



On the Drivers of Populism in Europe: Public vs. Elite?

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It has become a commonplace in the last few years that the alienation between public opinion and the elites is the major driver of populism in Europe. A [recently published Chatham House research](#) specifically aimed at exploring this divide. The research, conducted between December 2016 and February 2017 in ten countries (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Spain and the UK) examined two groups: 10,000 members of the public and approximately 1,800 members of Europe's 'elite', individuals in positions of influence from politics, the media, business and civil society at local, regional, national and European levels.

The results are interesting, because whereas on the one hand they confirm some of the commonplaces about the elite-people divide (e.g. that the elite is more liberal than the people), they also contradict many others. Inspired by the Chatham House survey, I want to make some observations on the drivers and the nature of contemporary populism.

First of all: what we have to remind ourselves of constantly is that the gap between politicians and public, criticised by populists, is – to a certain extent – normal and also an inevitable aspect of representative democracy. Politicians make the decisions – and voters have the right to criticise them. Railing against politicians provides an outlet for negative feelings for a lot of citizens. In many countries, politicians are the least trusted people, despite the fact that we can directly elect them. And while we may regret that trust levels towards politicians are on a record low, we have to seriously think about whether the classic politician-voter divide is not, to a certain extent, a natural phenomenon. In the Chatham House study for example, only eight percent of the public said that politicians care about what people like them think. And, without idealising the world of politics, this is an assertion we can easily refute. In democracies, you can question politicians' goodwill or competence, but not their interest in what voters think – as this is the most important thing for getting (re)elected.

Second, there is a tendency in European political discourse, especially on the left, for taking all the blame for the distance between the elites and the public, saying: we – the elites – should do better to close it. But it is not always easy. For example, one of the findings of the research is that authoritarian attitudes in general, and pro-death penalty views in particular, are the best predictors of Eurosceptic views. What could EU stakeholders do to persuade Eurosceptics with such views, and close the gap? Re-introduce the death penalty? Transform democratic EU Member States into authoritarian regimes?

Especially after crises, 'rage against the machine' can take the shape of a big wave, impossible to break. And usually it is accompanied by another huge wave consisting of unrealistic and sometimes irrational expectations, hard to deal with for politicians.

Third, the elite vs. public divide is not omnipresent. There are some points of view which actually unite the elites and the public in Europe: e.g. that the strong Member States should show solidarity towards the poorer ones, that the EU works in a democratic manner and that there is reason to be proud to be European. The elite and the public both identified the same top achievements: peace, the Schengen area, freedom of movement, the single market and the single currency. They also agreed on its failures and weak points, such as the refugee crisis and excessive bureaucracy.

Fourth the elite is just as divided (e.g. on the question of how deep integration should go), as the public – especially between more liberal and authoritarian positions. While the data also show an important divide in general attitudes, beliefs and life experiences, talking only about the division between the 'elite and the 'people' as two homogeneous groups is misleading. This dichotomy only exists in rhetoric, not in practice.

Last but not least, this study shows again that the alienation from and the disillusionment about the European Union does not depend on people's economic situation. Having a low income had almost no



relation to someone's Eurosceptic views – neither on the authoritarian attitudes of the voters. The constituency of populists is, in contrast to common wisdom, not necessarily identical with the 'losers of globalisation'. This means that policies focusing on economic growth and removing inequalities as such are not sufficient at all for targeting populism.

Identity-related fears (e.g. of the 'Muslim invasion') and the feeling of being on the periphery of society, matter much more. So does political nostalgia, one of the main drivers of the rising right-wing populism, strongly related to age of the voters. And this nostalgia is something that needs more investigation: a majority of the public (54%) think their country was a better place to live in 20 years ago, which makes them long for the past instead of holding hopes for the future, and provides a good hunting base for politicians promising to make their nations great again and restore their old glory.