## Populism, extremism and the mainstream in Europe's identity politics

**A Policy Network/Barrow Cadbury Trust Project**

Identity politics in Europe has moved from race to immigration to culture to Euro-scepticism and nation. Anti-muslim sentiment cuts across all of these anxieties so it has come to the fore; it is by no means limited to this alone, however. The response of mainstream politics – with particular reference to social democratic parties and movements - has been weak, as it has failed to fit the politics of identity with its traditional political framework. There has been a pattern of first evasion, then panic, overreaction, defeat and then despondency.

Conservative politics has been far accommodating to identity politics. However, as conservative parties attempt to straddle the interests of the business community and express settled notions of culture, they too face a dilemma: a friction between liberal global markets and defence of a perceived way of life. While better able and more willing to respond to the politics of identity, the centre-right, therefore, will also face tensions that it may only be able to cope with for short periods of time.

With both mainstream political forces unable to coherently respond to the politics of culture and identity for any period of time, other political forces have been able to step into a perceived political vacuum. There have been two types of broad response with a degree of crossover between the two: populism and extremism. While populism is not necessarily negative more broadly, it is likely to be so in the arena of identity politics. Extremism is distinguished by its flirtation or embrace of physical threat and aggression – political, emotional or physical.

The temptation has been to see the rise of the English Defence League in the UK, Jobbik in Hungary, the Sweden Democrats, the PVV in the Netherlands, or the FPÖ in Austria as class politics pursued through a different means. The fact that all these parties, organisations and movements are so diverse should, instead, draw us away from simple and convenient explanations. Instead, there needs to be a deeper understanding of the way that identity and class interact. Alongside this, there is an important discussion about the nature of different right-wing movements, and how mainstream politics creates a space for and responds to populism and extremism. Failure has been more typical than success.

The purpose of this new project is to take understanding of this interplay to a new level and to build practical insight into the interrelationship of the mainstream, populism and extremism.

The project will consist of three seminars which will focus in turn on the UK, northern Europe and continental Europe. It will bring together research, case-studies and briefings to investigate the key research questions outlined below. Following the seminars, a final paper will be produced, complete with European case studies of how the antagonistic and corrosive aspects of identity politics has been resisted and defeated – and where mainstream politics has failed.

**Key research questions**

The project will explore and suggest exploratory hypotheses based on initial evidence in answer to the following questions:

   • What are the distinguishing features of mainstream, populist and extremist political movements?

   • What are the conditions – political, constitutional, cultural or economic - in which populism/extremism is able to thrive?

   • How do these different political approaches overlap, connect and where are barriers between them? And how does each political 'style' handle different political issues, eg the EU, ethnic and cultural relations, economic and social change or the politics of nation and the functioning of democracy itself?

   • Where are there good examples of campaigns, political strategies and policy responses at a community and national level which have successfully neutralised antagonistic political forces?

   • How have parties been able to accommodate and absorb populist or even extremist symbols and arguments? What are the limits of absorption from both a political and ethical standpoint?

**Final paper**
The final paper will draw together:

   • Analysis of the interrelationship and interaction between the mainstream, populism and extremism.

• Define the characteristics of each of these political 'styles' drawn from the analysis of the three seminars.

• Assess similarities and differences between the contexts for challenge and change in each country case.

• Consider how parties have responded to these challenges to the mainstream – where they have tried to absorb the threat and where they have not.

• Analyse the opportunities for populism and extremism created by the failure of the political mainstream.

• Demonstrate through case studies some effective responses of the mainstream to populism and extremism.

• Country specific analysis from selected seminar contributors.


**Conclusion**

This project is designed to develop understanding of identity politics in two main ways: considering the mainstream, populism and extremism as connected and interrelated and to develop a knowledge base of the strategies and approaches that have had some success in confronting populism and extremism. It is designed to feed into strategic political considerations but also the organisational strategies of campaign groups and community organisations. The purpose is to counteract the rise of an antagonistic rather than unifying identity politics that creates false division and breeds hate and violence.