EUROPE 23.10.2019 | Marcus Roberts

'That depends on your politics!'

Non-members elect the party leader: YouGov's Marcus Roberts on whether the UK Labour Party's experiment worked out

Read this interview in German.

In 2013, the UK Labour Party opened up the election of its leader to non-members – if they signed up and paid £3. How has that worked out for the party?

The answer is: that depends on your politics!

If you are a Corbynista you're thrilled. You believe that the changes brought in by former Labour Leader Ed Miliband helped create the structure to channel the hundreds of thousands of new supporters Jeremy Corbyn's establishment-shattering, surprise leadership win enthused.

But if you're of the Labour old guard, you fear that it opened the floodgates to too many clicktavists more interested in social media likes than knocking on doors for elections. What's worse for the many Labour MPs who still oppose Corbyn is that the party has shifted too far to the left and is stuck with a potentially unelectable but popular leader.

What type of candidate can benefit from such an open model of political organising?

Open political models benefit fast growing, grassroots propositions. The low cost of entry acts as both their great advantage and their fundamental challenge because on the one hand they can rapidly attract large numbers of new recruits through their mass market low cost infrastructure but on the other hand, those they attract tend to be less invested, and more transient.

Politically, this aids candidates that fall outside of the mainstream, but capture the public imagination – like Jeremy Corbyn or Bernie Sanders on the left or Boris Johnson or Donald Trump on the right.

This may well lead to a further polarisation of politics as such candidates tend to excite their party bases at a cost to the common ground of national politics.

This need not always be the case however, as Mayor Pete Buttigieg and Senators Kamala Harris and Elizabeth Warren are proving in the Democratic primaries at present, sometimes being a fresh face and/or offering bold politics is enough to capture the insurgent, anti-establishment spirit of these times.

What are the risks and opportunities of such a process?

There are electoral advantages, structural risks and moral questions posed by such a process.

Electorally, it can be attractive in the short term as more base-driven politics leads to greater clarity of political position, more radical policy agendas and a corresponding uptick in support for the party from a re-energised coalition that welcomes the turn-away from the grey compromise politics of the past. This can lead to a surge of support and in electoral systems that reward plurality as opposed to majority winners election wins can be eked out accordingly.

Structurally this can lead to the party changing its voter coalition, as has been the case with Corbyn's Labour, from a smaller, more solid and reliable base of support (roughly 30 per cent nationally) to a larger, more fragile pool of support (40 per cent in 2017 veering to 20 per cent in 2019).

What's more, this can come at a cost to sustainability in the way the nation is itself governed as parties have less incentives to co-operate on a bipartisan basis as they fear their base's reaction more – see the Democrats and the Republicans in Congress for proof of this over decades now!

What does this mean for the political discourse ?

There's further damage to the national discourse as political opponents shift from being people who you disagree with to being those who are morally wrong. This intensification of partisanship through a shift from normal politics to moral opposition can create dangerous and potentially lasting fissures and cleavages in society itself. Something foreign adversaries such as Russia are all too adept at exploiting.

Did Labour manage to attract young hopefuls to the party?

Yes for the membership; yes at first for voters; then later no for voters.

In essence, Labour's new structure allowed for Jeremy Corbyn to easily bring in large numbers of new members. Over 100,000 young people were inspired by him to join Labour.

Then in the 2017 general election young people (particularly 25-39 year olds) showed up in higher than usual numbers boosting Labour's fortunes dramatically.

But the story of the post-2017 period has been that of disillusionment with Corbyn's Labour. The chief reason for this is his refusal to clearly oppose Brexit, but Labour's antisemitism crisis has also played a part in rocking the moral foundations of the Corbyn experiment. The consequence electorally has been a major shift in young people support away from Labour to the Brexit-opposing Liberal Democrats.

Simply put, young voters may join for the candidate, but they must be sustained by the politics.

This interview was conducted by Joanna Itzek.



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