

Interview - Matthew Goodwin

Written by E-International Relations

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Matthew J. Goodwin is Professor of Political Science at the University of Kent, Senior Fellow at Chatham House and co-author of the forthcoming *National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy*. He tweets regularly @GoodwinMJ.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

Great question! I am a political scientist who specialises in the study of political behaviour and within that national populism. This field has long roots and is often traced to the 1940s and 1950s, when scholars sought to make sense of the rise of fascism and also communism (which were often both subsumed under the heading 'totalitarianism'). Pioneers included people like Seymour Martin Lipset, Earl Raab, Richard Hofstadter and Daniel Bell. But the more recent literature that seeks to explain the post-1980 rise of populism (the so-called 'third wave') is typically traced to Klaus von Beyme's edited volume in 1988 and, thereafter, to influential work by the likes of Hans-Georg Betz, Herbert Kitschelt, Jens Rydgren, Roger Eatwell, Cas Mudde and Piero Ignazi. This literature then boomed as national populists in states like Austria, France and Italy became more prominent. They were already the most studied party family. But then came 2016.

The votes for Brexit and Trump have 'turbo-charged' this literature, bringing new people and ideas into the field. I am extremely excited about that because, at least in my view, the literature on national populism had stagnated. Albeit with some notable exceptions, at broad level studies were not particularly innovative. They were certainly becoming more methodologically sophisticated but there were often few, if any, innovations in theory. The usual 'model' of a paper was to download the latest European Social Survey data, run an analysis of who voted for party X at election X, explore whether this is about economic deprivation, anti-immigration or political distrust, and then wait for the next election.

This is now beginning to change, thankfully. A new generation of scholars and an influx of new minds are exploring new avenues. Perhaps the most dominant debate right now focuses on the relative importance of economic and cultural factors and, crucially, how these interact to produce support for national populism (i.e. is this rooted in economic anxiety or a values-led backlash against immigration and cultural change?). I'm also personally interested in the return of relative or 'nostalgic' deprivation within the literature, not least as something that might offer a 'bridge' between these two broad economic and cultural blocks, an idea that we pick up and explore in *National Populism*. There is also a growing acceptance that we need to devote more work to exploring the internal organisation and membership of these parties, and that we need to work much more closely with our friends in social psychology to design better measures and cross-disciplinary research.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

My thinking has changed quite a lot over the years, as has the literature. Traditionally, the study of fascism and national populism was filled with Marxists and/or socialists who were driven more by their desire to denigrate these movements than examine them objectively. This held back the literature, not only because there was a clear political slant to the research but also because many researchers lacked the skills required to explore the issue in a more

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sophisticated way. Influenced by my PhD supervisor, Roger Eatwell, I had little time for such an approach that routinely 'pathologised' populism. Instead, we wanted to take these movements (and their grievances) seriously and explore their support as objectively as possible. In later years, I was also lucky enough to work with colleagues who either had different methodological skill-sets or came from different sub-fields of political science, which further contributed to my thinking around these issues.

How do you define populism in your new book *National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy* (co-authored with Roger Eatwell)? What were some of the challenges that you faced while writing the book?

We offer a specific definition of national populism in the book, which we feel better captures the phenomenon than some of the definitions that have been used until now. Of course, the literature has debated how best to define populism for many years (this was once called the 'War of Words' and for good reason!). But we do take a different slant from quite a few of our colleagues. Unlike others, we take populism seriously. We do not view it simply as a 'style' of politics but as a serious tradition in its own right, and one that can be traced back over many centuries. Nor do we view this tradition as anti-democratic or, by extension, 'far right' or 'fascist' (labels that we think are highly misleading). On the contrary, we view populism chiefly as a response to the spread of liberal democracy, as a phenomenon that seeks to prioritise the culture and interests of the nation, which promises to give voice to the plain or 'true' people who feel they have been neglected if not held in contempt by political and economic elites. But, of course, we develop a lot of these ideas and thoughts in the book.

I think there were three challenges in writing the book. One was simply to digest the vast and ever-increasing number of studies on this topic. *National Populism* is not strictly an academic book. It is written for a wider audience. But, at the same time, we are both academics who wanted to anchor our take in the evidence and (hopefully!) write something that also contributes to debates in the literature. This meant covering as many studies as we could, even if we do not cite them in a traditional sense. Second, Roger Eatwell specialises in the history of ideas and also historic fascism whereas I tend to work more on the contemporary political scene and with quantitative data. Bridging these backgrounds was a challenge but also a fun one. Third, accepting that you cannot answer everything in one book. Because we look at the rise of national populism across the West, there will inevitably be things that we gloss, like variations within country X, or the role of issue Y in region Z. My first publisher at Routledge once told me that writers ultimately need to learn how to 'let go' of their project and accept that there will always be questions that remain unanswered. I think this was good advice. Hopefully, we will contribute to the debate but also raise some questions that others take forward.

How far do the ideological differences between eurosceptic political parties limit the prospect of them forming larger political movements across the continent?

Because most of these movements are ultimately nationalist ones they are instinctively wary of transnational movements or attempts to foster links above the nation state. Look, for example, at the way in which some of these movements have pushed back against Steve Bannon's efforts to promote a pan-European movement. Having said that, there is also clearly a much greater degree of international co-operation than in previous years and this is something that I would argue has been facilitated by social media. If you look, for example, at the international networks that surround the 'Free Tommy Robinson' case in the United Kingdom, or the growing links between national populists in Europe around the refugee issue, these point toward a greater level of cooperation than in the past. I think it is also fair to argue that these parties are now actively trying to learn from one another in a more serious way than in the past. During the 2000s, academics were already pointing to the 'cross-national diffusion' of ideas, strategies and tactics but my own reading today is that this is probably more frequent than in the past.

The European parliament provides an opportunity for eurosceptic parties to join parliamentary groups, gain seats on committees and receive financial subsidies. Will these factors discourage such parties from seeking the withdrawal of their respective countries from the EU (even if they wish to see significant reform)?

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Not every national populist party wants to leave the European Union. While some, like the UK Independence Party (UKIP), were very hostile to their country's EU membership, others in Central and Eastern Europe want to remain within the EU even if they are very unhappy with how the EU is seen to be managing issues like the refugee crisis. I am not convinced that this 'sceptical support' is something grounded in the need for parliamentary resources but rather in the reality of public opinion within those states. For example, in France it soon became clear to Marine Le Pen that a large or some would argue overwhelming majority of voters were not open to her calls to leave the European Union and so she softened that position. In Italy, while the national populist Lega is instinctively sceptical toward the EU it is also aware that while the Italians are certainly also sceptical about the Euro single currency there is currently not much appetite for leaving the bloc altogether. But one point that we do make in the book is that we also need to remember how the nature of euroscepticism itself is changing. This is not the 1980s and 1990s when debates about the EU focused on rather technical, dry and constitutional issues. Today, the risk facing the EU (as we learned during the Brexit referendum) is that euroscepticism increasingly becomes merged with immigration and public anxieties over demographic change. This would almost certainly expand the 'pool of potential' for eurosceptic movements.

You recently argued that Sweden's ruling Social Democratic Party has adopted tougher policies towards refugees in an attempt to reduce support for the nationalist Sweden Democrats in elections later this year. Will mainstream parties elsewhere be tempted to emulate anti-immigration policies if this approach is seen to bring electoral benefits?

I think the jury is out on this one. On the one hand, we have seen a number of centre-left movements adopt more restrictive positions on immigration, integration and the refugee crisis, not only in Sweden but also Denmark, Germany and the UK. Even some think-tanks in the US are urging the Democrats to do the same, aware that they need to halt the defection of blue-collar workers to the Republicans and that hyper-liberalism on identity issues is not an effective strategy. But other social democrats have remained more committed to an internationalist and socially liberal stance on these issues. Against this backdrop we know that social democracy is suffering major electoral losses and has plummeted to record lows in countries like Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, France and Italy. So, we are going to have to wait and see which of these competing approaches turns out to be more effective not only at stalling the defection of working-class voters to national populist parties or apathy, but also at retaining the loyalty of socially liberal middle-class professionals. How social democracy can rebuild and sustain an election-winning coalition is the million-dollar question.

Europe's party systems have been described as volatile and recent elections have witnessed the rise of new movements, however La République En Marche! in France stands out for being pro-European and centrist. Do you expect to see similar pro-European parties of significance emerge in other countries?

As we argue in the book, once you step back from the short-term factors and look at the long-term trends then it is clear that Europe's party systems are becoming more volatile, less tribal, increasingly fragmented and less predictable. One of the big winners of these broader trends, at least so far, has been national populism while one of the big losers has been traditional social democracy. This heightened volatility also helps to explain why new parties like En Marche! but also Five Star in Italy have been able to seemingly come from nowhere to win recent elections. But it also means that unless things change other outsider or challenger parties will also find it easier than in earlier decades to breakthrough and challenge the established parties. So, I would not predict a general rise in pro-European centrist parties. What seems more likely to me is just a general rise in volatility more generally, which could have quite different outcomes in different countries.

According to your recent research on patterns of public opinion there are broadly six political 'tribes' in the European Union, with the 'EU Rejectors' and 'EU Federalists' at the extremes dominating debate. Why have the larger 'tribes' in between failed to shape public discourse about the future direction of the EU?

I work a lot with Chatham House, because I find the territory between academe and policy and public communities intellectually interesting and rewarding. This particular project drew on a large comparative study to map the different

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tribes of Europe and also saw more than 100,000 members of the public engage in our online survey tool to find out which tribe they belonged to. The larger tribes like the “Hesitant Europeans” (people who are broadly on board with the European project but remain sceptical about its current direction) are not having as much influence as the other, more radical groups for two reasons. The first is that the EU Rejectors and EU Federalists are simply more vocal, whether in politics or on social media. Certainty of belief is always louder than ambivalence. Second, we found that the larger tribes do not easily map onto party politics. This was a problem at Britain’s EU referendum, for example, where you find that a binary ‘remain or leave’ decision does not lend itself easily to the fact that large numbers of people were fairly ambivalent. One risk for the EU going forward, we argue, is that these larger tribes are also not static; they may move in one direction or the other. This means that for the pro-EU crowd it is crucial that they develop a compelling and clear message for these voters while also demonstrating competence on big and divisive issues like the refugee crisis. Meanwhile, for the anti-EU crowd these voters may become more available should the EU fail to respond to these big sweeping challenges.

Prior to the UK’s 2016 referendum on European Union membership, you contended that “culture trumps economics” to explain support for leaving the EU despite perceived economic risks. However, how significant were economic arguments in *favour* of leaving for those voters less concerned with cultural issues?

I think that Britain’s Remain camp got a lot wrong, and I told them this at the time. They never really got to grips with the fact that for many voters the “risk” was less to do with the economic consequences of Brexit than with the cultural consequences of remaining in the EU. We forget this now but the referendum was called against the backdrop of a pan-European refugee crisis, which the EU was struggling to control, and amid major terrorist attacks like those in Paris in 2015 and suicide bombings in Brussels in March 2016. These events added a layer to already strong concerns in Britain about freedom of movement and a perception that the European Union was undermining or even threatening Britain’s wider identity. These, in turn, were underpinned by strong feelings of Englishness and a long tradition of euroscepticism that can be traced back over decades if not centuries. As historians have argued, from 1707 onwards you can basically map British scepticism toward continental Europe and this escalated during the latter half of the twentieth century. Most Leavers were preoccupied with cultural issues while most of those who were chiefly concerned about economics sided with Remain. This values-led fault line means that we are incredibly unlikely to see major changes of opinion toward the question of EU membership while we are also incredibly unlikely to find consensus among Leavers and Remainers any time soon.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations or those interested in studying the politics of the European Union?

I would honestly begin with a discussion about the work-life balance. Increasingly, higher education and the accompanying culture is asking academics to wear multiple hats. This is especially true in the United Kingdom where, aside from the universal ‘publish or perish’ mentality, scholars now have to think about translating their research into policy communities (the so-called ‘impact’ agenda), as well as being a good teacher, a good citizen and capturing grant income. This requires a formidable skill-set and we collectively need to get to a point where we recognise that different academics have different skills and that people cannot do everything. In the first instance, this also means that early career researchers need to think very carefully about how to look after themselves. Academic life is a marathon not a sprint. I have certainly made big mistakes in my academic career, working too hard in my twenties for example. In response, I have recently imposed some ‘ground rules’ which I feel do make a tangible difference; do not work at weekends; check e-mail only twice a day, once in the morning, and once toward the end of the afternoon; turn off social media and other electronics at 6 or 7pm; and exercise regularly. Only when you have a good work-life balance should you begin to think about other issues.