Populism and Civic Engagement

Populism in Europe: Future scenarios

Matrix

Scenario matrix

Populists on the outside
- Extreme yet amateurish minority populist parties
- National politics still inclusionary
- No extensive influence over discourse– ignored / laughed at
- Media treat them as spectacle (eg invited occasionally on to talk shows)
- Public attitudes at large apparently unaffected by party's presence
- Activism/network building
- Rights remain secure
- Potential local or European parliament election breakthroughs
- No institutional change

Constant struggle
- Populists parties in out of coalitions
- Exclusionary politics visible in public sphere - Precarious situation for minorities
- A vibrant and re-energised public sphere. Increased civic engagement and / or parties adopting "culture war" positions
- Adversarial media models thriving
- Public attitudes split
- Activists prominent on media platforms in public debate
- Concepts of rights & citizenship being politically contested – this can have a legal impact/legacy
- "swingy", contested elections and frequent shifts in governments
- Contestation over state institutions

Populism dominant and entrenched
- Populist parties win elections and hold power
- Politics exclusionary /changing ideas status of citizenship
- Debate and discourse remains polarised despite opposition being defeated
- Media captured and / or compliant. Mainstream media opposition weak
- Public attitudes strongly supportive of exclusionary government
- Party activists in positions of power
- Rights removed
- Repeated electoral victories
- Institutions weakened or captured

Liberalism contented
- Collapse of populist parties
- Consensus style of politics
- Depolarisation of debate
- Media reporting news not crisis
- Public attitudes increasingly cosmopolitan & internationalist
- Activists demobilised / foregrounding of expertise and institutions
- Extension of rights
- Electoral dominance of liberal / technocratic parties
- Institutions stable

Opportunistic populism
- Opportunities for populist "grifters" prevalent across politics, but no grand vision. Mainstream parties "flirt" with populist ideas
- Scepticism towards inclusionary political projects
- Poisoned well of public debate
- Traditional media circumvented / ignored. Low level online click-bait culture war
- Public attitudes exploitable, but not by parties.
- Party activists mainly engaged in online discourse
- Status of minority rights "debated"
- No electoral success for populist parties
- Little institutional change

Populism pressure cooker
- Failed/uncharismatic populist leaders and parties Some mainstream parties adopt exclusionary populist language and policies
- Highly polarised political landscape and public debate
- Media "performing crises"
- High spill-over of public attitudes visible in mainstream culture war
- Party activists visible & active in mainstream sphere
- Status of rights debated vigorously
- No electoral breakthroughs / high structural barriers to success
- No institutional change

Activated — Latent

Populist attitudes successfully 'activated' or transformed

Low/Reducing — Prevalent /increasing

How common are Populist attitudes in the population?

Indicators in the matrix

The indicators denote the status and / or behaviour of the following factors in each scenario:

- Parties and leaders
- Status of politics (inclusionary or exclusionary)
- Status of public debate / discourse
- Behaviour of media
- Public attitudes
- Behaviour / activity of party activists
- Status of rights (secure or under threat)
- Electoral success
- Institutional influence

S
Scenario descriptions

Liberalism contented

In this scenario, populist parties have collapsed. There is little public disagreement about policy or the future direction of the country. Debate is generally peaceable. However, certain economic views and macro-disagreements, such as issues of globalisation or de-industrialisation, are kept off the agenda. The media report news in a calm way in this scenario and publicly expressed political views and attitudes are predominantly cosmopolitan and internationalist. Populist activists are generally de-mobilised, and expertise and institutions are privileged as sources of authority in the political sphere. Rights for minorities and equal rights are extended and electoral politics is dominated by liberal or technocratic parties, which provides the appearance of institutional stability.

Indicators

- Collapse of populist parties
- Consensus style of politics
- De-polarisation of debate
- Media reporting news, not crisis
- Public attitudes increasingly cosmopolitan & internationalist
- Activists demobilised / foregrounding of expertise and institutions
- Extension of rights
- Electoral dominance of liberal / technocratic parties
- Institutions stable

P
Populists on the outside

In this scenario populist parties exist but have very little influence over public debate, which remains calm albeit with small outbreaks of disagreement and scandal. On a national level politics remains inclusionary and petty differences are not exacerbated on a general scale, despite the attempts of the amateurish populist leaders and parties on the electoral scene. The media treat the new populist party as entertainment, and report on any scandalous incidents involving the leader. In this way, the nascent but amateurish populist party and the media have a symbiotic relationship. The media rarely provide coverage about their policies. Public attitudes seem largely unaffected by the presence of this extreme populist party, at least those attitudes that are publicly articulated. The activist base of the populist party uses this time in the media spotlight to build networks and recruit members. Rights remain secure in this scenario because the populists achieve neither electoral breakthrough nor sufficient influence over mainstream parties. There is, however, the potential for electoral breakthrough at the local level or in European parliament elections. Institutions of the state remain unaffected.

Indicators

- Extreme yet amateurish minority populist parties
- National politics still inclusionary
- No extensive influence over discourse – ignored / laughed at
- Media treat them as spectacle (e.g., invited on to talk shows)
- Public attitudes at large apparently unaffected by party's presence
- Activism/network building
- Rights remain secure
- Potential local or European parliament election breakthroughs
- No institutional change

C

Constant struggle

In this scenario populists may sometimes win or be close to winning power but never outright or on their own. They are in and out of coalitions, failing to get a secure foothold in power. Exclusionary politics are voiced in the public sphere and the situation for minorities appear to be more precarious. 'Culture war' positions are adopted by some parties as public debate increasingly descends into acrimony. On the other hand, there is a more vibrant and re-energised public sphere as people fight back politically against the populists, leading to people engaging more in civic society and political parties. This may be turn out positively for democracy as more people participate in the democratic process. Adversarial media models thrive in this scenario, particularly online, and the algorithms driving content on platforms like YouTube aid this polarisation of political positions. This polarisation mirrors a split in public attitudes. Activists of populist parties are prominent on social media platforms and appear in public debate and occasionally on TV. While rights and citizenship status are secure in this scenario, who gets rights and who should be counted as a citizen is vigorously debated in public, something that can have a lasting legal, social or political legacy. Elections swing from one party to the other, with none securing dominance or a stable lead in the polls. There is frequent change in government parties. Institutions and the role they play in society, such as the judiciary and parliament, are contested politically.

Indicators
• Populists parties in out of coalitions
• Exclusionary politics visible in public sphere. Precarious situation for minorities
• A vibrant and re-energised public sphere. Increased civic engagement and / or parties adopting "culture war" positions
• Adversarial media models thriving
• Public attitudes split
• Activists prominent on media platforms in public debate
• Concepts of rights & citizenship being politically contested
• "swingy" and contested elections and frequent shifts in governments
• Contestation over state institutions

P

Populism pressure cooker

Attitudes supportive of populist ideas are widespread amongst the population in this scenario, but due to structural barriers or failed populist leadership, populists achieve no electoral breakthrough. However, some populist ideas, or at least populist rhetoric, do achieve breakthrough as mainstream parties start to adopt them as their own. As a result, this scenario contains hostile and conflictual public debate, and it is impossible to engage in good faith political disagreement without the speaker's motives being questioned. Attitudes supportive of populism have increased in this scenario and can be heard in public discussions of politics. The media is 'performing crises', meaning every disagreement is framed in a sensationalised form, aided by online social media platforms that make money from polarised viewpoints. Whether certain groups should have rights taken away from them is debated in public too. Despite the deep divisions in society and forthright populist viewpoints in the public sphere no electoral breakthrough occurs, and as a result institutions remain secure, despite being criticised and having their legitimacy called into question by populists.

Indicators
• Failed/uncharismatic populist leaders and parties
• Some mainstream parties adopt exclusionary populist language and policies
• Highly polarised political landscape and public debate
• Media "performing crises"
• High spill-over of public attitudes visible in mainstream culture war
• Party activists visible and active in mainstream sphere
• Status of rights debated vigorously
• No electoral breakthroughs / high structural barriers to success
• No institutional change

Opportunistic populism

This scenario provides openings for opportunists with no grand political vision, or 'grifters', those professional controversialists who personally monetise the polarised political landscape. Mainstream parties flirt with populist ideas and rhetoric and there is a general scepticism amongst the public and politicians about an inclusive style of politics and debate. The public sphere is poisoned by bad faith discussion as traditional or more responsible media is circumvented or ignored. Online there is a low-level culture war style of political debate with polarising 'clickbait' new stories featuring prominently. It is through these mediums, rather than by political parties, that public attitudes supportive of populism are exploited and monetised. Populist party activists primarily organise online, homing in on cultural issues, rather than organising in workplaces or recruiting members in person. The status of certain minorities is brought into question in this scenario, however there is little electoral success for populist parties and limited chances of institution change.

Indicators
- Opportunities for populist "grifters" is prevalent across politics, but no grand populist vision   - Mainstream parties "flirt" with populist ideas   - Scepticism towards inclusionary political projects   - Poisoned well of public debate   - Traditional media circumvented / ignored. Online click-bait culture war   - Public attitudes exploitable, but not by parties.   - Party activists mainly engaged in online cultural discourse   - Status of minority rights 'debated'   - No electoral success for populist parties   - Little institutional change

P
Populism dominant and entrenched

In this scenario we see populist parties winning and holding power and using this to make changes to the institutions of the country. Public debate is still full of conflict in this scenario, however, the media is now supportive of the new populist government and in many cases the government now owns the media or has influence over what it says. The concept of 'citizenship' is insecure in this scenario and who can or cannot be a citizen is fluid and contested. Equal rights and minority rights are removed, leaving people less protected. Despite opposition parties being comprehensively defeated in this scenario, the style of governing by the populists in power maintains severe division and acrimony in public debate. The government levels accusations against other, more shadowy elites, sometimes abroad, and against minorities within the state. Independent media is severely weakened in this scenario and other media outlets are captured by the governing party in some way. Public attitudes are strongly supportive of government. Party activists are in positions of power and often get roles in various state institutions which, as a result, become weakened and cowed. Certain rights are removed as the dominant party wins repeated elections.

Indicators

- Populist parties win elections and hold power
- Politics exclusionary /changing ideas status of citizenship
- Debate and discourse remain polarised despite opposition being defeated
- Media captured and / or compliant. Mainstream media opposition weak
- Public attitudes strongly supportive of government
- Party activists in positions of power
- Rights removed
- Repeated electoral victories
- Institutions weakened or captured