

POLICY BRIEF

POPULISM AND THE POLITICAL PROCESS IN AUSTRALIA

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Executive summary

The world is currently going through a populist moment where stable and tolerant democracies across Asia, Europe and the Americas are witnessing the unprecedented success of what were once considered extreme political views.

The Australian Government (the government) needs to ensure its democratic institutions and political processes are equipped to withstand the potentially harmful impacts of this phenomenon.

Communication strategies must be modified to revitalise the support and trust of the Australian people, combatting the social media-heavy strategies of populist opponents.

The government should implement the following:

1. Ensure proper democratic processes are maintained so democratic institutions can withstand the potentially detrimental impacts of populism.
2. Educate the public on their valuable roles within the democratic system and encourage political parties to better engage with and represent constituents.
3. Listen to the public's needs and address issues of importance by communicating these in a simple and effective manner.
4. Consider new methods such as live Q&A videos on social media as a way of prioritising consultation with the public on issues that matter to them.

Background

Institutions

Australia must confront the challenges populism poses to democratic institutions. Rising authoritarianism has left fewer democracies worldwide than two decades ago, with many giving way to illiberal democratic regimes.

Communication

Voters on both the left and right of the political spectrum increasingly claim that their needs are not being served by mainstream parties, leading to a loss of trust in the government. Populist leaders fuel this cynicism by emphasising an 'us versus them' mentality and use charisma and purported authenticity to gain an advantage over the alleged 'elites.'

The challenge

Populism undermines Australian democratic institutions and political processes at a time when these must be strengthened. When populism flourishes the rights of minority groups are threatened. A robust and innovative communication strategy is necessary to mitigate the threats posed by rising populism within Australia.

Recommendations

(1) Democratic Institutions

The populist phenomenon has gone through important changes to evolve into what it is today. Crucially, it presents a threat to democratic procedures and institutions. Democratic institutions need to be protected by restoring public confidence in their work.

Populists often create a discourse that excludes certain demographics of people and erodes democratic integrity. This can result in intolerant, racist and xenophobic discourse toward vulnerable groups. Populists challenge democratic integrity by painting their opponents as enemies and evil. This rejection of the traditional democratic debate threatens the integrity of the political system.

Populism has created a substantial lack of public confidence in democratic institutions and politicians. In 2016, a key survey saw that 40 per cent of registered American voters have lost faith in democracy. Most of these voters identified themselves as Trump supporters. Within Australia, we have seen large amounts of disenfranchisement with major political parties. Only 30 per cent of voters took interest in the federal election campaign.

Democratic processes are under significant threat. President Duterte of the Philippines launched a controversial war on drugs that ignored legal processes and used populist rhetoric to stifle out human rights activism. Police forces were used in the anti-drug operations and accusations of extra-judicial killings of drug suspects without a trial. This operation has claimed more than 12, 000 lives. President Duterte's actions demonstrate the threat populism and its leaders can bring to bear on democratic processes and procedures.

(2) Engaging Democracy

Democracy is not opposed to populism but has limited capacity to protect fundamental principles of the system. As a consequence, liberal democracies have become vulnerable to the rise of these movements. For democracy to be sustained, incumbents and challengers must engage with the same fundamental rules of the system that are threatened by populist movements. Political disillusionment is evident globally, with citizens growing restless and disgruntled with an apparently stagnant political system.

Populism boosts competition of ideas, re-energises dialogue on dismissed issues and pushes political parties to offer more for their constituents. However, the thawing of the system is not benign. Populist leaders do not simply provide ideological alternatives, they challenge the fundamental rules and norms of democracy.

This challenge has fuelled the trend of placing one's trust and one's vote in the hands of a charismatic leader who claims to know, understand and fight for the people against a nefarious establishment. While relying on democratic tools and infrastructure, populism is rewriting the rules that allow democracy to function. Within populist movements the political elite constitutes a diabolic player, justifying violations of what is acceptable in practice.

In recent years, fledgling democracies have succumbed to illiberal democracies or electoral dictatorships. Historical precedent points to the tendency to rewrite principles on executive power, democratic limitations and the political process.

For democracy to be sustained, incumbents and challengers must engage with the same rules.

To counter the rise of populism, the government needs to understand and appreciate its relationship with democracy. Major political parties need to do more for their constituents and engage with sectors of society that are alienated from political discourse. If political parties can better represent an engaged public that understands their function within the democratic system, there will be less impetus to turn to populists.

(3) Communication Style

The government needs to understand the successful aspects of populist communication strategies and use them to engage the public and shore up the foundation of the democratic system. Support for populists has surged due to their effective ability to communicate to their audience. Research has shown that there are three core reasons why populists are able to capture audiences' attention and support.

1. Populist leaders reduce complexity by using simple language, whereas mainstream politics use jargon that the average person cannot follow. It is recommended that the government takes its complex ideas and policies and communicates them in a more simple manner that people can connect with.
2. Populists rely on emotions to persuade supporters. Studies indicate non-populist appeals are unable to stimulate emotions as strongly as populist ones. Populists manipulate audiences' that already harness anger by blaming those in power for societal injustice and inequality. By eliciting this anger, populists are more likely

to change attitudes and increase votes. Emotions can play a significant role in decision making. The government should, therefore, increase their use of emotive language and ideas to gain the support of the public.

3. Populists will use or depict a crisis to persuade audiences that their needs are not being met by mainstream politics. This puts people in an uneasy situation where they desire direction and solutions. Populist parties use this to assert themselves as the sole group who acknowledge the people, assuring them they will solve the crisis. This gives the populist leader semi-authoritarian power, which represents a significant threat to democracy.

Crises can be a sign of ineffectual politics whereby societal interests and values are not reflected in policies. To avoid this it is recommended that the government communicates the matters that concern the Australian public most by listening to their needs and addressing them. This appeases the public and decreases the likelihood of voters being persuaded by populists.

(4) Social Media Strategy

Current social media strategies should be adjusted to increase engagement and provide a forum for discussion. With more than 15 million Australians on Facebook, the focus should be on using this platform for regular interaction and generating two-way conversations, rather than simply making announcements.

Broadcasting live videos on Facebook allows the Government to hold virtual "town hall meetings". For example, former foreign minister Julie Bishop's live Q&A regarding the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper made "foreign policy less foreign" to the Australian public.

The former prime minister Malcolm Turnbull has appeared in similar live videos. During these videos, viewers asked questions in real time via the comments. The Ministers were able to personalise the interaction, greeting viewers by name and responding live. While the new prime minister Scott Morrison has started posting short casual videos that aim to strip policy of jargon, these do not offer citizens the notion of a conversation.

Populists tap into the frustration people experience when they feel their voices are not being heard. Currently, tools like Facebook live Q&As are underutilised. By harnessing these more effectively, the government could address this frustration by demonstrating an interest in individual concerns.

Conclusion

This brief proposes the adoption of four recommendations:

1. Ensure proper democratic processes are maintained to better equip and protect democratic institutions.
2. Appreciate the dynamic between populism and democracy, enabling public education and greater political participation.
3. Engage with the needs of the Australian population through clear and emotive channels.
4. Utilise prominent media platforms such as Facebook, challenging the populist-hold on such communication channels.

Understanding and responding to the projected impact of populism on democratic institutions, political processes and government communication needs to be a priority of the Australian government. With the development of an effective strategy to combat the threat of populism, the government will be able to mitigate potentially harmful repercussions.