



Populism, nationalism, or national populism? An analysis of Slovak voting behaviour at the 2010 parliamentary election

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the impact of populist attitudes on party preferences and voting behaviour at the 2010 Slovak election. Using an original battery of questions on populist attitudes developed by the author and attached to the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems post-election survey, the article addresses hypotheses about the impact of populist attitudes on preferences and choices alongside nationalist and economic attitudes and the socio-demographic 'transition loser/winner' divide. It finds that whilst nationalist and economic attitudes are significant predictors of preferences and choices, populist attitudes are much less influential than anticipated.

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Introduction

Recent years have seen a burgeoning literature on populism in both halves of Europe, with scholarship on the West European radical right broadening to incorporate a more sophisticated and conceptually distinct analysis of populism and studies of 'unorthodox' parties in Central and Eastern Europe rising to meet it. Yet a particular lacuna remains largely unaddressed. Reflecting on the recent rise of national populism among Slovak political parties, one political sociologist observes that

studies discussing the phenomenon of populism traditionally focus on political actors, such as political parties or individual leaders, or the issues used to mobilise the public. Much less attention is paid to analysing the link between populist appeals and voter attitudes (Gyárfášová, 2008, 35).

This asymmetry is a product of the painfully slow evolution of populism from the primeval soup of concepts and theories to the shores of empirical study. In recent years, with a growing consensus that populism may inhere in something conceptually distinct from the more established ideologies with which it has traditionally been associated, scholars have turned their attention to the analysis of distinctly populist elements of party discourse. However, whilst party appeals are readily available to the analyst in the form of electoral manifestos and media archives, there is a paucity of data on attitudes that relate directly to the core tenets of populism. Post-election surveys provide a wealth of information relating to voter attitudes on canonical dimensions of political competition: pro-market versus anti-market; libertarianism versus authoritarianism; traditionalism versus moral modernisation; Europhilia versus Euro-scepticism. These data are directly pertinent to the analysis of the policy-proximate attitudes of voters, but not to the meta-political attitudes in which populism inheres.

This paper uses original, populism-specific survey questions to address the issue of voting behaviour in response to the putative upsurge of national populism in the political appeals of Slovak governing parties during the period 2006–2010. It tackles the key question of whether voters were responsive not only to the prominent debates over national identity, minority rights and the civic versus ethnic principle, but also to the populist – and, indeed, anti-populist – arguments in which those debates were expressed. Section 2 describes developments in Slovak party politics during the post-1998 'return to transition',

defining the lines of political competition with respect to national populism and identifying the key protagonists. Section 3 draws on the literature on Slovak voter behaviour in this period to develop hypotheses about the political preferences and voting behaviour of Slovaks with respect to the government/opposition 'populist divide'. Section 4 presents and explains the module of questions on populism and details the methods of analysis. Section 5 presents the outcomes of the analysis.

The paper concludes that populist attitudes only have a limited impact on party preferences and voting choices, with the moral and normative claims of populist discourse more relevant than its depiction of the essential ontological structure of the political. Whilst there is clear support for claims about the electoral efficacy of divides on the 'national question', and also strong indication of the importance of attitudes to the key precepts of economic liberalism, there is only limited evidence that a propensity to accept populist arguments combines with these 'thick ideological' principles to generate preferences and influence outcomes. Whilst the issue of how to measure populist attitudes remains an open one, these results suggest that caution be exercised in assuming that populist appeals are met with populist responses.

National populism in the Slovak party system

In conditions of simultaneous top-down liberal–democratic transition and party system formation in Central and Eastern Europe there was much potential for the emergence of populist appeals to the electorate. Where transition was pursued in earnest, it necessarily involved the implementation of reforms that challenged economic interests, cultural mores and the assumed integrity of national identities. Some political currents closely identified themselves with the broad ideology of reform, furnishing the policies it entailed and the elites that implemented them. Others opposed certain measures or counselled restraint, but did not challenge the general direction of transition. A third current moved beyond opposition to individual policies to question the legitimacy of transition and its protagonists. Whilst in the first decade of transition the momentum lay largely behind the reformers in countries at the vanguard of transition, the second decade saw the 'mainstreaming' of anti-liberal and populist currents that had previously existed in noisy but marginal political niches.

A conceptual definition of populism

Whilst it is still too early to speak of a prevailing consensus on the theoretical and conceptual definition of populism, there is some crystallisation of scholarly opinion around the notion of populism as a 'thin ideology' that combines with other, more established, ideologies. The concept of 'thin ideology' was elaborated by [Freeden \(1998, 750–751\)](#) in reference to the incapacity of the ideology of nationalism to furnish 'a solution to questions of social justice, distribution of resources, and conflict-management which mainstream ideologies address'. Although nationalism essays a distinct interpretation of the political in its insistence on the original integrity of the nation state as political unit and the primacy of the national interest, it is 'meta-political' in its focus on broad ontological and normative assertions rather than the detail of policy. Recent work on the theory of populism has come to similar conclusions. Drawing on the observation of [Canovan \(2005, 128\)](#) that populism consists at root in an appeal to the vague but powerful notion that 'we, the People, are somehow the source of political authority', and the previous insights of [Mudde \(2004\)](#) and [Fieschi \(2004\)](#), [Stanley \(2008, 102\)](#) derives four core concepts the combination of which is characteristic of all manifestations of populism.

- The existence of two homogeneous units of analysis: 'the people' and 'the elite'.
- The antagonistic relationship between the people and the elite.
- The idea of popular sovereignty.
- The positive valorisation of 'the people' and denigration of 'the elite'.

According to this definition, the thin ideology of populism is centred around a Schmittean 'friend–enemy' distinction between 'the people' and 'the elite'. The absolute and antagonistic nature of this ontological divide is bolstered by normative and moral justifications for a majoritarian and 'authenticist' interpretation of the popular will in political decision-making. The vagueness of these precepts and the plasticity of 'the people' as a concept make it congenial to a variety of different 'host ideologies', from the agrarianism of the 19th century American Populist Party to the small-government ethos of the 21st century Tea Party movement, to cite examples from one country alone.

The emergence of Slovak national populism, 1998–2010

In the Slovak case, liberal–democratic transition was derailed between 1994 and 1998 under the regime of Vladimír Mečiar, and political conflict was dominated by a divide between liberalism and authoritarianism ([Gyárfášová and Krivý, 2007, 82](#)). Yet although liberal democrats set aside ideological divides to oust the Mečiar regime for the sake of democracy, these differences remained latent. The politics of nationalism were sharpened in the Mečiar era, when the sizeable Hungarian ethnic minority was targeted as a scapegoat for Slovak ills ([Harris, 2010, 186](#)). Anti-Hungarian rhetoric formed

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