

Role of Political Trust in the Rise of Populism

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Abstract. Explanations on the rise of populism focusing on the public demands for populism have largely been confined to the discussion of economic and cultural factors, while paid little attention on the interaction between economic and cultural factors, and the interaction between the demand-side and supply-side factors. Based on previous theoretical and empirical studies, this paper attempts to complex the model for the rise of populism, explaining the interaction between different factors with the changing levels of political trust. This paper finds that, besides working similar to other demand-side factors on increasing individual propensity to vote for populist parties and to abstain in elections, political distrust creates an environment favorable to populist parties by encouraging individuals' non-institutionalized participation. In such environment, populist parties can strategically adjust their way to present their ideology and leadership, and further drive public sentiments against or distrusting the establishment which later becomes their electoral assets. In other words, populist distrust enables populist parties to more effectively mobilize their potential voters and gain electoral breakthrough. This paper only serves both as a starting point for discussions on populism incorporating the interaction between different factors, and as an attempt to add to the discussion of political trust another level of implication.

Keywords: populism, political trust, electoral participation, non-nationalized participation.

1. Introduction

Populism is hardly new to western democracies, and has received increased support recently among western democracies with the strong presence of Donald Trump as U.S. president, Marine Le Pen in French, and the Italian Five Star Movement. Despite the debate over its precise definition and its implications on liberal democracy, a great amount of work has focused on the demand-side explanations for the rise of populism, largely confined to the question that either economic inequality or cultural values determine the populist mass support. This leaves out of the discussion the interaction between demand-side factors that may influence individual attitudes towards populism, and the role of supply that determines the strength of populist parties, i.e. factors that determine the extent to which they can actually mobilize those potential supporters to vote for them. To further the discussion from these aspects, this paper attempts to complex the model for the rise of populism by highlighting the role of another factor, political trust, that has commonly been under-analyzed or even mistaken. However, the intention is not to argue that political trust should be treated as an independent determinant. This paper only serves as a starting point for discussions incorporating the interaction both inside demand-side factors and between the demand- and the supply-side, and attempts to add to the discussion of political trust another level of implication.

This paper will be developed in the following structure. The next section will outline what is populism and review previous explanations for the success of populist parties, mostly from the perspective of the demands for populism. The section after that will firstly conceptualize political trust and its relevance to the populist attitudes, especially to the interplay of different demand-side factors in the process of individual attitude formation. Then based on previous theoretical and empirical work, this paper will explain the mechanism for political trust stimulating populism through electoral participation and non-institutionalized participation, which works both on the demand- and the supply-side.

2. Concept of Populism and Explanations for its Rise

Populism is a notoriously vague concept. It has been defined as a discourse [1], a political style [2], and a “thin” ideology, a limited set of concepts of the political world [3, 4, 5]. Despite such divergence, it is generally agreed that the core of populism is the antagonistic relationship between “the people” and “the elite” [3, 4, 5, 6, 7]. As Canovan [6] well illustrated, this core underlies populism’s main characteristics: the discourse legitimizing itself as representing “the people”; the style marked with simple and direct language, analyses, and policies; and the mood with a flavor of political renewal, which leads to charismatic leadership and centralized organizational structure. Since these characteristics suffice to outline the phenomenon of populism, this paper will not continue the discussion of the precise definition of populism.

Populism has been a common phenomenon in western democracies since the early 1990s with a great bulk of explanations emerging on that [4]. Mudde [7] reviewed the populist radical right literature with a trichotomy framework: the demand-side of the breeding ground for them; the external supply-side of the “political opportunity structure” concerning the institutional, political, cultural context, and the media; and the internal supply-side of factors directly related to those parties, i.e. ideology, leadership, and organization. Not limited to the radical right, this framework has been applied to populist parties in a broader sense [8, 9, 10]. The majority of articles fall within the demand-side range, seeking to explain what makes people prone to populist parties’ appeal [7]. These articles can be grouped into two: one linking the mass support of populism with economic inequality, commonly arising from the social-level economic structural change [8, 9]; and the other one emphasizing the consequences of cultural backlash against waves of progressive values since the last half century [10]. The debate in this range so far is largely confined to which one is the determinant of mass populist support.

No matter what the conclusion might be, two questions remain. The first one concerns the interaction between these demand-side factors. Though it has been acknowledged that economic and cultural factors interact on the micro-level [8, 10], the mechanism of such interaction is left unclear. However, individual attitudes are highly endogenous. Individuals give priority to different factors based on their experience. Without considering the interplay between these factors and the possibility that this interplay may change the level of importance individuals give to, say their economic grievances, it risks oversimplifying the demand-side model and misidentifying the potential voters of populist parties.

The second question is to what extent individual attitudes can be translated into actual populist support. Even if one perfectly fits the profile of potential populist voter, one may not actually vote for populist parties in elections. The supply-side, therefore, is more crucial to explain why potential voters are mobilized more or less by populist parties [7, 11]. Giving insights on that, Guiso et al. [9] linked economic insecurity with the supply-side, suggesting that abstention caused by economic factors provides electoral space for populist parties to emerge and to choose a favorable orientation. Nevertheless, this model is limited in that it focused more on the initial stage of populist parties, but few on how after entry they mobilize their potential voters to gain electoral breakthrough. That is to say, more explanations on the supply-side and also the interaction between the demand- and the supply-side are needed.

This paper therefore attempts to address these two questions by highlighting the role of another factor, political trust. The next section will firstly discuss the relevance of political trust to populist demands, and then focus on how low levels of political trust stimulate populism on both the demand- and the supply-side through its influence on electoral and non-institutionalized participation.

3. Linkages between Political Trust and Populism

Political trust is not new in the theme of populism, yet only a few studies directly linked it to populism [12, 13]. More often than not, it was simplified as a product of economic conditions [8], a channel through which economic insecurity influences populist support and populist parties [9], or one of the cultural variables [10]. Some empirical research equated it as satisfaction of government

and democracy [10] while some equated it as trust in politicians and observed a totally different, positive relationship between trust and populism [14]. However, political trust is more complex than indicated above.

Political trust can be understood as individuals' evaluation of political institutions based on their normative expectations [15]. It is theoretically distinguished from the general concept of political support in that: (1) it is a form of diffuse support independent of specific outputs; (2) its objects are neither too generally supported as democratic principles nor too specific as political actors or policies; (3) it indicates the degree to which individuals perceive they are uncertain about and/or vulnerable to objects' future behavior [15]. In similar ways, Grönlund and Setälä [16] differentiated political trust from satisfaction that is more limited to individuals' attitudes towards policy outcomes.

Then, how is political trust relevant to the discussion of populism? As Canovan [6] elaborated on, populism draw strength from the inevitable tensions between the two faces of democracy: the redemptive face as a vision promising people perfection, power and direct expression of will, and the pragmatic face as a system in nature a business of politics, a restriction of power and the mediation of voice. If individuals regard the established system incapable of dealing with these tensions well enough by their criteria, they may tend to populism which promise a version of democracy closer to their vision. Political trust as an evaluation of democratic institutions and procedure, i.e. the pragmatic democracy, inherently incorporates individuals' perception of how well the established system can resolve these tensions. In this sense, compared with other demand-side factors, political trust more directly indicates individual proneness to populist appeal.

Moreover, political trust integrates in its evaluation the interaction between different demand-side factors. Political trust is jointly determined by various factors and the standard to which individuals make evaluations. Factors including both economic and cultural factors, and other factors as corruptions all play a role, but individuals evaluate these factors according to their subjective values, their related experience, or the way they compare their situations with other nations or historical performance [15]. Such subjectivity, however, enables political trust to more comprehensively reflect individual attitudes. For example, individuals may attribute their economic grievances to government to a lesser degree if they have experience of receiving aid from governmental agencies. This variance owing to the interplay between different factors cannot be shown by individual level of economic insecurity, but is inherent in the evaluation process of political trust.

Therefore, political trust cannot be simply regarded as part of economic or cultural factors in the discussion. It has its own contribution to populism through institutionalized and non-institutionalized participation, the former one directly related to the electoral process or political institutions while the latter to unconventional political activities outside political institutions [13]. Electorally, similar to other demand-side factors, political trust decline increases voters' propensity to vote for populist parties in elections [12, 17]. Meanwhile, political trust is found to be positively linked to voter turnout, and its absence is generally regarded as an important explanation for the increase in abstention [12, 13, 16, 17]. As Guiso et al. [9] illustrated, abstention in turn provides space for populist parties to enter the competition and to choose a favorable orientation.

More on the supply-side, low levels of political trust encourage non-institutionalized participation [13, 18] that facilitates the success of populist parties in three ways. To begin with, denoted by Inglehart (1997), unconventional political activities are often led by non-elites as a challenge or access to the elite-led political system (cited in [13]). Increasing non-institutionalized activities, assisted by the mass media, therefore creates an environment unfavorable to the establishment while tolerant to the challengers. Secondly, since non-institutionalized activities are usually goal-oriented and issue-specific [13], such environment enables populist parties to more easily tap into public demands. More specifically, populist parties can not only strategically choose the timing of entry and their orientation [9], but also strategically put emphasis on issues the public care and dynamically adjust the way they present their ideology and their leadership to better mobilize their potential voters. Thirdly, populist parties can themselves launch unconventional political activities or reorient them to issues favorable to them, e.g. economic inequality. By doing so, populist parties can further fuel public demands for

change or public distrust of the establishment, which in turn creates more grounds for their mobilization.

4. Summary

In sum, political trust more directly and comprehensively reflects individual proneness to populism, and influences both the external and internal supply of populism. Electorally, it is linked with individuals' propensity to vote for populist parties. Moreover, distrusting voters tend to abstain from electoral participation and opt for non-institutionalized participation, providing both electoral space and a favorable environment for populist parties. Meanwhile, increasing non-institutionalized activities enable populist parties to strategically present themselves and participate in social discussions or movements to further drive public demands, which in turn supplies them with more chances to succeed.

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