

From marginal to mainstream? Study of Populism features revealed in the Conservative Party

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Abstract: *The rise and mainstreaming populism has not only expanded its influence in populist parties in the U.K., but also exerted tremendous effects on the mainstream parties. As it is discovered that the Conservative Party has taken an increasingly populist stance over the years, internal and external explanations for such a shift have been explored, and the analysis concludes by asking what this means for both the party itself as well as the British society in the long run.*

Keywords: *Populism, the Conservative Party, mainstream party*

1. Introduction

In recent years, a wide range of movements and even politicians are labeled with the term populism, showing the upsurge trend populism is currently experiencing in Europe, even though there is yet agreement to be reached on how to define it precisely[1]. As a matter of fact, the English word “populism” originates from the Latin word “populi”, suggesting the important role “people” plays in this concept. Here the word “people” seems to refer to all citizens. However, what this word truly implies is, as frequently claimed by those populist parties, the group of “oppressed people”, especially those who are opposite to the elites[2]. Therefore, the basis connotation of the word populism lies in its pursuit of the values and ideals of the grassroots. And populism hence, typically focuses on the most prominent issues that entail the sentiments of anti-elitism, anti-political establishment and radical nationalism.

The rapid development of populism in Europe continues to preoccupy scientists in this field. However, previous studies on populism focused more on the topics related to populist parties. In fact, much has been written about the campaign strategies[3-5], the campaign performance [6-10], and the analysis of the voters of the populist parties[11-13]. However, systematic investigation on why the mainstream parties shift towards populism is still a field that has rarely been touched upon.

With populist parties gaining more support from the masses, many mainstream parties in Europe start to find ways to adapt to the issues that are strongly advocated by the populist parties, among which the Conservative Party in the U.K. is by no means immune to this phenomenon. Rooduijn et. al. once mentioned that the United Kingdom has experienced a substantial increase of the extent to which mainstream parties use populism in their manifestos, when researching whether populism is a contagious phenomenon[5], though without systematically digging into why the populism in the Conservative Party is actually going from marginal towards mainstream. And Bale argued that in the UK, it is the Tories that was the author of its own misfortunes[14], which suggests that the fusion of populism and Euroscepticism already exists in the Conservative Party, while the populist party, especially in recent years, constitutes a necessary driving force in urging the Conservative Party to propose an increasing number of policies that contains populist features. In this paper, we thus aim to focus on the reasons that lead to the Conservative Party’s respond to the issues strongly advocated by the populist parties as well as its consequences.

2. Explanations for the Conservative Party Increasingly Shifting towards Populism

The Conservative Party is traditionally considered a defender of elitism, which is the opposite of the core idea proposed by populist parties. However, the former “magically” finds a way to accommodate some principal ideas advocated by the latter, which exerts interests among scholars in finding explanations for such a shift. As a matter of fact, the logic behind this phenomenon is quite obvious,

which is closely related to the ultimate goal for most of the political parties: maximizing the votes one could obtain and extending the possibility of taking office. However, among all the ways to maintain its ruling position, the specific reasons that lead the Conservative Party to shift towards populist party during that period of time deserve to be further explored.

2.1. External Reasons: Political Space and Pragmatic Considerations

2.1.1. Political Space

The shift of the Conservative Party is affected by the positioning of political parties within the policy space. Political space refers to the degree to which mainstream parties occupy the electoral terrain of the radical right[15]. And when the mainstream parties' ideology converge, they tend to leave a "gap" in the electoral market. Some scholars argue that where established parties follow a moderate course in favor of the "winners" of globalization, they provide an opportunity for the creation of parties that mobilize the "losers"[16]. And the Conservative Party is no immune to this phenomenon. In fact, the "Consensus Politics" has been formed between the two mainstream parties in the U.K., when the new Labor Party taking office, and it means that the two mainstream parties often reach a consensus on major issues[17]. However, the convergence of ideologies means that issues adopted are often products of compromise between the left and right political parties, which leaves marginal voters no choice but to look for new spokesmen. And that's when the populist party slips in. The populist party's claiming of representing the masses quickly won the heart of the voters, especially those that were originally supporting the Conservative Party, which urges the Conservative Party to change its policy stance in the hope of winning back those voters.

2.1.2. Pragmatic Considerations

One of the motivations of Conservative Party's shift was stemmed from perceived loss of loyal voters. With the continually integration developed among EU members, some of EU's major policies such as free movement have threatened the sense of safety among local citizens. In addition, the outbreak of the financial crisis as well as the impact of the sovereign debt crisis within EU have further intensified the British People's repulsion of EU. This kind of sentiment was manipulated by populist parties through advocating their understanding of people's deprived feelings, and proposing to representing them to fight against the establishment as well as the elites in both the British government and the EU. And thus an increasing number of voters, especially voters who used to support the Conservative Party, are attracted to vote for populist parties. The outstanding performance of the emerging populist parties has brought great pressure to the Conservative Party, and urges it to change its major policies so as to cater to the public opinion, in the hope of winning back those voters. In fact, some scholars have mentioned that when the votes and/or seats of the right wing populist parties increased significantly in a national election, the mainstream political parties would most likely tilt their policy positions to the right because of the threat to its ruling status in the next elections[18]. Therefore, in the face of the excellent performance of the populist parties in the U.K., it is only understandable that the Conservative Party has tried its best to reduce the differences with the populist parties on the major issues. And the fact that "after the Conservative Party held the Brexit referendum, the support rate of the UK Independent Party in the national election in 2017 dropped sharply" proves that the Conservative Party's strategy indeed worked.

2.2. Internal Reasons: Intra-party Conflicts and Ideology

2.2.1. Intra-party Conflicts

Relieving the tension within the party has also been one of the explanations for the Conservative Party's shift. Although Cameron's "big society" campaign strategy has improved the image of the Conservative Party, it however, fails to help win a majority in the parliament, which to some extent hampers Cameron's authority as a party leader. In fact, there has already conflicts regarding EU existing within the party for quite a long time, and Cameron, as a member of Pro-europeans, has been under great pressure from those Eurosceptists. For instance, in October, 2011, David Nuttall, one of the backbenchers, has submitted a proposal, requiring to seek power from the masses, and asking for a referendum to determine the future relationship between British and the EU. Even though the proposal was refused, its influence should not be overlooked. As a matter of fact, that backbencher's success of winning the support of 81 MPs has been regarded as one of the two biggest revolts against the Prime Minister after World War II. And this incident not only exposed the intra-party conflicts to the public, but also encouraged other Eurosceptics to firm their will in continuing their effort. Especially after the

growth of the populist parties in the U.K., nearly 100 MPs jointly applied for a Brexit referendum in 2014. What's more, two members also publicly announced their intention of leaving the Conservative Party and joining the populist party—UK Independent Party instead. Therefore, in order to appease the Eurosceptics and maintain the unity of the party, the Conservative Party has to seek change, and take some of the populist party's policies into serious consideration.

2.2.2. The role of Ideology

Besides sewing up the split within the party, ideology has also frequently been proposed as pivotal factors for explaining the Conservative Party's shift. On the one hand, both the Conservative Party and the populist parties are considered the right-wing parties in the political spectrum, which implies that it is more feasible for them to converge on some populist issue. For example, one of the populist parties—the UK Independent Party regarded Brexit as its principal aim, while Euroscepticism exists in the Conservative Party for a long time, especially after the economic crisis happened in 2008. Therefore, the resistance of adopting some of the populist parties' policies within the Conservative Party would be rather weak. On the other hand, even though the populist parties initially attract the support from the masses by claiming that they are opposing the elites and the establishments, they would tone down many of their extreme ideas, once they achieve their initial success, so as to fight for opportunities to form coalition government with the mainstream parties. And in this way, the ideological heterogeneity between the Conservative Party and the populist parties would be lessened, and the possibility for the Conservative Party's acceptance of the issues strongly proposed by the populist parties would be thus increased.

3. Consequences of the Conservative Party Shifting towards Populism

With more populist parties standing on the political stage, many traditional political parties began to feel threatened and started to regard involving issues that are highly advocated by populist parties as a panacea in winning elections. Although making compromises with populist parties in certain issues may function in decreasing the attraction of the populist parties and thus winning back the heart of the voters in a short period of time. If it however, fails to stay alert to populism which is said to have been fed by the incitement of public fear and anger, it will not only do harm to the party itself, but also exert some negative effect on the whole society.

3.1. Consequence for the Conservative Party

Given the populist party's alleged threatening effect on wooing the voters, it comes as no surprise that the Conservative Party would be so urgently wanting to take actions to guarantee its ruling stability, even though it might mean compromising to some of the populist policies. However, it should be noticed that if the Conservative Party continues to take a populist stance when ruling, it may further intensify the contradictions within the party. In fact, the division between "Pro-European and Eurosceptic" in the early stage and the "soft Eurosceptic and hard Eurosceptic" in the later stage has already revealed the divergence that existed in the party towards EU. Thus, if the party's response to this is simply continue to follow the populist party's strategy by demonizing the EU, and allow it to go mainstream, it will inevitably aggravate the party's division and hinder the effort of seeking consensus within the party. What's more, as the ruling party, the Conservative Party should have issued policies based on the welfare of the masses. However, if it continues to appease the populist party and focus too much on specific issues such as immigration and EU, or exaggerates the demands of certain groups, its legitimacy and authority might be negatively affected or even weakened.

3.2. Consequence for the British Society

Although the populist parties claim that they speak in the name of the voters that are often ignored by the mainstream party, their speeches actually bring negative effect towards minority groups. Some surveys have indicated that the discrimination against immigrants in Britain has been worse after the Brexit referendum[19]. Hence, if the Conservative Party continues to take a populist stance, it is foreseeable that the tension between the local citizens and the immigrants would be intensified, which might further split the society. Moreover, if the Conservative Party moves further towards populism, the stability of the British society might be shaken. As mentioned before, populism is fed on inciting people to confront elites and the establishment, and they often provide some controversial topics with crude solutions to attract people and win their support by taking advantage of their irrational emotions.

Hence, if the ruling party compromises to this kind of force even further, it is likely to aggravate the political instability in Britain in the long run. Furthermore, besides nourishing people's discontent and anger, populism is often criticized by depending solely on two to three issues in most of their proposals. However, what should be noticed that even though populist parties usually don't have a complete plan, the power of the issues being put forward by them shouldn't be overlooked. In fact, the Conservative Party has already accommodated some of their policies, and if it is lured to step further right, more extreme decisions might be made under the "hijacking" of the "public opinion", which may do harm to the British society in the long run.

4. Conclusion

With the emergence of populist parties in the U.K. in recent years, mainstream parties such as the Conservative Party, have begun to accommodate some of their policies into their political agenda. The influence of populism on the Conservative Party has become more than apparent over the years. Although paying more attention to the so called overlooked groups might be helpful for winning back some of the voters, it should be noticed that if the Conservative Party insists on taking a populist stance, it may intensify the contradictions within the party, weaken the party's legitimacy and authority, and aggravate the fragmentation of British society in the long run.

As a matter of fact, even after Britain "breaks up" with EU successfully in 2020, the contradictions between them have not been completely solved, and thus it is still too early to conclude that issues that nourished the rising populism in the U.K. has been eradicated. Therefore, the mainstream party should still keep an eye on the re-emergence of the populism in the U.K. However, since the attraction of populism might be decreased once the issues strongly proposed by the populist parties are no longer regarded as the main problem, it is fair to say that the possibility for the Conservative Party to thus turn into a radical right populist party is pretty low.

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