



S05E08: What's behind the rise of populism?

Richard: Hello and welcome to Crossing Channels. I'm Richard Westcott. What's behind the rise of populism? That's the subject of the latest in our collaboration between the Bennett School of Public Policy at the University of Cambridge and the Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse at the Toulouse School of Economics. As ever, we're going to draw on the interdisciplinary strengths of both institutions to explore a complex issue. How do people come to feel represented or unrepresented in politics? What role do place, inequality, and everyday experiences play in shaping political attitudes? And what can the rise of populism tell us about trust in democracy today? To explore these issues, we have Davide Luca from Cambridge University. Davide, start us off. What does your research focus on?

Davide: Hi Richard, I will describe myself as an economic geographer. And so my research focuses on the causes, consequences and implications of spatial inequality and geographical polarization. So if you think about the causes, I will particularly focus on whether geographical inequality and spatial inequality is driven by governments or what governments can do to affect them beyond market forces. We often think about markets, but what is the role of public actions? And then there's the big issue about the consequences of spatial inequality that relates to today's podcast. And it's how place and geography shape outlooks, our behaviors, and some of the very personal outcomes, such as I think about education, income, etc. And last but not least, it's also important, like in my research, I also focus about the solutions - what can we do about it?

Richard: And joining us from the Toulouse School of Economics we have Laurenz Guenther. Laurence, remind us of your main research interests.

Laurenz: Hello Richard, so I work on political representation and populism. For instance, I examine questions such as to what extent two parliaments represent the political attitudes of

ordinary people and what is the relationship of a potential lack of representation with the rise of populist parties.

Richard: Populism is often discussed through elections, parties, and political leaders. But today we want to look at what sits behind those political outcomes, why some people feel that mainstream politics doesn't speak to them, and how questions of representation, trust, and inequality shape those feelings. Davide, when we talk about the rise of populism, how much of it is about where people live? And their everyday lives.

Davide: Yes, where people live and let's call it place matters quite a lot. If we take a picture of political and behaviour across places, we often see stark differences. Think about Brexit in the UK, think about protests in France, think about the election of Trumps in the US, think about lots of other elections that have happened in the last years across Western Europe and the broader world. And we often see a stark difference or like a link between place and individual behaviours and political behaviour in particular. And the evidence seems to say that everyday subjective perception matters a lot. And in fact, what matters is not the objective differences across places, but the subjective everyday experience that people feel and perceive through their social networks, their friends, their daily lived experiences. Think about, for example, about relative economic decline. There is a work on this and about the status threat. It seems that the people who are voting most for populist parties, for extreme politics, is not the poorest or sometimes people call them the losers of the global economy, but these people who feel who had a status and they feel that their status is declined. So they feel a perceived threat. Same with migration. The highest reaction against migration are not in the places that have high migration, but in places that feel the threat of migration or a change in a community. Now, from a researcher's point of view, there is a big problem in answering your question of whether does place matter? And the fact is that we don't know whether it's a place that shapes attitudes, or it's what researchers call the sorting. So how people distribute themselves across places. Some researchers say, well, people in cities vote more for liberal parties just because they tend to be more educated, younger, et cetera. And so a big challenge of research is to disentangle these two effects, the role of geography versus the role of individual factors.

Richard: Yes, I was gonna ask about that, 'cause we say place and we think, well, countryside city, you know, obviously you can have no money in both, you can have different political views in both. How can you work out if it's the actual place or the people you're around in your small environment?

Davide: Yes, the researchers have become very creative in thinking about techniques to disentangle these. And one of the ways, for example, is to track individuals. And so we use surveys to track individual over time. We call them panel surveys. And we try to see how the perceptions of the same person or the political outlook change when individuals move in and out of places. And like a modern variation of this is to compare siblings or members of the same family. In a sense, you can assume that siblings are exposed to the same family background, the education, et cetera, et cetera. And you see how the two siblings change their behaviour moving in and out of places just because they have been exposed to different geographical characteristics in different stages of life.

Richard: Laurenz, your work on political representation gaps and populism examines the gap between the preferences of citizens and their elected representatives. So from your perspective, is populism mainly about the economy or culture or political structures or you know, all three basically in equal measure, or are there perhaps other factors as well?

Laurenz: I think it's a combination. I do find it helpful to think of populism as a symptom to a lack of representation. This is kind of the perspective that I have in my research, meaning that, and this is what I showed descriptively in my work, most people in Europe, most ordinary people, hold political attitudes that are much more culturally conservative than basically all parties. Except for the populists. So for instance, in most countries, for example, Germany, but also the UK, even the Christian Democrats or the Tories in the UK are on cultural issues and on immigration in particular, more liberal than the average voter. So there is this huge share of the population that does not have any mainstream party to vote, kind of, given that they vote based on how close they are to a party. And I think that this gap provided populists with an opportunity.

It provided fertile ground, so to say. And I think this is what populists use to their advantage. And now if you do that as a populist, you enter as a new party and then you fill this policy space and so on, then I think it becomes very natural for you to tell this narrative about corrupt elites not representing ordinary people and so on. And this is what populists do all the time. And this is actually what scientists used to define populism. So the scientific definition of populism is people who claim that there is a corrupt elite that does not represent the people. I do, however, think that other factors matter a lot. I think it's the coming together of several factors that enables this spectacular rise that we have. mean, like the rise of populism, just in terms of rise of party families, is the biggest rise for sure in post-war Europe and probably beyond that. Populists are now the strongest party family throughout Europe. I mean, for instance, in Germany, the AfD has risen faster than the SPD even during the 19th century, during all of these economic turmoil that you had and so on. So I think at least two other factors are really key. So I think one is for sure these economic anxieties and so on. Like real or not, I guess the grievances are there and have been there for a long time, but if the economy works really well, then maybe people can be bought off, so to say. They may be fine to some extent. But I think as soon as things don't work anymore, I think these grievances become more visible. And the last factor is, of course, is, I guess, social media, which allows populists to market themselves.

Richard: As an ex journalist, I have skin in the game, but it's interesting you talked about culture there and you talked about social media. And it's also interesting you say, you know, demonstrably we have got a rise in populism at the moment, you can see it. But is there a sense that that feeling was always out there? It's just there are people able to tap into it because it's easier to get your voice out there with the media, or or is there a sense that opinions are changing and people are becoming more populist in the way they think? Do we know?

Laurenz: We know a lot about opinion change. So just regarding the underlying attitudes like immigration attitudes or so on, these did not change that much. in particular, immigration attitudes have been super stable. There are some nice studies where people track the same individual over many years and also the whole population over many years. And this has not really changed much. In Britain, we have very good data, for instance, and they are like for

the last few decades. I mean, from the 70s onward or 80s or so onwards you see that like 70 plus percent want much less immigration and so on. On a few other topics people have become actually more liberal culturally. So running in the opposite direction like gay marriage or many things related to gender. Regarding like populist per se, meaning anti-elite or more people-centrist, I think we have a bit less that and I'm not 100 % sure maybe Davide knows better, but I also I don't think people have become more populist in this way. But then again, I would guess the main reason why people vote for populist parties is not because they have the populist attitudes themselves, i.e. being people-centrist, but just because they are anti-immigration and the populists are the only guys who are anti-immigration enough for the people.

Davide: Yeah, and in fact, there is debate, as Lawrence was saying, like voters' preferences perhaps have remained stable, but priorities might have changed. So a person like or dislike immigration, but in the 70s they will have prioritized economic and views towards the strikes or other aspects before immigration. And now immigration, even if the underlying taste is the same, becomes more salient in an election.

Laurenz: Yeah, I totally agree. This is also my reading. And then again, I think this brings us a bit back to a point we had earlier. Why did these priorities change so much? I think there are at least like two reasonable causes: like one is that social media, you know, enabled some actors, for instance, populists to just make that more salient. And the other thing is that well, immigration just increased, no, in particular asylum immigration, because we know that people mostly are like anti-asylum-seeking immigration and are much more fine with other immigration. And this particular type of immigration increased a lot in Europe during the last decade or so.

Richard: Davide, we've touched on this a little bit, but in your work on urban, rural, political disenchantment, you show that political differences across Europe are not simply city versus countryside divides, as it were. They're more nuanced than that. Could you go into a bit more detail about that? Well, you've got the cities and the suburbs and that, you know, how much does it break down as you move out and and what do you find?

Davide: Yeah, absolutely. There are nuances that one needs to consider. The first one is that when we think about urban-rural polarization, as you highlighted, we need to think about a continuum. The data out there shows that it's not a black and white picture, but it's really a spectrum, if you want. So attitudes tend to vary, but again, on a gradient between inner core, highly densely populated cities and more remote peripheral, often rural regions. I also want to highlight the point of a peripherality in a sense that the distance to big cities, for example, seem to matter. So think about the difference between a small village, so a small settlement close to London, versus a small settlement in the remote rural Cornwall or remote Eastern Germany. So distance matter a lot. And the type of community that sits there. Again, think about the small village in the Cotswold in a very wealthy part of the UK versus a small settlement in eastern Germany probably with a high unemployment and other issues and obviously these will be very different places. There is something that in geography we call "boring city size". So think about a place like Cambridge where we are recording part of this is a city that is probably the same size as Boston in Lincolnshire or like a small town in France and elsewhere. But because of it is being so connected and very close to London

and the other global centers of research, it has characteristics that you will associate to a much bigger city.

Laurenz: So what would you say are the, say, three most important factors about the place in terms of affecting populist voting?

Davide: Yeah, so this is a fascinating question and we don't have probably an answer. My own take is that density is key, so the density of people, which is the characteristic that defines urbanness. There is debate over what is a city, but density seems to be a key metric. I would say the second one is distance, the distance between your place, your settlement and other big cities. And the third one, perhaps diversity, if we want in a sense that you can think of diversity as ethnic diversity or social diversity, et cetera, et cetera. And that's also seem to matter lot to me.

Richard: Curious actually, Davide, what about age?

Davide: Age, absolutely. So the demographic also plays a key role. So again, if we think about the electorates, we see that younger people tend to vote for more progressive parties as it was against the populist parties that are predominantly voted by older people. So age, education as well, matter a lot. Education that correlates with income and with class, obviously. There is a bit of gender dimension as well. And this, you want, are the individual characteristics. And then the question is, to what extent do individual characteristics matter more or less compared to the influence of the environment where people live?

Richard: Lawrence, what does all this tell us about political trust? Are people losing trust in politics or just the mainstream parties in politics? So, you know, you vote for a party, you trust that they're going to come in and do what they say and fulfil their promises and follow a manifesto and make your life better.

Laurenz: Do think in that sense people have not lost trust in politics overall. think this is more a confined issue. So trust in established parties is very low in most European countries and has been steadily declining for the last 20, 25 years or so. And this then displaced into what I described before with these representation gaps that made it probably easier for new parties to enter. If the trust is already low, people are more willing to switch the party. You also see that, by the way, a lot in many elections. You now see that much more people switch also between mainstream parties, suggesting that party loyalty has decreased. And yeah, if you ask people how much they in particular are in favor of democracy in general, people are still very much in favor of it. So I don't think that that has changed. What, however, more and more people say is that they lose trust in the way that democracy is practiced nowadays, in the form, the specific form that it takes, which I guess is then related to their feeling of not being represented.

Richard: So what can mainstream parties do to rebuild a better connection with people?

Laurenz: I would argue the main thing they can do is to represent their attitudes better. And also I do think that many grievances people have are relatively local. We talked about that a little bit before. So I don't think people are like generally against all kinds of immigration, but they are against asylum migration, at least in large numbers. And so this is a relatively local

thing and mainstream parties can become active here and reduce this specific type of immigration. then, you know, and this is something that maybe Davide can say about more, but I do have often also the impression, also coming from a rural area, that a lot of the concerns that you would have as a rural person are not really reflected in discourse of elites. Not like a simple example would be that many people in rural areas need cars. But like in elite discussions, because of like climate, there's a big emphasis on taxing car owners and so on. But all of these are relatively local things. I think they need to be identified and then acted upon. And I think this can be done. And if mainstream parties do that, they can win the competition with populists. think a common counter argument that you would hear from mainstream politicians would be, well, if we do that, people will vote for the original. I do think if this is done well, this need not happen because like populists do often, I mean, they usually have very little experience in government and they tend to paint with a broad brush and I think also bundle a lot of things into their policy positions that are not necessarily popular. So if you're more precise and just identify the few things that people don't like and if you like then argue with your competence and getting stuff done, you know how government works and blah blah, I think this is doable.

Richard: Davide, what about policies for place?

Davide: I would say there is an economic type of answer. there are scholars or researchers saying, well, some of these grievances are economic, so they relate to economics. And so we need to somehow address special justice or special distributive justice. So we need to provide more facilities to rural areas where the health centre is closing, where the school is closing, et cetera. We need to perhaps provide better cations or on other aspects. But this is, I will say, it's only part of the problem. As Lawrence was mentioning, he highlighted a key point of the cars and saw the green backlash towards climate policies more broadly. So cars is one of the examples, it can be broader. And in these aspects of kind of policies, the evidence seems to be that it's not only about distributive issues, but there are also some procedural aspects and some symbolic aspects. Let me explain with two examples. There is evidence on coal mine closures in Spain. So this narrative, common narrative is that closing a coal mine will create backlash because people will lose jobs and they will vote for populists. And evidence shows that when the closure is discussed with trade unions or with either local organizations or that makes citizens feel that procedurally has been done in the right way, in an inclusive way, there is less of a backlash. And equally, there is also research showing how policies, have a big symbolic component beyond the material. So think about, for example, in France, which is the place of the gilets jaunes protests, as we know, researchers have tested to see whether combining, for example, new environmental policies, so let's say reducing or increasing taxes on cars, have a less of a backlash if they are combined with policies that somehow seem to target the elite. So there was a vignette saying, well, would you oppose climate policy if we also combine it with taxing or forbidding politicians to take the airplane for short flight or things like that? And these seem to have an effect. So suggesting that there is a symbolic component beyond the material aspect that we probably have somehow overlooked so far in debates.

Richard: That's interesting. People just feel like less picked on, frankly

Davide: They find it's unfair as Lawrence was saying. I also grew up in the countryside and in the countryside you need a car like there is no way around. You don't have public

transport, you live far away. If you need to bring your children to school or meet your friend, you just need a car. And so if you, a government tells you rightly so in a way, the government is trying to reduce the emissions. But if you tell you, you are the one that is picked, the rural fellow will say, why me? Why don't you tax the people in cities? The ones more likely to take more flights and other things that are highly polluting too.

Richard: Okay, we always like to finish by looking ahead into the future. So looking ahead, are you optimistic or pessimistic, really, about the ability of democratic systems to respond to populism, spatial inequality, and declining trust? Laurenz, are you optimistic or pessimistic?

Laurenz: I'm optimistic. I know that many, many people really perceive a crisis, but then I mean, looking, just looking at the history there, there have been really, really bad situations. Two months ago also, I spoke to an older professor who was just about to retire, an American, and I asked him a similar question actually. And then he told me about the USA in the sixties where like each year they were like, I forgot the number, but there were dozens or don't know hundreds of like attempts to detonate a bomb somewhere and you know, JFK was assassinated, Martin Luther King was assassinated the same year I think, but democracy did not end. And I do think that the democracy we have now will not end. And I guess the main reason is something that we discussed earlier and this is that there's I think no demand for dictatorship or something like that. The vast majority of people does really want form of democracy. They just think that we are not democratic enough, the sense that citizens are not heard enough. And if this demand is really there, then I think it's basically impossible to erect a dictatorship here. I see it actually as a challenge for our generation, David Dez and mine, to make this work in practice. I would say I'm not only optimistic, but actually I'm extremely happy that I was born in this time, because there's something to do.

Richard: Well I love that. David, are you optimistic or pessimistic?

Davide: Well, I will start with some concerns that I have. And for example, the increasing role of AI makes me concerned when I hear that my friends now ask the AI oracles even just where to go on holiday, forget who to vote for. And clearly there is a risk of increasing these echo chambers of information. But despite that, I'm also optimistic. As Lawrence was saying, I feel that perhaps we can see populism as a sort of a healthy scepticism, in a sense if we think about at the end of the day, democracy is a good system because it allows people to respond to their political offer in a way. And so it might be just that there has been changes that have gone too far or too far for some communities and some communities are just saying hey, perhaps sometimes not in a nice way, sometimes they say it's reflected or manifested in a way we find it difficult, but it's anyway it's a healthy skepticism. And I would like to say two examples. One is, as Lawrence was saying, the 60s were a period of lots of protests. And if we take geographical polarization, seemed to be something similar happening in the end of 19th century, the Gilded Age in the US. And in fact, research shows that, for example, in the 70s and 80s, people in the countryside were more supportive or more trustful towards institutions than now. These trends can go up and down in history.

Richard: Well that's all we've got time for on this episode, so thanks so much to Davide Luca from Cambridge University and Laurenz Guenther from the Toulouse School of Economics for joining us. And thank you for listening to Crossing Channels. We'd love to hear what you think. Your reviews help us shape future episodes and make it easier for new listeners to

find the show. If you enjoyed this one, why not explore some of our earlier episodes too? We've covered a huge range of issues from online trust and what money can't buy. So how universities should adapt to AI and what is really happening with the mental health crisis amongst young people.