Populists vs. technocrats. New(?) framework for public debate

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workshop in Venice, Università Ca'Foscari

19/20 December 2019

Story behind the research concept

Polish context

which is (as we all know) the European context too…

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Other research drivers

1.   Interdisciplinary conference "Limits of Europe", Carlton House Terrace, London, 1st-2nd October 2018 co-organised by King's College London.

2.   Establishing interdisciplinary research network co-funded by the UACES (the academic association for contemporary European Studies).

3.   Preparing research proposal on "Revisiting the legitimization of EUropean politics: beyond populism and technocracy. Towards an agonistic pluralist model" for NORFACE call. Main contributors (alphabetically): Russel Foster (KCL), Bogna Gawronska-Nowak (IRMiR), Jan Grzymski (OBM University of Warsaw), Piotr Lis (Coventry University).

What next

1. Tentative research scope& aims

2. Possible directions of "how to do it" & expected outcomes

3. To be discussed

Social polarisation

"The splitting of a society into two distinct groups that are different ends of a spectrum, such as rich and poor, or white and black."
Oxford Dictionary of Human Geography, 2013

Intuitive ex ante assumptions:

1. Recently (after the global financial crisis?) in Europe there has been significant increase in social polarisation, which has its manifestations in political and social (media) debate polarisation, as exemplified in Poland and the UK.

2. Such a polarisation has a negative impact on society in short and long run.

Technocrats vs. populists

Both populists and technocrats show similarities when saying that they offer **exclusively legitimate solutions**. Populists claim to represent the interests of 'the people', while technocrats claim to be implementing an objectively correct set of procedures.

Both sides offer radically different approaches to address political, economic and social issues, but both exclude pluralist solutions. Hence, both are a-/anti-political, where 'the political' is assumed to be based on respectful confrontation of opposing political, economic and social visions (Mouffe 2000, Laclau 2005)

Towards a new model of public debate

Is it possible to move beyond the current impasse of technocrats and populists by adopting a new model of public debate? Is it possible to avoid mutual delegitimization?

Such a model could be sensitive to Chantal Mouffe's critique of Habermasian deliberative democracy, especially considering Mouffe's idea of the **agonist, or the adversary, as opposed to the antagonist, or enemy** (Thomassen, 2016).

We would like to refer to specific conceptualization of **legitimacy** to its function, source, and connection to democracy.

Rainer Forst's claim that **all moral subjects have an absolute right to justification** seems intellectually attractive and worth to be explored. **Justification requires a discourse**, which Forst terms 'a communal room of justifying reasons' (Forst, 2007, p. 209).

Tentative research plan

1. Content & network analysis of Twitter

   · Critical (experts' choice supported by "naive" content analysis results) selection of some key issues that are leading themes in Polish and UK public debate: (for example) climate change, migration, income inequalities, health care system, free trade.

   · Network analysis will help to understand how the message is spread around.

   Aims: To identify the polarisation gap, to describe it, to define the "Message Issuers" and "Message Receivers" on both (Technocrats' and Populists') sides.

Tentative research plan

2. In-depth interviews with Message Issuers (Technocrats& Populists) and Message Receivers (Technocrats& Populists, Residuals?)

Aims: supplementing, expanding and deepening our knowledge about the polarization process, ways of mutual delegitimization of polarised groups.

3. On-line experimentation based on well-known experimental research on labor market discrimination to check social reception of the same content but formulated in different narratives based on our initial results.

Aim: practical verification of some initial assumptions of our "new model of public debate".

To be discussed

- Data availability and consistency (paid data or "do-it-yourself" harvesting?). Twitter time series (paid) available from 2006.

- English Twitter is not = UK Twitter.

- Difficulties in proper identification of Internet frauds, boots and trolls.

Thank you!

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