

Closing the gap between representation and governance: the case for the random selection of party candidates

The purpose of this paper is to understand the potential for good governance in democratic politics, given the rise of populist parties. The first half of the paper argues that it is impossible for populists (correctly understood) in opposition or in government, to have positive effects on the functioning of democracy. Indeed, while governing parties have responded to the increasing popularity of populists by replicating, co-opting, or excluding them, this is insufficient to tackle the challenge of populism, or the underlying reasons for its popularity.

Addressing the various social, economic and environmental policy problems that populists thrive on is important, but the confounding political consequences of technocratic policy solutions highlight the need to address the prior question of *how* policy is created. Central to this is the declining representative function of the political party in the policy process, with party leaders increasingly controlling the formation of public policy or outsourcing it to technocratic policy-makers. This is a fertile ground for populist attacks and shows deeper reform is necessary. Connecting public policy with the representative function of democratic politics may be part of the solution to promote good governance. This paper offers a potential solution within the UK context:

Recommendation 1a: at the next General Election the UK Government should trial the random selection of party candidates for a proportion of constituencies. Candidates should be drawn from the electorate based in each constituency.

Recommendation 1b: to prepare these candidates for the election cycle and provide an understanding of the policy process, the Government should fund a mandatory course (with flexible hours of attendance). This will provide candidates with the skills and knowledge required for a public policy role.

Recommendation 1c: to encourage individuals to accept selection, the state should introduce bursaries for candidates, and provide statutory time off work for participation in the election.

Understanding the populist challenge

Populism is often associated with anti-elitism or anti-establishmentarianism. For some it is a convenient political diatribe. These approaches to understanding populism are insufficient because it muddies the water with other forms of politics, and sometimes, just the politics of opposition.

Populists differ from other kinds of politicians in two ways. First, they claim to speak directly for the people. But their idea of the people often emphasises a part for the whole. For instance, Nigel Farage claimed the vote to leave the EU in 2016 was a “victory for *real* people.” Populists govern without the participation of the people because their form of representation is symbolic, rather than empirical – the populist already knows what the people want, they just need to implement it. In some ways, authoritarian forms of government share this approach. But what differentiates populism from authoritarianism is its second element. Populism is infused with moralistic language: the corrupt versus the pure, truth versus lies. To return to Nigel Farage’s speech, his victory was claimed for “the real people” against the “lies, corruption, and deceit”ⁱ of politics and big banks.

These two elements explain why they are corrupting forces in democratic societies. For instance, where populists do not win elections, they claim fraud, corruption, and conspiracy. In his defeat in the 2020 presidential election, Donald Trump claimed the vote was stolen. After all, according to the populist logic, how could he not win the election if he spoke directly for ‘the people’? Conspiracy theories contribute to a visceral mistrust in democratic politics that is difficult to undo.

Recent elections have lifted populist parties from opposition to governing, including the successful election of Orban in 2010, and Trump in 2016. While in opposition, populists have little formal power, in Government populists have been associated with three techniques: hijacking the state, clientelism (or providing material benefits in exchange for political support), and attacking civil society.ⁱⁱ

All three seek to forge the political reality that populists stated existed all along. For instance, research by the Tony Blair Institute showed that over 50 per cent of populist leaders between 1990 and 2014 amended or re-wrote the country’s constitutions and ‘many of these changes’ extended term limits or weakened checks on executive power. Populists may argue this was the will of the people who elected them. But populists are rarely elected on a platform to change the constitution.ⁱⁱⁱ The effect is the same: populists become less likely to be challenged, on the pretence that they along represent the people and protect them from, for instance, the corrupt elites. The irony is that countries, once governed by populists, drop an average of five places on the Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index.^{iv}

established democracies (such as the US) populists have normally come to power exclusively through existing political parties. It is also based on the assumption that populists can be managed by the party. Instead, many have gone on to weaken party influence and control. Donald Trump mostly conducted policy and engagement with “the people” through social media rather than party or media channels.

The final approach is to exclude populists. In so doing, Governments can continue governing without the distraction of populists. But to respond to populism’s exclusionary language with the exclusion of the populists themselves fuels the narrative that a conspiracy exists against them and in the interests of the ‘corrupt’ elite. The impeachment of Donald Trump may be legally sound, but the political implications of a guilty verdict could be the worsening of political tensions within American society.

Understanding populism’s appeal directs us to the challenge, but it cannot provide the answers

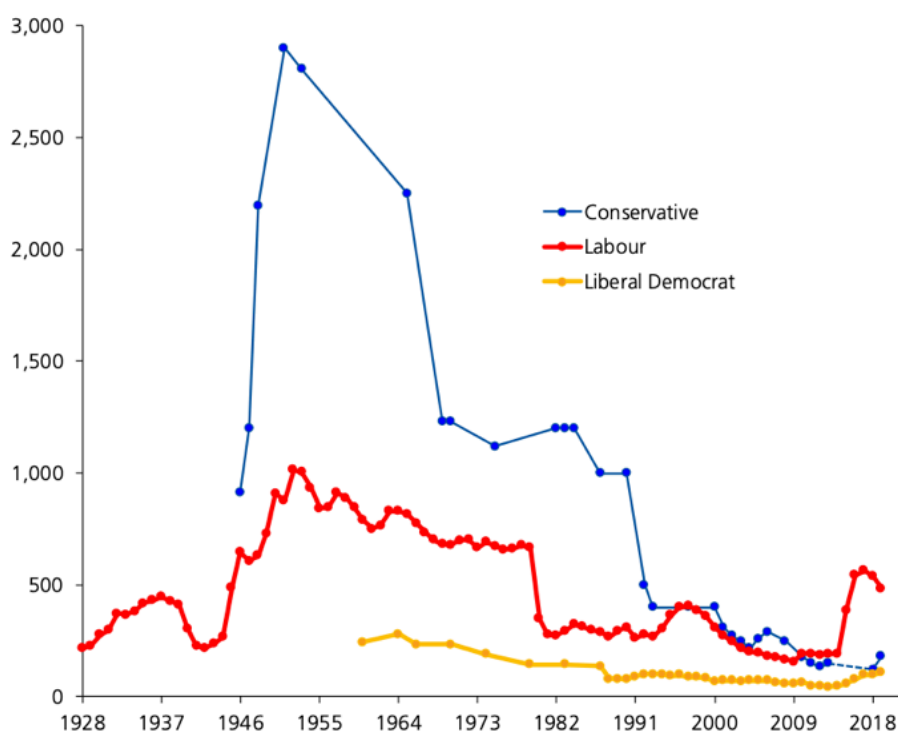
What unites the approaches above to tackling populism is the assumption that populists are aberrations to the political norm. But what is markedly more bizarre than an American billionaire president calling himself an ordinary American, is the reality that tens of millions of ordinary people elected him president. In the US context, Trump’s popularity can in part be explained by strong partisanship, but this fails to explain the election outcome. It hides the reality that there may be legitimate unaddressed concerns of the people who vote for populist leaders. If this is the case, the increasing popularity of populists begs the question whether parties have been governing well before this ‘age of populism.’

It is easy to identify the many forces confronting individuals and families today. One of such force relates to the functioning of the economy under neo-liberal reforms. These policies initially turbo-charged the revival of western economies after the stagflation of the 1970s. Many proved popular with the electorate. For instance, the *Right to Buy* scheme offered council house tenants the opportunity to buy their house at a discounted rate. Conversely, the policies of low inflation, shareholder value maximisation (rather than re-investment in the company), and the push towards flexible labour markets has contributed towards a heady mix of low growth, stagnant incomes, and increasing inequality.^x

However, any economic policy solution to these problems is likely to be confounding politically. For instance, increasing immigration is often seen as a technical fix to tackle slowing economies. This policy can bring new ideas, new skills and more labour. But moves to increase immigration have been at the centre of populist backlashes. These confounding realities mean that decisions taken must have legitimacy. In other words, good governance is as much about *what we do* in democracy as it is about *how we do it*.

How public policy is formed has changed over the past 20 years. At the centre of this change is the decline of the political party.^{xi} One of the party's central function was to aggregate and articulate the interests of its members and convert this into public policy. However, this representative function has been weakened in two ways. First, there has been a collapse in partisanship and party membership (Figure 2).^{xii} Today, party membership represents less than one per cent of the population, yet continues to be the sole route to governing. Figure 2 also shows a small revival of the Labour Party's membership after Jeremy Corbyn was elected leader. However, the Labour Party is still half the size it was in the 1950s.^{xiii}

Figure 2: party membership of the three main political parties in the UK, thousands, 1928-2008



Source: House of Commons Library

Second, governing has become synonymous with a stronger role of party leaders in the executive function of Government, and an increasing deference to expertise and technocratic policy-making.^{xiv} While there has also been an increase in stakeholder consultation in the legislative process, facilitated by digital technologies, this process provides no assurance to stakeholders of the policy outcome.

In short, parties are no longer the centre of political life, but maintain the function of governing. This has suited populists, who have capitalised on the evacuation of political parties from their representative function by claiming to be the true, and only, representative

of the people. It is also, as above, why co-opting populists into the party is naïve: established parties can provide support for ruling ambitions, but have limited control of the leader's actions or influence on policy formation. The solution may lie in finding a new, experimental way to combine representation with the policy process.

Democratic politics needs new experiments: the case for the random selection of party candidates

Introducing a random ballot for the selection of MPs in representative politics is new to modern democracy (**Recommendation 1a**). In the UK today, the majority of MPs are elected in safe seats. This makes the selection of candidates important to the election process, and is one of the functions parties control. While the details of the process differ, parties usually require assessments of the candidate's political membership, skills, and career history. This is followed by the release of a centrally approved list of candidates from which local members make a final decision. In response to calls for a more representative Parliament, some parties have created initiatives to increase the diversity of candidates, such as the Labour Party's all-women shortlist.^{xv}

In contrast, this new initiative would involve several new steps. First, an organisation would have to be appointed as an impartial judge of the process (for instance, the Electoral Commission, or EC). Second, a proportion of UK constituencies would be randomly chosen to participate. It is important that even after a trial period not all constituencies are randomly selected so that talented career politicians have a route into politics. Third, in these constituencies, each party that wishes to contest the seat would have to make the EC aware of their intention to do so. Fourth, the EC would randomly select members of the electorate who live within the constituency. Fifth, to ensure the willingness of participants, these selected individuals would be able to choose the party to represent. If more than one individual selects a particular party, the final candidate is selected through another random ballot. Individuals have the option to opt-out. If more than one party, or all parties, have not been selected, another random selection is conducted until all parties has a candidate.

This solution has immediate benefits over the current process. First, despite recent attempts to increase diversity in politics, parties have struggled to increase *the supply* of interested people from diverse backgrounds. The random ballot would create an in-built bias towards diverse representation. Second, loyalty to the party under the current system matters as much, if not more, than good policy-making or representing constituents. Politicians are often moved into the local area with little prior knowledge or experience of local communities. Under the random ballot selection, individuals are chosen from within the local constituency and, therefore, more likely to be integrated with, and understand the concerns of, the local community.

Critically, against the populist logic that only they represent ‘the people’, and that the governing parties represent a corrupt elite, this system would build in a symbolic defence against such claims by realising the democratic promise of a government *by* the people.

Against this policy, there are several counter-arguments:

- 1 Candidates selected would be untrained in policy formation and other skills expected of politicians.** To counter this, individuals who are selected should be provided with impartial state-funded policy training at undergraduate (but not necessarily degree) level. This would have the effect of merging experience (from a diverse range of people, interests and backgrounds) with expertise (**Recommendation 1b**).
- 1.1 People will refuse to be a candidate, primarily due to the cost of running, both financially and emotionally.** Running to become an MP has been estimated to cost, on average, £11,118,^{xvi} primarily due to lost earnings and renting accommodation in the constituency. Individuals under the random selection process are already based within their communities, and so would not need to relocate. To counter the remaining costs, individuals should be provided statutory time off for preparation and participation in the election, and bursaries can be provided to support those on low incomes (**Recommendation 1c**).
- 2 Individuals are simply not interested.** The responses to 1 and 1.1 may contribute to a higher proportion of interested candidates. Aside from these incentives, candidates have the opportunity to form new networks. They are also a symbolic part of the revitalisation of democracy, and a move *away* from politics perceived as an interest of elites only.
- 3 It is unfeasible to believe that parties would relinquish control over the selection of candidates.** Indeed, the reform may even show that there is a way forward without the party. In any case, the aim is not to save political parties, but to show the possibility to experiment with democracy that needs reform.

ⁱ The Guardian, 2016 [Accessed via: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/video/2016/jun/24/nigel-farage-eu-referendum-this-victory-for-real-people-video>]

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid

^{iv} Tony Blair Institute for Global Change (2018) The populist harm to democracy: an empirical assessment [Accessed via: <https://institute.global/sites/default/files/articles/The-Populist-Harm-to-Democracy-An-Empirical-Assessment.pdf>]

^v Runciman, David (2018) How Democracy Ends. London, Profile Books.

^{vi} The Guardian and Team Populism (2019) [Accessed via: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2019/mar/06/revealed-the-rise-and-rise-of-populist-rhetoric>]

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- ^{vii} Raw data provided by Team Populism [Accessed via: <https://populism.byu.edu/Pages/Data>]
- ^{viii} Politico (2016) Clinton campaign manager calls Trump a Kremlin puppet [Accessed via: <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/08/trump-russia-mook-clinton-foundation-227237>]
- ^{ix} Sinclair, Betsy; Smith, Steven S; Tucker, Patrick (2018) Many Democrats think that the 2016 election result was rigged [Accessed via: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2018/09/11/many-democrats-think-that-the-2016-election-result-was-rigged/>]
- ^x Cox, Michael (2018) Understanding the global rise of populism [Accessed via: <https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/publications/updates/populism>]
- ^{xi} Mair, Peter (2013) Ruling the void: the hollowing of western democracy. New York : Verso, 2013
- ^{xii} Ibid
- ^{xiii} House of Commons Library (2019) Membership of UK Political Parties, Number SN05125
- ^{xiv} Mair, Peter (2013) Ruling the void: the hollowing of western democracy. New York : Verso, 2013
- ^{xv} Institute for Government, Innovations in candidate selection [Accessed via: <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/our-work/parliament/innovations-candidate-selection>]
- ^{xvi} Hardiman, Isabel (2018) Why we get the wrong politicians