

Anarchy in the UK (and Everywhere Else): The Ideological Roots of Populism

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Introduction

In political terms, we are living in the midst of the proverbial ‘interesting times’. The election of Donald Trump and the UK’s Brexit referendum in 2016 are being seen as turning points in modern democratic politics. As further evidence, new political forces seem to be at play with fresh citizen movements – ranging from France’s “Yellow Vests” to the UK’s “Extinction Rebellion” – emerging quickly and decisively. Politics appears to be dramatically more polarised, with movements based on populist messages being seen as key agents of this polarisation.

But is this perception of increased polarisation supported by the data, and is it actually a new pattern? While research has shown that political elites have become more polarised (e.g. Poole and Rosenthal 1985; Gentzkow et al., 2019) the evidence on polarisation amongst the general public is less clear. We tackle this question from the perspective of polarisation in the *political ideologies of citizens* (Draca and Schwarz, 2018).

We define ‘ideologies’ as clusters of political opinions, for example, the tendency for positions (such as pro-immigrant views, low trust in major companies and preferences for more government intervention) to co-occur amongst particular groups of people. Our analysis uses a set of consistently defined questions from the World Values Survey (WVS) across 17 countries in North America and Western Europe. These questions are reported in Table 1 (p.14) and cover a wide range of themes about opinions on social issues, the organisation of the economy, the role of government and trust in institutions.

We take this pool of questions and identify clusters of similar political opinions using unsupervised machine learning methods. The advantage of these particular methods is that they allow for the ‘mixed membership’ of ideologies among individuals. For example, we’re able to characterise people as being ‘mostly conservative but a bit liberal too’, thereby providing a good reflection of how people think in practice.

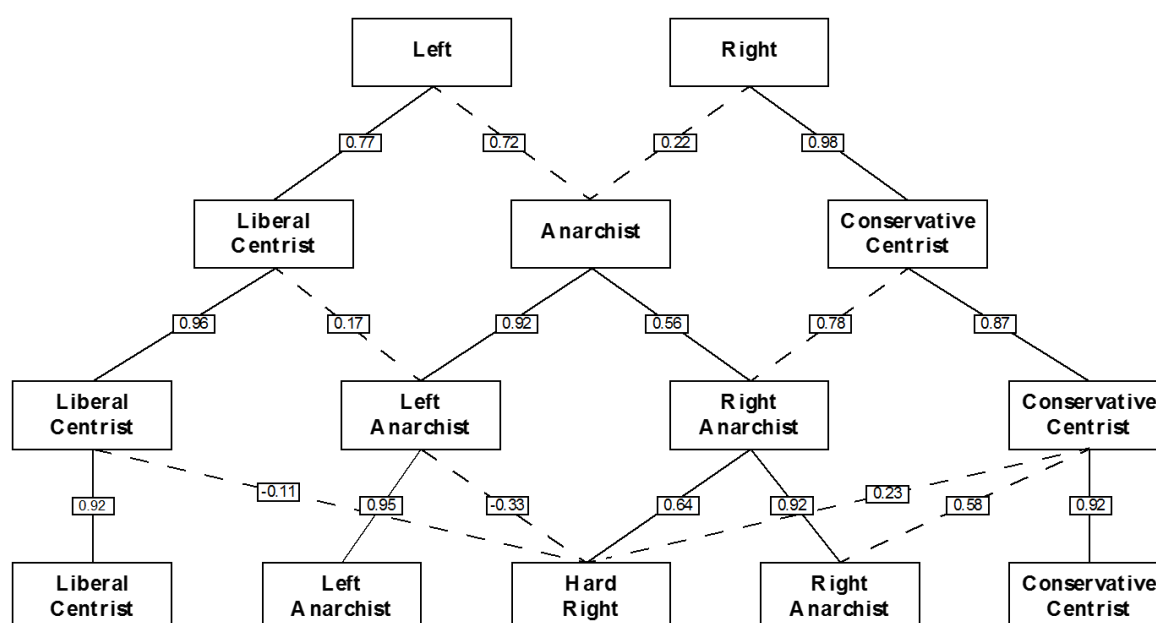
Key findings

Two main findings stand out from our research. Firstly, while there is a clear “Left-Right” dimension to the structure of the ideologies in the data, there is also another critical dimension at play. This is apparent in two ideological clusters that are defined by low confidence in societal institutions such as parliaments, major companies and the press. This can be seen in Table 2 (p.12), where we report the top ten opinions or ‘issue-positions’ that define the ideologies in our main model (which consists of four ideological types).

Based on their low trust in institutions we label these types as “anarchists”. Interestingly, they additionally split into Left Anarchist and Right Anarchist types that are differentiated by their positions on social issues. While these two types appear to be natural bases of support for different left- and right-wing populist movements, we prefer the label ‘anarchist’ as a descriptor. In part, this is because the term ‘populist’ has been gaining pejorative connotations (e.g. Murray, 2016), while related terms such as ‘anti-establishment’ are arguably now over-used in left- and right-wing polemics (e.g. Hume, 2017; and Jones 2014). But more specifically, while the term anarchist is often associated with a particular strand of radical, syndicalist politics, we argue that, in our context, it accurately conveys the questioning of existing institutions that is characteristic of current populist politics.

We contrast our Left and Right Anarchist types with alternative Liberal Centrist and Conservative Centrist types that are more supportive of societal institutions. In Figure 1, we illustrate how the hierarchy of ideologies evolves as we allow our algorithm to identify more clusters in the data. The anarchist type emerges as soon as three clusters are allowed to be identified. The share of anarchist views in the population is considerable, with cross-national averages of 17% for the Left Anarchist type and 27% for the Right.

Figure 1: Hierarchy of Types.

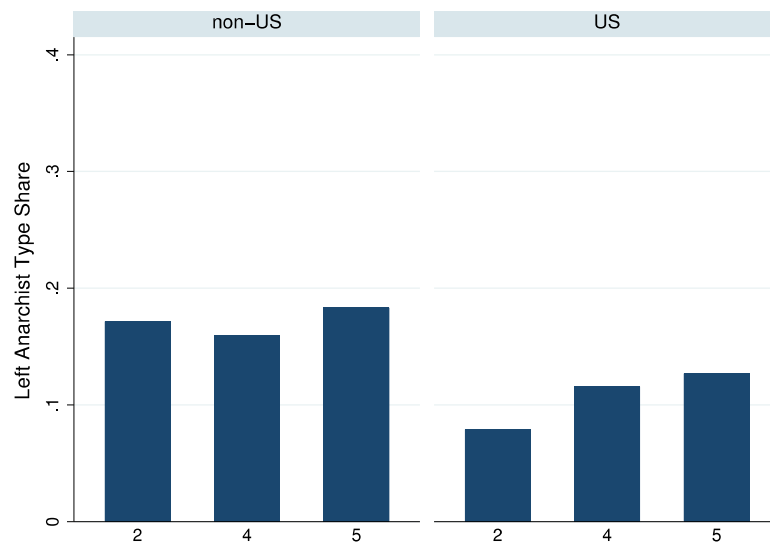


Notes: This figure shows the hierarchy of types as created by Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) for different numbers of ideological types. The values reported amongst the lines connecting the boxes record the similarity of types based on the correlation in the issue-position probability vectors across types.

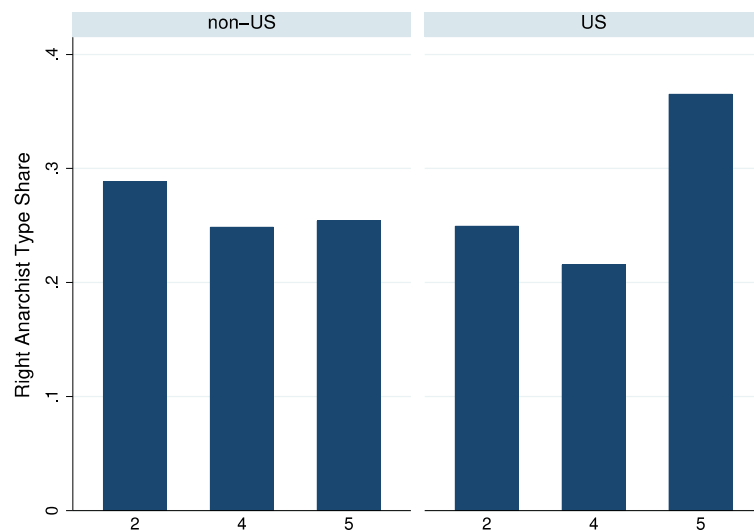
This leads to our second finding, namely that *there is limited evidence of strong trends in the growth of anarchist ideologies*. The Left and Right Anarchist types of are strongly present in our data from its beginning in the late 1980s. And as Figure 2 shows, while there is some notable growth in both anarchist types in the US from the mid-2000s, the trend is steady for most countries.

Figure 2: Growth of Anarchist Ideologies, 1989 – 2009.

(a) Left Anarchist Types



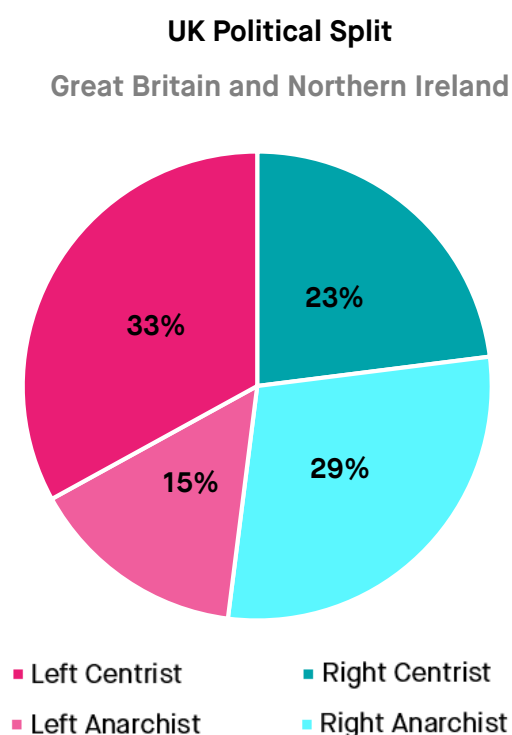
(b) Right Anarchist Types



Notes: This figure compares the levels of type shares across waves for the Left Anarchist and Right Anarchist types. We pool all 16 non-US countries (effectively all Western European countries apart from Iceland and Canada) and contrast them to the US. The pooling for the non-US sample is based on WVS sample weights. The timing of the waves is Wave 2 (1989-1993), Wave 4 (1999-2004) and Wave 5 (2005-2009).

But what about anarchy in the UK? As we can see from Figure 3, the UK became more left-wing and anarchic over the 1990s and the 2000s, with shifts of 3-7% across our measures. In terms of the international shift to the left, the UK is at the lower end of international trends, but it is in the upper end for the growth of anarchist ideologies. The Right Anarchist ideology dominates in terms of UK anti-establishment politics with a population share of approximately 29% versus 15% for the Left Anarchists (Figure 4).

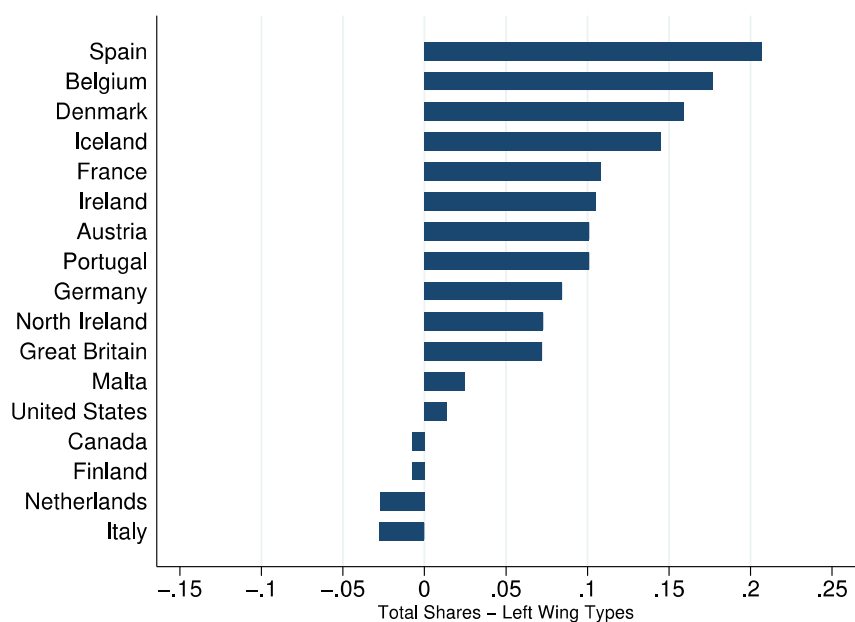
Interestingly, our data shows that UK right-wing politics is split sharply between its centrist (23%) and anarchic, anti-establishment (29%) wings. In contrast, UK left-wing politics is dominated by the Liberal Centrist group, which has more than double the presence of the Left Anarchist ideology (33% versus 15%).



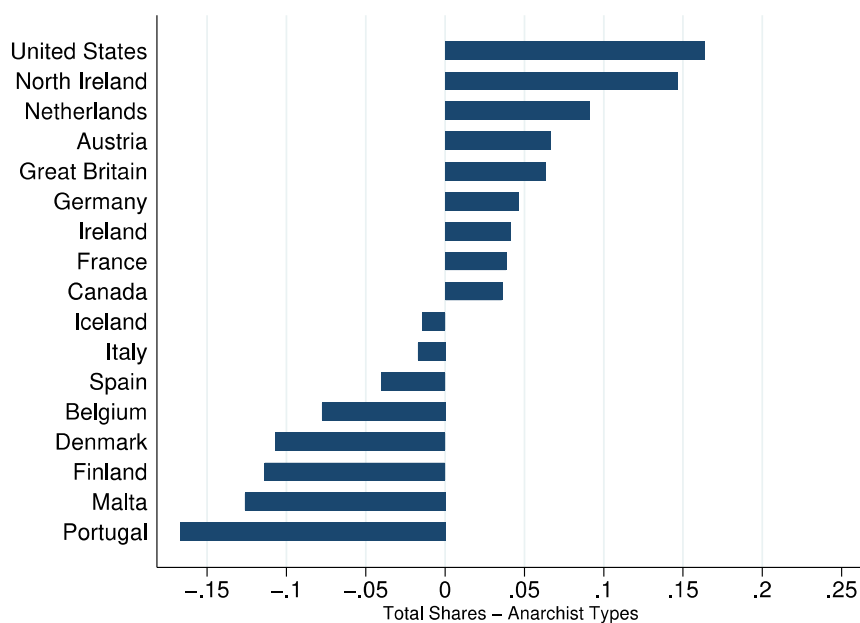
This points to two things relevant to the UK's current political landscape. Firstly, *the split of opinion between Right Anarchist and Conservative Centrist ideologies arguably makes UK right-wing politics more volatile and fractious relative to the left*. The ongoing turbulence within the Conservative party certainly bears this out. Secondly, *centrist politics is not dead in the UK*. Indeed, there is a modest centrist majority in the UK if we consider the combined shares of the Liberal Centrist and Conservative Centrist groups (33% + 23% = 56%). Again, this is reflected in the realignments that appear to be occurring in UK politics with some centrist Conservative MPs separating from their party and the Liberal Democrats capturing a surge of support in polling. Based on our breakdown of ideologies, the “interesting times” in UK politics have some strong roots and are set to continue.

Figure 3: Changes in Ideological Type Shares Over Time

(a) Change in Left-Wing Types

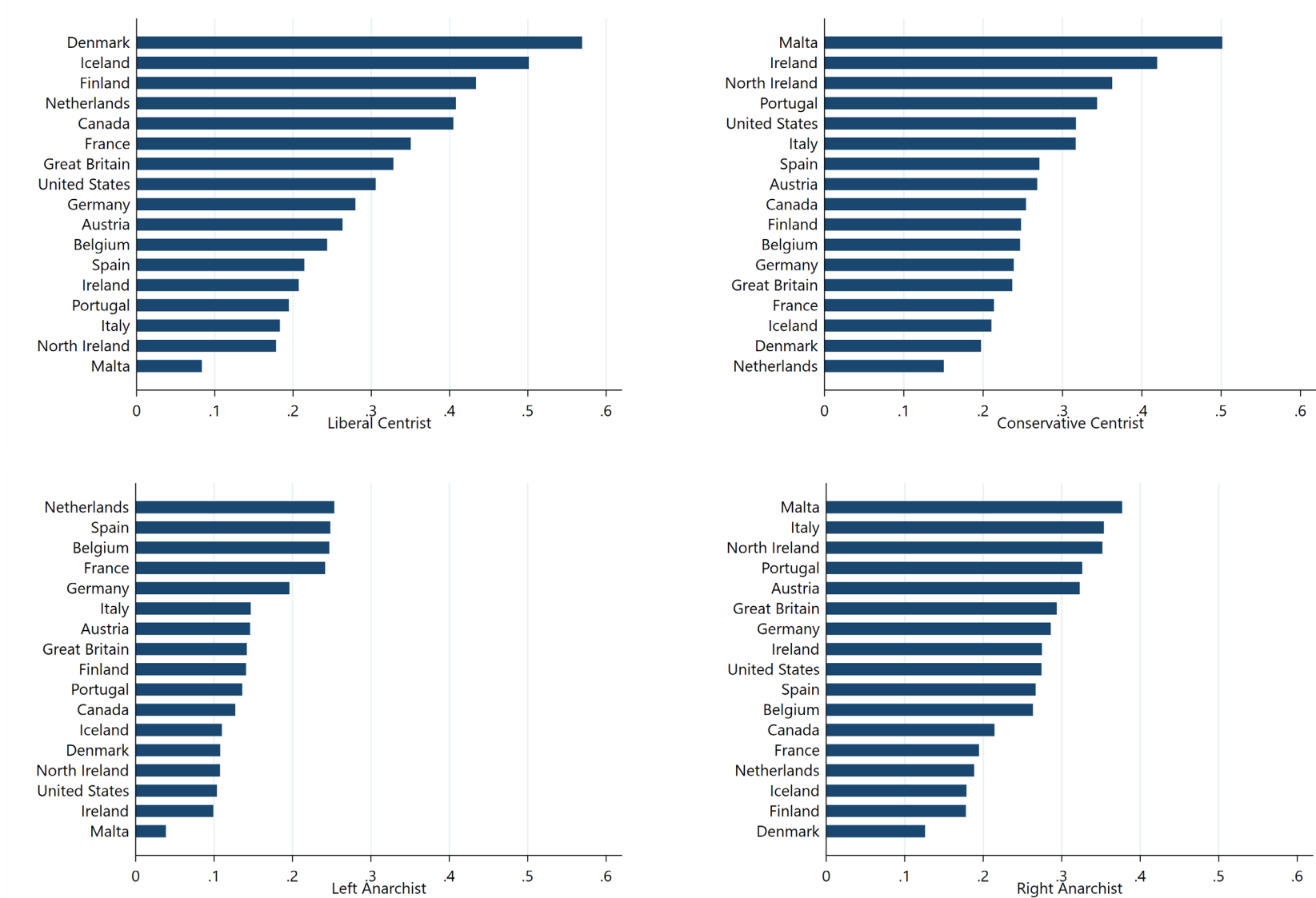


(b) Change in Anarchist Share



Notes: This figure shows changes in ideological type shares by country between wave 2 (1989-1993) and 5 (2005-2009) of the World Values Survey. In (a) we pool the shares for the Liberal Centrist and Left Anarchist ideologies while in (b) we pool the Right Anarchist and Left Anarchist ideologies.

Figure 4: Breakdown of Ideological Types by Cou

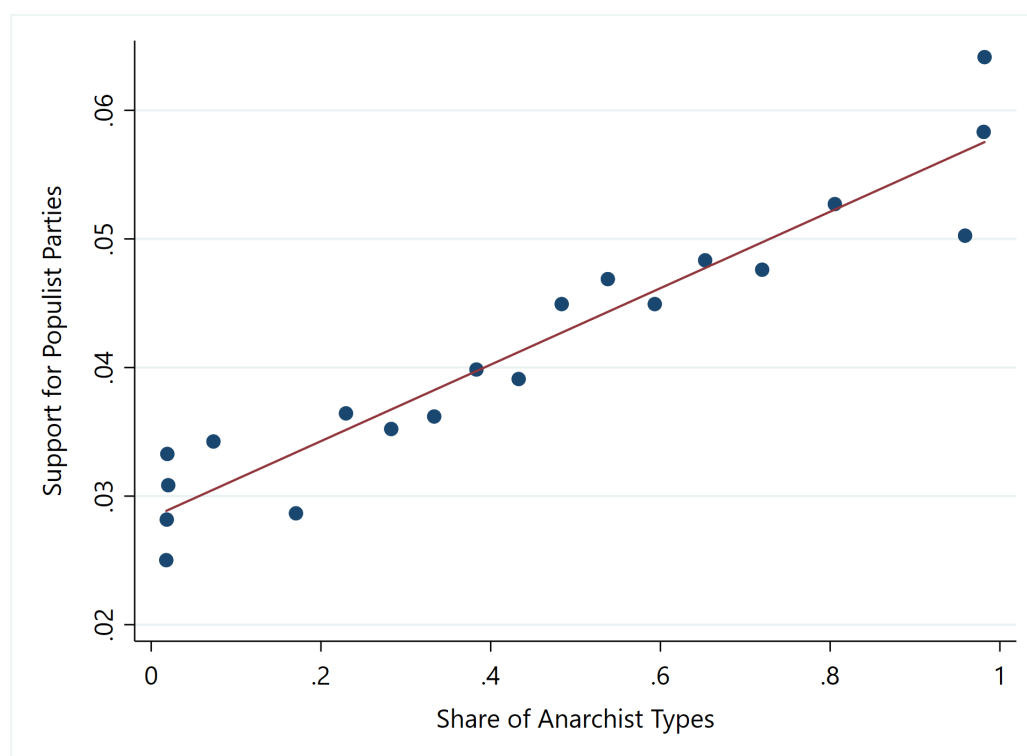


Notes on Figure 4: This figure shows the mean country-level type shares aggregated over individuals. Country means calculated using WVS sample weights.

The roots of populist politics

How strong is the link between anarchist ideologies and populist politics? Our work uncovers a range of evidence that strongly suggests this link. Firstly, as Figure 5 shows, there is a strong ‘raw’ correlation between an individual’s anarchist ideological share and the probability of voting for a populist party. This relationship remains strong even after we control for personal characteristics (e.g.: age, gender and income) as well as an individual’s own self-positioning on the Left-Right scale that ranges between 1-10.

Figure 5: Anarchist Ideologies and Support for Populist Parties



Notes: This figure shows the relationship between the individual-level share of anarchist types and the voting for populist parties coded according to the Rooduijn et al. (2019) classification (binscatter plot on 68,417 observations).

The regression models reported in Table 3 (p.13) shows how this relationship plays out in detail. The notable finding here is that our variables representing an individual’s share in our different ideologies is a better predictor of the likelihood of voting populist than variables their self-positioning on a 1-10, Left-Right ideological scale. Indicators based on the Left-Right ideological scale only become significant when we re-specify them as indicators based on “hard left” and “hard right” positions only (column (4)).

While the data indicates that populist support can be explained in part on the basis of those holding “hard left” or “hard right” opinions, our ideological share variables are still significant after including these indicators. This means that there is plenty left unexplained if we look at politics using the pure Left-Right framing. We argue that our

“empirical ideologies” framework is picking up a systematic pattern of anti-establishment politics that has gone undetected by conventional political indicators.

Why now?

If we think of anarchist ideologies as the natural support base for populist movements, then the important point to note from our research is that this base has been *latently present for decades*.

How, then, have populist movements activated themselves so strongly now, even though the pre-conditions for their emergence have been in place for so long? One possibility is that technology has facilitated the entry of new political movements that tap into anarchist sentiment. Another is that economic shocks – specifically, the financial crisis and associated austerity policies – triggered the populist mobilisation (Fetzer, 2019).

Realistically, a combination of these two factors (and others) is likely to be at play. However, our analysis strongly suggests that declining trust in institutions is a crucial driver of the current turmoil in democratic politics, making reforms that rebuild trust a major priority across all types of political parties and movements.

References

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Table 1: Summary Statistics

Code	Question	Scale	Share For	Share Against
	On this list are various groups of people. Could you please mention any that you would not like to have as neighbours?	{0,1}		
A124_02	People of a different race		0.097	0.903
A124_06	Immigrants / foreign workers		0.123	0.877
A124_07	People who have AIDS		0.208	0.782
A124_08	Drug addicts		0.638	0.362
A124_09	Homosexuals		0.217	0.781
C002	Do you agree, disagree or neither agree nor disagree with the following statements: "When jobs are scarce, employers should give priority to people of this country over immigrants."	{1-3}	0.600	0.305
E036	Rate your view on a 1 to 10 scale between the positions: "Private ownership of business and industry should be increased" vs. "Government ownership of business and industry should be increased"	{1-10}	0.506	0.255
E037	Rate your view on a 1 to 10 scale between the positions: "Government should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for" vs. "People should take more responsibility to provide for themselves"	{1-10}	0.376	0.469
E039	Rate your view on a 1 to 10 scale between the positions: "Competition is good. It stimulates people to work hard and develop new ideas" vs. "Competition is harmful. It brings out the worst in people"	{1-10}	0.613	0.215
	Could you tell me how much confidence you have in these organizations:	{1-4}		
E069_01	Church		0.519	0.481
E069_02	Armed Forces		0.567	0.433
E069_04	The Press		0.356	0.644

E069_05	Labour Unions		0.385	0.615
E069_06	The Police		0.704	0.296
E069_07	Parliament		0.413	0.587
E069_08	The Civil Services		0.451	0.549
E069_13	Major companies		0.432	0.568
E069_17	Justice System / Courts		0.533	0.466
Please tell me for each of the following actions whether you think it can always be justified, never be justified, or something in between:		{1-10}		
F114	Claiming government benefits		0.076	0.869
F115	Avoiding a fare on public transport		0.086	0.842
F116	Cheating on taxes		0.106	0.828
F117	Someone accepting a bribe		0.035	0.931
F118	Homosexuality		0.407	0.432
F119	Prostitution		0.196	0.663
F120	Abortion		0.348	0.458
F121	Divorce		0.496	0.280
F122	Euthanasia		0.418	0.430
F123	Suicide		0.149	0.730
G006	How proud are you of your nationality?	{1-4}	0.885	0.115

Notes on Table 1: This table reports summary statistics for the recoded questions from the WVS. The third column reports the original coding of the question in the WVS. Questions with a binary or 1–4 coding are recoded into two indicator variables expressing either support or opposition to each issue. Questions with 1–3 or 1–10 allow for a neutral coding if the answer is coded as 3 or 5 in which case both indicator variables are coded as zero. The fourth (fifth) column contains the share of people coded as a positive (negative) response to the question.

Table 2: 4 Type Ideological Model

Liberal Centrist	Left Anarchist
Confidence: Police	No confidence: Churches
No problem neighbours: Homosexuals	Justifiable: Divorce
No problem neighbours: People different race	No problem neighbours: Homosexuals
Justifiable: Divorce	No problem neighbours: People AIDS
Proud of nationality	No problem neighbours: People different race
No problem neighbours: People AIDS	No problem neighbours: Immigrants/foreign workers
Not justifiable: Someone accepting a bribe	No confidence: Parliament
No problem neighbours: Immigrants/foreign workers	Justifiable: Homosexuality
Not justifiable: Claiming government benefits	No confidence: Armed Forces
Confidence: Justice System/Courts	No confidence: Major companies
Conservative Centrist	Right Anarchist
Confidence: Police	No confidence: Parliament
Confidence: Churches	No confidence: Civil Services
Confidence: Armed Forces	No confidence: Justice System/Courts
Not justifiable: Suicide	No confidence: The Press
Not justifiable: Prostitution	No confidence: Labour Unions
Not justifiable: Abortion	No confidence: Major companies
Proud of nationality	Not justifiable: Someone accepting a bribe
Confidence: Justice System/Courts	Not justifiable: Claiming government benefits
Not justifiable: Someone accepting a bribe	Not justifiable: Avoiding a fare on public transport
Confidence: The Civil Services	Not justifiable: Cheating on taxes

Notes on Table 2: This table lists, in order, the 10 most important issue positions for the 4 main ideological types identified in the World Value Survey Data. Highlighted text draws out those issue positions that distinguish anarchist from centrist types.

Table 3: Ideology and Voting for Populist Parties

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Populist	Populist	Populist	Populist
Conservative Centrist	-0.007** (0.003)		-0.007** (0.003)	-0.008*** (0.003)
Left Anarchist	0.037*** (0.004)		0.036*** (0.004)	0.033*** (0.004)
Right Anarchist	0.033*** (0.004)		0.033*** (0.004)	0.032*** (0.004)
L-R Self-positioning (1-10)		-0.001* (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)	
“Hard Left”				0.024*** (0.004)
“Hard Right”				0.028*** (0.004)
R-squared adjusted	0.050	0.046	0.050	0.052
Number of Observations	67,666	67,666	67,666	67,666

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses. A 0-1 indicator for whether an individual voted for a Populist party is the dependent variable. The variables Conservative Centrist, Left Anarchist, and Right Anarchist are individual ideological shares between 0-1 (Liberal Centrist is left out as the base case). The “Hard Left” and “Hard Right” variables are dummies for whether an individual scores themselves at the ends of the Left-Right scale (1-2 for Hard Left and 9-10 for Hard Right).

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PUBLICATION DETAILS

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