Trust, Cynicism and Populist Anti-Politics

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Abstract

This paper addresses a number of inter-related issues. Its overall focus is the decline of traditional participation on the one hand and the concomitant emergence of support for alternative politics of a populist type. It has often been argued that the increasing focus on scandals and corruption has done much to alienate voters from traditional politics and that this alienation has, in turn, resulted in what might be termed a ‘soap-operatisation’ of politics, with an attendant diminution of trust in political institutions (Cohen, 1999; O’Neil, 2002). We contend that, while reducing political events to variants of soap-operas (with the demystification and banalisation of politics to which this gives rise) has had profound effects on the public perception of the political and political institutions, the result may not be simply a lack of, or diminution of, trust in politicians and political institutions, but rather a growth in cynicism. The paper argues that while cynicism is often assumed to be a component of the decline in trust in institutions (Offe, 1999) the two are, in fact, different and can give rise to different manifestations.

We address the difference between the two concepts and develop a hypothesis whereby supporters of populist alternatives can be located within two attitudinal clusters; we examine the characteristics pertaining to each cluster and tentatively conclude that each set of attitudes gives rise to distinct political choices and political behaviour. A major element of our argument is that, with respect to populist politicians and populist political parties, we can establish that a cynical view of politics and political institutions will tend to produce individuals who support ‘political entrepreneurs’ such as Berlusconi, Perot or Schwarzenegger; while a real distrust in institutions will translate into support for a populism of the radical right such as that of a Le Pen or Haider. Lack of trust is said to lead to populism as an ‘extra-institutional short-cut to political trust’ (Offe, 1999) but our argument leads us to a differentiation between variants of populism – something which the contemporary literature on populism fails to do – based on the initial rationale for its emergence. Finally, we conclude that, not only is the conflation of mistrust and cynicism problematic for the study of populism (as a form of ‘anti-politics’), but that, more generally, this conflation has hindered our understanding of the nature of the trust relationship between individuals and institutions.
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The conventional explanation of the rise of populist parties in Western Europe is premised on the pivotal role of popular disillusionment with mainstream political parties. Amongst the principal reasons adduced for such disillusionment is the perceived rise of corruption, which is believed to be particularly damaging for democratic legitimacy:

One of the dangers of political scandals is that they can help to produce an attitude of deep distrust among some sectors of the population, leading to diminishing levels of interest and participation. (…) And a society in which significant sectors of the population have effectively given up their stake in the political process, turning their backs on a political system they judge to be irredeemably flawed or corrupt, is not a society with a strong and vibrant democracy (Thompson, 2000: 258-9).

The argument we seek to develop in this paper is that such an understanding fails to capture a much more complex set of relationships between corruption, trust and the rise of populism. Rather than an argument in which corruption is identified as the primary trigger for alienation from mainstream politics, we argue instead:

a. trust in the public institutions which comprise what we term ‘political space’ (political parties, government departments, the media, etc.) is dependent on a clear understanding of their role and where their legitimate boundaries lie;

b. corruption scandals, and the way they are instrumentalised and mediated through the press and television has a key impact on the perceived boundaries of public institutions, either reinforcing or blurring traditional lines of demarcation between the political class, the media, the judiciary and corporate interests;

c. if the lines of demarcation are reinforced, then disillusionment with mainstream politics is likely to lead to what we term traditional alienated populism, whereas a blurring of these lines creates opportunities for the emergence of what we term entrepreneurial populism;

d. where trust in public institutions remains relatively high, even in spite of corruption scandals, populist alternatives of either type are unlikely to prosper.

The paper is structured in five sections. In the first, we outline the distinction between lack of trust and cynicism, building on Sartori’s analysis of anti-system parties. The second section looks in more detail at the issue of trust and its relationship to institutions. In the third
section, we discuss the political instrumentalisation of scandals and the crucial role of the media. Section Four discusses in greater depth different forms of populism, and in the final section we outline some preliminary findings from our analysis of data provided in the third wave European Values Study 1999/2000.

A word of warning is in order at the outset. This paper represents work which is very much in progress – in reality, only just begun. What we have sought to do, therefore, is to outline the arguments we hope to explore in more detail, but we are conscious that the data we have used can provide only the most preliminary indication of support for these arguments; moreover, we are also aware of the need for more fine-grained and longitudinal data to develop the arguments in more detail.

1. Anti-system parties: lack of trust versus cynicism

There is a significant argument to be made here in party political terms and with regard to the role and nature of anti-system parties. We have gone back to Sartori’s analysis of polarized pluralism and examined more carefully his argument concerning the role of anti-system parties in party systems. For Sartori, an anti-system party is a party that is opposed to the system. These parties, writes Sartori cover a wide range of attitudes ‘ranging from alienation and total refusal to “protest”’ (Sartori, 1976: 132). But importantly for our argument, what these different types of anti-system parties have in common is their ‘delegitimizing impact’. All of these parties ‘share the property of questioning a regime and of undermining its base of support. Accordingly, a party can be defined as anti-system whenever it undermines the legitimacy of the regime it opposes. (…) the political system faces a crisis of legitimacy.’ (Sartori, 1976: 132-3). Sartori, however, goes on to distinguish between an opposition to issues and an opposition of principle. Anti-system parties fall under the second heading.

For our purposes, what struck us as compelling is that while traditional populist parties as the French Front National (FN) fall into this category of principled opposition, parties such as Forza Italia draw their strength from a rather different type of opposition, which seems to us to escape the categorisation put forward by Sartori, insofar as the opposition is not to the concept of the Italian Republic (in France the FN opposes French Republicanism), but rather an opposition to the workings of this Republic, a specific instance of Republicanism. Further, the opposition is of a particular type because, rather than oppose the system, the strategy is to ‘play it’. In contrast to Sartori’s framework, therefore, we seek to identify two very different anti-system attitudes, at least one of which has not been properly categorised in the existing literature. Our argument is that the anti-system parties of the Forza Italia type are a new
phenomenon based on a new assessment of the relationship between trust in individuals and trust in institutions, which is in turn largely structured by the media.

A lack of trust in institutions has been blamed for both voter apathy and populist mobilisation. It has become widely accepted that generalised trust leads to a variety of social and individual benefits and that declining levels of trust lead, correspondingly, to a loosening of the social and political fabric. Explanations of the rise of right-wing populism have made much of this, and they rely increasingly on mantra-like statements about the lack of trust in politicians caused by scandals and corruption, the public’s disaffection with traditional representative institutions and the role of these populist parties as receptacles for resentment and alienation in the face of untrustworthy institutions.

While some of this may well be accurate, two things are striking. The first is that the populist politics to which we refer can look very different from one place to another. Berlusconi has little to do with Le Pen, and their voters differ radically. Similarly, the similarities between a Pym Fortuyn and a Jorg Haider are tenuous. They share enough so that the label ‘populist’ fits, if not like a glove, then certainly like a useful pair of loose overalls. But what separates them is almost as significant as what draws them together. We think we can discern at least two types of populism here: one a ‘traditional populism’, led by anti-intellectual strong men with direct links to the very robust right. The other is a right-wing populism, which can be referred to as ‘entrepreneurial populism’, led by leaders who may have a common touch, but who are highly successful businessmen and whose rhetoric is far-removed from the strident anti-immigrant and xenophobic rhetoric of the traditional populists. The second striking aspect of the contexts in which these parties arise is that, while voters may be alienated from institutions, some of them obviously bother to vote and, when polled, a large majority of them do trust their government to be democratic and a democratic system to be the best solution.

Given this, we hypothesise that there are two types of reaction at play: cynicism leading to entrepreneurial populism, on the one hand, and lack of trust (or, in Sartori’s terms, alienation) leading to traditional populism, on the other. We contend that, while it may be a question of degree rather than quality, the two are actually quite different. Lack of trust can be summarised as an unwillingness to rely on, or make yourself vulnerable to, a particular party. A lack of interpersonal trust would mean a reluctance to place oneself in a vulnerable position, i.e. in a position of potential loss or danger, with respect to another party. We do not trust that this person will look out for our best interests and fear that they may disregard them or our safety. Lack of generalised trust refers to our sense that relying upon a particular group or institutionalised group makes little sense and, again, places us in a position in which our
vulnerability might be exploited, or at the very least not protected. In other words lack of trust leads to fearfulness and an unwillingness to take chances for fear of being taken advantage of or instrumentalised. Eventually this leads to a declining spiral of engagement with that particular party and, finally to withdrawal and, in the worst possible case, alienation from that party.

Cynicism, however, presents different characteristics. Where lack of trust signals an unwillingness to engage for fear of being ‘taken advantage of’, cynicism merely signifies a willingness to engage but with lower expectations. As cynics we expect to be disappointed, we hold few hopes that our engagement will be rewarded to the extent or in the manner in which we are led to believe that it will be. So, I may not trust the institutions that structure political life but I am willing to act as if I did because there is something to be gained from that engagement. Even if that gain may be a perverse by-product. Cynicism is thus stronger than the ‘healthy scepticism’ of the ‘knowing’ voter, who has a realistic sense of what can and cannot be achieved by politicians, and happily subscribes to the Churchillian notion that democracy is the worst of all political systems, except for all the others. Unlike the cynical voter, who has low expectations but seeks some trade-off from participation, the healthy sceptic is more tolerant of the imperfections of the democratic system and therefore more ready to abide by its face-value rules. In order to test these arguments, we have focused on the following European democracies: France and Austria, where ‘traditional populism’ has seen some success in the shape of Le Pen and Haider; Italy, where ‘entrepreneurial populism’ has prospered under Berlusconi; and Germany, Spain and the UK, where neither traditional nor entrepreneurial populism has gained a strong foothold.

2. Trust and institutions
To relate trust to institutions is problematic because trust is something that we experience primarily on an inter-personal level. Hardin for example, goes as far as to argue that it makes no sense to trust a specific institution or set of institutions because we do not have sufficient knowledge of them to base our trust on anything significant (Hardin, 1991, 1996).

Similarly, Putnam’s conception of trust fudges the issue as to how one moves from particularized (interpersonal) trust to generalized trust (trust in strangers). The picture that emerges is one in which there are at least two different types of trust at play: one type is rooted in Hardin’s notion that we can only trust someone if we have reason to think that they will act in our interest or ‘as our agent’, as Hardin puts it, on a specific matter. This is the case of particularized trust. The other type of trust, however, which affects cooperative behaviour in the larger society, is in fact based on the very opposite of Hardin’s premise,
namely on the assumption that an institution will be no one’s agent and will not act on behalf of particular interests (Rothstein, 2000). We place our trust in institutions precisely because we ‘trust’ that they will act impartially. And this trust stems from the fact that while the outcome of an institutional process may not be ‘in our favour’, the process itself was impartial. The nature of the process therefore, is what in great part legitimates trust in an institution. For this trust in the process to exist that process must be publicly debated, agreed upon and transparent throughout. Reconnecting with a Rousseau-ian vision, neo-institutionalism underscores the fact that the process by which the rules are agreed upon and the transparency of that process form the basis of the institution itself. Part of the trust stems from our having been (however remotely) engaged in the process of deciding upon the nature of the legitimate process to be adopted from now on. We cooperate in creating the venues for cooperative behaviour.

What this also points to, however, is another underspecified area of theories of social capital, and that is the mechanism by which – if any – one moves from one type of trust to the other. Putnam assumes that they are related. Neo-institutionalists have shown how this is so by opening up the contents of the institutional black box to reveal the role of individuals within them and by highlighting the nature of the links between civil society and institutions.

Fukuyama (1995) for example, argued that democratic societies draw on stored social capital. He roots social capital in what he calls ‘pre-modern cultural habits’ which are based on the face-to-face relations of small communities. The growth of communities and the development of a ‘rights’ culture are, according to him, what accounts for the erosion of social capital, the decline of cooperative behaviour and, as a result, the decline of both American capitalism and American democracy. Yet authors such as Zucker (1986) have argued convincingly that the US economy began to grow at its most rapid when it was able to separate trust from the characteristics that Fukuyama attaches to small communities. According to Zucker, the US economy began to develop institutional means of producing trust in the second half of the nineteenth century, a period corresponding to the emergence of the US as a world power.

In other words, once the community had given itself the means to transcend the limits of interpersonal trust, it was able to generate the forms of cooperation necessary for its expansion and thriving. Luhmann (1979, 1988) also notes that social systems will be able to gain from complexity when exchanges can also occur autonomously from face-to-face relationships. These arguments confirm that there are at least two types of trust operating in
large scale and complex societies and that institutions are instrumental in generating the type of trust needed for high and complex levels of cooperation.

Institutions play a key role in creating generalised trust and cooperation, because inherent to an institution is what Offe refers to as their ‘triadic’ nature. He clarifies the point by citing Ostrom:

> Working rules must be common knowledge and must be monitored and enforced. Common knowledge implies that every participant knows the rules, knows that others know the rules, and knows that others also know that the participants know the rules (Ostrom, cited in Offe, 1996: 204).

We have shared knowledge of institutional rules. Not only are we able to sanction, in some measure, institutional design, but one of the primary functions of institutions is to publicise their own procedural legitimacy.

Offe adds to this argument by pointing out that we can extend trust to institutions without even relying on dense social networks (though dense networks rely on trust) because

> Institutions provide normative reference points and values that can be relied upon to make sense of [their] rules. (...) [I]t is this implied normative meaning of institutions and this moral plausibility I assume it will have for others which allows me to trust those that are involved in the same institution. Although they are strangers and not personally known to me. (Offe, 1999: 70).

The answer to why we should trust institutions even though we do not personally ‘know’ them is that they allow us to know strangers more than we would otherwise. This is a more encouraging and more feasible strategy than Putnam’s. According to social capital theory we should strive to know as many people as we can in order to minimise our perception of being surrounded by strangers whom we cannot trust – the process of generalisation of trust stems from a sociological ripple effect from the individual outward. But it is a ripple effect that makes individuals dependent on intensely cultivated, relentlessly pursued social networks.

The argument we seek to develop here is that political cynicism gives rise to a particular type of hybrid (democratic cynical) trust. As we shall see, in the context of a lack of trust in particular institutions, and the broader context of trust in democracy as the best possible system, the media play a particular role in creating the necessary illusion that the populist entrepreneur is both untrustworthy and yet well known enough to be trusted insofar as he known to be untrustworthy.
3. Corruption and the instrumentalisation of scandal

‘…[M]edia interviews where the interviewer sets out to entrap and draw blood do nothing to enlarge public understanding – but that is because the listener and viewer collude in seeing the Minister, MP or official in the same way as the media. That is, not as legitimate representatives of a public realm that can only be sustained in the last resort if we respect it; rather, as somebody we want to see discomfited or commit a gaffe. Public life has become a kind of soap opera in which issues are less important than the private foibles, wobbles and passions of the actors in the drama.’ (Will Hutton, The Observer, 28 March 2004).

It is both natural and logical to assume that scandals related to political corruption in particular will have a damaging impact on the perceived credibility and trustworthiness of politicians. In fact, corruption is potentially more damaging to democratic legitimacy than other perceived shortcomings, such as policy failure or poor management of the economy: it can hit at the very roots of the system. Democracies set themselves apart from non-democracies on the basis of their claim to exercise power in a disinterested manner: citizens are entitled to expect the political class and its administrative support structure will operate in a transparent and accountable manner. In regard to interactions with civil servants or other public sector officials (tax officials, local government offices, national health systems, and so forth), citizens are entitled to expect parity of treatment, regardless of their status or income. It is this predictability and lack of arbitrariness in terms of process which underpins the differentiation of democracies from non-democracies. Democratic states are Rechtsstaats, which operate according to the ‘rule of law’, ensuring that outcomes are seen as legitimate on the basis of the nature of decision-making, rather than the decisions themselves (which may indeed favour particularistic interests). Thus, activities by public officials – most especially politicians and bureaucrats – which are seen to be corrupt can hit at the very heart of a democratic system’s claim to legitimacy. The likely consequences for trust are easy to deduce.

It could be argued, though, that the revelation of corruption scandals in democracies can actually reinforce legitimacy, so long as the perpetrators are apprehended and appropriately punished. There is certainly a line of argument that occasional shocks to the body politic are cathartic: by exposing failings, but demonstrating that they can be dealt with, democracies are able to reinforce their legitimacy (as some would argue occurred with the Watergate scandal in the USA in the early 1970s). However, the potentially cathartic impact of such scandals
will depend on the extent to which they are genuinely seen as isolated or atypical, rather than as representative of something more fundamentally rotten in the organisation and practice of democracies. The reason that corruption has become such a focus of concern in west European democracies is precisely because of the fear that it may be far more widespread and endemic that previously imagined. Major corruption scandals since the early 1990s throughout much of democratic Europe, involving key political figures and exposing links not just with corporate interests but – in some cases – with organised crime, have contributed to growing doubts about the probity of the political class and therefore the trustworthiness of the democratic system.

However, as is the case with the relationship between social capital and trust or between trust and institutions, the nature of the impact of corruption scandals on perceptions of the political class is in practice complex and multi-faceted. It is helpful to draw a distinction between, on the one hand, what may be termed the political instrumentalisation of corruption scandals and, on the other, the impact of such scandals (and their interpretation) on the voting public. Although the two are in practice linked, there is an important conceptual distinction to be drawn in terms of the central question of perception: the objective circumstances of corruption in a given state may not be accurately reflected in its representation in the public domain. The challenge, therefore, is to understand how and why incidents of corruption lead to scandals in the first place, before turning to assess the way such scandals influence trust and voting behaviour.

A string of significant scandals in west European democracies since the early 1990s, involving both the financial and especially the political worlds, has resulted in close attention being paid to how we explain and combat what to some looks like an inexorable rise in corruption. Indeed, the much acclaimed triumph of capitalism over communism following the collapse of the Soviet bloc regimes at the end of the 1980s was tainted in much of Western Europe by the subsequent revelation of corruption scandals involving leading political figures. The most dramatic of these occurred in Italy, following the so-called ‘Mani Pulite’ investigations into bribery in Milan, which in turn exposed a major network of corruption involving politicians at the highest level (Della Porta and Vannucci, 1999). Further scandals were revealed in France, notably the so-called Elf Aquitaine affair which led to the imprisonment of a former government minister (Heywood, Pujas and Rhodes, 2002); in Germany, where a linked investigation revealed that long-term Chancellor, Helmut Kohl, had set up a secret political slush fund to channel funds to the ruling CDU (von Alemann, 2002); in Belgium, where the Augusta-Dassault defence contract scandal led to the conviction of former deputy premier and NATO secretary-general, Willy Claes; in Spain, where a series of
high-profile scandals resulted in several ministerial resignations and the discrediting of the
Socialist government of Felipe González (Heywood, 2002a). Even in the United Kingdom,
long seen as free of high-level political corruption, accusations of sleaze in government led to
the creation of a Committee on Standards in Public Life.

But have these countries really seen a dramatic increase in instances of corruption since the
early 1990s, or is it rather that there has been a growth in the reporting of ‘scandals’ (not
necessarily the same thing)? Pujas and Rhodes (1999) have argued that one explanation for
the wave of scandals which seemed to sweep quite suddenly through southern Europe in the
1990s was the changing relationship between political parties on the one hand, and between
political and other social actors on the other. The critical point in this argument is that the
traditional arrangements which have characterised the organisation of political space in the
post-war era began to break down. One way in which corruption has become politicised, or
instrumentalised, is that parties which previously competed for votes on the basis of ideology,
yet colluded in corrupt activities, have altered their tactics. The policy platforms which used
to characterise and distinguish left and right have increasingly converged, whilst the pressure
to demonstrate governmental effectiveness in an increasingly interdependent policy
environment has led to an emphasis on technocratic, rather than ideological, solutions
(Heywood, 2002b). The grounds of political competition have therefore moved, and in place
of increasingly otiose ideological disputes, parties have resorted to throwing corruption-
related accusations at each other. Indeed, as ‘clean government’ has increasingly been
presented as a positive good, so parties have sought to occupy the moral high ground and
thereby attract the support of the ever greater number of floating and ideologically disoriented
voters: it is striking how many election campaigns in western Europe (and the USA) over the
last decade have featured candidates’ trustworthiness as a key theme.

The US presidential election campaign of 2000 arguably went even further: George W Bush
made much play of how, in contrast to his opponent, he trusted ‘the people’ rather than ‘the
government’. The logic of the argument, as Mark Warren points out, is that individuals and
organisations should keep control over their own resources rather than delegate them to
government, thereby obviating the need to engage in the risky business of trusting in
government to use them appropriately. This stance is entirely consistent with the more
general neo-liberal attack on ‘big government’, and its attendant doctrine that private
provision is almost universally better than public provision. However, as Warren goes on to
outline, the argument has a sub-text that government cannot be trusted because the institutions
and agencies that comprise it are not to be trusted: even though their rhetoric is one of
disinterested public service, the people who work in government, politicians and other public
officials may covertly be serving their own interests. Thus, ‘Bush’s rhetoric shades into the charge that “government” is not to be trusted because it is corrupt’ (Warren, 2001: 1). In turn, this reflects a shift away from an emphasis on the democratic choice between party political platforms over competing visions towards an anti-democratic form of populism. In line with the wider trend discussed above, Bush’s appeal to voters was to trust in him personally, rather than the institutions of democracy. This ‘politics of personal trust’, as Warren terms it, has become a feature of many democratic elections in recent times.

Party activities and competition, though, also have to be seen within a wider context. It should be noted that the dramatic wave of scandals which came to light in southern Europe during the 1990s was usually instigated by headline-grabbing investigating magistrates (Della Porta, 2001). Moreover, these ‘crusading’ magistrates often worked in close collaboration with the mass communications media, especially the press, which had started to intervene more actively and directly in politics and was less trammelled than in the past by the demands of political parties or proprietors or by the constraints of a more ‘corporatist’ post-authoritarian era. In a much more fluid political space, which is no longer the effective monopoly of the political class, the media and other interests have increasingly started to compete with politicians to influence public opinion. The boundaries between the political, commercial, judicial and reporting world have in turn become more porous, with increasing numbers of high profile figures moving between several of these spheres. For instance, as major media proprietors have become increasingly influential political figures, so politicians have developed closer links with business, giving rise to the emergence of what Della Porta and Pizzorno (1996) have termed ‘business politicians’, closely linked to the growing professionalisation of political parties. Meanwhile, leading magistrates such as Baltasar Garzón in Spain and Antonio de Pietro in Italy have also moved between the judiciary and high elected office.

Pujas and Rhodes (1999) describe the generation of scandal as a process of ‘competitive elite mobilisation’, which evolves over a number of phases: first, the revelation of typically small-scale corruption by a relatively minor actor; second, the denunciation and ‘criminalisation’ of that and other associated activity by judges; finally, the escalation of public outrage via a press campaign fed less by investigative journalism than by strategic leaks from the legal investigation. Once public opinion has been ‘scandalised’, the media is able to mobilise a public sense of indignation against the political class, whilst encouraging magistrates to continue exposing and indicting corrupt activity. In essence, this is how the tangentopoli scandals emerged in Italy during the 1990s. What is being described, then, is effectively a ‘cycle of contestation’ in which, as elites rotate in power, public attention is drawn to (and
then often tires of) media exposure of their shortcomings. However, one key part of this cycle may be the ‘demobilisation’ of public and political concern over the issue of corruption: as reports into scandals peter out (as they must), the public loses interest, the media moves onto other issues, and judges tire in their pursuit of prosecutions.

Thus, as the diagram below indicates, there are two aspects to ‘cycles of contestation’ over time: the first refers to the frequency of cycles and the second to their magnitude. With regard to frequency, there are delays in the occurrence of the cycles over time after the first one occurs. For example, while the first cycle will reach its maximum at time $t=1$, the second cycle reaches its peak slightly after $t=3$ and the third well after $t=5$. This suggests that once the first cycle occurs, there is an increasing delay before each subsequent one. The second aspect is that the magnitude (or impact) of the cycle decreases over time, represented by the decreasing size of the local maximum values over time (the straight line represents the declining effect of scandals on the public). Previous cycles therefore have a type of ‘minimizing effect’ over the magnitude and impact of subsequent ones. The end result is that as $t \to \infty$, the magnitude of a cycle will be negligible.

In the case of Italy, for example, the protest and media attention which reverberated around the world in the early 1990s has been replaced a decade later by acquiescence or even apathy over the issue of political corruption. Indeed, the election to the premiership in 2001 of Silvio Berlusconi – a man who regularly denounced the ‘hero judges’ of the anti-corruption crusades as politically motivated ‘reds’ – together with the re-election of Jacques Chirac to the French presidency in 2002, might suggest that the political catharsis created by the 1990s scandals has largely exhausted the appetite of the public (and politicians) for further upheavals. The
‘cycle of contestation’ offers a potentially revealing insight into how corruption scandals are instrumentalised. However, the precise manner in which such a cycle emerges and is played out will depend to a crucial extent on how much ‘blurring’ of traditional lines of demarcation between the political and other spheres actually takes place. It is our argument that the greater the extent of such blurring, the more likely that ‘new’ actors will be able to enter the electoral arena: these are the ‘entrepreneurial’ populists who are able to play on a sense of cynicism that corruption scandals induce amongst significant elements of the electorate. If the system is rotten, so the argument goes, electors may as well support someone who has demonstrated their ability to ‘play’ the system and prosper within it. This is a variation on Mark Warren’s argument about the ‘personalisation of trust’, which gives rise to a new form of clientelism and deflects attention away from institutional reform:

When people seek out personal trust relations with politicians, they are, in effect, seeking protection against a corrupt system while hoping for influence that circumvents public institutions. The new clientelism appeals to cynics: ‘government’ is beyond rehabilitation (Warren, 2001: 3).

On the other hand, where the cycle of contestation has not managed to break down the traditional lines of demarcation, the response amongst the electorate may simply be a growing sense of disillusionment and alienation: the system is rotten and will remain so whilst the current structures remain in place. In these cases, the terrain is likely to be more fertile for a more traditional form of populist ‘anti-politics’, alongside growing levels of abstention.

Our argument is that such a broad process can be identified in most European democracies – although, clearly, the extent to which the a ‘cycle of contestation’ follows the particular pattern indicated above in any given country will be crucially influenced by such factors as the nature of media ownership, the structure of the judiciary, the professionalisation of the political class and the inter-penetration between business and political interests. Moreover, whilst the ‘cycle of contestation’ may provide an aggregate level indication as to how and why scandals emerge and are politicised, the argument we wish to investigate here is that the impact of scandals varies according to different groups of voters. It would of course be impossible to outline the whole range of potential responses to corruption-related scandals by the voting public. Instead, what we seek to do here is to highlight the kinds of response which may contribute to the rise in support for entrepreneurial populism on the one hand, and more traditional populism on the other.

The media clearly plays a pivotal role in the political instrumentalisation of corruption. In the literature on scandal and its consequences for the political process, a number of theories can be identified (Thompson, 2000). For our purposes, the most interesting are the so-called
‘trivialisation’ and the ‘subversion’ theories respectively. According to the ‘trivialisation theory’, the media has undermined the political class through its obsession with scandal and with pricking the bubble of authority: reporting of news has declined in comparison to the reporting of scandal, and news has become dominated by ‘soft journalism’ and ‘infotainment’. The media increasingly specialise in the sensational and the emotive, placing ever more emphasis on discourse which is primarily visually determined and turning the routine reporting of politics into soap opera: research by Thomas Patterson (2001) found that between the early 1980s and 2000, soft news has increased dramatically. In that period, news stories with no public policy content rose from 35 per cent to 50 per cent of all reporting; stories with some degree of sensationalism from 25 per cent to 40 per cent; and human interest-focused news reporting jumped from 11 per cent to more than 26 per cent. The so-called ‘tabloidisation’ of the media (including television) goes alongside a ‘privatisation’ of public sphere, as public figures lose any sense of mystery or aura: the most intimate personal details of politicians are revealed and debate tends to become focused on the trivial (do politicians get their hair dyed, what are their sexual propensities, drinking habits, why do they sweat in public, and so forth). Voters are able to entertain the notion that they ‘know’ their representatives, based on how they appear in countless televised performances and photo-opportunities. But this, of course, is a two-way street: the media’s shift to a more personalised content is reflected in politicians themselves seeking to use the media to bypass more conventional party-based channels of communication with the electorate. Political broadcasts have increasingly become focused on the ‘character’ of leaders, rather than the public policies they would seek to promote.

The danger of this form of ‘trivialisation’, following Warren’s argument, is that it depoliticises political judgement: ‘when the trustworthiness of the candidate overrides agreement on the issues, the vote does not reflect a judgement about public affairs, but is something more like a defensive reaction against a system that has, for all practical purposes, been written off as captured by other interests’ (Warren, 2001: 6). Warren refers to this development as a form of ‘new clientelism’, which ‘expresses a cynicism about the domain of collective action.’ What we end up with is a situation in which the appeal to personalised trust claimed by politicians – based on character-based rather than skills-based attributes – actually reinforces a disengagement from the more conventional democratic political process, in which debate is driven by arguments over the most appropriate distribution of resources. As we argue in more detail below, responses to what might be termed the focus on froth rather than substance will lead some voters to become wholly disillusioned with the conventional democratic options on offer and look for anti-system alternatives, whilst others will favour supporting the ‘political entrepreneurs’ who can ‘play the system’ effectively.
According to ‘subversion theory’, there is a divide between ‘popular news’ (the tabloids) and ‘official news’ (the broadsheets or serious press): the claimed authority and objectivity of the official news – that which political class would like to see reported – is subverted by challenges of the popular news, which in turn cultivates scepticism and disbelief. Popular news invites readers and viewers to laugh at the pompous claims of political class, whose power depends on being taken seriously. But in reality, according to the popular news, the political class is characterised by incompetents who are unable even to do what they set out to do – that is, manage the economy and enact policy effectively. The fact that the policy milieu has become increasingly complex in an ever more inter-connected global environment cuts little ice: politicians are constrained to make promises about what they will achieve, even though there is little chance of their being able realise those promises. Therefore, one seemingly logical response is for voters to become increasingly cynical about the political class and to look instead to those with proven track record of achievement in the kind of dirty world that should fit them well for doing what politicians have proved themselves incapable of – that is, in particular, being successful in their own (non-politics) sphere, whether that is in the corporate or even the entertainment world.

4. Populism

In line with the most useful definitions of populism, we can argue that all the movements we examine present the following traits attributable to populist parties or movements: they claim to represent the ‘common man’, the average voter whose voice has long been lost; they claim to be able to return to a golden, more innocent age of politics during which politics and political decisions rested in the hands of those who contribute most significantly to the everyday life of the nation by their labour; they claim to have identified a gap between the leader and the led and that political power has been usurped by an undeserving, spoilt and corrupt elite whose aim is to govern for its own benefit while reaping and withholding the political, social and economic rewards which rightly belong to the people; above all, they abhor what they regard as the gratuitous professionalisation and intellectualisation of the political realm which has led to its corruption and the subsequent exclusion from it of those it claims to represent.

Whether in the case of Le Pen’s rantings against the technocratic and exclusionary Fifth Republic, his calls for plebiscitary politics and extended use of referendums coupled with relentless accusation that the French political elite had ‘carved up’ the governing of France; or Haider’s attacks on the Austrian ‘Proporz’ system which never failed to preserve and privilege the same elite while stripping the average Austrian citizen of what was rightfully
his, or even Fortuyn’s denouncing of the ‘Polder model’ and the politics of compromise (a system which according to Fortuyn ‘always asked the same people to compromise’) – a quick scan through the parties’ web sites and electoral material yields impressive and relentless similarities regarding their pursuit of reform of the political process and non-consensuval style.

Part of what is interesting for us is that all types of populism are not only dependent on a democratic framework but in fact very supportive of a type of democracy. As Canovan (2000) has argued, therefore, populism can be understood to be ‘pathology of democracy’ (what she refers to as ‘a shadow cast by democracy’) – hence the support for democracy and a democratic system which we find in all countries where populism is successful. But our argument is that, depending on whether we are dealing with alienation or cynicism, there will emerge two very different types of populism. If there is real alienation from the system, then the populism will be of a traditional, right-wing anti-system type. If, rather than alienation, the voters are prey to cynicism, then what we will see emerge is a type of entrepreneurial populism.

4.1 Entrepreneurial populism

The entrepreneurial populism to which we refer is that of politicians such as Silvio Berlusconi in Italy. Berlusconi has all the hallmarks of the populist leader, but can nevertheless not be classified alongside Jean Marie Le Pen or Jorg Haider. Nor can he appear alongside Chirac or Tony Blair. While the latter have adopted a populist style in some instances, theirs’ is precisely that: a populist style, rather than populist politics.

Figures such as Berlusconi on the other hand present a very particular type of profile. While striving to be perceived as non-professional politician (something common to all populist leaders), Berlusconi’s credentials as successful businessman who is seen to have ‘done well by the system’ and ready to apply his brand of motivation, work and analysis to what is perceived as an inefficient and ailing political system are key to his success. If we think for a moment what the reasoning behind a vote for the entrepreneurial populist might be, it goes something like this: the diagnosis made by supporters of entrepreneurial populism (EP) is that, while the system may be corrupt, the response is to vote for someone who can play this system to his and to their advantage. In populist terms, the person for whom the vote is cast needs to present a certain set of characteristic that are in line with populist traits. The person needs to be seen as successful in the ‘real world’. In other words, they must appear to be in politics as an outsider and a non-professional who has proven his worth in another ‘more real’ sphere of life. Here people like Berlusconi or Blocher fit the type as successful businessmen. The argument is consistent with Thompson’s emphasis in his ‘social theory of scandal’ in
which scandals are seen as struggles over symbolic power in which reputation and trust are at stake (Thompson, 2000: 245). As Thompson argues, reputation can be character-based (as in the appeal increasingly being made by mainstream politicians) or skills-based (as in the appeal made by entrepreneurial populists).

The paradox in this sort of support for entrepreneurial populism is that the person does not necessarily have to be seen as trustworthy or moral. In fact, in most cases, their moral credentials are somewhat weak. But this is taken to mean that he can beat politicians at their own game: professional politicians are no less corrupt, but the fact that they are less successful or effective gives the populist entrepreneur the upper hand. They have what the Italians call ‘furbizza’ (street-smarts). The reasoning here is that if politicians are going to behave as badly, or as inefficiently, as they do, it makes more sense to elect someone about whom you have no illusions in terms of morality or trustworthiness, but whose street smarts can be relied upon. Where the populist calculation comes in, however, is that while the person may not be trust-worthy, there is sufficient trust in both their being one of us (hence the importance of the person being perceived as the local lad who’s done well) and the enduring faith in democratic institutions which will allow for a trickle down effect to the ordinary people.

The trust here is a set of constructed paradoxes:

- the entrepreneurial populist is trusted because he does not claim to be trustworthy and nor is he perceived as being so;
- the system is seen as generally corrupt enough that it deserves to be ‘played’ rather than respected;
- but, simultaneously, the democratic system is still trusted enough to deliver some of the benefits down to ordinary people despite the populist leader’s aim to play the system for himself.

Interestingly, therefore, we find ourselves faced with a new type of trust, a trust placed in an untrustworthy individual in order to play a system whose institutions one does not trust but whose ideals and intentions are still trusted.

In the context of the debate on the possibility of generalized vs. interpersonal trust this is striking. Neither Hardin’s account whereby trust in institutions is impossible (what we want is someone in our corner), nor Rothstein’s model of generalized trust, capture this voter choice. The trust in the politician can be interpreted as a perverted type of interpersonal trust (I trust him [to get the job done] because I know he is not really trustworthy). The trust in the system as a whole is a version of generalized trust (the system will deliver some of the
goods), but there is no intermediary trust in institutions (which are bypassed in favour of a populist leader).

4.2. Traditional, right-wing populism

Leaders such as Jean-Marie Le Pen draw their support not from their business success, but from the feeling of commitment to democratic ideals which they emanate. Unlike a Berlusconi who is happy to admit that he is making the best for himself and for others of a system he has managed to infiltrate, Le Pen’s appeal lies in his relentless refusal to infiltrate the system. Where the populist entrepreneur thrives on a lack of political ideals and a wily public persona, a Le Pen thrives on the notion that, against all odds and despite the abdication of professional politicians, he alone will maintain a commitment to democratic ideals.

Here we have a very different type of voter profile and much less mainstream support. The profile is mixed, but generally encompasses two types of voters. Both the FPÖ and the FN initially drew their (timid) support from the traditional right; their supporters were mostly male (this has remained a constant), in late-middle age or nearing retirement, often drawn from the small bourgeoisie (local doctors, successful small businessmen and entrepreneurs). Further, they were drawn from specific regions: in France, the South and the East (mainly Alsace); in Austria, Carinthia and Styria.

This support remains, but electoral success for both parties has coincided with the rise in a different type of support, that of younger, more disaffected voters (the FPÖ has become the strongest party by far among the members of younger generations of voters with a share of 35 percent), of lower socio-economic status (only 35 percent of the blue-collar voters opted for the Social Democratic Party, while 60 percent voted for centre-right parties, of which the FPÖ managed to attract 47 percent) and with lower levels of education. Thus to their initial regional strongholds in the comfortably off provinces, the parties have added the more modest suburbs of large capitals and the industrially decimated zones of France and Austria. This vote is no longer strictly the domain of the provinces.

The electoral data show (Plasser et al., 1999: 431; Mayer, 2003) that this new form of support is characterized either by first-time voters with little or no previous political experience, or by voters whose allegiances were previously to the left or the far left (in the case of the FN, there is a notable transfer of votes from the Communist Party’s Parisian ‘red belt’ to the FN). This is noteworthy because it demonstrates the non-partisan nature of the choice for what is a significant proportion of the parties’ voters. While these parties are clearly right-wing, it makes more sense in light of these results to assume that while some of their supporters endorse their robust
partisanship, their recent electoral support comes from voters who are less swayed by the left/right dimension and more so by their message of reform of a political process from which they feel utterly disconnected.

What is of importance for the argument at hand is the power exerted not by a left/right policy driven discourse, but rather by reform driven rhetoric. This takes us to the heart of the politics of populism, where the operative distinctions in analytical terms are not so much left/right but status quo versus opposition or infiltration. The operative question for the our argument, therefore, is how that reform is conceived, either through an anti-system attitude or through a cynical attitude.

5. Preliminary data analysis: the European Values Survey

For the purposes of a rudimentary data analysis, and given the limitations imposed by our access to the relevant data, we decided to look at a number of variables. First, we looked at basic information concerning the rate of abstention in the cases we are interested in. Our hypothesis is that where there is a blurring of the lines regarding the role of and expectations placed upon institutions and thus, as in Italy, the sense that the system is open to entrepreneurial populists precisely because of the blurring of these lines, participation should be higher than in places where the lines are not so blurred – that is, either in polities where the populism is a of a more traditional and alienated type (for example in France), or in places where there is no populism (for instance in the UK or Germany). This is borne out by recent figures that clearly show a higher rate of abstention in France (as a polity susceptible to traditional alienated populism), the UK and Germany (where we find neither type of populism) than in Italy, where we find the clearest case of entrepreneurial populism.

Our second aim was to take the results of the European Values Survey (EVS) of 1999/2000 (the results of the latest one will be available only later this month) and discern trends reflecting the impact of cynicism vs. lack of trust on party-political outcomes. In the first instance we contrasted those polities exhibiting a form of populism (either traditional or entrepreneurial) with those polities in which populist parties of any sort are absent. Our first hypothesis, therefore, was that where populist parties do well there should be stronger evidence of a generalised lack of trust or cynicism than where there populist parties do not do well.

Given our understanding of populism, those people who would support a populist party would generally:

a. experience lower levels of confidence in political institutions;

b. feel a commitment to democracy coupled with a heightened sense of betrayal;
c. believe more strongly in the importance of strong leadership;
d. display lower levels of political involvement/interest.

Thus, in places where a populist electorate does exist, we would expect to find lower levels of confidence in political institutions, a high commitment to democracy coupled with a sense of democracy’s failure ‘to deliver’, a greater support for strong leadership, and lower levels of political involvement.

To test this hypothesis, we selected the following questions from the EVS:

- how much confidence do you have in the press? V203
- “……………………………” the police? V205
- “……………………………” parliament? V206
- “……………………………” the justice system? V212
- are you satisfied with democracy? V213
- view government bad-very good V214
- democracy is best political system V220
- democracy is indecisive V222
- how often do you follow politics in the media? V263
- how interested are you in politics? O17
- how important is politics in your life? V5
- do you belong to political parties or groups? V16
- how often do you follow politics in the media? V263
- political system needs a strong leader? V216

Our argument is based on the notion that there is a difference between lack of trust and cynicism. We argue that entrepreneurial populism is based on a cynical view of politics and an attitude dependent on an instrumental view of democracy and institutions. We hypothesise, therefore, that where there is entrepreneurial populism, there should be higher levels of inter-personal trust than generalised trust, coupled with a belief in the soundness of the democratic system and a respect for technocracy and expertise.

We thus added the following two questions to control for an attitude susceptible to yield the sort of cynical trust alluded to above:

- political system needs experts making decisions? V217
- people can be trusted vs. you can’t be too careful V66
The hypothesis is that positive appraisal of the first statement would be higher in those polities where entrepreneurial populism has gained a foothold than in those polities where traditional populism holds more sway. We would expect that levels of interpersonal trust would be higher in those polities too.

Where a traditional type of populism was present we should be able to identify a set of attitudes related to lack of trust; where an entrepreneurial populism was present we should be able to identify a set of attitudes related to cynicism.

To conclude this paper, we are able to offer only some very tentative preliminary comparative results in regard to populist vs. non-populist polities.

A. Levels of confidence in political institutions

Spain and Germany have the highest levels of trust in the press. While France and Italy and Austria confirm that where there is a form of populism, confidence in the press is strikingly lower. Interestingly, however, the UK (also a non-populist case), is an outlier and displays the lowest levels of trust in the press: (37.3%) claim they have ‘no trust at all’ in the press and only 1.2% claim to have ‘a great deal of trust’ in the press.

Italy displays the lowest levels of confidence in parliament (with 66% of respondents claiming that have either no trust or not very much trust in parliament), but contrary to expectations, the two second highest measures for lack of trust in parliament are to be found in Britain and Germany, where we might have expected to find higher levels of trust in political institutions. France, predictably, has the lowest numbers of respondents who claim to have ‘a great deal of trust in parliament’ and offers an interesting profile of an otherwise almost equitable distribution between the three other options. Paradoxically, France and Spain have the highest numbers of respondents who claim to have ‘quite a lot of trust in parliament’. On this variable, therefore, the results are more mixed than on the press and no discernible profile emerges.

In regard to levels of generalized trust, again the results are mixed: we expected to find a clear distinction between polities in which populist parties had been successful and polities where they had not, but the results are not so clear cut. While Italy, France and Austria display very low levels of generalized trust, more so than Spain and Germany, once again, the UK is an outlier since it displays the second lowest levels of generalized trust.
B. Commitment to democracy and sense of betrayal

We looked first at levels of commitment to democracy and respondents’ answers to whether democracy is the best political system. Here, as predicted, in countries with populist parties the levels of ‘agree strongly’ that democracy is the best political system are higher than where populist parties are absent. However, on the workings of democracy, the picture is more nuanced. Here, as we expected, most respondents across countries for example found democracy to be somewhat indecisive. The highest level of dissatisfaction on this score is to be found in France where 26.2% and 47.3% respectively of respondents agreed strongly with the idea that democracy was indecisive. Italy, as predicted, came (a distant) second with 8.6% agreeing strongly and 43.9% agreeing with the statement and Austria, again as predicted, came third (4.8% and 36.5%). Spain and Germany exhibited the highest percentages of disagreement with the statement. So far, so much in line with predictions. But, once again, Britain’s profile was unexpected, since it had the second highest agree strongly score (10.6%) but overall came third to Italy once ‘agree’ and ‘agree strongly’ had been added up. Britain and Germany however did exhibit the highest levels of respondents who strongly disagreed with the statement that democracy was indecisive.

On the general question as to whether they were ‘satisfied with democracy’, both Italy and France have the broadly expected profiles and exhibit the lowest rates of satisfaction with democracy. Austria here is an outlier, as the rate of satisfaction with democracy is higher than expected. Though perhaps the recent perceived threat to the workings of democracy (in the form of Haider’s election) might have heightened the positive evaluation of the system at the time as a reaction.

C. Belief in strong leadership

This is a tricky variable because political histories (in the case of Austria, Italy, Germany and Spain) are likely to have a significant impact on what respondents feel able to endorse. However, we are able to distinguish clear support for a strong political leader in France and Italy, insofar as this is where the views that this was a ‘very bad idea’ were lowest and support for a strong leader was highest.
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