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The centre hasn't lost populist right voters (yet)

Support for right-wing populists isn't that deep and coherent. That's why the centre shouldn't shift further to the right

Right-wing populist parties won a significant share of votes in the recent European Parliament elections. While their presence in the European Parliament will be felt, their success remained below what many had feared.

Still, observers worry that populist right wing parties' advances mean yet more voters are 'lost', having definitely and irrevocably abandoned the values of an open society. This assumption is not only counterproductive but wrong. Even amongst those who vote for them, support is not as deep and coherent as often suggested.

There are many people who support right-wing populists, but who still believe in the fundamental principles of liberal democracy. Mainstream parties should not give up on them, but reach out – not by mimicking the polarising extremes of the right, but by building on the common ground that is still shared.

More nationalistic

Because of their significantly different attitudes compared to the overall population on issues such as immigration, it's indeed easy to think of voters of populist-right parties as altogether 'lost' to their nationalist and exclusionary arguments. Supporters of parties, such as the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany, Italy's Lega, Hungary's Fidesz or Rassemblement National (RN) in France hold views that tend to be more nationalistic across many domains than supporters of other parties.

While, for example, 35 per cent of people across those four countries think that it's absolutely essential for a good society 'that as few migrants as possible come to their countries', the percentages are much higher

amongst supporters of populist right parties. As many as four in five Fidesz and three quarters of Lega supporters agree with the statement as well as around two thirds of RN and six in ten AfD supporters.

Some have taken such tendencies to imply that mainstream parties need to adopt the views of the right and emphasise inward-looking views in opposition to alleged liberal, cosmopolitan values. That, however, is misguided, as representative data from our research project 'Voices on Values' demonstrates.

Shifting right is not the answer

The views of voters of populist-right parties are more heterogeneous and complex. While some exclusively hold extreme positions, most do not. A clear majority of supporters of such parties, for example, considers the protection of minority rights absolutely or rather essential for a good society, ranging from 59 per cent of RN supporters, to 76 per cent amongst those supporting the AfD and over 80 percent for Lega and Fidesz voters.

By shifting further to the right, seeking to appeal to more voters, mainstream parties miss the opportunity for a conversation grounded in fundamentally democratic views.

We see a similar picture with regards to freedom of religion. Just under six in ten AfD and RN supporters, two thirds of Lega voters and 80 per cent of those backing Fidesz feel that everyone should be able to follow their religion as they see fit.

It's a common mistake to assume that everyone holding right-wing attitudes has abandoned liberal values altogether. This only applies to a minority of the voters of populist right parties. Across these parties the percentage of people who embrace inward-looking, closed society values, but reject liberal, open society values ranges from only six to 15 percent.

The majority isn't extreme

The majority has not fallen for extreme positions, but rather values both attributes of open societies (such as protection of minorities, freedom of religion and expression and opportunities to criticise the government) and, simultaneously, characteristics of closed societies (such as a more ethnic conception of citizenship, scepticism towards migration and an emphasis of a majoritarian culture). 67 per cent of RN supporters fall

into this group, the same applies to 77 per cent of those favouring the AfD and 82 and 85 per cent respectively for Fidesz and Lega voters.

These findings remind us that people vote for parties for a variety of reasons. Some do, because they fully agree with the ideology proposed. Others respond to specific issues and some select them in opposition to other, often established, parties. There's variation in the profiles of populist right voters.

Understanding this is crucial to avoid mistakes that will eventually strengthen parties emphasising closed, nationalist societies. It is counter-productive to portray the voters supporting them as coherently extreme, opposed to all liberal values and ultimately 'lost'. Doing so restricts our ability to engage based on our common ground; the liberal democratic values many still share.

Similarly, trying to simply adopt the positions of the right will lead to a failure of centrist parties, as we have seen in many member states during these elections. By shifting further to the right, seeking to appeal to more voters, mainstream parties miss the opportunity for a conversation grounded in fundamentally democratic views.

Rather than assuming that all voters of populist right parties are as extreme in their views as the leaders of those parties and conceding ground to them, supporters of open societies should aim to engage by emphasising the commonalities across the population – and not inadvertently push people into greater polarisation.



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