural values in their societies. And perhaps these drivers of resentment feedback to each other, leading to generalized loss of confidence in the political system. A fascinating topic deserving further research in the future.

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